

Oral exam practice 1

Part A: Group Discussion (Preparation: 10 minutes; discussion: 8 minutes per group of four)

The extract below appeared in yesterday's newspaper:

City lights

Hong Kong Island's night-time skyline¹ is one of the world's most famous. The phrase "Hong Kong City of Lights" gets 14.8 million results in a Google search.

Much of this lighting, however, is unnecessary and wasteful, and contributes significantly to increased air pollution. Lights in many empty offices and shops are left on all night, and billboards² are unnecessarily bright and are often still on at five in the morning.

More and more, people are objecting to light pollution from too much artificial light³, which affects our health and natural body rhythm⁴ by interfering⁵ with our sleep.

Researchers from the University of Hong Kong found that the brightest areas of Hong Kong, such as Mongkok and Wanchai, had 500 times more light than the darkest spots in Hong Kong, such as Lantau and Sai Kung. According to Friends of the Earth, electricity use for lighting increased 20 per cent from 1997 to 2006, while the population increased only six per cent.

Some green groups maintain that while individual companies have responded positively to criticism by cutting lighting hours, general change can only be brought about by laws controlling light pollution.

You are editors of the school magazine. The next edition of the magazine is going to focus on light pollution in Hong Kong. You are meeting to plan the edition. You may want to talk about:

- the effect of light pollution on residents
- who may be the worst offenders⁶ and why
- how light pollution could be reduced without government intervention⁷ (i.e. legislation)
- anything else you think is important

Part B Individual Response (one minute per candidate; no preparation)

1. Do you like Hong Kong's bright lights?
2. Does light pollution bother you?
3. Do you think light pollution can affect a person's health?
4. Do you know anyone whose sleep is affected by too much bright light outside?
5. What kinds of business signs do you think are the most effective?
6. Do you think education can solve the problem of light pollution?
7. Where do you think light pollution is the worst in Hong Kong?
8. What would you do if a large, bright, flashing sign were put up outside your bedroom window?
9. Would you like to live in an area that was almost completely dark at night?
10. Do you think we need laws to control light pollution?

Vocabulary and ideas

Effects of light pollution: (1) wastes energy and contributes to air pollution through increased emissions⁸ from power plants, as HK Electric and China Light and Power burn more polluting coal; (2) affects the health of urban residents whose sleep is affected by unnatural light; (3) prevents us from seeing the stars at night and experiencing part of nature's majesty; (4) city children may grow up never seeing the stars; (5) constant exposure⁹ to flashing lights can make some people feel dizzy¹⁰.

Health danger: (1) Studies show that light at night disrupts¹¹ natural sleep cycles and interferes with one of the body's greatest natural defences against cancer – melatonin, also called "the hormone of darkness". (2) Melatonin, which is secreted by the pineal gland at night, and particularly in the early hours of the morning, both stops the growth of cancers and boosts¹² the immune system¹³. (3) Light during sleep stops its production, by making the body think it is daytime.

Worst offenders: (1) stores in the main shopping streets of Mongkok and Wanchai that keep both exterior and interior lights on all night, especially neon signs; (2) large companies that rent massive billboards²; (3) spotlights on the front of office towers; (4) lights left on in offices

How it can be reduced: (1) Set up long term reduction targets. (2) Organise 'lights-out' campaigns to raise public awareness of the problem. (3) Talk directly to companies who leave their lights on after closing. (4) Ask companies with extremely bright or flashing signs to turn them off at 10 or 11pm. (5) Find ways to change the culture of competing on brightness. (6) If necessary, conduct a shaming campaign, like on Friends of the Earth's website, where you can vote for the top 10 "ridiculous lighting" winners in HK.

Individual response: sample answers

1. Do you like Hong Kong's bright lights?

I think Hong Kong's bright lights are beautiful in a way, but I have to admit, I would rather see a starry sky than artificial lights.

There are some good points about the lights. They make the city seem exciting and full of energy. They probably impress tourists. And businesses need them to a certain extent to let people know where they are and what they do.

But they cause so many problems. Some companies just go too far. It seems as if they will do anything to get attention. Their signs are too big, too bright and too flashy. They are almost like a violent assault on the nearby residents. Also, they result in extra air pollution because of the coal that must be burnt to produce the electricity for them. As long as there are no limits, some companies will just keep on competing to see who can be the brightest. The only thing that can stop companies like this is a law to control light pollution. Thank you.

