

Candidates' Performance

Paper 1

Paper 1 consisted of three parts; Part A, Part B1 and Part B2. All candidates were required to complete Part A and then choose either Part B1 or Part B2. Part B1 was designed to be the easiest section, while Part B2 was designed to be the most difficult section. The total number of candidates attempting Paper 1 was 74,195. A total of 36,880 candidates chose to do Part B1 while 37,315 chose to do Part B2. Candidates who attempted Parts A and B2 were able to attain the full range of levels, while Level 4 was the highest level attainable for candidates who attempted Parts A and B1.

Overall results

A statistical analysis of Paper 1 was carried out¹. The overall results are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Paper 1 overall results

	Full Mark	Mean Score (%)	S.D. (%)
Part A	47	64.71	23.81
Part B1	41	56.38	20.36
Part B2	41	50.24	19.55

Part A

Part A consisted of one reading passage, which was a short story set in the future. It concerned a robot sent to deliver an apology to Winston Sinclair from a former colleague, Karl Anderson. Upon accepting the apology, Winston must come up with his own apology to be delivered by the robot, thus continuing the act of kindness.

The text is a combination of narrative and dialogue. While the structure and lexis used were relatively simple compared to the texts in Part B, candidates needed to work out implied meanings of the text, such as the robot's intention, the action Karl regretted, and how Winston felt about the revelation some years later.

Short stories were included as a text-type for the first time in the compulsory Part A of this year's paper. The story chosen was relatively simple and straightforward.

Reading skills tested include identifying the main characters of the story, arranging events into their chronological order and summarising the message behind the story. Most candidates were able to handle basic story elements such as characterisation, plot and setting. This year there were 19 items (38% of the total of 47 items) which over 70% of candidates answered correctly, compared to 7 (17% of the total 41 items) in 2013 and 16 (34% of the total of 45) items in 2012.

Easier questions included the True/False/Not Given items (Q.6i, ii, iii and Q.9i, ii, iii) for which the information was given explicitly in the text. Over 80% of candidates were awarded the mark for four out of six of these items. The sequencing question (Q.14) was also straightforward, with 71% of candidates being awarded the mark.

The instructions for Q.24 seemed to confuse some candidates. The question required candidates to fill in missing words from a list of given options to complete five different apologies. For example, in Q.24v, 'I'm sorry that I _____ your letters', candidates were required to select the word *ignored* from the given options. However, some candidates selected the option *replied to* but changed it to *did not reply to* giving the same meaning as the correct answer but not using the options in the correct way. These candidates were not awarded a mark for this item.

Some of the more difficult questions involved interpreting the implicit meaning in the text. In Q.21, 'What does it mean when the robot says, "Insufficient value"?' , the answer required candidates to understand that Winston's apology was not serious enough (1 mark) compared to the one he received (1 mark). Only 27% of candidates were given the two marks for this question. Another more difficult question, Q.28 'What is the message behind this story?' required an overall interpretation of the story and for answers to be supported by ideas that could be implied from the text. For example, that it is never too late to make an apology (1 mark) which can make people feel better about themselves (1 mark), but answers such as *making an apology is important* would be considered too vague to earn a mark. Only 36% of candidates were awarded 2 marks for this question.

¹ Figures provided for test items are taken from the onscreen marking system. There may be slight variations between these figures and the final scores.

Part B1

Part B1 comprised two reading passages on the same theme. The first passage introduced the theme of writing love letters to strangers, and explained how the trend, started by a woman living in New York City, had spread worldwide. The second reading passage was written from the perspective of a journalist chronicling her first attempts at writing love letters to strangers. Part B1 comprised 20 items for the first passage and 21 for the second, a total of 41 items.

Easier test items for the first passage included finding explicitly-stated information, such as the name and founder of the website (Q.31 Q.34), answered correctly by 89% and 88% of the candidates respectively. Q.43 involved sequencing the events concerning the start of the website and the development of the trend. This question was answered correctly by 69% of candidates. Q.44 concerned the guidelines for writing the letters and candidates were required to mark statements as either 'Do' or 'Don't'. Three of the four items were answered correctly by over 70% of candidates.

Two questions involved scanning for words with similar meaning. Q.36 involved finding a word with a similar meaning to 'letters' (in paragraph 3), with 80% of candidates finding either 'notes' or 'messages'. In Q.40, 'In paragraph 4 find a word which can be replaced by "put"', 64% of candidates found either *tuck(ed)* or *slip(ed)*. One of the main ideas of the text was tested in Q.33, 'Who are the letters written to'. The required answer was *strangers*. Only 31% of candidates answered this item correctly.

The second reading passage in Part B1 was slightly more challenging. One of the more difficult items was Q. 45, 'What nationality is the writer?' The answer required candidates to infer from the sentence in paragraph 1, 'I'm not sure that's something we British do well.' This was answered correctly by only 38% of candidates. Again, the key idea that the letters were written to strangers seemed not to be understood by many candidates. Q. 57 asked candidates to compare writing the love letters to writing a Tweet and candidates were required to complete the stem 'Both are _____', with an answer showing that both the love letters and Tweets were written to strangers. The stem did not seem to help candidates complete the answer and only 39% were awarded a mark for this item.

Overall, for Part B1 there were nine items (21% of a total of 41 items) which were answered correctly by more than 70% of candidates and only two items (4%) which were answered correctly by less than 30% of candidates. This was considered to be a good spread of questions for Part B1.

Part B2

Part B2 consisted of one reading passage, an excerpt from the autobiography of Stephen Fry, a well-loved British actor, writer and comedian, in which he gives his thoughts on fame and the rise of celebrity culture. Where it was felt necessary for the successful completion of test items, notes regarding the background and social context were provided.

The first part of the text is narrative and candidates were required to interpret the writer's feelings (Q.60, Q.61), identify his actions (Q.62) and interpret reasons for his actions (Q.64) and feelings (Q.63, Q.65, Q.66). This section of the text was straightforward and four of the ten items were answered correctly by more than 70% of the candidates.

The passage then becomes expository and candidates were required to identify the main ideas of each paragraph (Q.84) and interpret the writer's views on fame (Q.68), the desire for fame and his comparison of the current generation and previous ones (Q.70, Q.71, Q.74, Q.77). The two most difficult questions were Q.81, which required candidates to identify that the word 'entrails' is used as a metaphor for inner thoughts or secrets, and Q.82, which required candidates to understand that the writer uses the word 'you' to mean everyone/anyone or people in general and not just the reader or any specific group of people. These questions were answered correctly by only 1% and 4% of candidates respectively.

In paragraph 7 the writer describes what he calls the false dichotomy of choosing between classical music and pop music. Q.74 required candidates to identify what he means by this false dichotomy, with one mark given for identifying the choice between the two forms of music and the second mark for showing that it is false because, as the writer explains, 'you can have both'. Only 37% of candidates were given both marks for this open-ended question. Another very difficult question was Q.79. Candidates needed to interpret the writer's feelings when he writes about his resentment of the adulation given to a fellow performer. Candidates were required to understand that the writer feels ashamed not only of his jealousy and his own desire to be admired (1 mark), but also because that desperation to be famous is now revealed to the public (1 mark). Only 8% of candidates were awarded the first mark and 2% the second.

