

## **SOME PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY BRUNEIAN STUDENTS WITH THE CAMBRIDGE O LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE READING COMPREHENSION PAPER**

MARY F NICOL<sup>\*</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

*For the last twenty years there has been little in improvement in the performance of Brunei students in the Cambridge O Level English examination and this has been the cause of some concern. In this study, a group of practising teachers were surveyed to find out what they perceived to be the main obstacles to success, and a number of student scripts were analyzed to see to what extent the students' scripts confirmed the teachers' perceptions. Teachers expressed concern over the suitability of the examination as well as concern at the low level basic skills shown by the students. The exam scripts confirm the latter. Some causes of the problems are considered, as well as some possible steps for future remedial action.*

### **INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

A report published in 1987 (The Project Group, 1987) in Brunei stated that, nationally, the percentage of students attaining a credit at O level English Language was around 10-12.5 per cent (referring to the statistics for 1984 and 1985). Bourke (1999) notes this same "Pattern of gross underachievement in O level English" in Brunei. In March 2003 the current acting Minister of Education was reported in the local press (Azaraimy, 2003) as saying that, over the last five years, the average rate of success had been 12.8%. In other words there has been little improvement over the last twenty years. This underachievement is of such concern as the exam is widely regarded as a requirement to entry to further education.

The 1987 report, based on a survey of classroom teachers' perceptions of the problem, made eight recommendations. Table 1 shows that all but one of these have been acted on, at least to some extent.

Thus, efforts have been made over the last twenty years. However, some actions have been judged unsuccessful and therefore discontinued (items 1 and 2). Improvements to resources seem to have been insufficient (items 6 and 7). Overall, the hoped for improvement in the success rate with this exam have not come about.

### **THE AIMS OF THIS STUDY**

This study, therefore, aims to consider what further obstacles exist that might account for the continuing low success rate. The questions addressed are:

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<sup>\*</sup> Department of English Language and Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

- i) What do teachers currently perceive the remaining problems to be?
- ii) To what extent do the students' mock-exam answer scripts bear out these perceptions?

Table 1: **1987 Report recommendations and actions taken since**

<b>Recommendation 1987</b>	<b>Subsequent Action</b>
1. The Ministry of Education should consider other exams than the O level	Some students in some schools have been given the chance to take the IGCSE ESL paper. This began in 1999, but was discontinued in 2003
2. There should be streaming after Form 3 and weaker students should take an alternative exam	Weaker students have been doing N level since 1997. This policy was discontinued in 2004
3. The BJCE (Form 3) exam should be revamped to make it a more suitable preparation for the O Level	This was done, with the current PMB starting in 1994/5. This exam has no multiple-choice questions and includes a summary, making it more like the O level exam
4. The course books should be updated	SEBD course books were commissioned. They were written by CFBT teachers working in Brunei. Since 1991 they have been available in all government schools. They are currently being replaced with an improved text book.
5. The qualifications of teachers should be upgraded, especially EFL qualifications	CFBT has been recruiting qualified TESOL teachers since 1985 and has also run RSA TESOL courses at certificate and diploma level since 1991 and 1989 respectively. Local and expatriate teachers have upgraded their EFL qualifications since then. Since 1993 UBD has been producing graduates with a major in education and TESOL.
6. There should be better provision of teaching equipment/resources	Although steps have been taken, teachers still complain of poor resources and difficulty of access.
7. Library facilities should be upgraded and expanded	Teachers continue to find this a problem despite improvements made
8. There should be a single syllabus used by all schools	It seems that this does not yet happen and each school continues to use its own syllabus

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS**

There were two research instruments used in this study:

- i) A survey of classroom teachers was conducted, asking them to identify what they perceived to be the main problems their students had with the different sections of the O level paper. In addition, they were asked what they considered to be the main causes of their students' problems. Fifteen teachers took part in the survey, both local and expatriate and from four different schools in the capital. Participation was on a voluntary basis. The survey was conducted in May 2003. (Appendix 1).
- ii) Student answer scripts were used in order to verify the teachers' impressions of the problems. The 45 scripts came from students in three different teaching groups at the Sixth

Form Centre in BSB and were part of the mock exams held in March 2003. The groups were from the middle of the ability range. These students had been successful enough in other O level subjects to gain entry to the college's A level programme, but were still trying for an elusive credit in English Language at their second or third attempt. (For exam question, see Appendix 2).

