

Monitoring the standard of a Grade 12 English First Additional Language Reading, Comprehension, Summary and Grammar Paper

A B S T R A C T Against the background of growing concern about the standard of the NSC assessment being lowered for various reasons, including political agendas, the value of proper monitoring mechanisms in the assessment chain cannot be underestimated. In this article these monitoring mechanisms, especially item analysis, are investigated. It is our contention that restoration of the quality of the matriculation examination process is crucially dependent on scrupulous monitoring of the assessment, marking and feedback processes in such a way that may be successfully used to identify and communicate problems as and when they occur in the assessment chain, and to make recommendations regarding strategies that may remedy these problems in future.

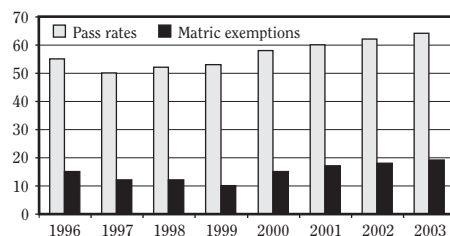
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1. Background

To get a clear picture of the problems educational role players face at matriculation level in South Africa, one need only to look at pass rate tendencies over the past decade. In an HSRC analysis of matriculation pass rates (2004), the following comparative graph of pass rates and exemptions was given:

Figure 1: National trend in matriculation pass rates and exemptions: 1996 to 2003

One reason given for the exemption rate of all matriculation learners staying below 20 percent was the fact that more and more learners had taken their subjects on the standard grade since



1996. The Executive Director of Umalusi, Dr Peliwe Lolwana, argued at a news conference on 21 September 2004 that standards of matric exam papers had not been lowered to improve the average of each province, although she admitted that the static number of learners with university exemption was a cause for concern.

Last year's picture was equally bleak. About 22 000 more matriculation candidates achieved university entrance in 2008 than in the previous year, but many could not be absorbed into an overtaxed tertiary education system. The 26% rise in 'matriculation exemptions' – from 85 000 in 2007 to 107 000 last year – comes despite the drop in the overall pass rate for the new National Senior Certificate (NSC) from 65% to 62,5%. Up to 50% of university students fail or drop out before completing undergraduate degrees. In the *Financial Mail* of 28 August 2009 Carol Paton asks the question if the '(matriculation) certificate is worth the paper it is written on.' This was stated in the wake of Theuns Eloff, the Chairperson of Higher Education SA (Hesa) and vice-chancellor of North-West University telling a parliamentary committee that the majority of students at tertiary level could not read, write or comprehend at the required levels and that general competence was declining.

Expressing specific concerns about English Additional Language, Prof Jonathan Jansen, formerly Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria, commented that there are 'serious concerns about the standard of the recent examination in important subjects like English Additional Language in the Higher Grade that show that the norm has been lowered on account of attaining better matriculation pass rates'. (*Beeld*: 31 December 2003, our translation). He furthermore articulated a growing concern amongst potential employers that the matriculation curriculum and examination do not equip learners with the necessary skills to perform anything but routine jobs and among the registrars of universities that more and more learners fail the admission examinations at universities and that the failure rate at universities is not improving, despite the improved matriculation results. Despite the acknowledgement of the problem, the situation kept on deteriorating and in 2007 the matriculation exemption level reached a low of 15.1%, leading the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor to issue the following statement: "This is a worrying decline as we need to increase the number of candidates for entry to higher education levels." (*Cape Argus*, 29 December 2007).

Taylor, an education specialist, in Carol Paton's article 'What's right with schooling', (in *Financial Mail*, 12 January 2007) too noted a discernible drop in the quality of the matriculation examinations between 1994 and 2004, which led to an increase in the number of passes. He attributed this to the 'decimation of the standard of papers and the bullying of statisticians' to raise the marks that occurred under the leadership of the previous education minister, Kader Asmal, but also noted the achievement of the current Minister, Naledi Pandor, in restoring quality, regardless of the politics of protecting the pass rate.

With Outcomes-based Education (OBE) now deployed up to Grade 12 in state schools, the first matriculants were assessed according to the new curriculum at the end of 2008, with no differentiation made between higher and standard grade. Since the implementation of Continuous Assessment Tasks (CTAs) in 2003, which is a crucial assessment tool in OBE, most schools have found them to be vague and very open-ended, resulting in an 'anything-goes' assessment. As a result 2003 experienced the highest failure and condonation figure for Grade

10 learners ever. Many teachers blamed the initial implementation of OBE and OBA up to Grade 9 for not preparing learners for what was expected of them in Grades 10 to 12, when teachers returned to teaching the interim curriculum, Report 550, which was to be the case up to 2007. Very pointed concerns that the FET assessment will be as unconvincing and shallow as that of the GET phase and not prepare learners for what is expected of them in tertiary institutions and business are being raised by many teachers at the Gauteng examination roadshows. It is our contention that restoration of the quality of the matriculation examination process is crucially dependent on scrupulous monitoring of the assessment, marking and feedback processes in such a way that may be successfully used to identify and communicate problems as and when they occur in the assessment chain, and to make recommendations regarding strategies that may remedy these problems in future.