The statistics show that Part B2 in 2014 was more difficult than Part B2 in 2013. There were seven items (17% of the total 41 items) which were answered correctly by more than 70% of candidates, compared to twelve items (29% of the total 41 items) in 2013. There were four items correctly answered by less than 30% of candidates, compared to six in 2013. The spread of questions from easy to difficult was considered to be about right for the majority of candidates taking Part B2, with several items that challenged the reading abilities of the very top end candidates.

Overall recommendations

Since this paper is testing reading skills, spelling and grammatical accuracy were not required in the more open-ended questions and longer answers. If the message was clear, then a mark was awarded. Candidates do need to be careful with spelling of single-word answers and short answers which can be copied from the text. If the answer to a short-response question is explicitly stated in the text, candidates should try to copy only what is relevant to answering the question.

Particularly in Part B2, but also in other sections, candidates are expected to make inferences, to put together pieces of information from different parts of the text, and to make inferences about attitudes and arguments, as well as interpret figurative language.

Candidates should choose carefully which Part B (Part B1 or Part B2) they will attempt in the exam. Anyone hoping to achieve a Level 5 must attempt Part B2. Candidates attempting Part B1 will be capped at Level 4 for the grading of this component. The capping policy is in place because the items tested in Part B1 do not assess the abilities required for attaining Level 5. Part B1 is designed for candidates whose abilities match the level descriptors for Level 3 or below, while Part B2 is designed to match levels of performance ranging from 3 to 5. Therefore, any candidate who wishes to attain Level 5 must opt for Part B2.

Candidates who are most at risk of being capped are candidates with a level of performance at the upper range of the Level 4 descriptors (or above) but who choose to do the easier part of the paper rather than the more difficult part. Candidates in the lower or middle ability range will not be disadvantaged by their choice of either B1 or B2 as equipercentile equating will be used to convert B1 marks to the same scale as B2 marks.

To know which part to attempt, students can complete both Part B1 and B2 of previous years' examination papers and compare their results in both parts. Teachers can also make reference to the level descriptors and advise their students well before the day of the examination which optional part of the paper to take.

Paper 2

Part A

Paper 2 Part A is a short guided writing task. This year, candidates had to write a short article for a local history newsletter that featured special places in Hong Kong. Candidates were instructed to write about an imaginary old village called 'Lucky Village' and were given the following headings:

- Life in Lucky Village 40 years ago
- An event that changed Lucky Village
- What Lucky Village is famous for

Space for three short paragraphs of equal length was given in the question-answer book and candidates had the freedom to order the paragraphs as they liked.

Marks between 0 and 7 were awarded in three domains: content, language and organisation.

General comments

The mean score for Part A was 56%. To achieve full marks, candidates had to indicate clearly that they were writing about a place called Lucky Village and provide some description of how the village had changed over time. Essentially, the task was a piece of narrative writing, although candidates were expected to write in the genre of a short article for a newsletter about local history. Most candidates were able to complete short paragraphs that were relevant to the task. Better candidates were able to write in an appropriate tone for a history newsletter, providing some historical background about the village and using a theme to structure their piece of writing. Weaker candidates tended to have less audience awareness and attempted the task as if merely answering questions. Other candidates

misinterpreted the task by writing a historical account of Hong Kong as an old village in the past, or did not understand the word ‘village’, writing as if Lucky Village were a person or a building.

Content

Candidates generally performed best in responding to the heading ‘What Lucky Village is famous for’. Typical answers included a ‘Lucky Tree’, the beautiful scenery, an old building, and food such as fish balls or seafood. Some candidates were able to develop their ideas with more creativity, such as writing about an annual fishing festival, ecotourism, a large number of twin births, the village as a famous place for Confucianism, and so on.

Although the topic concerned life in a village 40 years ago, historical accuracy was not important, although candidates should have made some reference to life in the past. Typical ideas included fishing and farming, living in small huts, and social commentary, such as ‘people were very poor’. In general, weaker candidates tended to be more literal in their description of what life was like 40 years ago, while stronger candidates were capable of using their imagination and to write with plausibility, conveying a sense that what they said could have been real. The best pieces of writing were often well planned, with carefully selected details to support each heading.

The section ‘An event that changed Lucky Village’ was found to be the most challenging one to write about and revealed the greatest difference between weak, average and strong performances. Weak candidates had difficulty interpreting the word ‘event’, writing instead on ideas which were totally irrelevant. Some candidates were able to describe something that changed the village, (e.g. ‘the village was destroyed’) but did not elaborate on how this subsequently affected the village. It was not necessary that the event described be a major catastrophic one, but to receive high marks, candidates had to convey how the event had affected the history of the village in some way. For example, ‘A group of foreign investors came and wanted to build a chemical plant nearby. Things got worse after the plant was built...’.

Language

The majority of candidates were weak to some extent in the use of tenses. Some used the present tense to write about the past while others used it to write about what the village was famous for. These mistakes sometimes affected the logical development of ideas, particularly if the ideas in the three paragraphs were not clearly linked. For example, in the same article, a candidate wrote about how the village was demolished and the fact that it was now visited by many people.

Other language problems included mistakes related to verb form (e.g. ‘will broke’), subject-verb agreement (e.g. ‘Lucky Village people is’), noun agreement (e.g. ‘many tourist’), parts of speech (e.g. ‘it would bring the lucky to you’) and sentence structure (e.g. ‘Everyone should work hard let them can have a better life’). There was also some Chinese-influenced phrasing (e.g. ‘People don’t want to happen the war’).

Organisation

Well-linked ideas within paragraphs and between sections demonstrated good organisation. Stronger scripts used appropriate cohesive devices and achieved overall coherence through careful structuring of ideas. For example, some candidates depicted the village as an unhygienic place, but said that after the spread of an infectious disease, the result was the village turning into a place famous for environmental protection. Weaker scripts usually showed fuzzy cohesion, repetitive ideas, a sudden change of ideas or no linkage between parts. This often resulted in unintelligible writing or text which was difficult to follow.

Recommendations for Part A

It is recommended that candidates read the task instructions carefully and make a plan before beginning to write, checking that their ideas are relevant to the task requirements. Answers which are well written but off topic are not likely to score high marks.

Candidates should pay attention to the content of their ideas and the accuracy of their writing, and allow time to proofread their work. Markers noted the frequent use of quotations, clichés, stock phrases and unusual vocabulary in candidates’ answers. While there is no rule against using these types of expressions, they should be used sparingly and in the correct context.

Candidates are also advised to read extensively to familiarise themselves with different text types and to expose themselves to a wide range of writing with different purposes.

Part B

This part comprises eight questions (Q2-9), which are based on the modules in the Elective Part of the three-year senior secondary English Language curriculum (S4-6). Candidates were required to choose one question and write about 400 words.