## **THE FINDINGS**

### **Findings of Teachers' Survey**

Two main strands emerged from the responses:

(i) The Cambridge O Level English language paper was considered to be an unsuitable examination for Bruneian students by 66 per cent of those surveyed. It was criticized as being dull and outdated (it was replaced in the U.K. in 1986), and was considered to be unsuitable since it is an examination intended for academic first language speaker students and not for use across the wider ability range of second language speakers entered for it in Brunei.

(ii) At the same time teachers described a situation where students were not equipped with the basic language skills necessary for success in this examination. They were particularly concerned about poor reading skills, lack of vocabulary and an inadequate grasp of grammar. For these shortcomings they were most inclined to blame the following factors:

<b>Factors</b>	<b>% (of teachers surveyed)</b>
The exam-oriented nature of the school system	93
The passive, non-interactive style of teaching prevalent in secondary and primary schools	93
Cultural and social influences outside school	86
Lack of good foundations in pre-school years	80
Lack of parental support	73

As regards the reading comprehension paper specifically, teachers identify the following problems that students have with this part of the examination:

<b>Problem</b>	<b>% (of teachers surveyed)</b>
Difficulty of the texts	66
Lack of vocabulary	46
Lack of world knowledge	40
Poor reading skills	40
Difficulty of the questions	40

## FINDINGS FROM EXAM SCRIPTS

### Reading comprehension questions

The average reading comprehension score for the scripts examined here was 9 out of 25 (36%). (The summary question from the examination was not included in this study.) Only 15 per cent of students scored over 50 per cent of the marks. The results are, therefore, disappointingly low.

Table 2 shows that when the information needed to answer the question is explicit in the text and just has to be identified, the students have very few problems.

**Table 2: Student performance when the information needed to answer the question is explicit in the test and just has to be identified**

Question	Correct	Partially correct	Wrong	Did not answer
1	42	1	2	0
2a	37	1	7	0
2d	37	0	8	0
5a	32	9	4	0
7 *	7	32	3	3

\* grammar difficulty (third conditional)

In all the questions which required candidates to locate information in the text, there was a direct match between the wording of the question and the wording in the text where the target information is located. In other words there was no attempt by the examiners to paraphrase or change wording. Tables 3 and 4 show that candidates got on somewhat better when this information followed rather than preceded the match.

**Table 3: Student performance where information precedes the matched phrase**

Correct	Partially correct	Wrong	Did not answer
81	33	18	3

**Table 4: Student performance where information follows the matched phrase**

Correct	Partially correct	Wrong	Did not answer
74	10	6	0

Tables 5 and 6 show that candidates do slightly better when the information is in the same sentence as the 'match', rather than one or two sentences distant, suggesting that they are reading locally.

Table 5: **Student performance where information is in the same sentence as the matched phrase**

Correct	Partially correct	Wrong	Did not answer
79	2	9	0

Table 6: **Student performance where the information is one or more sentences distant from the matched phrase**

Correct	Partially correct	Wrong	Did not answer
76	41	15	3

Another type of question that caused difficulty is where they were asked to select information from, or summarize, a section of the text. Table 7 shows the results for the only question of this type on this paper.

Table 7: **Student performance when selecting or summarizing is required**

Question	Correct	Partially correct	Wrong	Did not answer
3	11	10	24	0

In two questions a difficulty concerning grammar arose. In questions 4 and 7 it was necessary to understand and use the “third conditional” e.g. “if they had done this, that wouldn’t have happened.” There were some misunderstandings of the construction as well as some difficulty in using it.

Table 8: **Questions that caused difficulty due to grammar problems**

Question	Correct	Partially correct	Wrong	Did not answer
4	7	32	3	3
7	0	21	18	6

### **Vocabulary related questions**

In 8 out of the 14 questions/sub-questions, students were required to answer in their own words. All of these questions required them to explain vocabulary. In 4 cases they had to locate and explain words, and in 4 cases they were given the word or phrase to be explained.

Table 9: Student performance in vocabulary related questions

Question	Given or to be found	Word(s)	Correct	Partially correct	Wrong	Did not answer
2b	To be found	Prestigious/ lucrative	1	12	27	5
2c	Given	Economics were pushed to their limits	1	22	22	0
4	To be found	Scrambling / frantically	0	21	18	6
5b	Given	Ironically (in context of text)	5	17	23	0
6a	To be found	Degree of judgement / arrogant	0	42	3	0
6b	Given	Hurtled (second aspect of meaning)	0	3	39	3
8	To be found	Avarice / complacency	1	40	4	0
9	Given	Rich / spurred / plausible / in the light of / contemplated / imminent / enticing / ominous	52	0	158	0
<b>Totals</b>			<b>60 (11%)</b>	<b>157 (30%)</b>	<b>294 (56%)</b>	<b>14 (3%)</b>