To give an idea of some of the mechanisms through which such monitoring may be achieved, this article focuses on assessment tools currently in use in the assessment of English Additional Language, specifically: *Paper 1*. Comprehension, Summary and Language (2 hours, 80 marks).

Although at the end of 2008 the format of the papers was slightly different, Paper 1 still totalled 80 marks.

For the purpose of this article, both the paper and learners' responses are discussed. These responses are significant indicators of classroom practice and as such crucial in establishing the validity and reliability of teaching and learning, assessment and moderation practices. The main monitoring mechanism applied is an item analysis of the National Senior Certificate exam (Paper 1) of the Supplementary Exam of 2003, which was found to be a fair representation of the average matriculation paper of English Additional Language. The items used in the paper, the memorandum of the selected paper, as well as the sufficiency of the moderation processes are critically evaluated; and the contextualisation of the monitoring mechanism, the selection of papers for analysis, standardisation of the sample and other relevant aspects of the fieldwork are discussed.

For the purpose of this article an item analysis was performed of a national English Additional Language paper to establish whether its standard was acceptable.

2. Monitoring mechanism: Item analysis

An item analysis is a process of examining class-wide performance on individual test items. There are four common types of item analyses that provide teachers with three different types of information, namely a) the item facility, b) the difficulty index, c) the discrimination index, and d) the analysis of response options.

According to Bailey (1998:134) *item facility* is an index of how easy an individual item was for the people who took it. The formula is as follows:

$$\text{Item facility} = \frac{\text{number of test-takers answering the item correctly}}{\text{number of test-takers}}$$

According to the Professional Testing Institute (www.proftesting.com: 2005) at the University of Kansas, teachers produce a *difficulty index* for a test item by calculating the proportion of

students in class who had an item correct. According to the Institute (www.proftesting.com: 2005) the difficulty index is one of the most useful and most frequently reported item analysis statistics. It is a measure of the proportion of examinees that answered the item correctly; for this reason it is often called the p-value.

Item discrimination shows how the top scorers and the lower scorers performed on each item. This allows us to investigate whether the item with a low item facility is actually difficult, or if other factors might be contributing to the low rate of correct responses to that item (Bailey, 1998:135). The Professional Testing Institute describes the discrimination index as a measure of how well an item is able to distinguish between examinees who are knowledgeable and those who are not. Point-bi-serial correlation looks at the relationship between an examinee's performance on the given item (correct or incorrect) and the examinee's score on the overall test. For an item that is highly discriminating in general, the examinees that responded well to the item correctly, also did well in the test, while in general the examinees that gave the wrong answer to the specific item also tended to do poorly in the overall test.

Distractor analysis is a procedure specifically related to the multiple-choice format. It provides us with information regarding the entire group of test-takers on each individual item. It tests the quality of each distractor. Some distractors might not be distracting at all, and therefore serve no purpose (Bailey, 1998:134).

In addition to examining the performance of an entire test item, educators are often interested in examining the performance of individual distractors (incorrect answer options) on multiple-choice items. By calculating the proportion of students who chose each answer option, educators can identify which distractors are working and appear attractive to students who do not know the correct answer, and which distractors are simply taking up space and not being chosen by many students. To eliminate blind guessing, which results in a correct answer purely by chance (and which hurts the validity of a test item), teachers want as many plausible distractors as are feasible. Analyses of response options allow teachers to fine-tune and improve items they may wish to use again with future classes (University of Kansas, www.specialconnections.ku.edu: 2005).

The fairest tests for all learners are tests that are valid and reliable. To improve the quality of tests, item analysis can identify items, which are too difficult or too easy, those which are not able to differentiate between those who have learned the content and those who have not, or have distractors, which are not plausible. If items are too difficult, teachers can adjust the way they teach. Teachers can even decide that the material was not taught and for the sake of fairness, remove the item from the current test, and recompute the scores. If items have low or negative discrimination values, teachers can remove them from the current test and recompute and remove them from the pool of items for future tests. A teacher can also examine the item, try to identify what was tricky about it, and either change the item or modify instruction to correct a confusing misunderstanding about the content.

When distractors are identified as being non-functional, educators may adapt the item and create a new distractor. One goal for a valid and reliable classroom test is to decrease the chance that random guessing could result in credit for a correct answer. The greater the number of plausible distractors, the more accurate, valid and reliable the test typically becomes (Haladyna, Downing & Rodrigues, 2002:333).

Item analysis still has tremendous value for an assessor when establishing if all curriculum items have been covered and if a fair spread of different items in a test exists.

3. The selection and standardisation of papers, schools and learners for the item analysis

Paper 1, specifically the supplementary examination of 2003, and the answer scripts containing the learners' responses to the papers, were selected for the item analysis.