2. Does light pollution bother you?

No, light pollution doesn't really bother me. I've always lived on a busy street, with a nightclub just across from my bedroom, so I've been used to sleeping with light in my bedroom since I was a baby.

I have pretty thick curtains that keep out most of the light, but of course some of it gets in at the edges. On many nights I prefer to keep the windows and curtains open to let the wind blow through, so it gets pretty bright on those nights, but I can still sleep easily. It doesn't seem to bother anyone in my family.

I know this is supposed to be unhealthy, and to be honest, I'd rather live somewhere else where I don't have lights shining in my room all night, but I don't think there's anything I can do about it.

Companies like this nightclub have to advertise to get business, so I can't blame them. I guess if people don't like the bright lights, they shouldn't live on a busy street. Thank you.

3. Do you think light pollution can affect a person's health?

Yes, I have read that light can disrupt the natural sleep cycle. In the short term this can interfere with sleep, so people sleeping in bright areas may be tired during the day. This makes it hard for them to concentrate at school or work and can lead to mistakes. If a person has to drive or operate machinery, this can be very dangerous.

In the long term it can increase the chance of getting cancer. I have read recent research that found that a lack of darkness at night can stop the production of a natural hormone needed to prevent cancer, especially breast cancer. I really feel sorry for night-shift workers who must sleep during the day, because it must be hard for them to make their bedrooms completely dark during the day, but at least they are exposed to natural light. The flashing lights from neon signs must be far worse. So I think that people who live on busy streets in Hong Kong and Kowloon live in a very unhealthy environment.

Vocabulary work 1

- night-time skyline** (n phr): [NĪT-tahym SKĪ-lahyn] the patterns of buildings along with their lights against the sky at night
- billboard** (n): [BIL-bohrd] a large board on which advertisements are shown
- artificial light** (adj, n): [ahr-tuh-FISH-uhl LĪT] light from batteries or electricity; natural light comes from the sun
- body rhythm** (n phr): [BOD-ee RITH-uhm] regular pattern of eating, sleeping, etc. that the body gets used to; when it is interrupted, it can cause health problems
- interfering** (vbl): [in-ter-FEER-ing] preventing/stopping us from sleeping properly
- offenders** (n): [ũ-FEND-ers] the companies responsible for light pollution
- government intervention** (n phr): [GŪV-ern-muhnt in-ter-VEN-shuhn] (a) government involvement to stop something from getting worse (e.g. government intervention in the stock market by buying stocks); (b) Government involvement through incentives to change behaviour or by making laws to stop certain behaviour (e.g. laws with specific regulations about how much light is allowed in certain areas)
- emissions** (n): [i-MISH-uhns] gas and particles sent out through power plant chimneys when coal is converted to electricity or from vehicle exhaust
- constant **exposure** (adj, n): [KON-stuhnt ik-SPOH-zher] having to experience flashing lights all the time
- dizzy** (adj): [DIZ-ee] feeling unbalanced because everything seems to be turning round
- disrupt** (v): [dis-RŪPT] prevent (proper sleep); stop something from continuing as usual
- boost** (v): [boost] improve; increase
- immune system** (adj, n): [i-MYOON SIS-tuhm] the body's cells and tissues that help protect it against infection

Vocabulary quiz 1: Fill in the blanks with words or phrases from the list on the right.

- _____ caught smoking in any venue where smoking is not allowed can be fined up to HK\$5,000.
- New data suggested that vitamin D may even _____ the _____ and decrease the risk of infectious diseases and illnesses, including certain cancers.
- In Hong Kong, we all spend almost all of our days and nights inside in _____.
- Melatonin is produced at night and regular _____ to sunlight affects the production cycle, which peaks in the middle of the night.
- The 72-story Bank of China is the most recognizable building in the Hong Kong _____, with its pointed angles of mirrored blue glass.
- One way to stop bright lights in your home from _____ with your body's natural clock is to wear sunglasses around the house before bed.
- These huge developments _____ the air flow and block sunlight for surrounding buildings.
- Vehicle _____ are largely responsible for our polluted air.
- She told her doctor she felt _____ after taking the drugs and could hardly sleep.
- Light pollution can affect our natural _____, sleep and health, and prevents us from viewing the stars.
- Laws and penalties will not only deter companies from leaving their _____ switched on for too long, but encourage them to save electricity.
- Is government _____ needed to stop e-mail spam?

skyline
billboards
artificial light
body rhythm
offenders
intervention
interfering
emissions
exposure
dizzy
disrupt
boost
immune system