A total of 73,785 candidates attempted Paper 2 Part B. Their work was assessed according to three domains: Content, Language and Organisation. The mean score achieved out of a total score of 42 for each question is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Paper 2 Part B results

Question	Topic	Mean	Popularity %
2	Sports Communication	17.33	14%
3	Drama	12.92	3.9%
4	Social Issues	20.74	19.8%
5	Debating	20.02	13.1%
6	Workplace Communication	18.00	34.0%
7	Popular Culture	18.92	4.4%
8	Poems and Songs	16.04	3.3%
9	Short Stories	17.01	6.8%
Unattempted			0.7%

The following is a summary of candidates' general performance in each question in this part of the exam. The following two sections provide general comments about student performance across all the questions as well as recommendations for candidates who are taking the exam in the future.

Content

Question 2: Learning English through Sports Communication

This question was relatively popular with candidates and, for the most part, was well handled. Stronger candidates were able to give credible reasons why the donation of fitness equipment benefits both the school and the fitness centre. What many students found challenging, however, was the text type, a letter to an organisation making a request. Some candidates began the letter with informal openings such as 'hi' or 'hello, how are you?'. Only the strongest candidates were able to demonstrate audience awareness and appropriate register and tone. They were able to write an appropriately formal letter that was persuasive and would not waste a reader's time or give them a negative impression of the letter writer.

Question 3: Learning English through Drama

Not many candidates chose this question. What appeared to be most challenging was writing an email to convey negative information to an audience of a similar age to the writer and that the writer is likely to know well. The strongest responses were able to draw the drama club's members' attention to the complaints from City Hall while still maintaining harmony among the group. Weaker responses tended to contain a lot of irrelevance, for example talking about the attractiveness of the performance, and not focusing on the issues brought up by the complaint.

Question 4: Learning English through Social Issues

This question was the second most popular. Some candidates, however, appeared to misunderstand 'filming movies' and wrote about filming their own movies or wrote about watching movies in the city centre. The text type was a letter to the editor and the stronger answers were clearly familiar with what such a genre looks like. Weaker responses tended to be too informally written for a letter to the editor, or were more akin to an argumentative essay rather than a letter. Candidates who supported filming movies in the city centre were able to come up with stronger arguments on the whole than those who opposed it.

Question 5: Learning English through Debating

This was another popular question and on the whole candidates answered it quite well. Some had trouble understanding 'access to lockers' and used a lot of their answer to complain about the size of the lockers, the location

arguments put forward to change the existing policy. The other main difference was the ability of the candidates to write a letter to a known recipient, an important person in the school who has a lot of power. Letters that lectured the principal would very likely be negatively viewed by the recipient and so could not be awarded the top marks even where the arguments put forward were sound.

Question 6: Learning English through Workplace Communication

This question was by far the most popular among candidates. Most candidates were able to talk about the major parts of the question adequately, namely the routine and good and bad parts of the job. Some candidates, however, did not read the question carefully and chose not to focus on a costumed character performer, instead focusing on other summer jobs. The stronger answers demonstrated creativity and imagination and were able to select and use language and organisation typical of an article that you would find in a newspaper or magazine.

Question 7: Learning English through Popular Culture

This question was not particularly popular with students. Of those candidates who answered it, some had difficulty as they seemed not to have been very familiar with what a stand-up comedy show was, but there were plenty of examples of candidates who seemed to know a lot about the topic and were able to write about it well. The weaker candidates were not able to describe the performance they watched. As in Question 6, stronger candidates showed good awareness of what an article would typically be like and were able to select content and language that would have a positive effect on the audience.

Question 8: Learning English through Poems and Songs

This was the least popular question. The weaker candidates did not appear to have read the question carefully and talked about being in a singing contest rather than a poetry festival. These candidates found it difficult to elaborate on their ideas. Stronger candidates were able to give specific details of the preparation for the poetry festival. They were also able to keep the content relevant for other students in the school magazine. Most candidates were able to use past tenses to recount the experience but some of the weaker candidates struggled with their tense use.

Question 9: Learning English through Short Stories

This was a moderately popular choice for candidates. The question arguably favoured creative and imaginative students, but not enough of the candidates were able to recount a story with a climax and some kind of resolution. Some candidates wrote about holding a farewell party instead of the events leading to the sudden departure of a roommate. The stronger candidates were more aware of the typical sentence structures and features of fictional stories and were able to recreate the structure and features through their language choices.

General comments

The comments below relate to all answers (Questions 2 to 9) from this section of the exam and focus on where candidates could have performed better. The comments broadly focus on candidates' choice of language, the accuracy of their language and their strategies for developing coherent and cohesive texts.

Choice of language

One area where the quality, and consequently the marks, of candidates' responses suffered was through the poor choice and use of stock phrases, clichés and quotes. The biggest problems were with the accuracy and appropriateness of these phrases, which may give the reader a negative impression of the writer.

Some examples of inaccurate or inappropriate stock phrases:

- 'the first recurring to my mind is'
- 'the justification to which my stance can be ascribed to are manifold'
- 'my justification to which my propensity can be ascribed are manifold'
- 'situated in such stagnant plight, I see no point in...'
- 'an incontestable truth'

Some of the phrases may be grammatically correct, but because of their verbosity would be better suited to satire or comedy. Such stock phrases would have no place in an email to a classmate or an article for the school magazine, or for that matter almost any written text candidates would need to write. Other problematic phrases were literary, so again would not really have a place in articles, emails and letters.

The other problem with language choice was the use of quotations in candidates' answers. Several answers quoted Nelson Mandela, Steve Jobs and even Nicholas Tse and the quotes were sometimes lengthy. As quotations are not candidates' own language, they do not contribute much to responses and may, in fact, negatively affect the marks awarded because of their impact on tone and style and the fact that they do not always cohere with other parts of the text. These phrases therefore often negatively impacted performance across all three domains (content, language, organisation).

Accuracy of language

Many candidate responses were hampered by grammatical inaccuracy and poor spelling of commonly used vocabulary. Problems frequently occurred in the use of tenses, subject-verb agreement, parts of speech, singular/plural/uncountable nouns and spelling. Some examples are given below:

- 'please donation your equipment' (part of speech)
- 'the donate of equipment' (part of speech)
- 'the donation benefit both you and us' (subject-verb agreement)
- 'your centre have many equipments' (subject-verb agreement + uncountable noun)
- 'last summer, I work in one of the local theme parks' (tense)
- 'safty' (for 'safety' – spelling)
- 'cinima' (for 'cinema' – spelling)

Stronger candidates were able to use a range of vocabulary and sentence patterns in ways appropriate to the text type. They skillfully chose language that was appropriate for the audience and to the style and register of an email/letter/article/letter to the editor.

Strategies for developing coherent and cohesive text

Many candidates' responses could have been enhanced with more sophisticated means for organising text. There was far too much attention to discourse markers as a way of organising text (firstly, secondly, furthermore, moreover, besides) which led to their overuse in paragraphs. Stronger candidates distinguished themselves from other candidates in their use of more sophisticated means of developing coherent and cohesive text. They were able to make use of such techniques as lexical repetition, word families, and pronoun referencing (it, they), and structured content logically, meeting reader/audience expectations for content.