The target group was drawn from four different secondary schools, namely: School A (which has a mixture of white, black, Coloured and Indian learners - most learners from lower middle class to disadvantaged backgrounds); School B (with predominantly Coloured and black learners from mostly disadvantaged backgrounds); School C (with predominantly white learners from mostly fairly advantaged backgrounds), and School D (an Afrikaans-medium private school with predominantly white learners from financially privileged backgrounds).

The above constituted a diverse group of learners from different socio-economic conditions and linguistic backgrounds (varying from Afrikaans to Sesotho to Nguni to Coloured Afrikaans to Indian English-speaking learners), with varying frames of reference and degrees of exposure to English. A control group of twenty learners per school (80 learners in total) with a normal spread of marks (strong, average and weak) was selected in consultation with the relevant class teacher. The reason for this selection was to help the modern-day teacher with the successful teaching of English as an Additional Language in a multicultural classroom by looking at their practical classroom situation.

The assessment tools, namely the national examination papers, were standardised, because they had gone through a rigorous moderation process by both the internal moderator of the examining panel, as well as the external moderator appointed by Umalusi (which is the certification body of assessment). The sample from each school was standardised in the sense that 20 learners from each school were selected in terms of their normal performance. The selection of schools covered a wide variety of the types of schooling communities found in Gauteng.

4. Monitoring the standard of the questions and the answers: The Grade 12 English Additional Language, Paper 1

The supplementary paper of 2003 was taken as sample paper to give an item breakdown of the various components assessed. Paper 1 counts 27% of the total mark for English Additional Language, which is a considerable weighting.

4.1 Section A: Reading Comprehension

This section had as theme passage an adapted article on the Augrabies Falls and the myths surrounding it, which made it more interesting and appropriate for South African learners than a topic that deals with an overseas phenomenon. As this was the Higher Grade paper higher level questions were asked. Most were inference-type questions where the answer was not given directly but was implied.

4.2 Section B: Point-form summary

Since 2000, learners are no longer required to do the précis but a point-form summary as this is an acknowledged study skill, which can be used in all subjects. In the supplementary paper

2003 the theme of the passage was *Tips on writing a bestseller*. Learners were instructed to read the passage and then, in not more than 65 words list at least seven facts in point-form, writing only one fact per line and using full sentences and their own words as far as possible. Marks were allocated as follows: 7 marks for 7 facts; 2 for language usage and 1 for adhering to the number of words.

4.3 Section C: Language usage

The breakdown of items tested in this section was as follows:

Derivatives and vocabulary (7 marks); reported and direct speech (5 marks); passive voice (2 marks); idiomatic expressions (4 marks); tenses (4 marks); apostrophe (1 mark); emphasis (1 mark); tone of voice (1 mark); plurals (3 marks); cloze-test procedure testing tenses, vocabulary, tag questions and spelling (6 marks).

The first nine marks of this section were quite tricky as they were all contextualised and the specific instruction was that the learners had to refer directly to the wording of paragraphs 1 and 2 to determine the answer to each question. The contextualisation of all questions is a characteristic of the communicative approach that is used for the teaching of English Additional Language. What is significant is the fact that four marks were allocated to idiomatic expressions, which is high compared to the weighting of the other items, especially since this is an additional language.

5. Results and interpretation

The item analysis was only done on Sections A and C, the Reading Comprehension and Language Sections. The only conclusion that could be made from an item analysis of the summary question would be whether summary writing was taught in class or not.

– Outcomes of the reading comprehension analysis

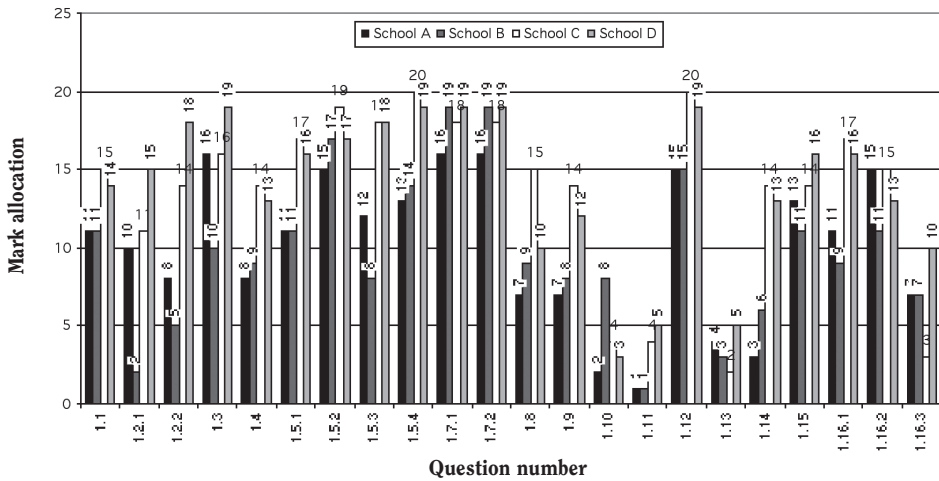
Table 1 indicates how many learners had a specific question correct or the difficulty index of the item and Figure 1 gives a comparison between schools of the difficulty index of Section A: Comprehension Test.

