

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2014

Pearson Edexcel International GCSE
in Sinhala (4SI0/01) Paper 1

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The total number of candidates sat for this year’s examination increased from the previous year. It appears that a number of new examination centres have opened up in Sri Lanka during the last two-three years giving opportunity for candidates at overseas to sit for the examination. There is also another important reason for more young pupils to study Sinhala as a subject for their international GCSE level examinations. This is mainly due to the present government’s initiative to implement the Trilingual Policy in primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka under which the study of all three national languages has become compulsory. Consequently, it is likely that the number of candidates taking this examination is going to increase every year.

The scope and the principal aim of the examination have not changed. In general, it is to test candidate’s overall ability to understand accurately general descriptions of topic areas covering customs and religion, transport and environment and past and present social situations of native Sri Lanka. Some questions focused on social and cultural situations which they are likely to be faced with. This involved formal grammar, style and vocabulary and also 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. These all cover general information. It was expected that candidates sitting for a test of this level of ability should be competent enough in constructing accurate answers and obtain full marks. Question 1(a) is about the best time to visit the most popular national park in Sri Lanka. For some candidates, found it difficult to find the correct Sinhala words for ‘the best’ and ‘between’. However, the majority were able to obtain full 2 marks.

The next question, 1(b) was to test candidate’s ability to understand a question and to find the appropriate question word in Sinhala. For some candidates, to find the appropriate verb to mean ‘to play’ in Sinhala (Cricket ‘gahanna or sellam karanna’) was not that easy. As Cricket is very popular in Sri Lanka, the majority of candidates were

familiar with the vocabulary and imperative sentence formation and were able to obtain full marks.

Question 1(c) – Out of all five answers a small number of candidates obtained full marks. Although many knew who Shakespeare was, they were unable to write his name in Sinhala correctly. A number of candidates used words like ‘katuswaraya’ and ‘gavuthamaya’ to mean poet as they found it difficult to translate the word for ‘the greatest poet’.

Question 1(d) – Candidates liked this question and the majority seemed to know the suitable term for human rights in Sinhala. Only a few could find the correct first person present tense verb for the subject I (mama). As a result, they were unable to obtain full marks.

Questions 2 and 3 are translations – from English to Sinhala and Sinhala to English. As evident from the last two years’ answer scripts, candidates found it more challenging to translate from English to Sinhala. This is not only relating to vocabulary but also to misunderstanding and application of correct Sinhala grammar and syntax.

Question 2 is an account of a very popular train journey from Colombo to Badulla. What it describes are the two trains involved, their guards, appearance and the journey through the beautiful tea-clad countryside up to Badulla. The vocabulary used by the majority of candidates did have some errors as they tried to create word combinations together. Candidates did not know Sinhala word for train – koocciya or dumriya or guard which they should have known.

Candidates attempted to construct meaningful sentences with appropriate subject verb agreement. Application of correct adverbs and conjunctions in sentences appeared difficult and misunderstood. The majority of candidates incorrectly translated ‘until after nightfall’ as ‘eliw ena tek’ - ‘until the following morning’. It was also common for most candidates to use the first person plural verb form ‘kalem u’ with third person singular/plural nouns.

Question 3 - is about a short description of a cultural city in Sri Lanka which is a very popular holiday spot in Sri Lanka. Candidates performed better in this question compared to question 2. Apart from a small number of candidates, the majority presented better translations for this question, particularly correctly formed sentences, indicating that their performance skills are comparatively better in English.

However, candidates had problems with appropriate vocabulary such as understanding the meaning of 'waari' (irrigation), 'shatha warshaya' (century) and 'kautukaagaaraya' (museum) as 'day light robbery'. Their overall performance in Sinhala suggests that very little attention has been given to reading general topics on travel and places of interest in Sri Lanka.

Question 4

Here, candidates were asked to write an essay of between 200-250 words in Sinhala, and had a choice of four topics. The choice of topic for this essay/letter seems to have been evenly applied this year and the favourite question was 4(c). This question gives candidates a chance to perform well and obtain marks for candidates to get a pass. The total marks are 35 and it is also possible to prepare in advance for a range of topics that may come for this question. The majority performed better on this task as advance language skills are not essential to score well.

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 colloquial usage. The significant weakness apparent from all the answer scripts was the incorrect application of Sinhala grammatical rules and failure to understand the gender category in written Sinhala. 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 loan words thus generating a type of creole or pidgin type usage.

Sinhala language is well known for displaying a major structural disparity between the spoken and the written registers. It generates some serious structural problems for the language teacher and the student from the very beginning of learning.

Therefore in teaching Sinhala, this structural disparity has to be well understood first and be taught and explained clearly to all learners at an early stage to avoid confusion and misunderstanding of the distinctively different structures of these two varieties.

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