Singapore teen tops world English examination

By Amelia Tan

SINGAPOREAN student Ho Ren Chun beat students from 127 countries to emerge in top spot in an English examination.

The 17-year-old Anglo-Chinese School (International) student made his mark in the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) English exam, which is designed for students whose first language is English.

Students who took the exam came from countries including Britain, India, New Zealand and the United States.

ACS (International) offers the IGCSE instead of the O levels, unlike most other secondary schools here.

Edexcel, the global qualifications quality standards body which administers the IGCSE, told The Straits Times that tens of thousands of students took the English exam and it is the first time a Singaporean has topped it.

Ren Chun said half of the exam's final grade was based on his performance in essays and poems which he did as part of course work.

The other half came from the written paper, which included comprehension and essay-writing exercises that test skills such as critical and analytical thinking.

The teen knew he had full marks for his course work before he took the written exam in November last year.

Still, he was surprised when he learnt earlier this week from his teachers that he had excelled in the exam.

"I didn’t expect to achieve this but I am happy because it is a recognition of my talent and passion for the English language."

Ren Chun, the youngest of three children, comes from a family of writers. His grandmother Li Lienfung and aunt Ho Minfong are both acclaimed writers.

His parents - Mr Ho Kwon Ping and Ms Claire Chiang, who head hospitality group Banyan Tree - encouraged him to read widely and bought him books.

The teen, who is active in drama and debate in school, said he loved reading comics as well as science-fiction and fantasy books when he was younger.

In recent years, he developed a keen interest in poetry, such as those by American poet Billy Collins. He plans to publish 50 of his own poems this year.

"Poetry appeals to me because I think it is a beautiful way of condensing many emotions and images in a few words. It takes a lot of thought and craft to master," he said.

The student, who will take the International Baccalaureate exams next year, is thinking of going to the US to study economics and history, or pursuing a business degree at the Singapore Management University.

Ms Eniko Kiss, who taught him English for two years at ACS (International), said: "Ren Chun’s creativity and talent make him stand out from other students. He is good in poetry, a skill that not many have, and has excellent critical thinking skills.”