Table 1: Difficulty index of the various items of Section A: Comprehension Test

Question no.	Mark allocation	School A 20 learners	School B 19 learners	School C 19 learners	School D 20 learners
1.1		11	11	15	14
1.2.1		10	2	11	15
1.2.2		8	5	14	18
1.3	Attained 1 mark	3	6	1	4
	Attained 2 marks	13	4	15	15
1.4		8	9	14	13
1.5.1	Attained 1 mark	3	1	1	0
	Attained 2 marks	8	10	16	16
1.5.2	Attained 1 mark	3	2	1	0

	Attained 2 marks	12	15	18	17
1.5.3	Attained 1 mark	3	0	0	0
1.5.4	Attained 1 mark	7	6	4	0
	Attained 2 marks	6	8	16	19
1.6	ERROR ON PAPER				
1.7.1		16	19	18	19
1.7.2		16	19	18	19
1.8		7	9	15	10
1.9		7	8	14	12
1.10		2	8	4	3
1.11	2 marks	1	1	4	5
1.12		15	15	20	19
1.13		4	3	2	5
1.14		3	6	14	13
1.15	1 mark	10	9	3	4
	2 marks	1	2	8	7
	3 marks	2	0	3	5
1.16.1	1 mark	6	5	9	3
	2 marks	4	2	6	6
	3 marks	1	2	2	7
1.16.2		15	11	15	13
1.16.3		7	7	3	10

Figure 1: Comparison between schools of Difficulty Index of Section A: Comprehension test



From these results the following emerge: There is a relatively small difference in average per section between School C and School D. School D claims that quality education with small

numbers (12-18 learners) per class is the main difference between and an advantage over state schools. School C has between 38 and 42 learners per class. Despite bigger classes, indications are there is still quality education in many state schools. The average for each section per school is given in *Table 2*.

Table 2: Average per section per school

	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B	SCHOOL C	SCHOOL D
SECTION A	45.9%	47.1%	68.9%	71.4%
SECTION C	55.0%	48.7%	59.5%	64.3%

Figure 2 illustrates the difference between the outcomes for Section A and Section C between the schools and *Figure 3* illustrates the relation between the results for Sections A and C and the average of each school.

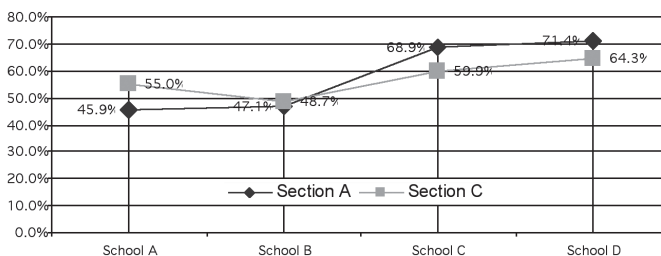


Figure 2: Difference between results for Section A and Section C between schools

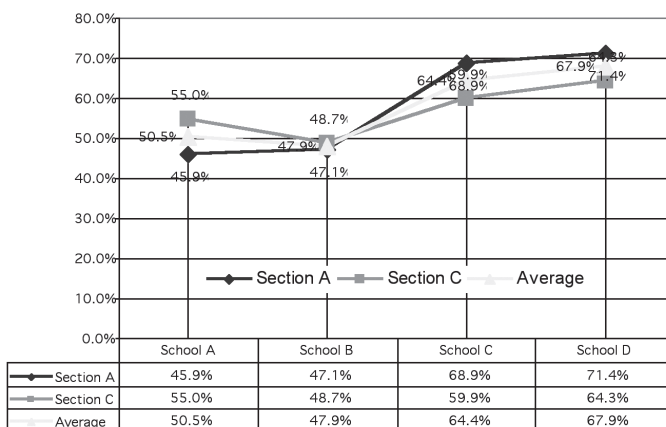


Figure 3: Relations between results for different sections and the averages for different schools

An aspect that could warrant further research is the correlation between the marks attained for Section A and those for Section C.

Section A, the *Reading Comprehension Section*, is often a reflection of the learner’s basic language understanding regardless of the presence of a good teacher.

Discrepancies occurring in the *Language Section* (Section C) can more often than not be ascribed to the quality of the teaching in the English classroom. Educators simply do not prepare their learners well enough for the Senior Certificate examination.

- 1.1 Choose the most suitable answer from the options given. Write ONLY the number of the question and the letter of the option you have chosen.
The river is described as 'moody' (par 1) because ...
A its water thunders loudly.
B the waterfall can be found in it.
C it harbours a monster.
D its level constantly fluctuates.
- 1.2 Quote ONE word from paragraph 1 to prove that ...
- 1.2.2 wildlife is plentiful at the Augrabies Falls National Park.
- 1.2.3 the scenery at the Augrabies Falls National Park strikes one as being very strange, like that of the moon's surface, for instance.