Recommendations for Part B

Candidates can do several things to improve their performance, both during the exam itself and when preparing for it. They need to be aware of their writing while they are doing it. They need to notice errors and inappropriacy as it occurs so that they can edit their work to improve its accuracy and appropriacy. During the exam it is extremely important that candidates read the questions carefully, as this will help them to address the keys points better. This might involve underlining key words or phrases that need to feature in the response. By being more careful, candidates can minimise the chances of a low mark due to an incomplete response.

In preparing for the written paper, students should be wary of focusing only on vocabulary and stock phrases and quotes, and on a small number of sentence structures that they feel markers will appreciate. It is vitally important that candidates make language choices that are appropriate to what they are writing. Candidates should try and become familiar with different text types (e.g. articles in magazines, letters and emails). Reading letters to the editor or magazine articles regularly will allow candidates to get used to what features of language are common and what is considered appropriate for these text types. Wider reading in general is likely to help with spelling and word choice, and candidates should try and balance narrowly-focused grammar and vocabulary activities with free-writing and extensive reading in order to maximise the chances of a good performance.

Paper 3

Paper 3 consisted of three parts; Part A, Part B1 and Part B2. All candidates were required to complete Part A and then choose either Part B1 or Part B2. Part B1 was designed to be the easiest section, while Part B2 was designed to be the most difficult section. The total number of candidates taking Paper 3 was 73,405. A total of 26,648 candidates chose Part B1 while 46,757 candidates chose B2, meaning that 36% of candidates chose B1 and 64% of candidates chose B2. Candidates who attempted Parts A and B2 were able to attain the full range of levels, while Level 4 was the highest level attainable for candidates who attempted Parts A and B1.

Overall results

A statistical analysis of Paper 3 was carried out. The overall results are given in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Paper 3 overall results

	Full Mark	Mean Score (%)	S.D. (%)
Part A	60	48.98	24.69
Part B1	54	42.49	27.02
Part B2	54	51.17	17.69

Part A

In Part A, candidates had to listen to four recordings in which three students, Helen Lee, Mike Wan and John Tung, spoke with each other and with other people about a project they had been asked to do to produce YouTube clips for their school website.

Task 1 (Mean = 70.0%)

Candidates were required to fill in a note sheet while listening to a meeting between Helen, Mike, John and Helen's teacher Ms. Stanley. The information required in the note sheet included names, dates and other specific information. All items required one word answers, except for Item 6, which required an email address. The items in this task ranged from very easy (Item 3 at 97% correct) to relatively difficult (Item 9 at 28% correct), though all but two of the items (8 and 9) were answered correctly by more than half of the candidates. Item 8 required the answer *article*, which was mentioned just once, and so proved difficult. The answer for Item 9, *ghosts*, was given twice, but candidates were either unable to identify this as the correct word to use, or were unable to spell the word correctly. The examination setters felt that it was important that the first task be accessible to the majority of candidates and this proved to be the case, as most candidates were able to identify the information asked for.

Task 2 (Mean = 67.3%)

In Task 2, Helen, Mike and John discussed the theme to use for their YouTube video clips. Candidates had to complete a table. The information required related to the speakers' opinions on the possible themes suggested, with their reasons, and so required some drawing of inferences from what the speakers said. The items in the task ranged from 38% to 97% answered correctly.

The items that required candidates to decide whether the speakers supported a theme proved relatively easy, with 84.5% getting these items correct. The reasons proved to be a little more challenging, with some candidates providing answers that indicated a basic misunderstanding. For example, Item 19 required the answer that most students *know the (important) places already*, but a number of candidates wrote *this place*, which was too specific. Item 23 proved to be the most difficult item in the task (38% correct) and required the answer *boring old writers* (though just *writers* was accepted as a correct answer). Other items proved difficult because incorrect forms or spellings of the required words were given, such as Item 56 (56% correct). The answer was *comics* and answers such as *comic* and *commics* were not accepted as they did not indicate that the candidate understood that what was required was a theme (so plural form) and what the theme actually was (so correct spelling required).

Task 3 (Mean = 34.2%)

In this task, candidates listened to an interview between Helen and Neelay Shah, a senior officer from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. In the interview, Neelay told the story of how a wild boar had attacked some villagers in the New Territories. Candidates had to listen to the story and complete a set of notes outlining the story. The task proved to be challenging for most candidates, with mean scores for the items ranging from a high of 54% to a low of just 7%.

The task required candidates to listen to a narrative interspersed with probing questions from Helen and to complete short notes with words or phrases either drawn directly from the recording or reformulated to fit the structure of the notes. In the first part of the task, Neelay described some of the household items that had been damaged. These seemed straightforward, *cupboard*, *carpet* and *curtains* (Items 29-31), but proved difficult for candidates as they had to extract these items of specific information from a section of the recording in which there was a lot of competing information. In particular, Item 30 proved very difficult (just 17% correct), possibly because carpets are not commonly found in Hong Kong homes.

The second part of the task consisted of a chronological retelling of the story of the wild boar in note form. Candidates had to understand the details of the story and then formulate answers to fit the notes, both syntactically and semantically. This proved quite difficult for most candidates. In Item 32, candidates had to complete the sentence ‘The boar _____ the dog.’ Acceptable answers were *chased* or *scared*, but some candidates wrote *scared of*, which conveyed the opposite meaning to that intended. Other items that required sentence completion with more than a single word also proved quite challenging, for example Item 33 (*broke his arm*), Item 34 (*banging the floor with a stick*) and Item 38 (*ate the food in the kitchen*), which on average were answered correctly by about one third of candidates. Other items required candidates to complete the notes with single or double word nouns, such as *injection* (Item 35), *cage* (Item 36), *dog food* (Item 37) and *vet* (Item 39). These items proved easier, except for Item 39 (18% correct), due perhaps to unfamiliarity with the term. The most difficult item in the task was Item 41, for which candidates had to provide an answer such as *was tranquilized*. As this was considered an unfamiliar term, answers such as *fell asleep* or *was caught* were accepted and the word *sleep* was mentioned three times in the recording. However, the idea proved to be too difficult for candidates to grasp and just 7% got the item correct.

The last item in the task, Item 42 (*released the boar or set the boar free*), was answered correctly by more than half of the candidates, indicating that most did understand the general thrust of the story, even though they might not have been able to extract many of the details from a free-flowing narrative.

Task 4 (Mean = 32%)

In Task 4, candidates listened while John showed the first of the YouTube clips to the teacher. The first part of the task covered an interview in the YouTube clip between Helen and Robbie Lo from an animal charity. Candidates had to complete a table with information from the clip. The items proved to be quite difficult for candidates due to the quite specific nature of the content and the required answers. Item 43, for example, required the answer *abandoned farm animals*, but many candidates wrote just *abandoned animals*, which was not specific enough and so scored no marks. Just 19% of candidates answered the item correctly.

In Item 48 (25% correct), candidates were asked to complete the sentence ‘This method hasn’t resulted in _____’, which required an answer such as *drop in population* or *fewer stray dogs*. Without the underlined object, the answer was unclear and so did not gain a mark. Another example was in Item 54, where the stem was ‘HK Government thinks the public would not _____.’ The required answer was *support/accept/agree with the method*, but many candidates simply wrote *agree*, which was too vague. This item was answered correctly by just 10% of candidates and may also have proved difficult as the recording states that ‘the government in Hong Kong doesn’t want to use this method’ and so candidates had to reformulate their answers to fit the negative structure of the stem.