Table 9 shows that very few students got full marks for these questions, with well under half failing to register any kind of score, and, on average, more than half the students getting no marks at all. A closer look at the answers that got some marks shows that students often did have some idea of the meaning, but lacked the necessary skills to express the meaning clearly and accurately

Of the 25 marks available on this reading comprehension section of the paper, 10 were for expressing meanings of given words in your own words, 8 involved both locating words and expressing their meaning and only 7 marks were for other reading skills. It is clear from the poor results for these questions (56% of all answers got no marks at all) that vocabulary is one of the areas Bruneian students need to be working on. For example in question 9, a purely vocabulary question where students choose five from eight choices to explain, 75% of answers got no marks at all. On examining them it was found that 15% did show evidence of some understanding of the meaning, but answers were not close enough to the marking scheme or were not clear enough. However, 60% showed no understanding whatsoever of the meaning and this is worrying.

## **DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

Teachers had expressed concern over the suitability of the exam, poor reading skills and lack of vocabulary

### **The unsuitability of the exam**

There is some justification for this view. Traditionally, in Britain, this exam was only taken by a relatively elite group of students who had already been identified as suitable material for further education. Although the situation and the type of exam have been changed in Britain, there are parts of the world, including Brunei, where this traditional type of exam is used across a wide ability range, resulting in disappointing pass rates. It is an exam intended for native speakers being administered to candidates with well below native speaker proficiency. It is, therefore, in many ways an outdated and unsuitable exam. In the reading comprehension paper, the emphasis has always been less on simply the ability to read and much more on the ability to express your understanding of what has been read. This tendency to test reading and written expression together is a feature of the British tradition that distinguishes it from the American approach (Hill & Parry, 1994). It is a feature that has caused problems for candidates in other countries such as Zimbabwe (Allen, 1994) and Nigeria (Parry, 1994) where the pass rate was below 30 per cent during the early 80s. Parry notes some features of the exam that contribute to the difficulties students have with it: The questions are often ambiguous and examiners demand a level of syntactic accuracy that goes "beyond the requirements of normal reading." She also notes that the language is often formal and students are required to understand idioms and figures of speech. All of these points were mentioned by teachers in the 2003 Brunei survey. In Zimbabwe, Allen observes that the curriculum and teaching methods used were influenced by the nature of the exam and were therefore also unsuitable for non-native speakers, thus compounding the problem. Bourke (1999) sees the O level exam as having little relevance for Bruneian students and suggests that an alternative should be found. Since then, the IGCSE exam has been tried and discontinued, suggesting that finding a suitable alternative is not going to be easy.

### **Problems with poorly developed reading skills**

There is evidence in these scripts that the students have poorly developed reading skills, showing a tendency to read at the sentence level, using content based, local strategies as well as having some difficulties with more demanding grammatical constructions. A more detailed study of their reading strategies would confirm this. Some of these problems are discussed below.

#### *The interaction of linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge*

It has often been concluded (e.g. Devine, 1988) that in order for a learner to read proficiently in a second language there needs to be interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. In the case of the students under study here, their teachers feel that both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge are areas in which their students have

problems. However, it should be pointed out that the text used in the analysis in this study happened to be the story of the Titanic. It can probably be safely assumed that most candidates were familiar with the Hollywood film and therefore lack of world knowledge was less of a problem here. However, 46 per cent of teachers surveyed maintain that lack of world knowledge is normally a problem for their students.

### *The lack of emphasis on meaning*

Cline (1998 cited in Rosowsky, 2001) describes a situation:

After struggling to read culturally unfamiliar material with a limited English vocabulary in the early stages, some of the pupils become habitual users of the surface and syntactic cues in print and, in effect, learn not to read for meaning. Becoming a second language reader when one practises the early skills of reading with a weak language base may carry the risk of developing compensatory habits that will later inhibit progress.

Both Cline and Rosowsky were working with Punjabi speakers of English in UK schools, but the situation described above might well apply to Bruneian students learning English. Teachers in this survey maintain that most O Level texts were above the reading level of their students.

Rosowsky's own paper (2001) concerns research with two groups of students (one group consisted of monolingual English students and the other of bilingual Pakistanis who had undergone Koranic education outside the school). Both groups were tested for reading accuracy (decoding) and also for reading comprehension. The latter group outperformed the native speaking group on the former, but did significantly worse on the second test.

