Chief Examiner's Report – January 2016

Functional Skills English: Reading Level 2

Section 1 – Overall performance

As a result of the review of Functional Skills English undertaken by OFQUAL, a new model of assessment for Functional Skills English Reading exams was introduced from September 2015. As would be expected, overall pass rates are lower than in the previous academic year.

Whilst many candidates are passing, significant numbers are not. The aim of this report is to try to highlight some of the aspects of the assessments that candidates are finding difficult, and to provide guidance to centres that, if implemented, should ensure a higher pass rate for their candidates.

It is very apparent that many candidates are sitting the exams before they have been adequately prepared for assessment. As Functional Skills English is a summative exam, candidates should only be entered after the teaching and learning has been completed and the candidates are familiar with the types of questions they are likely to encounter.

Section 2 Areas of good performance

2.2.1 – Select and use different types of texts to obtain and utilise relevant information

In general, questions addressing this criterion are well answered. Part of the task is always to identify which is the correct document to use, and the clues provided in the questions tend to be well deciphered. For instance, the question may start with a phrase similar to *According to members of the public...* This would indicate that there will be one document that is exclusively written by members of the public (perhaps a forum), or a document that will contain contributions from members of the public, such as a review section on a website selling a product or service.

Section 3 Areas for development

Level 2

Insufficient number of responses submitted

One very significant contributory factor to low marks is a failure by candidates to submit sufficient responses to questions. As a general rule, the number of marks available for a question is indicative of the number of responses required. It has been very common to see only one response offered for a four mark question, for instance.

On occasion, a question will specify how many responses are required, but frequently this will not be the case; therefore, it is imperative that candidates take note of how many marks are available for each question, and then submit the appropriate number of responses.

As an example, a question may look similar to the question below:

Identify biased phrases from Document 2
5 marks

Upon reading this, the candidate should immediately assume that there will be at least five biased phrases within the document, and that five responses are required.

2.2.2 – Read and summarise information from different sources

The question will always specify the two sources of information that the candidate must use in order to provide the response. If only one source is used, the candidate cannot obtain full marks for the particular question. The sources are usually separate documents, but on occasion may be information from two different people within one document. Once again, it is important that candidates read the question carefully so they fully understand the documents or parts of a document to use in forming responses.

2.2.3 - Comment on how meaning is conveyed

One change introduced as a result of the OFQUAL review was the slight shift of emphasis when assessing assessment criterion 2.2.3: *Identify the purpose of texts and comment on how meaning is conveyed*. Previously, there was an equal emphasis on layout features and language features. At level 2, the greater emphasis is now on how language has been selected and used by an author to enhance communication.

Any question assessing this criterion will specify whether it is language or layout that is being addressed. It is essential that candidates read the question carefully and determine for themselves whether their responses need to cover language or layout. In addition, some questions will ask for examples of a technique being used, whereas others will ask for an explanation of why the technique is effective, or how the technique enhances communication, for instance. Once again, it is essential that candidates read the questions carefully and respond appropriately.

Examples of language techniques used by authors to enhance communication are: humour; alliteration; emotive language; use of the imperative; short, succinct sentences; persuasive language; informal/formal language; hyperbole; bias. This list is by no means exhaustive. It is important that candidates can recognise different techniques employed by authors of a text, and are able to explain how they enhance communication.

2.2.4 – Detect point of view, implicit meaning and/or bias

It is apparent that many candidates have a limited understanding of what constitutes bias within a written document. At level 2, it is common to ask a candidate to identify particular phrases within a document that are biased. It is essential that candidates can distinguish between a factual statement and one that is biased.

It is also important that candidates understand that questions addressing the same criteria in different exam papers will be worded differently. Therefore, a question asking candidates to identify bias may not explicitly mention bias, but may ask candidates to distinguish between opinion and fact, or to simply identify examples of opinion, for example.

A common type of question asks candidates to identify phrases which have a similar or exact meaning to a phrase given in the question. Significant numbers of candidates provide answers that are not taken from the source documents. It is essential that candidates understand that the answers to this type of question are always to be found within the source documents.