The answers to Questions 1.1, 1.2.1, and 1.2.2 demonstrate a marked discrepancy between the performance of learners in School B and those in the other three schools. School B is a mainly Coloured school in an underprivileged Coloured community. There is limited access to the different media at school and even less, if any, at home. Exposure to Standard English is usually limited to interaction with the English teacher, as Afrikaans is in most instances the mother tongue. These three questions are vocabulary questions, the nature of which is quite advanced. These lexical items will most probably only be known, if there is a fair amount of exposure to written English, therefore the importance of reading should never be underestimated. Spelling and vocabulary are predominantly influenced by reading.

There is a definite gap in performance between Schools A and B and Schools C and D. This phenomenon could be attributed to a number of factors. The majority of learners in Schools C and D come from privileged backgrounds with exposure to a number of things that the majority of learners in the other two schools can only dream of, for example, travelling across South Africa and abroad, a variety of media forms like television, satellite television, the Internet, magazines and newspapers on a daily basis, etc. The presence of extensive schema impacts on a learner's reception of a text. Another factor is the quality of teaching. At the private school, School D, the members of staff are handpicked. The school is in the financial position to offer a bigger package to their teachers. The other advantage is the small classes that are taught (between 12 and 18 learners maximum per class). School C, a state school performing comparably to School D, has also been in the fortunate position of appointing better teachers at their school because they could offer them performance bonuses added to their monthly income, which would be paid by the governing body of the school.

With regard to the multiple-choice questions it was interesting to note on the papers that School C's teacher had apparently taught her learners to always make a pencil question mark next to the multiple-choice questions so as to remind them to re-visit them after they have finished the paper, and then, even if they do not have any idea what the answer might be, to take a chance and fill in any answer, but never to leave an open space. Multiple-choice questions should always be attempted. A learner has a 25% chance of being correct.

Questions 1.5.1 to 1.5.4 are true or false questions. Current practice in the National Department of Education and all the provincial departments of education is to disregard the true and false, if no quote or motivation is given. An informed teacher who does provincial marking

in November, will know about these practices and will coach his/her learners to always give a quote with the true or false, even if it is completely incorrect because the learner could then still get the marks for the true or the false, even if the quote is incorrect.

Question 1.6 was erroneous. This is a reflection on the setting process.

Question 1.8 had a word restriction. The learners were not allowed to use more than three consecutive words to answer the question. It was obvious from a number of responses that many learners did not know the meaning of 'consecutive' because words from different lines and paragraphs were quoted. A number of learners also did not adhere to the three words limit set by the question. In this instance, the learner would have been penalised for not carrying out the instruction.

The same issues apply to question 1.9.

Quote TWO SEPARATE words from different paragraphs to prove that the Gariep Monster has been responsible for deaths.

Question 1.11 was poorly answered. It is a vocabulary question and the two items, 'carcasses' and 'fatal' should be words that are in the average Grade 12 learner's range of vocabulary. The average Grade 12 learner is not a reading learner, which impacts on his/her range of vocabulary and spelling ability.

1.13 What is the Gariep Monster in reality?

Question 1.13's outcome was very poor. The fact that only 12% of all the learners had it correct, implies that only 12% of all the learners comprehended the main argument of the passage, that is that the Gariep monster is in fact the Augrabies waterfall. Once again the lack of the appropriate schema in a very limited frame of reference leads to the lack of comprehension.

1.15 List THREE outward characteristics of the Gariep Monster.

Question 1.15 was dealt with well by most learners. Listing the outward characteristics of the Gariep Monster was a given as it entailed direct referencing. Once again it implies that most learners function on a more literal level than on a more demanding figurative level.

1.16 Consult the map, which shows a cross-section of South Africa.
1.16.1 List the geographic landmarks (mentioned in this passage) along the Orange River from its origin to its final destination.
1.16.2 If the Gariep Monster were to swim against the flow of the river, which town on the map would it reach first?
1.16.3 In which neighbouring state does the Orange River originate?

Questions 1.16.1 to 1.16.3 covered the visual literacy component in the form of a map that had to be interpreted. Overall Schools C and D performed better in these questions. This could be explained by the fact that the learners from these schools who come from a higher socio-

economic level are most probably more well-travelled than those of the other two schools. Teachers at all four schools admitted that the average high school learner has a very low level of general knowledge.

5.1 Interpretation of results of the Language Section

Questions 3.1.1 to 3.1.9 were in the form of a cloze test where learners had to refer directly to the short passage and derive answers from it. Generally the learners of all four schools performed well in these questions. The communicative approach to the teaching and the assessment of English Second Language ensures that the learner can contextualise the question given and apply it to a real communication situation.

Question 3.2 was a passive voice question. Learners from Schools A and B did not perform very well in this question. Low performance in this structure is usually ascribed to poor teaching methodology.

Rewrite the following sentence, starting with: Pasta strands
'My sister was picking up pasta strands.'

3.3 Give the correct form of the words in brackets. Write ONLY the number and answer:
No 3.3.1 (soon) had Rebecca 3.3.2 (ran) into the kitchen than she (discover) a very wet floor. It was clear that Amy 3.3.4 (misunderstand) Rebecca's instructions, but this calamity would 3.3.5 (teach) her not to interpret everything too 3.3.6 (literal).