The most difficult item in Task 4 and in the whole test was Item 53, which was answered correctly by just 3% of candidates. Candidates were required to complete the stem ‘Part of the animal’s _____.’ with the answer *ear is cut off*. Candidates were unable to process what would be an unfamiliar concept and then put it into the correct form, i.e. the information ‘ear’ and ‘cut off’ were both required.

In the second part of the task, Ms. Stanley gave her opinions on the You Tube clip and candidates had to complete a table summarising her criticisms and suggestions, as well as John’s reaction to Ms. Stanley’s comments. Candidates were required to infer Ms. Stanley’s opinions from her comments to John. Items 56 to 59 proved to be challenging for candidates, with mean correct scores on these items of around 27%. Though the answers were fairly explicitly provided by Ms. Stanley, with repetition/reformulation by John, candidates had to listen carefully and write their answers quickly as the information was quite dense. Item 58 was most challenging, with only 21% answering correctly. The answer required was *biased* or *unbalanced*. Candidates may not have understood ‘biased’ as being equivalent to the more obviously negative ‘unbalanced’. The final item, Item 60, in which candidates had to choose from five possible adjectives what they thought John’s reaction to Ms. Stanley’s comment was, proved to be quite easy, with 64% choosing the correct answer *disappointed*.

Recommendations for Part A

Candidates should spend the preparation time familiarising themselves with the tasks. With the help of the given instructions/headings/prompts/choices, they may be able to predict the likely development of a text. They may be able to predict the vocabulary they will hear in the recording and make guesses about possible answers. Candidates should also read the prompts and stems carefully to predict the form of answers required, i.e. whether it should be a single noun or noun phrase, or a short clause conveying a more complete meaning. Before moving on to Part B, candidates should take the time to check whether their answers make sense within the context of the situation. All the tasks were designed around a theme so there should have been enough contextual clues to support the answers.

Part B

Part B employs a graded approach, in which candidates are required to complete either Part B1 or Part B2, but not both. Part B1 is designed to be the easier option and Part B2 is designed to be more difficult.

In both Parts B1 and B2, the situation was similar, with the candidate adopting the role of Joey Wong, an assistant at the Kowloon Exotic Pets Hospital. However, the tasks in B1 and B2 were different (see below for a detailed description of each task).

In both parts, candidates were judged on their ability to locate and communicate relevant content effectively, with effective communication in English (accuracy of language use, coherence and organisation, and appropriacy) counting for 50% of the marks in all tasks except Task 5. Markers paid attention not only to whether candidates were able to locate the relevant information in the data file, but also to whether they were able to present it in an effective manner. With respect to this component, candidates were expected to demonstrate that they could: 1) effectively manipulate content from the data file in a wide variety of ways to create grammatically correct texts; and 2) produce original language using a range of sentence structures with accurate grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Candidates' mean scores for the six tasks are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Mean scores for Paper 3 Part B tasks

Part B1 (easy section)			Part B2 (difficult section)		
Task 5	Task 6	Task 7	Task 8	Task 9	Task 10
41.22%	42.99%	43.25%	60.55%	48.52%	44.44%

The following section discusses the candidates' performance in the different tasks.

Part B1

Part B1 consisted of three tasks:

- Completing an introductory webpage
- Writing a reply letter in response to a letter of complaint
- Writing a report about virtual pets

The B1 data file included the following kinds of texts: a podcast of a pet club show, which candidates listened to; a complaint letter; a webpage; an online forum exchange; the foreword to a book about exotic pets; a chart; an extract from an interview; and an extract from a newsletter.

The candidate's performance is summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Paper 3 Part B1 results

Task	Full Mark	Mean Score (%)	S.D. (%)
5	18	41.22	29.96
6	18	42.99	24.49
7	18	43.25	26.62

From the table it can be seen that the test proved to be successful in discriminating weaker from stronger candidates.

Task 5

In this task, candidates were required to use information from the data file to complete an introductory web page for the Kowloon Exotic Pets Hospital. The task was worth 18 marks: 14 marks for task completion, 2 marks for language and 2 marks for appropriacy. Language was judged according to the comprehensibility and accuracy (grammar and spelling) of the answer. Appropriacy was judged according to whether the answer was written in an appropriate register, tone and style with respect to the required text (e.g. a definition). The main skills tested were the identification and appropriate presentation of information.

The task was divided into three different questions, all of which presented slightly different challenges to candidates. Question 1, 'What is the definition of an exotic pet?', challenged candidates to provide a brief answer in grammatically correct and appropriate English, using full sentences. Question 2, 'What kinds of exotic pets are there

in Hong Kong?', challenged candidates not only to identify relevant information but also to organise it effectively by placing it in a correct general-specific relationship with the information in the prompt, for instance, where examples were called for. Question 3, 'Why do people have exotic pets?', challenged candidates to present their answer in a stylistically coherent way, for example, using parallel structure when constructing each of the bullet point responses.

Task 6

This task required candidates to write a reply letter in response to a letter of complaint addressed to the candidate's supervisor. The task therefore involved carefully reading and understanding the letter of complaint, as well as identifying the main elements of the complaint, which included: first, the writer's dissatisfaction about a recent visit to the pet hospital; second, the writer's request for further information on the choice of an exotic pet. Candidates had to identify relevant information from the data file to be used in the reply and in this way they combined information from different sources in the data file in order to create an appropriate reply letter. In this task, information that was to be found in the podcast (i.e. the listening input) was often overlooked by candidates.

The better candidates demonstrated a good understanding of the letter genre, including how to open and close the letter. In this case, because the letter was in response to a complaint, it was necessary to include an apology in the letter, as indicated in the instruction email. However, this was done by only a little over one third of the candidates. Candidates varied in their ability to use the appropriate register for a written apology, as illustrated by these examples:

*I feel so sorry about that.
I would like to send the sincerest apology to you.*

Here the second example is more appropriate to the context of an apology found in a letter, with the first example more likely to be encountered in spoken language.

Task 7

In this task, candidates were required to write a report about virtual pets, based on a range of sources in the data file. The title of the report ('Virtual pets: A report') was provided. This task therefore tested candidates' ability to locate relevant information and synthesise it using language appropriate to a formal report.

In this task, candidates were asked to provide some background and were prompted to refer to available statistics. This involved interpreting and summarising a graphic chart. The best candidates were able to do this in a concise manner, by distilling the relevant message from the chart (i.e. the increase in the number of virtual pet owners).

Candidates were also tasked with describing the kinds of activities that virtual pet owners engage in with their pets. In order to do this, they had to exercise their ability to inference, generalising from a number of specific examples that were provided in one of the data file texts. Locating this less explicitly marked information appears to have been challenging for candidates, who did not generally do as well on this section as on others.

