Chief Examiner Report for Functional Skills English: Reading

NCFE Level 1 Functional Skills Qualification in English (603/5058/1)
NCFE Level 2 Functional Skills Qualification in English (603/5054/4)

Window: 14th October – 18th October 2019 (Paper)

Level 1 Pass Mark	17 / 30
Level 2 Pass mark	16 / 30

Each learner's external assessment paper is marked by an Examiner and awarded a raw mark. During the awarding process, a combination of statistical analysis and professional judgement is used to establish the raw marks that represent the minimum required standard to achieve a Pass grade. As well as analysing performance on the assessment paper itself, performance standards and statistical outcomes in legacy qualifications and equivalent assessments (both within NCFE and, where available, across other awarding organisations) are considered to ensure Pass marks represent comparable standards.
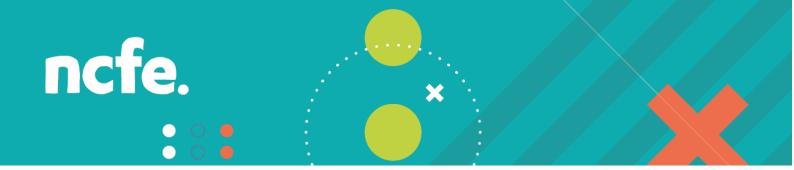
Generic Overview

This qualification had only been live for four weeks before learners took these papers. Given this very short preparation time it is not unsurprising that so few learners sat the reading papers, or that some found aspects of the subject criteria challenging.

Having said that, it was pleasing to note that the majority of learners seemed to engage with the texts and were able to use information in them to obtain relevant information.

At both levels, good exam technique is vital. Learners should focus both on the text in the source documents as well as the specific wording of the instructions and questions. Many learners missed straightforward marks by not reading questions with sufficient care. Students should be reminded that this is a test of reading, and this includes the questions and instructions as well as the source documents.

Level 1

The topic of this paper was 'Fake news' and most learners were able to answer the majority of questions. However, some learners left numerous questions unanswered and were clearly struggling to provide correct answers to others. It is essential that learners are prepared for assessment and are entered at the correct level.

Successful learners gave complete and succinct answers using information found in the source documents. However, many learners were very unprepared for this assessment and they scored low marks. There were some areas of concern with particular aspects of Reformed Functional Skills which are detailed below, together with specific advice for centres.

Learners failing or at borderline found questions based on higher order skills more challenging.

Question 4 required learners to give two reasons why the writer had referenced quotations from a report. Instead of answering the question, several learners simply lifted sections of text from the document. What was required here was for learners to understand the reasons behind the choice; correct answers were:
- To show it comes from an important/valid source
- To back/support his argument
- To show that fake news is a serious matter.

Question 18 targeted the same SoS as question 4 (12. Recognise that language and other textual features can be varied to suit different audiences and purposes). Again, it was evident from some responses that several learners had not been taught how to recognise language or textual features. The question was:
State the textual feature used by the writer in each of the following quotations.
a) 'I think this fake news problem is so big, so complicated and so out of control that it's impossible to stop'.
b) 'Don't you think fake news is a terrible problem?'

Answers were a) rule of three or repetition and b) rhetorical question. Several learners gave incorrect answers such as '*this is an opinion'* or '*persuasive'*.

Questions 5 and 13 were about organisational features and targeted SoS 14 (Understand organisational and structural features and use them to locate relevant information). Question 5 asked learners to state what organisational features had been used to divide the text into sections. The correct answer was either subheadings or bold text. Some learners were completely unaware what the term 'organisational features' meant and made comments such as 'Fake news has been around for hundreds of years'. Some learners gave 'paragraphs' as an answer. Paragraphs are not an organisational feature.

Questions 8 and 14 focused on SoS 15 (Infer from images meanings not explicit in the accompanying text). This is new for reformed FS and most learners struggled to find the right answer. Question 8 clearly asked 'What does the chart imply about access to news that is **not** mentioned in the text?', yet many learners described the chart or made statements that were in the text. Similarly, answers to question 14 were also weak in the main, with some learners' answers making no sense at all (*it does it for free speech*).