Questions 3.3.1 to 3.3.6 were also in the form of a cloze test. A cloze test is an exercise, test or assessment where certain words have been removed from the text, and the learner is to complete it by filling in appropriate words. Question 3.3.1 was an idiomatic expression (*No sooner/than*), which was answered well by all schools, reinforcing the argument that the learners generally know the 'sound' of the language due to a high exposure to it. However, in the following 3.3.2 that tested the participle form of 'run', the response was extremely poor, which could perhaps be ascribed to the haphazard use of tenses in those forms of language that they are most exposed to, which are the lyrics of pop music, teenage chat shows on television, et cetera.

School A performed the best of all schools in the tense questions. Their teacher admitted to being very rigorous in drilling tense structures and time words but it is also clear that the learners were taught how to apply the structures, which is in line with the principles of communicative language teaching.

Question 3.3.4 tested the past perfect tense form in an already past tense sentence. This question seemed to be beyond the grasp of most learners. This tense structure should be dealt with in primary school already, but clearly it is not.

Question 3.4 was poorly answered – learners had to complete the idiom: 'Too many cooks ...' Learners' verbal responses to this question were that they had never heard this expression before. Some thought it to be archaic.

3.5 Complete without using expletives:
'In hot water' means to be in big ...

The next idiomatic expression tested, in question 3.5 was not deemed archaic and the results were much better than those of question 3.4. The fact that most learners got to the right answer can possibly also be ascribed to the fact that there is a similar expression in Afrikaans.

Supply the correct form of the word in brackets.
His 4.1.1 (refuse) to answer the knock at the door proves the 4.1.2 (man) utter irritation at being woken so early.

Question 4.1.1 tested another derivative – changing the word 'refuse' into a noun, which had a very average result. School B performed poorly in this question, mainly because of a spelling error – *refusel* instead of *refusal*. The learners sometimes had the right idea, especially with derivatives but their poor spelling ability hampered the obtaining of higher marks.

Question 4.1.2 tested the use of the apostrophe in the possessive case. It became clear that more than half of the learners did not know how to apply the apostrophe correctly. This is again a structure that needs to be taught in the classroom.

4.2 In the sentence, 'I'm sorry to bother you', the stranger for bothering them so early in the morning.

Question 4.2 tested the use of the 's' compared to the 'z' in the spelling of words (*apologised*). There is sometimes a misunderstanding that all British spellings take the 's' and all American spellings take the 'z'. This is not the case and should be taught, which it clearly is not.

4.3.1 Capital letters represent stressed syllables in the following word. Which option represents the correct pronunciation of this word?
A AD-mo-nish-ed
B ad-MO-nish-ed
C ad-mo-NI-shed
D ad-mo-ni-SHED

4.3.2 The most probable tone of voice used in the question in par.4 is ...
A somewhat curious.
B slightly irritated.
C unmistakably angry.
D seemingly polite.

Questions 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 were multiple-choice questions, which tested stressed syllables and tone of voice respectively. Tone of voice, which is seen as an aspect of a higher level of difficulty, was apparently out of the frame of reference of Schools A and B.

4.5 Give the plural form of the underlined words in the spaces below.
We thought only our one neighbour's wife was awoken by the noise, but meantime all our 4.5.1 4.5.2 4.5.3 awoken by that noise.

Question 4.5.2 tested the plural form of the word 'wife'. The manipulation of the singular fe-structure to the plural structures of 'ves' was only done correctly by 45% of all the learners. This is a structure that should be taught in grades 4 and 5 already and only reinforced at high school level.

It is also significant to note that in questions 4.5.3; 4.6.1 and 4.6.2, School A performed best of all. The teacher admitted to using the methodology of drilling structures until they are instilled in all learners. It reinforces the argument that before a teacher can move to a completely 'rule-less' communicative teaching and assessment rules first have to be taught to learners.

That the necessary quality assurance mechanisms are definitely in place for the setting and the writing of the papers has become clear during the research for this article. Poor performance in the papers seems to be largely due to poor classroom practice.

6. Findings

6.1 Reading comprehension

When setting a reading comprehension passage, the most common difficulty is to find a passage that will fall within the frame of reference of most, if not all, learners who have to write the paper. This has proven to be even more problematic when setting a national paper, which has to be written by all the English Additional Language candidates writing matric in South Africa [except those who write the IEB (the Independent Examinations Board) examination.]

According to schema theory all humans possess categorical scripts that they use to interpret the world. Information that does not fit into these schema will be misinterpreted or not comprehended at all. In a linguistically unequal country that has a diversity of languages and levels of grammatical competence, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find a passage which will fall into all learners' and teachers' schema.

