Course Report 2017

Subject	ESOL
Level	Higher

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any Post Results Services.

This report provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers, lecturers and assessors in their preparation of candidates for future assessment. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

Section 1: Comments on the Assessment

Summary of the course assessment

The 2017 question paper performed as expected and the grade boundary was set as intended.

Component 1: question paper: listening; reading and writing

Listening

This section of the paper involves candidates listening to two texts, one monologue and one dialogue, and demonstrating understanding by answering a range of question types such as multiple choice, gap-fill and short answer questions.

The purpose of this section of the question paper is to allow candidates the opportunity to demonstrate the following skills, knowledge and understanding:

♦ understand detailed and complex language spoken in English
♦ identify and show understanding of the overall purpose, main points and aspects of detail
♦ identify and show understanding of opinions and/or attitudes

This section carries a total of 20 marks.

The topics for the stimulus texts this year were felt to be less familiar to candidates, with a wider range of vocabulary in the texts, so candidates found this component more demanding. This increase in demand was intentional given that the 2016 listening component had been less demanding. This section performed as expected and enabled candidates to perform to the extent of their ability and assessors to award marks in line with national standards.

Reading

Section one: reading is worth 25 marks and involves candidates reading two texts and demonstrating understanding by answering a range of question types such as multiple choice, matching, gap-fill and short answer questions.

This section gives candidates an opportunity to demonstrate the following skills, knowledge and understanding:

♦ understand detailed and complex language written in English
♦ identify and show understanding of the overall purpose, main points and aspects of detail
♦ identify how detailed vocabulary, language features and text structures are used to convey meaning
♦ identify and show understanding of opinions and/or attitudes

This section of the question paper performed well, with a good range of marks being achieved across the paper. The reading texts covered appropriate topics and challenged candidates sufficiently.

The questions for text two were slightly easier to take into account the more demanding stimulus text. Overall, this appeared to have resulted in this section being slightly less demanding than intended. This was discussed at the grade boundary meeting and was taken into account in the setting of grade boundaries.

Writing

Section two: writing is worth 25 marks and asks candidates to write two texts: one shorter text on an everyday topic and one longer text on either a work or study related subject.

This section gives candidates an opportunity to demonstrate the following skills, knowledge and understanding:

♦ produce written English using detailed and complex language to convey meaning
♦ use structures and vocabulary, as appropriate to task
♦ use appropriate features of grammar, spelling and punctuation
♦ use conventions of style and layout appropriate to task

The writing tasks performed as expected. In writing task one, there was a slight decrease in the amount of support offered to candidates in terms of prompts, but this did not disadvantage candidates in any way and the topic of the task allowed them to demonstrate a greater range of grammar and vocabulary than questions in previous years. In the optional writing task, those who attempted the essay generally did better than those who attempted the report question. The majority of candidates attempted the essay rather than the report question.

Component 2: performance: speaking and listening

This internally-assessed course component functioned as expected at Higher level, and enabled candidates to perform to the extent of their ability. The parameters of this task do not change from year to year.

The performance, as set out in the Course Assessment Task document, consists of a discussion in some depth, on a topic from everyday life, study or work. The discussion should last 8–10 minutes if conducted in a pair, or slightly longer if in a small group. There are 25 marks allocated to Speaking and 5 marks allocated to Listening — a total of 30 marks for this component.

The course assessment task provides information on assessment conditions and guidance on the aspects of language to be assessed. The level of demand of the actual task undertaken by each candidate depends, to some extent, on the topic selected by the assessor or candidate and the assessment brief provided by the assessor. This allows topics that have been covered in the learning programme, and/or topics of personal interest to candidates, to be selected. The topic selected and brief provided for candidates by the assessors is a key factor in defining the level of challenge presented for the discussion.

From the sample that was externally verified, it was evident that the marking instructions provided sufficient information for assessors to accurately identify appropriate bands and marks for candidates. Where assessors had adopted the general marking principles and the holistic approach outlined in the course assessment task, marks were generally awarded in line with national standards.

Section 2: Comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

Component 1: question paper: listening; reading and writing

Listening
Text 1 was completed more successfully than text 2, but overall candidates performed well.

Questions 1, 2 and 6, which focused on listening for detail, were done especially well.

Reading
Candidates generally performed well in both texts and knew how to deal with the different question types.

Candidates were more successful at reading for specific information than reading for opinion or identifying paraphrases.