Responses to questions focusing on vocabulary and specialist words were mixed. It was pleasing to see that most learners answered Question 9 correctly: The writer says 'we can be swamped with fake news'. What does the word 'swamped' mean in this context? Some learners' answers weren't quite specific enough: *It means there is loads* was not awardable. The answer needed to focus on the amount of fake news being overwhelming. In answering question 11, weaker learners tended to simply rephrase the quotation given instead of explaining its meaning. They were asked: What does Webus.com mean about fake news when they say 'Perhaps we just need to embrace it'? The correct answer was 'that we should welcome/accept it'. *It is impossible to stop* was an answer frequently given by failing candidates. Again, this was a lift of a phrase from the document rather than an attempt to answer the question.

Question 12 required learners to explain the meaning of the word 'platforms' in the context of the source document. Many learners gave generic answers such as '*websites, social media, Twitter'*. The correct answer was tools, programs or apps.

Question 17 clearly asked learners to give examples from the text where contributors had used persuasive language. In this answer examiners were expecting to see quotations from the document that were persuasive. Some candidates wrote: *they use humour language* or *they are positive,* neither of which were awardable.

Question 19 asked learners to compare the information, ideas and opinions given in Document 1 about fake news with what the contributors say about fake news in Document 2. Answers awarded all three available marks for this did exactly what was required and marshalled their answers effectively using examples from the texts. Weak answers gave no comparisons and simply restated each document's contents.

Advice to centres for Level 1 Reading

SoS 10

Learners must read the question carefully to ensure they are comparing information from the documents they are told to. In their answers they should make clear to which document they are referring. They should also consider information from all the documents the question requires of them. Comparison should be explicit. Learners scoring higher marks on these questions are able to compare both information and ideas backed up with evidence from the relevant texts.

SoS 12

It was apparent that many learners had not been taught about language features. At Level 1, learners can be expected to identify these in texts and to explain their effect on the reader. Language features might include: rule of three, rhetorical questions, irony, exaggeration and so on.

SoS 14

Answers to these questions were very mixed. Some learners simply did not understand what organisational features were. Others were able to identify but not explain why they had been used in the text. For example, when explaining why bullet points have been used in a document, the answer must directly relate to the text. So: *to list things* would not gain marks, whereas '*to list the instructions so the reader knows how to find the office'* would be awardable. Organisational features may include images, bullet points, numbered lists, headings and subheadings and so on.

SoS 15

Many learners simply stated what the picture was in answer to these questions, which is incorrect. They need to relate the image to the text and answer the specific question asked.

SoS 18

Again, answers to these questions should be directly related to the texts and not a generic explanation of the use of punctuation marks. For example, in an explanation of the use of brackets: *To give extra detail that isn't needed*, would not gain a mark; whereas '*To give additional information about the office opening hours'* would be awardable.

Level 2

The topic of this paper was 'Throwaway fashion' and most learners were able to answer the majority of questions. However, some learners left numerous questions unanswered and were clearly struggling to provide correct answers to others. It is essential that learners are prepared for assessment and are entered at the correct level.

Most learners were very unprepared for this assessment and scored low marks. There are some more challenging requirements at RFS Reading Level 2 that will take some time to teach. As with Level 1, there was a trend for weaker learners to use generic comments in many answers and not relate their responses directly to the texts they had read.

Answers to questions about organisational features (SoS 16) were especially weak. For example, Question 3 required learners to say why the writer had used bullet points and footnotes in a document. Answers such as: *to make a point* or *to find information* were too vague and generic to be awarded marks. Examiners were looking for responses such as:

Bullet points:
- To divide up examples of the EAC's findings
- To draw the reader to facts / statistics about the effects of throwaway fashion.

