
Functional Skills

ENGLISH

Level 2

Report on the Examination

4725

March 2017

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Overview

This qualification continues to maintain very high standards and a pass at this level is a strong indicator of ability in reading and writing of Standard English. This has been underlined through Ofqual reviews which gave AQA's Functional English exams a clean bill of health. There is every reason to remain confident of the value of this qualification. It is consistent in its standard as a test of basic English reading and writing skills and is the basis for secure progression.

Component 1 Reading

This report covers both the OnScreen and the paper versions of this test.

The March series employed three texts on the theme of sight. Source A was a charity appeal from the organisation, SightSavers, about the eye disease trachoma. The students engaged well with the story of Kuala and the multiple choice questions were very successful, with accuracy rates ranging from 71-84%.

Source B was a newspaper report about an app called Be My Eyes, through which sighted volunteers can help blind or partially sighted people via a one-way video link. This also proved very popular with students, probably owing to the technology aspect. The multiple choice questions on this source proved slightly more difficult evidenced by somewhat lower success rates, in particular:

Question 7

This asked about the main purpose of the newspaper article, the correct answer being “persuade people to volunteer to help blind people”, which was selected by just under 58% of students. Those who failed to score on this question largely selected the option “explain the workings of the app”, which was indeed **one** of the purposes, but not the **main** one as required by the question. Good practice for this paper, then, would be to identify several different purposes a text might have, as this skill is also tested in Q13.

Once again, the questions testing implication were largely very well done, with success rates of 72% and 78.5% indicating a much better grasp of this difficult element of reading attributable to some very sound teaching.

There are still considerable numbers of students who fail to follow the very clear instruction to write the letter of their chosen option in the box. Circling or ticking the letter in the list happens too often. In addition, far too many students try to hedge their bets by offering two options and this strategy will always result in the mark being withheld. Students should be reminded that this is a test of reading, which also includes the questions and instructions. A further plea from the Principal Examiner relates to those students who use a computer to answer these questions. Some such students choose to type out the entire answer, which is unnecessary, wastes the student's time and is deeply unhelpful to the examiner. Could centres please ensure that only the letter A, B, C or D, relating to the chosen option is given by the student rather than the entire answer.

Question 13

This was much better done than in January, with 55% gaining full marks, but once again, 11% failed to gain any marks, which is difficult to understand. A noticeable number of students simply answered using the wrong source, while 1% did not attempt the question. A number of students

continue to use “advise” in the incorrect sense of informing, while others inexplicably fail to use the given list of purposes.

Question 14

This series, students were given a text about the importance of looking after one’s eyes and asked to select from it six pieces of advice to keep the eyes healthy. The question worked very well, with a good spread of marks. Almost 17% gained full marks, with 75% achieving 4 or above, which was very gratifying. Achievement was undermined when information rather than advice was offered and it is worth reminding students that advice will always need to be presented in the form of a command or instruction, generally with an imperative or modal verb. Students will always do better if they are taught to extract the answer from the text very specifically rather than lift chunks of text in the hope that the correct option will be contained therein. In this case, the ability to distil advice from information was needed.

Question 15

The accessibility of the source for this question aided students in successfully summarising features of the Be My Eyes app. The question asked for three elements: the way the app works, along with the benefits for both users and volunteers. All three elements needed to be covered for full marks, and this was achieved by 5% of students. 56% scored 4 or above, indicating good engagement with text and task. Sadly, over 3% of students did not attempt this question at all.

Overlong responses are still occurring: students should be taught that it is rarely necessary to include everything possible and that additional pages for this question generally indicate a lack of summary and should be discouraged. In this instance, information about the number of users was not relevant to the task and should not have been included. Overall, however, the skills of summary have steadily improved and it is clear that some centres are teaching this very effectively.

Question 16

Performance on this question was particularly weak this series, with almost 20% gaining no marks, only 9% achieving full marks and over 3% not attempting the question. It remains a mystery why this is so. There are still significant numbers of students who seem to have no idea what “visual presentational” means, and those that do far too often offer simple generalised comments about the effect of the aspect of presentation, comments which are not accepted and rewarded. Students need to be taught what constitutes a meaningful comment on the use of picture(s) and colour. A simple way to elicit such comments would be for students to ask themselves how the impact of the text would be different if the picture or colour were changed. A degree of accuracy is also required in the designation of presentational features, for instance, “sub-titles” are not the same as “sub-headings”. Sometimes, there are good, meaningful explanations of language or linguistic device use, but these are not relevant to this question and generally cannot be rewarded.

Teachers have done some sterling work on this question and there are some high calibre comments which are a delight to read and would be worthy of high marks on the legacy GCSE. Unfortunately, too many students are let down by their lack of awareness of how to approach this question.

