

EXAMINING ENGLISH

Are there Alternatives?

by Bob Ellison

MOST of the attention devoted to the issue of public examinations in the last six months has focused on security. 'Leakage' of papers and wholesale copying in examination halls has become a worrying national problem indicating that the scramble for a pass has taken a serious turn for the worse.

What this means is that the results of examinations such as SSC are thrown into doubt as the genuineness of performance comes under the spotlight. We ask ourselves about the reliability of results. If we took a particular candidate and asked him/her to take the same examination again would we get a similar result? If we do not get a result close to the original one, then the measure being used is untrustworthy.

There have been many suggestions how to overcome this problem ranging from expelling cheats from the examination room—an apparently dangerous course of action—to transferring the responsibility for examinations to district education boards, which will work independently of one another; how the latter proposal will solve the problem is not clear.

In the midst of all this discussion, it seems that an equally important issue is being ignored and that is what are the purposes of these examinations. Are they simply about ranking students as first, second, third etc. without any reference to what these students can actually do with the language?

If you look at current examination papers for English at SSC level, you will see their emphasis on regurgitating facts of a literary and linguistic nature which have been committed to memory by students. And even where there is an attempt to examine language, it usually revolves around an esoteric knowledge of grammar which bears little relationship to the real world of communication. As a result, unfortunately many students cannot utter anything comprehensible, or write coherently in a language they have apparently been learning for the previous six or seven years.

What Can be Done?

It has become almost a cliché to say that what society needs as the next millennium approaches is an increase in its skills. In English language, there is a great need for an improvement in our ability to communicate particularly orally and in writing as the world becomes one marketplace.

Evidence from examination papers in Bangladesh suggests

that as far as English is concerned students are learning very few, if any, appropriate skills.

There is an alternative to the present approach, of course, but it is not a simple one to introduce for a number of reasons. In the first place, it will require 'a leap into the unknown'; a place where the teaching of language emphasises real communication. Secondly, teachers will have to improve their skills in order to deliver the new curriculum. Finally, in order to get the support of industry and commerce, it will be necessary to assure employers that this new examination will measure useful English language skills and that the results will be trustworthy.

The question of examination security is of primary importance as there is no guarantee that new examinations in English will be any more successful than the present ones. There is a need to seek solutions to some of the problems associated with examination leaks and cheating. For example, the printing of papers might be moved outside the country. Candidates seen to be cheating would have their examination numbers noted by two independent invigilators and then be subsequently informed that their papers would not be accepted. In the latter case, this would at least avoid face-to-face confrontations in the examination hall.

However, with an emphasis on skills rather than, for example memorisation, there will at least be a fundamental change which will move the teaching of English into line with what is happening in many, economically successful parts of the world.

Test Example

An example of a skills-based examination follows. It is not suggested that the example is appropriate to SSC level at this stage. However, in the future, it is hoped that such a test, adjusted in cultural content, would not be too difficult for students at this level.

This is a common format in many countries allowing the testing of a wide range of reading skills: e.g. scanning for specific information, extracting important details and inferring meaning. The answers have to be sought rather than are provided as with multiple choice questions. Therefore, the 'guess' factor is reduced. It is a real task in that one can imagine a situation where one might be given a leaflet of this type from which information has to be obtained. In addition, although

the text is new and cannot have been memorised, if students have been taught the skills of reading well, they should be able to deal with the questions without too much difficulty. Finally, although answers have to be written, provided it is clear that the text has been understood, correct grammar etc. is not required.

Situation: Your company is going to re-locate to Rocklands in London. At a recent staff meeting several members of staff asked you about how they could reach the new premises by public transport. In particular, they wanted to know about the new Rocklands Light Railway.

Task: Using the information in the leaflet that you have obtained, write the answers to their questions. The questions are given below the leaflet.

Your answers should be brief, but give all the information required against the number of the question. For example:

Can we use RLR tickets on other train services?

Yes you can use them on the Underground and National Railways.

Leaflet

The Rocklands Light Railway (RLR) came into being when re-development in Rocklands made it essential to improve public transport — both for commuters and local residents. From the start it proved popular and it already needs to expand to meet an increasing demand.

All stations are monitored by closed circuit TV. In addition, mobile staff patrol the stations, which are clean and brightly lit. The destination of trains is flashed on an Electronic Indicator on station platforms, and also announced on the public address system. Every train has a train Captain, who checks tickets and can answer queries whilst ensuring the smooth operation of the train.

All stations have special lifts that take wheelchairs and space is allocated for wheelchairs on the trains. Trains were built to take wheelchairs easily. Each station is equipped with a passenger alarm (emergency use only) which, when activated by a push button, establishes immediate contact with our control room. There are emergency buttons on trains for passenger use if warranted. Whilst engineering work is in progress to improve and extend the railway (after 9.30 pm and at weekends, until further notice) a special DLR substitute bus service is operated. The railway is con-

trolled from the Operations and Maintenance centre adjacent to Popular Station. Queries about the railway are also handled from here (telephone 0171-583 0311) or from our 24-hour information service 0171-222 1234.

Single journey tickets to all RLR and Underground stations can be bought on the day from the coin-operated ticket machines in station entrance halls. You must have a valid ticket before you travel. Any passenger without a ticket will be dealt with in accordance with the regulations. This may involve payment of an additional fare 10 times the value of the fare avoided, or may lead to prosecution. London Regional Transport and National Rail Travelcards and Capital cards are valid on RLR trains and substitute buses provided they cover the right fare zones. RLR tickets are valid on the Underground and National Railways. Group and special tickets can be bought in advance by writing to the Rocklands Light Railway, PO Box 154, London E14 9QA, and on the day from the RLR Information Centres at Island Gardens stations (open 10 am to 4 pm weekdays) or at Tower Gateway station (open 10.45 am to 3.15 pm most days).

Questions

- Where are tickets checked?
 - Who checks tickets?
 - What can we do if there is an emergency on the station platform?
 - How do we get tickets for single journeys?
 - If we are planning a special journey for several people, where can we get tickets?
 - How do we know where the trains are going?
 - When does the railway close on weekdays?
 - Can we use RLR trains if we are working on Saturday?
 - Is it possible for disabled people to use the RLR?
 - What will happen if we are on a train and don't have a ticket?
 - Can we travel on the RLR without a ticket issued by the RLR?
 - If it is late at night and we need information about RLR services, how can we get it?
 - If we miss the last train, how can we travel on the RLR service?
 - While we are waiting for trains, how are we protected from thieves and other criminals who might enter the stations?
 - Can all National Rail Travelcards be used on the RLR?
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