The Reading Comprehension Section assesses whether the reader understands what he/she is reading. If the topic or the language is inaccessible to the target group of learners, it has failed as an assessment tool, because it does not meet the assessment criteria of fairness and validity. However, if the learners and teachers have a very restricted frame of reference and a limited vocabulary, it will be extremely difficult to set a paper that will accommodate the full range of learners we have in this country: from the learners in the extreme rural areas who only hear English in the English classroom (where the quality of English that the teacher uses may not be very high) to the sophisticated and privileged learner from most urban areas who is exposed to English in visual, auditory and audio-visual form and the written media, with the added advantage of usually having a teacher with a fair to high level of English proficiency.

In both instances there are exceptions – one will always find the language teacher who does not really have a natural ability to acquire a high level of fluency and proficiency in an additional language, which is then transferred to the learner as well. In these instances the influence of the mother tongue is very often visible.

If the learner is not exposed to a variety of different genres of English writing, chances are that his/her vocabulary will be inadequate. Interpretation of the given topic used in the reading comprehension will then be seriously impeded.

The issues of cultural and religious, and to a lesser extent, gender bias, cannot be ignored either. However, to find a suitable text for reading comprehension and language usage that is not biased in any way is an almost impossible task. Any writer moves within a specific cultural context and his/her own frame of reference.

6.2 Language usage

Since 1984, when the methodology of the teaching of English Second Language was changed from a structural to communicative approach, assessment procedures also had to change. Contextualised application of the language rules was the order of the day. For the first time an anchor passage was given for this section – the context provided often assisted in finding the correct answer.

Cloze-test procedures were used with greater frequency because most grammar structures could be tested by means of this type of question. Learners were taught to look out for the ‘by somebody’ structure as it would usually indicate that the passive was to be used.

However, most of the ex-DET (Department of Education and Training) schools continued with a more structural approach; only after all the ex-departments had amalgamated in 1996, was the communicative approach generally applied.

Some teachers, especially in the townships, still use the language textbook as the only resource. The topics dealt with in these textbooks are often very restrictive. A good strategy is to bring the newspaper into the classroom by taking an article from it and using it as the anchor passage on which all activities for the cycle are based.

Before 2002, learners wrote preparatory examinations that were set by their own teachers. Often these papers were not on par with the provincial examination paper and did not cover all aspects of English that needed to be assessed in a matric examination paper. Results in English Additional Language between 1996 and 2001 were generally poor.

As a measure to assure the quality of both the paper and the responses of the learners, a provincial preparatory examination has been written since 2002. These papers are set by the provincial exam panels. They are standardised and go through a rigorous moderation process.

The results of English Additional Language have improved since 2002 and one of the reasons for this must be the fact that many learners now for the first time have exposure to a standardised paper shortly before they write their Senior Certificate Examination papers.

The schools are provided with a moderated memorandum for the paper and have to do their own marking. Teachers will mark their papers and then in the two weeks before the final exam will discuss the paper and the memorandum with their learners. District Facilitators oversee this process.

Many people feel that teachers are disempowered by this action as they are not expected to set a proper exam paper any more and therefore get little, if any, practice in the actual setting of a full paper. This is a very problematic situation – one that will not be solved until teachers are trained and re-trained well enough to set their own papers and do their own valid internal assessment.

7. Monitoring the Quality of the Marking Process

The validity of the marking process may be jeopardised when, as on occasion has been reported in the media, markers who do not meet the minimum requirements for marking, still are appointed; where learners after having had their answer scripts remarked, acquire completely different marks to that which had been given to them during the marking session; and where teachers who are not even teaching the relevant subject are allowed to mark learners' scripts.

In 1996 and 1997 the appointment of markers was done very haphazardly in Gauteng. There was no database available of teachers and markers' teaching and learning experience and the application forms had to be considered at face value. In an extreme instance, the then Chief Director of Education in Gauteng, Dr Charles Nwaila, accompanied by a contingent of power players in the province, physically removed seven markers from the marking hall of the English Second Language Paper 2. These teachers were all teaching at the same school and after a tip-off by another teacher (the legitimate English teacher of the school) that they were neither teaching English nor had any relevant qualifications for the subject, they were dismissed as markers and faced a disciplinary hearing.

Since those early years after amalgamation of the ex-departments, however, many processes had been put in place to ensure that knowledgeable markers are appointed every year. A rigid screening process is undertaken after the receipt of the application forms; *first* at district level where the subject facilitator make certain recommendations about the suitability and expertise of the applicant; then at the Marking Unit where a *second* screening of applicants takes place on the database, which is refreshed and updated after every year's marking session. Every Senior Marker has to write a short report on every marker in his/her team at the end of each session. Relevant aspects, which must be commented on are punctuality; subject knowledge; teamwork; marking speed and quality of marking. If there are any concerns about any of these aspects they are noted on the Marking Unit's database for the convenience of the panel that must do the appointments for the next marking session. The *third* screening takes place when the appointment panel consisting of the Internal Moderator, the Chief Marker (usually the examiner) and Deputy Chief Marker(s) do the appointment of markers. This panel is usually very knowledgeable about the markers, as they have worked closely with them on previous occasions. If there is any note against a name of marker that they want to query they will contact the Senior Marker who wrote the report before making an appointment or dismissing an application. The policy is to give all applicants a fair chance of being appointed but if there is any reason whatsoever to doubt the integrity and/or subject expertise of an applicant, the person will not be appointed. Policy also prescribes that a certain percentage of novice markers must be appointed every year – novice markers who, although they are lacking in experience, must still have the relevant qualifications in the subject.