When young students are learning to read aloud and memorize the Koran the emphasis is on a perfect reproduction of the text. This process encourages bottom-up reading strategies i.e. correct recognition of letters, words and sentences. The text itself is well beyond the level of the student in terms of both concepts and language and therefore full understanding of the text is not expected.

In 1985 the Moroccan Literacy project found a similar situation among Moroccan children living in London. This study noted the use of bottom –up teaching strategies and also noted that learning by heart was an activity of great cultural significance that featured in the Moroccan education system up to University level.

In her UBD undergraduate project paper Ho Guan Eng (1998) analysed the verbal behaviour of six different teachers in reading comprehension lessons in secondary 4 classes in Brunei. She notes that in four of the six lessons the teacher began by dealing with vocabulary and grammar difficulties before asking students what the text was about. This would reinforce bottom up reading strategies. A number of teachers in the 2003 survey in Brunei expressed concern about the styles of teaching and learning practised in Bruneian classrooms. They felt the non-interactive nature of the process and the use of rote learning ran counter to the demands of the O level English exam.

Ghadesy and Nicol (2001) found that Brunei Malay students had poorer reading comprehension skills than their Chinese counterparts. One difference in the backgrounds was the religious education the Malay pupils underwent. It was suggested that the time spent on this and the type of teaching and learning practised might to some extent account for the difference in reading skills between the two groups. Further study would be needed to confirm this.



Bruneian school children often spend a considerable number of hours in after-school tuition classes. It is possible that the type of teaching and learning practised in these classes is similarly unhelpful.

Heavy emphasis on decoding can slow reading down to the point where the short-term memory is taxed. This will encourage reading locally. It is also possible that the guessing for meaning strategy encourages learners to slow down and interrupt their reading.

### **Problems related to vocabulary**

Parry (1994) notes that Nigerian students had greatest difficulty with questions demanding lexical substitution and the findings here confirm this as a major source of difficulty. Laufer and Sim (1985) found that in interpreting a text, second language readers relied on words more than on background knowledge or syntactic knowledge in order to understand a text. Similarly, Haynes and Baker (1993) conclude that second language readers are hampered more by vocabulary problems than by lack of reading strategies. Lack of vocabulary was identified as a major problem by 60 per cent of teachers surveyed and the results of this study seem to confirm the extent of the problem among Bruneian students. Some of the problems are considered below.

#### *The lack of prominence in syllabus/ course books*

Vocabulary has long been a neglected area in EFL teaching, losing out to grammar or communication, despite the fact that students generally rate it high on their list of needs and priorities. Priority in teaching schedules and course books tends to be given to reading comprehension, summary writing and essay writing skills.

#### *The lack of explicit instruction*

It has long been the accepted wisdom that reading widely will improve a learner's vocabulary. There is evidence that it will, but gains tend to be very limited, especially in a second language, where less reading is done than in the first, (Meara, 1997). However, Paribakht and Wesche (1997) found that reading plus explicit instruction led to greater vocabulary gains than reading alone.

#### *The inferring meaning from context strategy*

Also popular in recent years has been the "inferring meaning from context" strategy for reading comprehension purposes. There are, however, certain prerequisites to be met before this strategy can be successfully used e.g. the students need to be able to understand the surrounding context and there needs to be sufficient helpful information present, as well as an absence of misleading information. A successful outcome is by no means guaranteed.

Parry (1997) found that while her L2 learners made inferences that were broadly correct, they often failed to arrive at an accurate representation of meaning. In other words their answers were partially correct. This was the situation found with the candidates in this study. While they were able to infer the approximate meaning of the word that was sometimes, but not always adequate for comprehension purposes, this left them with a level of understanding of meaning that was insufficient for the demands of most of the questions

they had to answer. In her 1994 study of Nigerian school students, she found them unable to infer accurately as their knowledge of surrounding words was inadequate. This is compounded by a weak grasp of syntax and an inability to make use of even fairly low level rhetorical cues. Given the nature of the Cambridge O level exam, it seems that being able to infer meaning from context, even if practiced successfully, may not be enough.

## **MEASURES THAT MIGHT MINIMIZE THE PROBLEMS**

### **Measures that might minimize the Reading Problems**

#### *The interaction of linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge*

Grabe (1986) recommends as classroom practice, initially choosing texts that are demanding in only one or other of these ways to allow students to learn how to deal with each type of difficulty separately. This would be an argument against using past papers until later on. Teachers in the 2003 survey were in favour of delaying the repeated practice of past papers.

