

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2013

International GCSE Sinhala (4SI0)

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International GCSE Sinhala:

The aim of the examination was to test candidate's overall ability to understand accurately general descriptions of topic areas covering customs and religion, traditional culture, environment, travel and holiday information, past and present social situations of historical importance of native Sri Lanka. Some questions were focussed on the required level of understanding as to whether the candidate has acquired the competence and knowledge which they need to apply in a given situation, whether it is formal or informal. This involved formal grammar, style and vocabulary and also standard spoken Sinhala as appropriate in the relevant social context.

There were four questions (compulsory) but with a choice of one from four topics in the essay question (question 4). A clear understanding of formal grammar, vocabulary and style was expected in all questions except for number 1 where candidates had the option to employ a less formal style.

Question 1

There were five questions – one simple question and four statements. It was expected that candidates sitting for a test of this level of ability should be competent enough in constructing accurate answers and to obtain full marks. Question 1(a) was about a situation where daily weather condition becomes a subject of conversation, enquiry or newspaper headlines. Apart from a very few candidates, the majority of candidates did not know the proper Sinhala words (either literary or standard spoken) for 'heavy rainfall', 'major roads' or 'extensive damage' and to construct a meaningful sentence.

The next question, 1(b) was to test candidate's ability to combine nouns, first and third person, and to use the appropriate past tense finite verb in written Sinhala. A significant number of candidates found this challenging in using the correct conjunctive particle and joining first and third person nouns correctly in an ordinary sentence. Similarly, a very poor understanding was shown in giving appropriate native Sinhala words for 'Negombo' and 'express train'. Question 1(c) was testing candidates' ability to employ suitable vocabulary in areas of religion and local customs. Most of the candidates did not know the Sinhala words for Adam's Peak or holy mountain, instead they employed the same English words writing in Sinhala characters. It can be observed from these examples that the general tendency of the learners of this target language is to discuss similar situations in mixed Sinhala, heavily influenced by their dominant language of English, particularly the familiar vocabulary.

Question 1(d) seemed reasonably accessible and except for very few candidates, everyone answered correctly. But, the candidates failed to take into account the fact that this question is about forming a negative question correctly: to understand the structural differences between 'Can't you?' (bari da?) and 'Can you?' (puluwan da?). Question 1 (e) does appear to have been accessible except for choosing the correct Sinhala word for 'sacred'. The particular problem for the most candidates in translating the given sentences into the target language, in this case into standard Sinhala, appears to have been the unavoidable interference from the primary language they are using at present and lack of appropriate vocabulary. Centres should be aware that candidates cannot expect or predict the type of questions they will be asked in this category where they

will be put to test the ability of their understanding of ordinary situations of varied types in Sri Lankan life and their skills in employing the appropriate vocabulary.

Questions 2 and 3 are translations – from English to Sinhala and Sinhala to English. Question 2 is an account of a very popular holiday destination in Sri Lanka and a historical city Kandy which has the grandest annual cultural festival known as ‘Kandy Perahara’. The passage is written in simple English and it has no idiomatic expressions. Significant number of candidates failed to find the appropriate words to use for terms such as Buddhists, drummers, lucky, Brahmin, lake, pilgrimage, etc. This shows that either they have not read the passage properly to understand the contents clearly or have rushed to translate it to save time. Some candidates have left the last short paragraph unattended and those who have attempted have failed to translate the meaning of ‘history and culture’ correctly. For candidates to score highly on these questions, centres should encourage candidates to read widely on religion, cultural festivals and history of Sri Lanka as well as any other text to improve their vocabulary. Further, course material should be designed and available to candidates on these topics with recommended simple texts.

Question 3 relates to a short account of the origin and popularising of Sinhala short story writing/reading in Sri Lanka. There were some candidates who scored highly in this question displaying their understanding of this category of literature and translating the passage into English using the appropriate style and vocabulary. Few candidates appeared to have understood the meaning of the word ‘laghu katha’ meaning ‘short’ but in general, as this passage relates to literature, the majority obtained good marks.

Question 4:

Here, candidates were asked to write an essay of between 200-250 words, and had a choice of four topics. The majority of candidates have chosen to write a letter to his/ her aunt or uncle who lives abroad describing a cultural festival they have attended recently. Question 4(d) was the most popular as it simply involves in writing a simple letter in Sinhala for which they may have had repeated practice. But, the candidates who chose this topic failed to understand that they were required to describe a ‘cultural festival’ not a cultural occasion or party they celebrated at home like a Christmas party or Sinhala New Year. As a result, they could not access high marks for this essay. Further, the majority exceeded the allowed word limited, in some cases by 100-150 words. In some essays, candidates have used many colloquial expressions and style as they would speak at home. Marks were not awarded in those instances as per the question asked.

Questions 4(b) and 4(c) appeared to be popular and also it seems that the candidates have had some practice in producing similar essays on these popular issues. The majority of candidates scored highly in this questions to secure good marks although they were not as successful in other questions.

Question 4 (a) was not as popular with candidates. From the responses, there were answers of high standard with arguments employing effective vocabulary and style and also employing good examples to support the arguments put forward. However, the majority of candidates have preferred to write on other

topics as such subjects do not require complex structure, vocabulary or style.

Conclusion

The apparent weaknesses revealed each year from the performance of the candidates stem from a lack of proper understanding of grammatical structure of written Sinhala language, particularly the syntax and the tendency to mix standard constructions with the colloquial usage. In places where the candidates failed to find the appropriate standard (written) words and phrases, they opted to use the spoken Sinhala grammar and style and sometimes non-standard colloquial spoken Sinhala, heavily mixed with English borrowed words thus generating a type of creole or pidgin type usage.

Sinhala language is well known for its distinctively diglossic nature—existing a significant disparity between the spoken and the written variety—and poses some serious structural problems for the language teacher and in particular for the learner. Therefore, in teaching Sinhala, this structural disparity has to be handled carefully and should be taught and explained clearly to all candidates at an early stage to avoid confusion and misunderstanding of the structure of these two varieties.

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