The two main requirements for a successful application are a) subject qualifications and b) relevant experience in the teaching and eventual marking of the subject. Every marker also has to complete a declaration form at the start of the marking session in which he/she declares that he/she meets the minimum criteria for appointment; has taught the subject during the past three years and has a thorough knowledge, understanding of the syllabus and marking skills required to mark the subject. It is obviously of no use if the setting and moderation procedures of a paper are in order but incompetent markers mark the learners' papers.

The Senior Marker plays a significant role in this regard. The teams usually consist of between eight and ten markers per Senior Marker. The Senior Marker takes responsibility for ensuring the quality of the marking and intervenes, if he/she sees that the marker is not performing up to standard by pointing out marking mistakes to the relevant marker and/or discussing and reinforcing problematic aspects of the memorandum again.

In extreme cases, when a marker cannot cope with quality marking the senior marker will report to the Chief Marker who in conjunction with the Centre Head will dismiss the marker with full pay up to the point where he/she has marked.

This process ensures that the quality of marking is not compromised by incompetent markers.

8. Monitoring the feedback

At the end of each marking session, both the Internal Moderator and the Chief Marker write an extensive report on both the quality of the paper presented and how learners experienced the questions as well as on the marking process.

Commentary on the adherence to the marking memorandum; questions which posed problems for markers; consistency in the allocation of marks and the accuracy of totals; the acceptance of alternative responses which are correct; the moderation process; a general rating of the markers' performance and evidence of script control and rigorous control by the Chief and Senior markers are some of the aspects that must be included in the Internal Moderator's report. The Internal Moderator, in conclusion, must also recommend if the raw marks should be accepted or whether there should be an upwards or downwards adjustment proposed at the standardisation meeting. The standardisation meeting will be attended by the Senior Manager of Examination and Assessment who will serve as spokesperson for his/her province.

The Chief Marker also has to comment on the standard of the paper compared to the previous year's as well as on the performance of the learners in each question. These reports serve a two-fold purpose: to advise the Senior Manager when attending the standardisation meeting and also to give feedback to teachers about the marking session because these reports are printed and presented as a handout to all schools at the beginning of each year.

At the roadshows, which are common to Gauteng, the marking reports are also used as a starting point for informing teachers about the previous as well as the next examination as specific question types which posed problems are discussed and pointers given to teachers on how to attempt teaching and answering these questions.

Subject facilitators at district offices are to ensure that all their English matric teachers get hold of the reports timeously.

9. Conclusion

Much thought went into the selection of the language corpus for the item analysis to establish a truly representative group of learners for research purposes. A township school was excluded from this research because permission from the relevant unions to which teachers generally belong could not be obtained. However, in any further research done, it would be very insightful to see how township schools perform against the others.

The setting of items for language papers is extraordinary difficult, because English First Additional Language is the subject with the largest learner numbers of all Grade 12 subjects and should, therefore, be highly accommodating as it is a national paper written by all learners in the country. To find the 'golden midway', is, however, easier said than done. This fact underpins all the problems experienced with finding the correct standard for each of the papers. Over the three years during the October/November Senior Certificate Examinations, it was a question of either too easy or too difficult, resulting in huge statistical adaptations to be made.

The results of the item analysis of the Supplementary Paper of 2003 are, however, to an extent heartening because there was a fair spread of marks and fairly predictable responses to questions. Many of the errors that were made by learners can be ascribed to inadequate schema. The high frequency of errors, unfortunately only proves that, despite all the quality assurance mechanisms put in place, the outcomes of the assessment of the Senior Certificate papers are not satisfactory.

A general comparison between the schools' results shows that there was very little differentiation between the outcomes of schools C and D, which proves the point that there is still quality education in many state schools and that parents need not feel despondent when they do not have the financial means to put their children in private schools. It is just a matter of finding a school that consistently performs well in the external departmental examination.

By using an item analysis to monitor the quality of the assessment a fair picture of the value of each item has been attained. Coverage of the syllabus has been ensured and for diagnostic purposes, for example in which item the learners battled and extra attention is needed the item analysis itself proved indispensable.

However, it becomes clear that most learners are just as good in a subject as their teacher is competent at teaching it. If a learner is exposed to a teacher who has a very limited frame of reference, who does not believe in keeping up with new policies and approaches and an inadequate level of language proficiency, it is improbable that the learner will excel in that subject. It is therefore imperative that teachers that are performing below par should be upskilled or mentored by more competent teachers by means of which the mindset of teachers, opposed to changing their methodology, should be adapted so that they become more innovative. When assessing no step of the assessment process should be left out, and special emphasis should be given to implementing monitoring mechanisms.

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