Writing
There was a good spread of marks awarded in the writing tasks and overall candidates responded well.

The Part 1, Everyday life task was done well, with candidates showing a good range of vocabulary related to charities and fundraising. Candidates also demonstrated a good range of grammatical structures in this task.

Part 2, task 2 Study demonstrated that most candidates are able to structure an essay appropriately.

Component 2: performance: speaking and listening
Overall, candidates performed well in all aspects of the performance component, generally obtaining marks in the higher bands.

Many of the candidates sampled were awarded marks in the top two bands for speaking and listening, performing particularly well in the following aspects.

Speaking:

♦ organisation, development and communication of ideas and opinions
♦ effectiveness and relevance of contribution
♦ use of structures, including complex structures, to communicate
♦ effectiveness of pronunciation

Listening:

♦ listening attentively to their partner and responding with a degree of spontaneity which fully supported the discussion

Candidates mainly produced natural and spontaneous discussions, and demonstrated the ability to initiate confidently and showed a sensitivity to turn-taking.

The majority of candidates demonstrated that they had made good use of the preparation time and felt confident with the process of being recorded. They also demonstrated a thoughtful approach to the topic and gave considered views during the discussion.

Overall, candidates who performed well contributed in an interesting way and demonstrated an enthusiasm for the topic and a genuine interest in what their partner(s) had to say, developing their ideas and incorporating them into the discussion well.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1: question paper: listening; reading and writing

There were no particular areas of the listening task that candidates were consistently weaker in. The most demanding questions were:

♦ Q10, which required candidates to identify specific information
♦ Q14 &15, which required candidates to identify the speaker's opinion through detailed listening

Reading

Candidate performance was slightly weaker this year in questions where they had to identify synonyms or paraphrasing between the texts and the questions. This was evident in responses for questions 7, 8 and 15.

Writing

Some candidates struggled with the appropriate style of writing, either using language that was too formal in the everyday life section or too informal in the work and study tasks. Candidates need to focus on the purpose of the tasks and the intended audience, which will help them to determine style.

Some candidates need to consider structure and paragraphing more. Some responses showed no evidence of paragraphing, which restricts access to the full range of marks. In terms of structure and cohesion, many candidates were trying to use different discourse markers and conjunctions, but these were often used illogically or incorrectly.

The report question was not done as well as the other writing tasks, mainly because the style chosen was not appropriate to the task. Some candidates adhered strictly to a very formal report with headings/sub-headings and bullet points, and copied too much of the question rubric into their answers without adding their own supporting points or information to demonstrate their range of language.

Component 2: performance: speaking and listening

Although many candidates used a wide range of structures, including complex structures, to communicate effectively, a few were not able to use an appropriate range of complex structures. These candidates had difficulty in clearly expressing their ideas and opinions during the discussion.

A few of the discussions lacked organisation and cohesion, which could have been a consequence of not having used the preparation time effectively to consider the topic and the points they wanted to make during the discussion. Alternatively, it could be a consequence of having had little opportunity to take part in, and reflect on, recorded discussions during the course. These discussions tended to be repetitive and did not explore aspects of the topic in any depth.

A few candidates dominated the discussion and didn't listen attentively or carefully to their partner or to other members of their group, when in a small group. This could be a consequence of not fully understanding the aspects of communication being assessed, particularly the marks awarded for listening to their partner(s) and the need to show a sensitivity to turn-taking.

When the discussion was carried out in groups of three or more, there was some evidence that a few candidates did not contribute or perform as well as they might have in a pair. The group dynamic had an impact on their ability to take part in the discussion effectively.

Some candidates performed less well across a majority of the aspects assessed, showing that generally their language skills were at a lower level of competence.

Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates

Component 1: question paper: listening; reading and writing

Listening

Candidates should take time to check their spelling and make sure that the words they have written are relevant to the topic of the questions. For example question 8 (a) the answer was 'close links.' Some candidates wrote 'close lengths'. Taking the time to check their answers would have helped candidates realise that 'lengths' does not make sense in this context. Minor spelling errors are accepted in the listening paper, as long as the word is recognisable and it is clear that the candidate understands the meaning. For example, in question 8 (c) the answer was 'seminar' — 'ceminar' was accepted, but 'cemoner' was not.

Candidates should be instructed to adhere to the word limit when a question asks for *no more than X words*. Many candidates lost marks by using significantly more than the requested number of words.

Centres appear to be using practice exams and past papers well to prepare candidates for the different question types they will encounter in the paper.