Part B2

Part B2 consisted of three tasks:

- Writing a website information page about becoming a veterinary nurse
- Writing a speech about virtual pets for an open day event
- Writing a letter to the editor in response to criticism of the exotic pets hospital

The B2 data file included the following kinds of texts: a podcast of a pet club show, which candidates listened to; a chart; an advertisement for further study; magazine articles; an interview extract; an extract from an academic book; newspaper articles; a letter to the editor; an extract from an annual report, including a chart; an email.

The candidates' performance is summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Paper 3 Part B2 results

Task	Full Mark	Mean Score (%)	S.D. (%)
8	18	60.55	15.88
9	18	48.52	17.73
10	18	44.44	19.46

From the table it can be seen that the test generated a reasonably wide score range and was quite reliable.

Task 8

Overall, this task was well done, with a mean of 60.55%. In the task, candidates were required to write a website information page aimed at young people or school leavers interested in becoming a veterinary nurse. Candidates had to identify relevant information from sources in the data file, including the listening input, the Pet Club podcast. They then needed to present this information, using an appropriate semi-formal register. Candidates were asked to provide a title for the information page and the best candidates were able to choose one which not only summarised the contents, but also demonstrated some awareness of audience (young people interested in this career option), as in the following example:

All you have to know about being a veterinary nurse

The title above indicates the content of the page – providing information about the veterinary nurse career – and at the same time makes an interpersonal appeal to the audience, through its use of the pronoun ‘you’. In the better answers, such techniques, appealing to the reader as part of an audience of young people/students were also found in other parts of the answer, as below, in the use of questions or in the use of the keyword ‘graduates’:

Ever considering to be a veterinary nurse after graduation?

After studying the courses, graduates can choose to work as a veterinary nurse in a pet clinic, such as a horse clinic.

Weaker candidates struggled to demonstrate this kind of audience awareness and as a result, the purpose of providing information and giving advice was not clear in their answers.

Task 9

This task was more challenging, and had a mean of 48.52%. The task involved writing a speech about old people’s use of virtual pets, to be given at an open day event. Candidates had to synthesise information across a range of sources, including the representation of visual information (a pie chart) in textual form. For this item, the better candidates were those who not only summarised the relevant information, but also commented on it, as here, where the candidate characterised the statistics as ‘notable’:

What is notable is that 26% of virtual pet users are over 65!

Commenting on the information presented in this way shows that the candidate was able to understand the relevant information and present a written stance towards it.

One challenge for candidates doing this task was to open and close the speech appropriately. For example, weaker candidates failed to provide an opening typical of a speech and sometimes used a phrase like ‘Dear guests’, more appropriate to a letter.

Task 10

This was the most challenging of the tasks in Part B2, with a mean of 44.44%. Candidates were required to write a letter to the editor in order to respond publically to criticism of the exotic pet hospital. In order to do this correctly, candidates needed to be able to understand the communicative situation, in which there were multiple audiences. In particular, they needed to understand that, although they were responding to the arguments raised by an individual, they nevertheless had to address their letter to the newspaper editor and not to that individual (here, Mr. W. Squeers). Although many candidates began their letters appropriately by addressing them to the editor, there were some candidates who began ‘Dear Mr. Squeers’.

One challenge that candidates encountered related to the higher level skill of constructing an argument. In order to argue against the letter it was necessary for candidates to concede some points. For example, in his letter, Mr. Squeers argued that exotic pets damage the ecosystem. To refute this point, candidates had to acknowledge the problem but focus their argument on the steps taken by the pet hospital to minimise this kind of damage. This required a careful reading, to determine what kind of arguments could be made based on the evidence available in the data file.

The task required candidates to make strong, explicit refutations of the points made by Mr. Squeers. The following is a good example of such a strong, explicit statement of stance in a candidate’s writing:

Dear Editor,

I am writing in response to the letter from Mr. W. Squeers on 23rd March, 2014. I would like to point out that the Kowloon Exotic Pets Hospital is doing a lot of voluntary work for the community in Hong Kong, and is not only concerned about making money.

As well as expressing a clear refutation, this candidate provides an opening sentence that conforms to the conventions for a letter to the editor.

Recommendations for Part B

As in previous years, there was a tendency among the weaker candidates (in both B1 and B2) to over-rely on information in the data file, copying it directly into their answers. This included instances where candidates actually quoted from the data file, sourcing the information and using quotation marks to show that the information had been directly appropriated. Candidates should avoid the temptation to copy in this way as their language marks are based on their ability to manipulate the data file, for example by paraphrasing information, as well as the use of original language. In other words, direct copying from the data file (especially where it is systematic) will lead to a lower mark for language ability and therefore a lower mark overall.

This year it was apparent that weaker candidates (in particular, those attempting Part B1) struggled to find information from the listening input when compared to information located in the written data file. In order to address this weakness, candidates should make full use of the time available before the listening to read through the question prompts in the data file and in the question and answer book. Doing so will help candidates form expectations about the kinds of information that they need to attend to in the listening. This will, in turn, allow them to take notes on those parts of the listening that are directly relevant to the examination questions. Candidates should practice this kind of 'strategic' listening, instead of trying to take notes on every single point in the listening text.

It appears that, in some tasks, candidates were not paying sufficient attention to the instructions and were therefore answering only part of the question. In Task 6, for example, an apology was called for in the instructions but only provided by a fraction of the candidature. It is important that candidates read the prompt carefully to ensure they understand all elements of the task. It was also noted that some candidates had difficulty locating information if they were required to use inferencing to generalise principles from specific instances (e.g. Task 7). Therefore candidates need to practise drawing inferences from texts in preparation for this examination. When candidates are confronted with a particular situation in a reading text, they should be working to not only comprehend that particular situation, but also be asking themselves 'what does this situation mean for other contexts?', and 'what general principle does this situation suggest?'

Paper 4

A total of 30 versions of the question paper were used over the ten-day examination period. The examination comprised two parts: Group Interaction and Individual Response. The Group Interaction discussion tasks were based on a variety of short texts. These occasionally included pictures to aid comprehension. Depending on the questions given, candidates were required to perform a variety of functional tasks, such as giving opinions, making suggestions, solving problems, explaining choices, arguing for and/or against a motion, and discussing the positive and negative effects of a suggestion.

The candidates' performance was judged in four domains: Pronunciation & Delivery; Communication Strategies; Vocabulary & Language Patterns; and Ideas & Organisation (see the Paper 4 [Speaking] Assessment Guidelines for more details). The mean scores given for each of the domains (out of a total of 14) were 7.13, 7.03, 6.83 and 7.35 respectively. The mean score achieved out of a total score of 56, derived by adding up the domain scores, was 28.33.

Candidates' performance in each of the four domains is discussed below for each part of the assessment.

