**Chief Examiner Report for Functional Skills English**

**NCFE Functional Skills Qualification in English at Level 1 – 501/1660/5**

**NCFE Functional Skills Qualification in English at Level 2 – 600/0140/9**

**September 2019**

**Level 1**

**Reading:**

As noted in previous reports, most learners are able to use information in the texts to obtain relevant information. Successful learners tend to give complete and succinct answers using information found in the source documents. Learners who rely on ideas from their own knowledge, instead of information in the text, will fail to gain marks. This is often the case for learners at borderline or failing. These learners’ answers tend to be characterised with either very brief or underdeveloped answers or very lengthy answers that drift from the question.

There are some specific areas of concern with questions about presentational features. The learners failing to gain marks in these questions either have no idea what the term means and tend to quote sections of the text, or they list random presentational features. Not all presentation features are present in each source document. Many learners are citing presentation features that simply aren’t present.

As in my previous report, it remains the case that learners failing or at borderline often find questions based on higher order skills more challenging. Most learners are able to successfully answer questions based on the first two coverage and range statements:

* 1.2.1 Identify the *main points* and ideas and how they are presented in a variety of texts
* 1.2.2 Understand different texts in detail.

However, questions based on the last two coverage and range statements are often answered incorrectly:

* 1.2.3 Utilise information contained in texts
* 1.2.4 Identify suitable responses to texts

It would therefore be beneficial for learners to rehearse questions that require them to interpret meaning in texts – particularly focusing on understanding inference and using context.

**Writing:**

These assessments have two questions with stimulus material leading into a task which is supported by bullet points. Students are able to use some of the information in the question. At Level 1 there will be an element of functional thinking in completing the task. The majority of students seem confident in meeting the requirements for content at this level. Good answers were those where students provided clear and detailed information. Strong students are also able to use effective and sometimes ambitious vocabulary. The ability to structure text was more patchy. The conventions of how to structure texts such as letters, emails, reports and articles is relatively straightforward to teach. Each Level 1 Writing paper has 4 marks available for format and structure. Centres should ensure learners are adequately prepared as stronger students are able to use structure accurately and gained all 4 marks.

Skills in spelling, punctuation and grammar have varied widely. They may be time consuming to teach, but the rules are straightforward. Given the significant percentage of marks available for SPaG, achievement in these areas remains an area of concern. For learners looking at progression to Level 2 in 2020/21, there will be a significant leap in requirements from L1 of the legacy qualification to L2 in Reformed Functional Skills. Putting the groundwork in now will support these learners. Currently, some learners entered at Level 1 are unable to write grammatically correct sentences with full stops and capital letters. This is a demand far below Level 1. Similarly, examiners continue to note issues with inconsistency in the use of upper case letters. Proof-reading skills seem non-existent as many common errors, such as omitting words, could have been corrected with proof-reading.

Checking writing is essential, perhaps more so for students taking on-screen assessments. We recommend practice in the use of word processors without spell/grammar check. Students should not be encouraged to write reams of text; we have noticed that longer answers are often full of errors. Specific issue with accuracy include:

* the upper-case letters used randomly mid-word
* lack of capital letters for proper nouns
* subject/verb agreement
* apostrophes used in verb forms (such as ‘speak’s or ask’s)
* inappropriate use of informal terms: ‘gonna’, ‘u’ for you and so on.

**Level 2**

**Reading:**

As with Level 1 learners, most learners at Level 2 are able to use information in the texts to obtain relevant information. There were some issues with multiple choice questions. Learners must follow the instructions and give only one answer where it is requested. Similarly, issues with not reading the instructions are a theme with some learners. Students should be reminded that this is a test of reading, and this includes the questions and instructions as well as the source documents. This may seem a really basic demand, but the number of borderline students failing often simply need to read questions with more precision.