#### *Reading speed and lack of emphasis on meaning.*

Stoller (1986), and others suggest that exercises to increase reading speed might discourage the word by word approach. It is also suggested that students be given exercises to encourage them to read in chunks. Knowledge of cohesive ties and anaphoric reference may help overcome the local reading tendencies of some second language learners.

On a more positive note, current research supports the idea that students can benefit from explicit instruction and strategy training. Varaprasad (2003), working with students at the National University of Singapore (NUS), describes some success in moving students from sentence-level, content based reading strategies towards strategies that encourage understanding of the whole text as well as connections between different parts of the text.

### **Measures that might promote more successful vocabulary acquisition**

Many researchers have concluded (e.g. Oxford & Scarcella, 1994) that it is necessary to teach students explicit vocabulary learning strategies, sometimes even in de-contextualized exercises.

Various explicit teaching strategies have been recommended. For example, Schmitt (1997) recommends word lists as being useful (especially for students comfortable with memorization strategies), but notes that this should be followed up with “additional, enriching information.” O’Dell (1997) calls for “repeated and active use” as well as “rich instruction.” Along the same lines, Sökmen (1997) recommends “a deeper level of processing” as well as “repeated encounters” with words to be learnt. If they are correct then most course books currently used in Brunei are almost certainly not doing enough.

Also recommended are the strategies of explicit teaching on word formation, helpful and meaningful ways of recording vocabulary as well as techniques for remembering and revising words. Vocabulary tests might be usefully employed in a school environment where testing is well accepted.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings from this study provide evidence that, as indicated by teachers in the 2003 survey (which in turn confirms the findings of Bourke's 1999 study), Bruneian students have identifiable problems with the reading comprehension paper as a result of poor reading skills and a lack of grammatical expertise. However, teachers also correctly ranked lack of vocabulary as a greater problem. As a test of reading skill, the O level English language paper reading comprehension section is unlike other such tests. It is suggested therefore, that candidates may need different preparation for this paper and some possible approaches have been mentioned.

It is worth noting that almost all the teachers surveyed expressed strong negative feelings towards some aspects of the school system and the learning and teaching styles that prevailed and perhaps this is an area that deserves further study. It is also worrying to note that 60 per cent of teachers had similarly negative attitudes towards the exam they are preparing their students to sit.

This study was limited to one question paper, fifteen teachers and forty-five students, and so conclusions can only be very tentative. Since no suitable alternative has been identified, it seems that, for the time at least, being teachers and students must continue their uphill struggle.

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## Appendix 1

### **Questionnaire for teachers of O level English**

Over recent years concern has been expressed at the relatively poor performance by Bruneian students in the Cambridge O level English examination. This questionnaire aims to identify some of the likely causes of difficulty, as perceived by the teachers. We feel that, as teacher sin the front line, you are likely to have very useful insights as to the reasons for the current situation. We would, therefore, be most grateful if you could take the time to fill in this questionnaire as conscientiously as you can. We would welcome any other comments or feedback you may want to offer.

Dr. Nesam Chitravelu (Senior lecturer DELAL, UBD).

Mary Nicol (Lecturer, DELAL, UBD).

**Instructions:**

Please give the brief answers requested and use the lined spaces to add further information where the space provided has been insufficient.

Please use the space at the end if you want to indicate any other areas which you feel we should be considering or any further causes for failure that you feel we have overlooked.

Thank you for your cooperation

**1. Personal details**

Nationality: \_\_\_\_\_

Level you are teaching: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years teaching in total: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years teaching in Brunei: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years teaching non-native speaker (of English) students: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Reading comprehension and summary**

**2.1 Classroom practice : which types of reading do you require your students to do, and how frequently?**

Type	Regularly (weekly / fortnightly)	Occasionally	Rarely / never
a) reading comprehension + questions			
b) shorter, simpler texts for grammar or vocabulary work			
c) reading for information e.g. for projects			
d) reading for pleasure (fiction)			
e) others (please specify)			

**2.2 Exam content : What are the main difficulties your students encounter with comprehension and summary?**

Difficulty	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree
<b>i) Comprehension section</b>			
a) level of text is too difficult for them			
b) lack of vocabulary			
c) content is culturally inappropriate/remote			
d) boredom with this type of task			

e) general lack of interest in reading			
f) lack of reading skills in L1			
g) lack of reading experience generally			
h) failure to understand the questions			
i) poor reasoning skills			
j) lack of general / world knowledge			
k) others (please specify)			
<b>ii) Summary</b>			
a) they don't understand the text			
b) they find it hard to stick to the word limit			
c) they don't understand the nature of the task			
d) they are reluctant or unable to use their own words			
e) grammatical weakness			
f) others (please specify)			