2.2.5 - Compare and Contrast

Many level 2 papers will now ask candidates to compare and/or contrast information within a document or across two documents. There is a significant difference between comparing and contrasting two things and merely listing text from a document. Examiners are looking for explicit evidence of comparing and/or contrasting, through candidates using discourse markers such as *on the one hand..., in contrast..., both documents..., whereas...,* or *similarly..., for instance.*

If a question asks, for example, *Compare the reasons given in Documents 1 and 2 for sales increasing,* a candidate will not achieve full marks if they merely list the reasons. In order to gain full marks, comparisons or contrasts must be made. A strong answer may be:

Document 1 suggests the reason was a spell of good weather. However, document 2 specifically denies the weather had an effect and says that the reduction in selling price was the main reason for increased sales. One similarity is that both documents suggest that a TV advertising campaign was a significant factor.

Section 4 Recommendations/Advice for centres

1. Instruct candidates to take note of the number of marks available for a question.

2. Teach candidates how to effectively compare and contrast through the use of discourse markers.

3. Expose candidate to many different documents that contain bias.

4.   Make use of the Guidance for Delivery document, available on the City and Guilds website. The guidance document includes a section on typical teaching activities that will help prepare candidates for the exam.

5.   Make use of the sample papers and worked examples available on the City & Guilds website.

6.   The Adult Literacy Core Curriculum should still underpin all the teaching and learning when preparing candidates for the Functional Skills English exam.

7.   As part of the learning process, expose candidates to all types of source documents, including web-sites, articles, business reports, formal letters and emails, leaflets, promotional material and advertising, amongst others. These should be studied in combination with the Functional Skills English Reading Level 2 criteria, with a view to candidates being able to:

2.2.1   Select and use different types of texts to obtain and utilise relevant information

2.2.2   Read and summarise, succinctly, information/ideas from different sources

2.2.3   Identify the purposes of texts and comment on how meaning is conveyed

2.2.4   Detect point of view, implicit meaning and/or bias

2.2.5   Analyse texts in relation to audience needs and consider suitable responses

Section 5 Additional information

Centres should be aware that pass marks may vary from paper to paper as a result of an awarding process undertaken by City & Guilds. Any difference in pass marks reflects the perceived and actual difference in demand of the exam papers, including the source materials and the questions themselves. Therefore, it is possible that two candidates with the same score may have different overall results (pass or fail) if they sat different papers.

City and Guilds were asked to adopt a non-formulaic approach to questions in reading papers. Prior to OFQUAL's review, all level 2 papers contained at least one question that was identical in every paper. Questions in the current papers are not repeated from one paper to the next, although the assessment criteria being tested remain the same.

Evolve platform

Evolve is the on-screen platform that candidates can use when taking the Functional Skills exams. It is apparent that some candidates are not scrolling down the page when reading some questions, therefore missing important aspects. For instance, a six mark question may ask a candidate to identify language techniques used by an author to enhance communication, and to explain the effectiveness of each technique. In that it is a six mark question, scrolling down the Evolve page would help the candidate to understand that three techniques and three

explanations are required, as the layout of the page will contain separate boxes and headings, eg,

Technique 1...

Explanation of technique

Technique 2...

Explanation of technique

Centres and/or candidates can select to sit a paper-based exam or to use the on-screen e-volve platform. If selecting the paper-based route, centres are reminded that candidates may word-process their responses, with the inherent spell and grammar-checking facilities being made available to candidates. However, internet connectivity is not permitted. Dictionaries should be made available to candidates, irrespective of the mode of examination selected.

Centres should always make use of the practice papers available on the City & Guilds website and should review the information in previous Chief Examiner's reports.

The Guidance for Delivery document, sample papers and worked examples can be found on the City & Guilds website:

http://www.cityandguilds.com/qualifications-and-apprenticeships/skills-for-work-and-life/english-mathematics-and-ict-skills/3748-functional-skills-qualifications#tab=documents

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