As with Level 1, there is a persistent trend for weaker learners to use general comments about presentation features. The examining team has noticed a trend for what feel to be stock or coached responses. Level 2 learners should be taught to both identify presentation features, and to explain why the writer used them, in relation to the text. So, a generic response, such as: ‘pictures make it stand out’, or ‘bullet points list things’ won’t gain marks. Learners should be able to explain why a particular image aids meaning in the context of the text they have read. Bullet points will have been used to allow the reader to understand the points (and these should be specified) quickly. It should also be noted that some learners still don’t understand the term ‘presentation features’ and are therefore unable to answer these questions at all.

As in my previous report, it remains the case that learners failing or at borderline often find questions based on higher order skills more challenging. Most learners are able to successfully answer questions based on the first coverage and range statement:

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

However, questions based on the last four coverage and range statements are often answered incorrectly or with less detail by those at borderline or failing:

* 2.2.2 Summarise information/ideas from different sources
  + The final question in most Level 2 Reading papers requires learners to answer a question that involves comparing and contrasting information across all three documents. Many learners simply state what each text is about and don’t actually answer the question set.
* 2.2.3 Identify the purposes of texts and comment on how meaning is conveyed
  + Presentation features may include images, bullet points, numbered lists, headings and subheadings and so on. As noted above, learners are expected to explain how they are used in reference to the document they have read.
  + Some learners don’t know what language features are. Language features may include rhetorical questions, repetition, irony, hyperbole etc. As with presentation features, learners must explain how they are used in reference to the document they have read.
  + Fact/opinion – some learners give incorrect examples of both opinions and facts.
* 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

**Writing:**

The majority of learners entered for Level 2 Writing made a good attempt at answering the two set questions. However, some centres are still entering students whose performance is well below that expected at Level 2. In particular skills in sentence construction, punctuation and grammar have been particularly poor for some candidates failing the assessment. The most prevalent issues were inappropriate comma splicing and a lack of end of sentence punctuation. Apostrophes were often used incorrectly to form plurals. Grammar errors in weaker learners were subject-verb agreement, the use of inappropriate tense and missing definite and indefinite articles. Weaker answers were also characterised with the adoption of a tone inappropriate for the set task, or the use of unnecessarily rude and strident vocabulary.

As with my comments for Level 1 learners, there is scant evidence that learners are proofreading word. Missing words and incorrect spelling of words provided in the scenario are both evidence that learners are not checking their writing. Learners taking on screen assessments should be provided with practice in using word-processors without spelling and grammar checks.

**Generic Overview:**

**For reading papers**: Good exam technique is vital. Learners should focus on both the text in the source documents as well as the specific wording of the instructions and questions. Many are missing easy marks by not reading questions with sufficient care.

**For writing papers:** Once again, good exam technique is key. Learners should spend an equal amount of time on both tasks. Responses should have an appropriate register and tone and be appropriately structured. Finally, learners need to write answers of an appropriate length for each question: aiming for 150-250 words per question at Level 1 and 250-350 words per question at Level 2.

**Overcoming an area: L2 Reading Comparing and Contrasting Texts**

The final question in most Level 2 Reading papers requires learners to answer a question that involves comparing and contrasting information across all three documents. In answers to these questions, learners must show that they have considered all three texts when answering the specific question set.

How these questions work varies:

1. Learners may be asked to say how texts are similar **or** how they differ.
2. Learners may be asked to compare the texts in order to answer a specific question.

**Learners should:**

* Give relevant and precise ideas from the texts
* Provide direct examples from the texts

**Learners should not use:**

* Their own knowledge
* Unsubstantiated answers

Questions may look like similar to this:

* Explain how all three documents have different ideas about (an issue/topic).
* Explain how all three documents have similar ideas about (an issue/topic).
* Using the information in the three source documents, explain whether you think **x** is a good idea or not.
* Compare and contrast the three source documents. Which is most likely to make you want to support **x** and why?

In NCFE papers, these questions are worth 3-4 marks. For top marks examiners expect to see **precise** ideas from **all** texts with **clear examples**.

A good way to approach these questions is for learners to:

1. Make it clear they understand the question.
2. Explain the information in their own words.
3. Refer directly to each text using short quotes from each.
4. Be precise. They won’t get marks for a vague answer.
5. Make it clear which text they are writing about

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