Additional comments

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**2.3 Which, if any, of the following remedies have you tried, and was the outcome successful in your opinion?**

<b>Remedy</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
a) give them simpler texts	
b) vary the post reading tasks	
c) practise reading skills in isolation	
d) encourage other types of reading	
e) persevere with texts at the specified level	
f) pair work or group work	
g) ask students to write their own questions	
h) others (please specify)	

Additional comments

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**2.4 Are there any other remedies that you would like to try, but don't because of exam pressure, time constraints, disapproval of parents or principals etc?**

Remedy	Reason for not trying it

### **Section 3. Writing**

**3.1 Classroom practice : Which types of writing do you require your students to do and how often?**

Type	Regularly (weekly or fortnightly)	Occasionally	Rarely or never
a) narrative (examination length)			
b) descriptive (exam. length)			
c) argumentative (exam. length)			
d) shorter pieces of any of the above types			
e) book reviews			
f) letters (formal and informal)			
g) reports			
h) other – please specify			

Additional comments

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**3.2 Exam content : What are the main difficulties your students encounter with the composition and guided writing section?**

<b>Difficulty</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
<b>i) Free composition</b>	-----	-----	-----
a) lack of ideas			
b) lack of vocabulary			
c) grammatical weakness			
d) lack of exposure to the genre			
e) lack of related reading			
f) lack of confidence			
g) inability to sustain the required effort to finish			
h) lack of logical thinking skills			
i) lack of general / world knowledge			
j) lack of interest / motivation			
k) other – please specify			
<b>ii) Guided writing section</b>	-----	-----	-----
a) they don't understand the task			
b) they don't understand the genre e.g. turn it into a narrative			
c) lack of ideas to supplement given information			
d) unable to merge the given information into their own sentences (grammatical problems)			
e) problems achieving the required level of formality			
f) general weaknesses of grammar and vocabulary			
h) others (please specify)			

Additional comments:

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**3.3 Which, if any of the following remedies have you tried and was the outcome successful, in your opinion?**

<b>Remedy</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
a) using model or sample compositions and analysing them	
b) setting shorter writing tasks	
c) more pre-writing discussions or exercises	
d) collaborative writing tasks	
e) focus on one aspect in isolation e.g. openings, endings, description of setting etc.	
f) peer editing	
g) process writing	
h) journal writing	
i) displaying work	
j) others (please specify)	

Additional comments x

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**3.4 Are there any other remedies / alternatives that you would like to try, but don't because of exam pressure, time constraints, disapproval of parents/principal etc?**

<b>Remedy</b>	<b>Reason for not trying it</b>

Additional comments

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## **Section 4. The Oral**

**4.1 Classroom practice** : Which of the following do you require your students to do, and how often?

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Regularly (weekly or fortnightly)</b>	<b>Occasionally</b>	<b>Rarely or never</b>
a) class discussions			
b) group discussions			
c) pair discussions / conversations			
d) oral presentations			
e) reading plays aloud			
f) there is little specific oral skill practice in class			
g) others (please specify)			

## **4.2 Exam content:**

**What are the main difficulties your students experience with the oral component of the O level? (You can also draw on your experience as an examiner.)**

<b>Difficulty</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
a) lack of practice speaking English in school			
b) lack of practice speaking English elsewhere			
c) shyness			
d) failure to understand the questions asked			
e) lack of preparation due to time constraints large classes etc			
f) accustomed to only giving short responses			
g) poor English			
h) unsuitable conversation topics			
i) problems with the reading aloud			
j) other (please specify)			

Additional comments

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**4.3 Which, if any, of the following remedies have you tried, and was the outcome successful, in your opinion?**

Remedy	Outcome
a) allowing students to write their answers down first / preparation first	
b) listening to taped interviews	
c) pronunciation practice	
d) pair / group work	
e) other (please specify)	

Additional comments

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**4.4 Are there any other things that you would like to try, but don't, due to time constraints, disapproval etc?**

Remedy	Reason for not trying it

Additional comments

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### **Section 5. General**

**Bruneian students have trouble with the reading and writing that is required of them. Drawing on your own experience and intuitions, where do you think the reasons for these difficulties lie? Please indicate the importance of each area you select and, if possible, give reasons for your opinions.**

<b>Area</b>	<b>very impt.</b>	<b>quite impt.</b>	<b>not impt.</b>	<b>Reasons</b>
a) in the pre-school years at home				
b) in primary school education				
c) the examination oriented nature of the Brunei school system				
d) in the type of teaching styles in other subjects (primary and secondary)				
e) in prevailing cultural and social influences				
f) negative student attitudes towards using English				
g) negative student attitudes to school work				
h) lack of parental involvement				
i) inadequacy of course books/ teaching materials provided				
j) confusion over recent changes to the O level paper e.g. weighting of marks, marking style				
k) lack of opportunity to use English outside school				
l) others (please specify)				

Additional comments

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## **Appendix 2**

### **The Exam Text and Questions**

Read the passage and then answer all the questions that follow below.