Overall, however, performance in this series was much improved, indicated by a mean mark of just over 21, which is very pleasing and suggests a good deal of sterling work for which teachers should be commended.

Functional Skills remains a good test of reading and understanding; is a useful step to further English examinations and a benchmark for EAL learners. With the approach of the new more rigorous GCSE English examinations this summer, the role of Level 2 Functional Skills takes on new importance. The skills of close reading, understanding, selection, identification of bias, implication and point of view; purpose, audience and summary are all vital to success in GCSE English Language. Functional Skills therefore is an excellent vehicle in which to practise and develop these skills, possibly in Year 9 or 10, as preparation for GCSE. Those centres and teachers who are already working with such commitment on Functional Skills are very well-prepared for the use of this assessment as a stepping stone to the single entry GCSE or maybe as an alternative, credible English qualification for students unable to access the new GCSE.

Component 2 Writing

With a consistent approach to assessment, in terms of question style and mark schemes, the examination provides a rigorous and fair test of writing skills for students. It has established itself as a strong currency in regards to educational progression and employment and for some students this qualification may be the only formal English qualification of value that they have achieved. Centres are increasingly confident in entering students who are well able to meet the demands of the Level 2 paper and in this series a very small minority failed to reach Band 2 for content.

This examination is excellent preparation for the GCSE English Language with its focus on functionality it is likely to be well suited to future specifications. It is also important to note that in the context of recent reform, where re-sit GCSE may not be an option for students, the need to achieve a creditable qualification in English is paramount for some students and this is where the Level 2 qualification will have a significant role to play. One area in which the current style of AQA Functional English examinations offers real benefit for educational progression is the engagement with ideas and views as well as transactional, mainly factual, questions. In this examination, Question 1 provides the opportunity for students to express views and opinions to support a real world argument or debate, in this case the role of street performers and musicians. We believe this approach is a distinct feature of AQA's provision and is especially useful in the progression of students to GCSE, where they are now required in Paper 2, Q5 to put forward an argument in a very similar, although perhaps less specific. In addition, Functional English at this level could be seen as the apex of a clear alternative progression route after Level 1, with Entry Level Certificate (Step Up to English) at its base.

Question 1

Question 1 invited students to express their views about the important issue of priorities within public transport. Students were asked to give their views, in a letter to a local newspaper, about the use of buggies and prams on buses when they may take away space from elderly or disabled passengers. A newspaper letter, presenting the views of a disabled elderly person, was used as stimulus material.

The question seemed to work very well and was tackled enthusiastically in the vast majority of responses seen by examiners. The intention behind the question was to engage students in issues that might affect them in daily life thereby providing an outlet, through a valid Functional English task, for informing the reader of the student's views and opinions. This type of question is significantly different from those of a more transactional nature, but it could be argued that, in a

world heavily dominated by social networks, most writing that now takes place involves the expression of views and opinion rather than information.

The responses were typical of this sort of task where understanding of the issues presented in a well organised response met the functionality requirements. Many of those reaching the top band produced this sort of considered response and produced a letter strong on clarity if less expressive than the previous series. What was most evident was a recognition of the vital importance of public transport for the vast majority of people, of all ages and backgrounds, trying to go about their daily lives.

Stronger answers established a context for the letter by outlining where they had read the letter and why they were responding. Thus some students explained that they were parents with children or that they were disabled or elderly. This indicated that in many cases the students had been able to adopt a persona to provide them with a route into the answer. The choice of the persona clearly determined the nature of the response in most cases. This was not the case in all strong answers, as some students wrote quite objectively from the point of view of a disinterested bus traveller. Nearly all answers, whatever the strategy adopted, showed some concern for the difficulties of passengers in both camps. If, for example, the student wrote from the point of view of a young mother, a good answer would nearly always show respect and consideration for elderly or disabled people. Having explored the issue, most students expressed the view that this was a predicament that could not be solved to the satisfaction of all passengers and they indicated that there would be a need for compromise from some passengers. The best answers firmly rejected the idea of banning buggies and prams as too severe. Eloquent answers referred to human rights and to the need for those without cars to use an often inadequate bus service. Many answers suggested increasing the space available in buses for wheelchairs and prams and the need for all passengers to comply with regulations. Some suggested the use of bus conductors to provide assistance and reduce delays.

What was also impressive about the best answers was the use of a vocabulary well suited to content: 'alternative', 'policy', 'infringement'; 'liberty' and so on. The use of ambitious vocabulary within well-formed sentences covering relevant points will almost always take the student's work into the top band.