Part A Group Interaction

Pronunciation & Delivery

Examiners reported that most of the candidates spoke audibly but many struggled with fluency. They also reported that the lack of intonation and the rapid delivery of some of the stronger candidates often made it difficult to award high level marks. Examples of common pronunciation problems reported by the examiners are tabulated below:

Problem	Examples			
Lexical items	in addition (pronounced ‘addiction’) diabetes (pronounced ‘dibetis’) habits (pronounced ‘hobbits’) failure (pronounced ‘failer’) courteous (pronounced ‘curtes’) traditional (pronounced ‘charditional’) soup (pronounced ‘soap’) feeling (pronounced ‘filling’)		beneficial (pronounced ‘benefical’) email (pronounced ‘emeel’) youth (pronounced ‘yorkf’) lack (pronounced ‘lick’) tertiary (pronounced ‘tortury/territory’) screenwriter (pronounced ‘screamwriter’) definition (pronounced ‘definatian’)	
Consonant clusters	proposal (pronounced ‘poposal’) blog (pronounced ‘bog’) published (pronounced ‘published’) friends (pronounced ‘fans’) classroom (pronounced ‘cassroom’) programme (pronounced ‘pogram’ or ‘pogam’)		waterfront (pronounced ‘waterfont’) qualities (pronounced ‘kalities’) complain (pronounced ‘compain’) cloned (pronounced ‘coned’) debts (pronounced with /b/)	
Word stress in multi-syllabic words	ambassadors	economic	couponing	tourists
	encounter	skateboarding	internship	tourism
	photography	youngsters	celebrities	motivation
	nowadays	subscribe	advertisement	fascinating
	graffiti	infrastructure	necessity	technological
	Switzerland	specific	advertising	intelligence
	economy	resources	extraordinary	dinosaur
Dropping of final consonants	<u>because</u> , <u>experience</u> , <u>service</u> , <u>besides</u> , <u>super-sized</u> , <u>clothes</u>			

Communication Strategies

Strong candidates were better this year at encouraging weaker candidates to contribute. Some even took the initiative to give some ideas for these candidates to comment on, and did so politely. In doing this, candidates displayed effective communicative strategies, including making reference to ideas suggested by other group members, rephrasing to clarify meaning, elaborating and expanding on points given by others, and drawing members’ attention to ideas provided in the text to make the discussion flow smoothly. It was also noted, however, that a number of otherwise strong candidates were overzealous in their encouragement of weaker candidates, leading to rather awkward situations where the weaker candidate obviously felt uncomfortable because of the actions of the stronger one.

Examiners also noted a strong reliance on the part of many candidates on the use of stock expressions such as ‘I agree’ or ‘That’s a very good idea’ without further elaboration on what they agreed with or why it was a good idea. Some followed such statements with the opposing views, which resulted in poor coherence in the group discussion. Some were so anxious to use all the notes they had prepared that they simply rushed the other candidates through. Examiners also observed that quite a number of candidates simply read from their note cards, making little eye contact with group members. Some looked at the examiners instead of the group during the discussion while others started the discussion by giving a mini-presentation then stopped to allow for comment on their points. Then, instead of responding based on the other candidate’s comment, they simply moved on to their next ‘mini-presentation’. This gave the impression that they were keener to present what they had prepared than to contribute to the interaction. This had a detrimental effect on the overall interaction and was taken into account in the score awarded in this domain.

Examiners also commented that weaker candidates often simply waited for others to invite them to contribute. This lack of confidence resulted in an impression of passivity and a low score in this domain.

Vocabulary and Language Patterns

As in previous years, most candidates succeeded in contributing something to the discussion, but their lack of vocabulary and inability to construct grammatically coherent utterances often made their ideas imprecise and ineffective. Examples of common problems in language patterns reported by examiners are listed below:

Problem	Examples
Commonly misunderstood word(s)/phrase(s)	street culture urban dictionary scold e-textbooks ban waterfront
Chinese English	widen their eye different country people
Comparatives	more better more harder more cheaper
Modals	can playing
Agreement	she don't
Verb 'be'	I am agree with you
Transitive verb Singular/plural nouns	discuss about childrens make many money
Connectives	although ... but
To-infinitive/bare infinitive	let us to do make them to do

Examiners also reported that some discussions were not easy to follow because the candidates misinterpreted the key ideas in the reading material. On the topic of common ‘health mistakes’, for example, candidates talked about how to stay healthy instead of the health mistakes listed. When asked to discuss the pros and cons of advertising on society, they focused on the pros and cons of public service broadcasting instead of commercial advertising. The word ‘society’ also seemed to be a problem, with some groups thinking that it referred to a ‘debating society’ rather than society in general.

Ideas and Organisation

Most examiners gave positive feedback on the wide range of topics covered and the visual support provided on topics that might prove challenging to some candidates, for example, airport ambassadors and ferris wheels. Most topics were related to current issues closely related to students’ life. Good discussions were produced when candidates were asked to talk about familiar issues like the changing role of technology. However, certain topics, such as those with more of an international perspective, proved to be challenging for most candidates. In such cases, candidates often either went off topic or just repeated the ideas given in the reading material. Candidates also had problems in the type of discussion where they were required to choose one preferred option from the three given. In such cases the interaction often became fragmented and candidates struggled to link others’ contributions to their own ideas. Sometimes, poor performance was due to the misinterpretation of the key word, for example, ‘discipline’ or ‘e-textbook’.

Stronger candidates were able to link the topic to their personal experience (e.g. food photos, super-sized food, education system), drawing examples from their school or home life (e.g. writing emails, couponing, helicopter parents) and using ideas provided by other candidates to make their argument more substantial. Such candidates showed sensitivity and critical thinking on topics like cyber-spying on kids, pursuing a dream, and creativity (e.g. questions to ask a dinosaur hunter, street culture, and the development of Central waterfront).

Part B Individual Response

Candidates were given one minute to respond to a question given by the examiner. The majority of the candidates were able to give comprehensible, audible responses. They were allowed to ask for repetition or request another question but this was included within the given one minute response time.

Examiners reported that quite a number of candidates wasted time by saying “Thank you for your question” or “This is a very good question”. Instead of using such fillers, they could have focused more on the key words in the question and begun their answer. Questions which required high-order thinking seemed to be challenging for most candidates,

though most examiners considered the questions well-set. A number of candidates lacked the initiative to elaborate on their responses after getting a Yes/No question such as ‘Do you like reading magazines?’ or ‘Do you think that being a police officer is a dangerous job?’ Some candidates simply provided a one-word reply and waited for prompts from the examiners. Others seemingly failed to understand the meaning of words like ‘rude’ and ‘compulsory’, and thus gave an incomprehensible response.

General recommendations

During the examination, candidates should read the materials, and listen to the question(s) given by the examiners, carefully. They should also pay close attention and be courteous to other candidates in the Group Interaction. For a natural interaction to take place, candidates should listen attentively to others and show a genuine interest in what they have to say on an issue instead of focusing only on their own prepared notes. They should also note that, in any discussion, it is only natural that someone may want them to clarify something that they have said. This is a frequent and necessary part of spontaneous interaction. They should not think that this would automatically put them in a negative light with examiners as having been in some way deficient in their communication.

To acquire a broader range of vocabulary, candidates are encouraged to expose themselves to a wide range of genres. To perform well in any examination, candidates should not restrict their reading materials to local current affairs only; knowledge of the world is of paramount importance. Instead of simply knowing about an issue, they should reflect on it and be able to justify their views. Although it has been said on many previous occasions, it remains true that to help improve fluency and expression of ideas, there is no substitute for frequent meaningful speaking practice in English with classmates and teachers.