You are recommended to answer the questions in the order set.

Mistakes in spelling, punctuation and grammar may be penalized in any part of the paper.

(The passage describes the building of the liner *Titanic* and her subsequent sinking on her first voyage from England to America).

1. Accounts of shipwrecks and other marine disasters exert a fascination that is all but universal. Disasters at sea are rich in examples of superhuman skill and determination, and, on occasion, criminal negligence, and sometimes more sinister behaviour. The name that inevitably springs to mind whenever disasters at sea are mentioned is *Titanic*. The loss of this ship in 1912 was particularly memorable not only because she sank on her first voyage after hitting an iceberg, but also because of the events that preceded the disaster.
2. The directors of the company that built *Titanic* were pioneers in the transatlantic passenger trade. However, they did not have much experience in the design and operation of appropriate vessels since ships of this class and size were a very recent innovation. Competition for contracts in the prestigious and lucrative business of the transatlantic run had spurred major competitors to build increasingly larger and faster vessels. With *Titanic*, both technology and economics were pushed to the limits. Furthermore, it was the intention of her owner to build a vessel which was capable of operating at a competitive speed and also to focus on luxury as a means of attracting the wealthy. At the same time, *Titanic* was uniquely designed with a system of watertight compartments and electrically operated watertight doors. The designers got carried away with the advances they had made in the construction of the ship and this led them then to make unwarranted and inaccurate claims for its safety. Their claim that *Titanic* was unsinkable was plausible but unfortunate in the light of subsequent events. It also encouraged the designers to ignore basic considerations of safety to which they might have otherwise given close attention.
3. One of these considerations should have been the number of lifeboats on board *Titanic*. Certainly she could have carried sufficient for all her passengers and crew without any difficulty; this was originally contemplated by the builders, but they later rejected the idea. If *Titanic* was truly unsinkable, why go to the unnecessary expense and trouble to provide something that caution would dictate for a less advanced vessel? It is quite likely that this overconfidence in *Titanic's* capabilities was communicated to her crew. Thoughts of safety gave way to the exciting prospect of manning such a splendid vessel on her very first voyage. Undoubtedly the captain was a fine seaman of outstanding ability; he had commanded several vessels on their first voyages, and he had planned to retire from his long career at the completion of *Titanic's* first voyage. Any fears for her safety he might have had were diminished in the face of the enthusiasm of *Titanic's* owner for her outstanding qualities. Besides, the owner disliked any criticism of his judgement and so it is understandable that the captain hesitated to express any possible doubts about the equipment and safety of this ocean queen.
4. At noon on 10th April, 1912 a long blast on *Titanic's* whistle signalled her imminent departure. Some people at the time expressed a certain wariness about that particular first voyage. Yet any faint premonitions of doom would have been hard to detect amid the eager anticipation which accompanied the first sailing of this superb ship. In fact, the ship's owner himself was among the passengers, along with a spectacular array of the most famous people of the day.

