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Principal Examiner Feedback

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Introduction

The paper is organised into three sections. Section A tests only reading and is based upon an unseen passage. The passage studied in Section A in June 2017 was adapted from *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* by Eric Newby. Section B tests both reading and writing by asking candidates to respond to one of the non-fiction passages from the Anthology, in this case, *Chinese Cinderella* by Adeline Yen Mah. Section C is a single writing task that is not connected to either of the reading activities already undertaken on the paper. The paper was well received with most candidates finding it very accessible.

Section A: Reading

Questions 1-4

The passage chosen proved to be accessible to almost all candidates, with very few experiencing any difficulties in reading comprehension. Question 1 is intended to be a gentle way into the paper and tests the skills of selection and retrieval, asking candidates why the travellers featured in the passage were unable to enter Istanbul by the Golden Gate. There was only a single mark for this question and almost all candidates were able to determine that it had been "sealed up" many years before. Question 2 asked candidates to select two words or phrases that showed the writer's positive attitude to Istanbul. The mark scheme identifies many possible responses and many candidates gained full marks but those who did not do so often failed to find two distinct words or phrases from the selected lines or did not directly answer the question. Question 3 asked candidates to explain what we learn about Hugh. As a five-mark question there were many possible responses to this question and many achieved full or nearly full marks, as they were able to explain about his intolerant briskness, his appearance and his general lack of sympathy for the experiences of Wanda and the narrator. Where candidates did not score full marks some failed to give sufficient detail for full marks and others listed features without offering any explanation. It is possible to score full marks on this question without finding five distinct characteristics of Hugh, as the quality of explanation is a key part of the response. Centres should know that the mark scheme explicitly instructs markers to reward the quality of explanation rather than simply counting the number of features that have been identified and they should bear this in mind when preparing candidates for this type of question. Question 4 was the higher mark tariff question in Section A with its greater focus on the writer's technique. This asked candidates about how the writer tries to create interest in the passage and provided bullet points for additional support and structure. At the standardising meeting all markers were made aware of a range of possible interpretations and that they should credit any that were clearly founded in the text. In the

published mark scheme examiners are told that they, "must reward all valid points that show an engagement with the text and an appreciation of the writer's technique rather than have a set agenda of items that they are looking for." Weaker responses were often limited to a small number of points focusing on particular elements within the passage, such as the arrival into Istanbul or the description of the Start Hotel, often providing little or no development. Many candidates were able to recognise the broad structure of the passage and how the writer creates a sense of romantic expectation at the start only to dash it in the most vivid terms throughout the rest of the passage. Better answers commented on the irony of the title and the creation of humour whilst less able candidates did not comment on the structure of the passage at all. The weakest answers were unable to recognise this change in experience and the expectations of the reader and were not able to accurately determine Hugh's relationship with Wanda and the narrator. Some answers showed a subtle and perceptive understanding of the tone of the passage, such as the "brothers" who are comical and threatening at the same time. Many commented on the emotive language used in the passage, such as "deep gloom" or "melancholy" and the powerful use of simile and metaphor in "like survivors of an artillery bombardment" and "a coma of fatigue". Better answers were often able to comment upon the sentence structure and the frequent use of short sentences, including the opening and closing sentences. Essentially the most successful candidates demonstrated higher skills of analysis and interpretation in evaluating the writer's techniques and did so by a careful reading of the passage and by focusing on the question. As has been said before in these reports, linked text and paraphrase does not constitute an explanation. It was a feature of better answers that they were more able to recognise the manner in which the writer creates humour out of adversity, using the familiar techniques of *schadenfreude*, with the experience of the appalling Start Hotel paling into insignificance against what we learn they have experienced on their journey. The arrival of the grotesque figure of Hugh represents a further decline in the fortunes of Wanda and the narrator and serves as a climax to this passage.

Section B: Reading and Writing

Question 5

Section B was based upon the pre-prepared text from the Edexcel Anthology for International GCSE English Language and Literature, *Chinese Cinderella*, and focused upon how the writer shows her thoughts and feelings in the passage. As a prepared text almost all candidates seemed to have knowledge of this text. Most candidates could recognise her anxiety as she travels home and some sense of delight or achievement at the end. Better answers were able to comment upon her relationship with her father and could comment on the use of "Holy of Holies" and how the reader could interpret the use of this term. Weaker responses were often quasi-narratives that did not focus upon the question and simply described the different elements of the passage rather than focusing upon the writer's thoughts and feelings. Stronger responses were those that were able to

recognise the patriarchal nature of the society, the link to the source story Cinderella and were able to offer a closer analysis of her relationship with her family. Stronger answers were then able to evidence these from the text and to explain in detail how those contributed to our understanding of her thoughts and feelings and how they were created.

Question 6

The writing task in Section B was closely related to the reading text in section B and asked candidates to write an entry for a magazine competition on the subject: "If I could go anywhere ...". The title was accessible to almost all candidates and produced a wide range of responses. Many chose to begin with the words "If I could go anywhere ..." and then went on to suggest a variety of choices before deciding on the best. Many wrote about particular places but it was the more successful responses that recognised the need to create an emotional link with the reader and set about crafting a response that did just that. As in the past, the weakest responses were often incomplete, lacking in paragraphing or structure and communicating at a basic level, often focusing solely upon a very limited range of ideas. Better responses wrote with a skilful command of the language showing a strong ability to engage the reader in the reasons for the choices made.

Section C: Writing

Question 7

Candidates were asked to imagine that they could acquire a special skill or talent and they were asked to write, explaining their choice. This proved to be accessible to most candidates. Once again, it is noted that the writing responses and particularly the final, 20 mark question, are sometimes not answered at all by some candidates. It is vital that students time their responses carefully and take note of the mark tariff, giving section C one third of the time available to them. This question produced a variety of responses such as time travel, mind reading, a musical skill, being a successful comedian, able to speak a variety of languages or the ability to change the world! It was heart-warming to see how many candidates wanted to relieve poverty, help their families and bring peace to the world. Weaker responses were often very brief and were limited in their ability to clearly express their ideas, often listing skills they would like to have with no real development at all. Weaker responses were often lacking in paragraphing and a sense of structure, which kept them in the Level 1 and Level 2 mark bands. More able responses wrote with imagination and communicated passion and interest in what they were describing and created a genuine sense of a relationship with their reader. The best writing showed subtlety and maturity and a control of a wide range of techniques to produce writing that connected strongly with its reader.

Conclusion

Each section above contains specific advice about what characterises weaker and stronger candidates. Centres are strongly encouraged to practise responding to unseen passages in timed conditions. This will support students in focusing their answers on what the question has asked for and in using their understanding of literary effects as a means of addressing the question rather than being seen as an end in their own right. The same principle applies with regard to studying the Anthology texts. The best practice in writing involves time management so as to respond appropriately to the mark tariff and the time available. Candidates need to focus on developing textual cohesion through effective paragraphing and structuring their writing. At all times have the intended reader in mind and make word level, sentence level and text level choices with a clear understanding of the intended effect. Writing should be seen as a crafted artefact and students should be taught the skills of writing with this in mind whatever the task may be.

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