School-based Assessment (SBA) Report

A total of 66,280 candidates participated in the School-based Assessment in 2014. As in previous years, it was found that the marks submitted by participating schools were on average accurate and reliable: 78% of schools fell into the ‘within the expected range’ category, while the marks of 11.9% of schools were higher than expected, and 10.1% lower than expected. Among the schools with marks higher or lower than expected, the majority only deviated slightly from the expected range. This is encouraging and shows that the majority of teachers had a good understanding of SBA implementation, meaning that the marking standards were generally appropriate and consistent.

In order to ensure that sufficient support is provided to help schools implement SBA smoothly and effectively, district coordinators kept close contact with the schools under their charge and carried out standardisation and feedback sessions on a regular basis. Help and advice were also offered to schools which encountered problems and school visits were conducted when necessary. In addition to this year-round support, briefing sessions and professional development courses were conducted at the beginning of the academic year to familiarise teachers with the SBA component. All sessions and courses were well attended and feedback from the participants was generally positive.

General Comments and Recommendations

SBA has now been implemented smoothly for a number of years, but there is always room for improvement. From time to time, it is always a good idea to review and reflect on what we are doing and to remind ourselves of the core principles of SBA. Although SBA is basically a school-based component and schools are given a lot of flexibility in its implementation, it is important to remember that there are some basic requirements and mandatory assessment conditions which all schools must observe in order to ensure that all students are able to benefit and are assessed in a fair and reliable manner. It is therefore hoped that all teachers will note the following comments and reflect on their own practice to make sure that the correct procedure is being followed.

1. The focus of the assessment should be on the speaking ability of the students and not on the students' memorisation skills or their ability to read aloud. Although this point has been mentioned many times on different occasions and through various channels, some candidates were still found to have written out a complete script of what they intended to say and then read it aloud during the actual assessment, regardless of whether they were making an individual presentation or participating in a group interaction.
2. Some students were given too much time to prepare for the assessment, leading often to over-rehearsal. This is counter-productive as an over-rehearsed performance during the assessment is usually very stilted and unnatural and thus cannot be awarded high marks. Such practices are against the underlying principles and spirit of SBA and cannot benefit the students in the long run. It is possible that there may be some extremely weak students who have great difficulty producing long stretches of intelligible utterances and are afraid of saying anything in

English. When this happens, it is possible to allow students to write out a script and read it aloud during the teaching and practice stage of SBA in order to encourage them to say something. However this is only the initial stage, and students should not be allowed to remain here but should be encouraged to progress. The next step may be for them to utter simple sentences based on their own notes, with the help of some scaffolding, so that by the time they are required to do their first ‘real’ assessment, they are able to express their ideas or opinions on their own, with perhaps some guiding questions to help them.

3. SBA is not a one-off activity; it is an on-going process aimed at developing students’ speaking skills so that they can really communicate with others under different conditions in the future. Teachers should ensure that students are given this opportunity to develop and excel. Teachers should aim to produce students who are able to think critically and to express their own ideas intelligibly and fluently and not just regurgitate what they have read, viewed or heard. If teachers believe and accept the underlying principles and spirit of SBA, many improper practices such as memorisation, reading a written script aloud and not interacting with others during group interaction and so on will no longer happen, and then students will benefit more from this component.
4. Students must be given the opportunity to demonstrate their best possible oral language use. In order to ensure that they can demonstrate their speaking skills effectively, the choice of texts, the design of the assessment tasks and the physical conditions during the assessment all play an important part. Regarding the choice of texts, students should be encouraged to choose something that they are really interested in and teachers can help by checking that the language level is within the students’ range of ability. Even students within the same class may have different levels of language ability, so choosing the right text is the first step to helping students do well in SBA. The design of assessment tasks is also very important. Using tasks which are authentic, interesting and at an appropriate level of difficulty can motivate students to perform better. Different levels of scaffolding can also be provided to help students. When tasks are boring and are too easy or too difficult, students easily lose interest and often resort to formulaic expressions and just go through the motions without any enthusiasm, thus producing work at a much lower level than their real ability. Finally, students must feel relaxed and confident in order to perform well so it is important that some thought is given to the physical conditions in which the assessment takes place. For example, when recording students’ performance, instead of the video camera being directly in front of the students, it could be placed behind the audience or slightly to the side so that it is less intimidating. Showing an interest in what the students are saying is also important.
5. The final point is that the value of regular practice and constructive feedback should never be under-estimated. Good speaking skills can only be developed through frequent practice followed by constructive feedback. Practice on its own is not enough since students need to be made aware of their strengths and areas that need improvement. They must be told what they can do better and what they have to actually do in order to progress. With proper guidance, students will definitely improve and develop better communication skills.

Conclusion

Statistical reports, video recordings of students’ performance and feedback from teachers, district coordinators and students, provide evidence that the SBA component is being carried out effectively in most schools. This success is mainly due to the effort, hard work and cooperation of teachers. In order to ensure that the assessment of this component continues to be reliable, valid and fair, teachers have to constantly review the underlying principles and mandatory assessment conditions to check that they are following the required procedure and to remind themselves of the true purpose of what they are doing.

Appendix 1: Conversion tables between the easier section and more difficult section of Papers 1B and 3B

There were two parts in Papers 1 and 3. Candidates were required to answer ALL questions in Part A. In Part B, candidates could choose EITHER Part B1 (easier section) OR Part B2 (more difficult section). In the grading process, the marks for Part B1 were converted to the marks on the scale for Part B2 using the tables on the next page. For example, if we refer to the conversion table for Paper 1B, a score of 20 marks scored by a candidate taking Part 1B1 would be converted to 5 marks on the 1B2 scale.

These tables were generated using the percentile-equating method as described in the booklet ‘Grading Procedures and Standards-referenced Reporting in the HKDSE Examination’, which can be found on the HKEAA website (http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/Media/Leaflets/HKDSE_SRR_A4_Booklet_Jun2011.pdf).

Conversion tables between the easier section and more difficult section of Papers 1B and 3B.

Paper 1B

1B1 (easier)	1B2 (more difficult)
0	0
1	0
2	0
3	1
4	1
5	1
6	1
7	2
8	2
9	2
10	2
11	3
12	3
13	3
14	3
15	4
16	4
17	4
18	5
19	5
20	5
21	6
22	6
23	7
24	7
25	8
26	9
27	10
28	11
29	12
30	13
31	14
32	16
33	17
34	19
35	22
36	24
37	26
38	29
39	32
40	35
41	38

Paper 3B

3B1 (easier)	3B2 (more difficult)
0	0
1	1
2	2
3	3
4	4
5	5
6	6
7	6
8	7
9	7
10	7
11	8
12	8
13	8
14	9
15	9
16	10
17	10
18	11
19	11
20	12
21	12
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26	14
27	15
28	15
29	16
30	16
31	17
32	17
33	18
34	19
35	20
36	20
37	21
38	22
39	23
40	24
41	25
42	26
43	27
44	28
45	29
46	30

Paper 3B

3B1 (easier)	3B2 (more difficult)
47	31
48	32
49	34
50	35
51	37
52	40
53	43
54	46