Weaker answers tended to fall down on tonal aspects even when the content was relevant. Commonly this involved one of the following: firstly, an over emotional response in which the student's use of rhetorical questions tended to overwhelm the reader; secondly, a curmudgeonly response in which bitter comments about noisy children, dangerous prams or the whining older generation dominated to the detriment of reasonable comment. The tonal deficiency of some of the answers was also matched by plainer language and sentences that struggled for clarity, often because they were too long. As sentence structure is actually part of the content descriptors (an Ofqual requirement) students who struggle to manage their content effectively within varied and grammatical sentences will not get into Band 3.

Question 2

This question took the form of a message of gratitude via email to the IT Girls: Computer and Mobile Phone Technicians. Students were asked to communicate on behalf of an 'elderly relative'. Whilst the core of the task did not prove in any way problematic, some students failed to meet the full briefing in the question and wrote from their own point of view or from the point of view of another person, not necessarily a relative, not necessarily elderly. Such answers tended to be found in Band 2 and because the bulk of the answer met the requirements of the mark scheme, they were able to remain in that band.

Good answers were able to incorporate the key words in the stimulus material to structure their answer. The students outlined the initial problems, such as a dropped or damaged phone, a cracked laptop screen or the freezing of all operations. In some cases the circumstances had the authenticity of daily life, such as a phone dropped into a sink, which gave greater depth to the credibility of the email. The students then moved on to describe the effectiveness of the IT Girls. Some students stressed the benefits of a speedy response as their relative was isolated while others emphasized how comfortable their relative felt when allowing one of the IT Girls into their home. A significant number of students talked about how the IT Girls explained what they were going to do and what changes to expect. This leaned very much on the concept that people, especially older people, feel vulnerable when using IT. There was a sense that certain software, viruses or messages could lead to more serious issues and therefore the reassurance offered by the IT Girls was considered to be most welcome. In many cases, students wrote about the IT Girls going well beyond their professional commitment by making tea and engaging in long conversations. Tone was almost always appropriate to the gratitude being expressed and the best answers completely avoided any sense of exaggeration or obsequiousness. A variety of sentence structure including complex sentences is a feature of Band 3 descriptors and it was pleasing to see so many students reaching this standard and using effective and challenging sentences in their writing.

Weaker responses lacked detail and consequently had restricted functional impact. Students often stated in the baldest terms that a phone was broken or that a computer did not work. There was no sense of a real family predicament, as there was in the better answers. Also, it was difficult to see why the student had written to the IT Girls because there was nothing to identify in the email as worthy of singling out for praise. There was a tendency to borrow, or paraphrase the wording 'used the above service and was delighted with her experience'. Because such answers lacked depth and credibility, it was not possible to move beyond a mark of 5 for content. Tonally, weaker answers were lacking in suitable vocabulary to express gratitude.

Accuracy

There was a better performance in Question 1 than Question 2 in regards to the achievement of 4 or marks for accuracy. Question 1 produced 72% at this standard while Question 2 produced 63% which is almost identical to the November 2016 series.

One examiner wrote: 'Accuracy problems seemed to be concentrated on sentence punctuation, both in the use of inappropriate comma splicing on simple sentences and a lack of any punctuation in longer accounts of incidents or ideas. Spelling held up well but the vocabulary tended to be more prosaic in both tasks compared to the January series.'

The most important descriptor for Band 2 achievement is 'meaning is clear' and in this series the vast majority of students reached this band. However, this descriptor is likely to carry a mark of 3 unless correct grammar, punctuation and spelling are present to some significant extent.

Unfortunately, some students are unable to produce correctly punctuated sentences, lacking closure with full stops and failing to begin with upper case. Where this is consistent, the student is unlikely to gain more than 3 marks, and where it is intermittent the mark is likely to be 4. Students who cannot sustain clear, well punctuated sentences are unlikely to achieve a Band 3 mark for accuracy (5-6) no matter how well written the response is otherwise. It is also the case that poorly constructed sentences are rarely found in answers where the mark for content is 6 or above. It is clear, therefore, that some students would benefit from additional support in these areas.

There was some difficulty in Question 2 when students attempted to use the direct speech of the relative as they expressed their gratitude. Sometimes, speech marks appeared around the name of the speaker, which indicated a serious lack of competence. Another issue was the lack of apostrophe for possession.

Generally, grammar is effective. The main areas of weakness here are subject-verb agreement and the use of appropriate tense. The occasional mistake would not hold a student back from achieving a top band mark, but regular mistakes in grammar would generally mean a Band 2 or even a Band 1 mark.

Alongside grammatical weakness, syntactic inadequacy often reflects mother tongue interference in second language speakers. Such students would benefit from additional support.

Spelling is often very good indeed and it is not unusual to find highly accomplished spelling of an enhanced vocabulary accompanying grammatical error as described above.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.