Footnotes:
- To show the meaning of the letters GDP
- To explain the meaning of 'GDP'
- To show how GDP is commonly used / that GDP is used to show relative economic performance of countries.
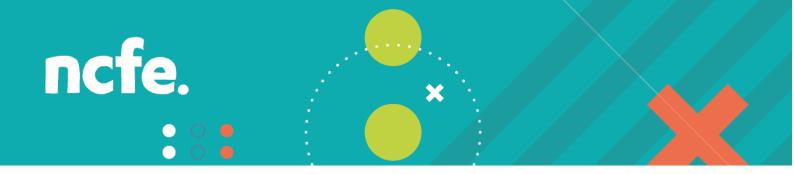
Many learners were unable to correctly state the main point of Document 1 which was to voice concerns about the growth of throwaway fashion. Instead of giving a specific answer, many said *it's about fashion.* Stating the topic of a text is not the same as understanding its main point (SoS 11).

Identifying the style of a text was also problematic for many learners. These questions target SoS 19 (Identify different styles of writing and write's voice). Question 5 asked learners to give two words that identify the style of writing used in Document 2. Examiners expected to see: persuasive, chatty, colloquial, personal or any other valid style. Several learners gave completely incorrect answers.

Questions for SoS (understanding textual features and devices) proved challenging for the vast majority of learners in this cohort. For example, Question 6 asked learners to give 2 reasons why the writer repeated questions beginning with 'what?' and 'why?' several times. Answers needed to be in reference to the text, so generic answers such as *to ask readers what they think* or *because they are rhetorical questions* were not awardable. Examiners were looking for:
- To show how strongly she feels about the waste
- To get the reader to think about the topic of throwaway fashion
- To emphasise her point of view
- To introduce new aspects of the problem with throwaway fashion.

Learners also found extracting examples of features from documents difficult in this question:

Give one example of each of the following features being used to present a negative image of throwaway fashion.

a) Emotive language
b) Personal experience.

It was pleasing to see that most learners were able to identify at least one fact or opinion from the document, though few got full marks for this question.

Question 14 asked learners to compare the views expressed in Document 3 with those of Document 1, and how these views are conveyed. This question has three available marks. Most learners achieved at least one mark as they were able to make mention of at least one view from each document. For two marks, examiners need to see some explicit comparison. For three marks (achieved by just one learner in this cohort) examiners needed to seed clear and explicit supported with examples from both texts.

SoS 17 is a new demand in the reformed qualification and requires learners to analyse texts and recognise their use of vocabulary and identify levels of formality and bias. Question 15 tackled this SoS where learners were asked to analyse all three documents and use examples to state which was the most biased. Most learners achieved at least 1 out of a potential two marks. Some achieved 2 marks. None achieved the full 4 marks. For full marks learners needed to make a clear choice of Document 1 or 3 and to consider all three documents in detail. There needed to be a comprehensive explanation, supported by examples from the texts. Most learners gave limited explanations for their choices.

Advice to centres for Level 2 Reading

SoS 12

Learners must read the question carefully to ensure they are comparing information from the documents they are told to. In their answers they should make clear to which document they are referring. They should also consider information from all the documents the question requires of them. Comparison should be explicit. Learners scoring higher marks on these questions are able to compare both information and ideas backed up with evidence from the relevant texts.

SoS 14

Learners need to understand what textual features and devices and to explain how they are used specifically in the text they have read. Learners should be taught to tackle this in different ways. For example, they may be asked to identify two techniques used by a writer to: persuade/argue/ explain etc, or they may be given a section of text and asked to identify the textual feature or device. They might also be presented with a section of text and be asked why it has been used.

SoS 16

Most learners were able to say what organisational features were. Some were able to identify but not explain why they had been used in the text. For example, when explaining why bullet points have been used in a document, the answer must directly relate to the text. So: *to list things* would not gain marks, whereas '*to list the instructions so the reader knows how to find the office'* would be awardable. Organisational features may include images, bullet points, numbered lists, headings and subheadings and so on.

SoS 17

This SoS is a new demand at RFS Level 2. Learners will usually be asked to analyse all three documents for a specific purpose: to say which is the least formal, most biased and so on. Learners must make a choice supported with information from the texts. For high marks, answers should give a detailed consideration of all three documents with examples. Many learners are simply outlining the content of each document in answer to this question. These sorts of responses are unlikely to contain any awardable content and are unlikely to gain marks.

SoS 19

This SoS is also new demand at RFS Level 2. Learners need to be taught about styles of writing and should be able to use this information to identify different styles of writing.

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