5. *Titanic* headed out into the grey Atlantic. Her massive engines were soon brought up to speed, and she steamed towards her icy destiny. Reports of huge icebergs were radioed by other ships right from the start but were given little attention on board *Titanic*. The increasing throb of her engines gave promise of even higher speeds. Although the owner had earlier declared that there was no point in driving the ship too hard, the possibility of an early arrival in New York was too enticing to ignore; a record crossing on this first voyage would receive much publicity. Amidst all the excitement, a day had been set aside for lifeboat drill. This indeed might have helped later and stopped passengers from scrambling frantically for places in these boats. However, the captain made the mistake of postponing the drill out of deference to the many illustrious passengers on board.
6. Meanwhile, further reports showed icebergs nearly in the path of the huge liner; unfortunately, not all these reports reached her control room. Nevertheless, the captain and his officers clearly knew there was a distinct possibility, even likelihood, of encountering an iceberg during the night. The captain must have known the risk he was taking in maintaining *Titanic's* speed, but decided to take it anyway; to have slowed his ship under the circumstances would have suggested a degree of timidity out of keeping with his character. Also, his reputation was involved; he was understandably proud of it and did not want to damage it at this stage of his career. This marvellous vessel he commanded was on her first voyage while he, ironically, was on his last.
7. The lookouts were specifically warned to watch for icebergs, yet they did not seem particularly concerned about this possibility. Nor had any extra lookouts been posted. No special instructions were given to the ship's engineers to stand by for possible emergency manoeuvres. The advisability of slowing the vessel to allow more time to react should an iceberg be sighted ahead does not appear to have been considered by the captain. This is hardly surprising as it would have thwarted the hope for an even higher speed on the following day.
8. When further messages about icebergs came in from the ship *Californian*, the young radio operator on *Titanic* ignored them. Although he was dedicated to his profession, he did not have that degree of judgement which comes from years of experience. Besides, the glamour of his job had made him arrogant. Meanwhile, as one of the lookouts neared the end of his watch, an ominous smudge about the size of his hand loomed on the horizon dead ahead. The object rapidly grew in size and distinctness. Convinced that one of the icebergs he had been warned about was directly in *Titanic's* path, the lookout raised the alert and watched helplessly as the ship hurtled towards the sheer grey wall of ice.
9. With hindsight it has been suggested that *Titanic's* officers should not have reversed the engines and altered the ship's course. Its collision with the iceberg would then have been head on, and the damage, though serious, would not have been fatal. Their mistakes were catastrophic, no doubt. But the reaction of the officers was understandable; they merely responded to the instinct that would have prompted most seamen under these circumstances. As it was, the side of the ship took the full impact of the iceberg; the damage to the watertight compartments was disastrous. Only

about one third of the passengers and crew, who together numbered over 2000, escaped in the inadequate number of lifeboats; the rest drowned.

10. Amidst the frantic scramble for places in the lifeboats, the owner of *Titanic* exploited his role as a passenger, and, as the last boats were being launched, seated himself in one of them. He was later persecuted by the press for not having gone down with his ship. Various conflicting stories were told about *Titanic's* gallant, but tragic, captain, yet none could be proved. Suffice to say, he went down with the ship and it is unlikely that he wanted to be included among those who survived. The sinking of *Titanic*, although partly a natural disaster, can also be seen as a man-made one, resulting from human avarice and complacency.

From paragraph 1

1. Give one reason why the loss of *Titanic* is ‘particularly memorable’ among disasters at sea.  
[1]

From paragraph 2

2. a) Ships like *Titanic* were a “recent innovation”. That was the initial disadvantage the builders faced in designing such a ship?  
[1]
- b) What two benefits were gained by ship owners who won contracts to build transatlantic ships? You must answer **in your own words**.  
[2]
- c) In building *Titanic*, “economics were pushed to their limits.” What is the author saying here?  
[2]
- d) The builders of the ship claimed that it was unsinkable. What was there in its design that made them so confident?  
[1]

From paragraph 3

3. From your reading of paragraph 3, suggest **briefly** the reason why some people felt wary about the first voyage of *Titanic* (line 30/40)  
[1]

From paragraph 5

4. The captain decided to postpone the lifeboat drill. Explain **in your own words** why this proved to be an unwise decision later.  
[2]

From paragraph 6

- 5 a) The captain maintained *Titanic's* speed to avoid any suggestion of timidity. What other reason did he have for maintaining her speed?  
[1]
- b) The captain was “ironically” on his last voyage. Explain fully what this means.  
[2]

From paragraph 8

6. a) The young radio operator misjudged the importance of radio messages reaching *Titanic*. Using your own words, give two reasons for his lack of judgement.  
[2]
- b) *Titanic* “hurtled” towards the iceberg in its path. Apart from the notion of speed, what other idea do you think is emphasized by “hurtled”?  
[1]

From paragraph 9

7. Perhaps it would have been better if *Titanic's* officers had ignored their seamen's instinct at the last moment. Explain why.  
[2]

From paragraph 10

8. The author believes that nature alone did not cause the disaster of *Titanic*. Explain in your own words what else he thinks was the cause.  
[2]

From the whole passage

9. Choose five of the following words or phrases. For each of them give one word or short phrase (of not more than seven words) which has the same meaning that the word or phrase has in the passage.

- |                              |                           |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. rich (line 2)             | 5. contemplated (line 25) |
| 2. spurred (line 12)         | 6. imminent (line 38)     |
| 3. plausible (line 20)       | 7. enticing (line 50)     |
| 4. in the light of (line 20) | 8. ominous (line 77)      |
- [5]