Reading

Candidates should use the checking time to check their spelling carefully. Words taken from the texts are expected to be spelled correctly.

Candidates should understand that when the question asks for *words or phrases from the text*, they should choose the specific words and phrases found in the text and not try to paraphrase for these questions.

For more open questions, candidates should be prepared to either choose words/phrases directly from the text or paraphrase.

When answering questions that ask for short answers, candidates should be careful not to copy long chunks from the text because this suggests they have not understood the specific information the question asks for.

For pick list question types, most candidates are now paying attention to the correct number of boxes to be ticked. If a candidate changes their mind about an answer, however, they should clearly score out the incorrect answer and highlight which answer they would like to submit.

Candidates should be instructed to adhere to the word limit in questions in the reading sections that ask for *no more than X words.*

Centres appear to be using practice exams and past papers well to prepare candidates for the different question types they will encounter in the paper but could focus more on paraphrasing skills to help candidates identify synonyms in the texts and questions.

Section 2 writing

Candidates should focus more on the purpose and target audience of the written tasks. Style is important in the Higher writing tasks, and attention needs to be paid to it. Many candidates lost marks through being overly formal or informal.

Centres are covering different genres well (eg reports, essays, letters, etc) although care should be taken not to be overly prescriptive with some formats, which leads to candidates being restricted by some questions — this is especially true with reports. Candidates need to be aware that there is a range of appropriate reporting styles. Candidates should not be encouraged to memorise fixed phrases which may then be used inappropriately, out of context.

Centres should give greater importance to the use of discourse markers, linking and signposting in longer writing tasks, especially the essay task in part two. Clear and correct use of this can improve a writing task considerably.

Handwriting was an issue with some candidates, and a significant number of scripts were difficult to read. Candidates should ensure that their work is legible and practise writing by hand in test conditions.

Candidates should be advised to try to produce answers within the recommended word count, and centres should train them to be aware of how much they have written so that time is not wasted on counting words. Candidates should focus on the communicative quality and accuracy of their work rather than the length.

Candidates need to be able to proof-read and edit their work, and should be advised to factor in time for this during the exam.

Component 2: performance: speaking and listening

Candidates should be made aware, early in the course, of the need to demonstrate an appropriately wide range of structures, including complex structures, in their spoken English. This is as essential as other communication skills if they are to achieve high marks in the performance at this level. Giving candidates feedback on areas for development in their spoken English at a point in the course when they can focus on improvement will support them. For more on the range of and complexity of language that is appropriate at Higher level, see Appendix 1: Illustrative Language Tables (ILTS) in the *Higher ESOL Course Support Notes* available on the Higher ESOL page of the SQA's open website.

In the sample that was verified, it was apparent that many assessors had prepared candidates well for the performance. Candidates appeared comfortable with being recorded and confident in their approach to the performance. They had been supported to clearly understand the assessment brief and had make good use of the allocated 15 minutes

preparation time to consider the topic and points for discussion. This approach enables candidates to participate in the discussion with confidence.

Candidates who achieve high marks for listening ensure that they listen attentively and develop the points made by their partner(s). Early feedback on listening skills will enable them to achieve high marks in the listening element.

Providing assessment briefs with a sufficient level of challenge is essential for Higher, and using or adapting the speaking tasks available in the Unit Assessment Support packs, or modelling tasks on these, should give candidates the opportunity to fully demonstrate their language skills.

Assessors should make candidates aware that lengthy monologues during the interaction reduce the opportunities for a natural conversation and appropriate turn-taking.

If assessing candidates in groups of three, consideration of the group dynamic is essential to ensure that no candidate is disadvantaged. If you believe that a candidate has been disadvantaged, the candidate can be assessed again in a different pairing or group using a different conversation task.

Sharing the aspects of language that will be assessed with candidates early in the course will allow them to focus on their strengths and areas for development in their spoken English.

Assessors should make use of the Understanding Standards packs available on the SQA secure site for the performance at Higher. These provide detailed commentaries on audio/video recordings of candidate performances which show clearly the basis on which marks have been awarded.

Grade Boundary and Statistical information:

Statistical information: update on Courses

Number of resulted entries in 2016	689

Number of resulted entries in 2017	783

Statistical information: Performance of candidates

Distribution of Course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of Course awards	%	Cum. %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum Mark -				
A	47.5%	47.5%	372	72
B	27.8%	75.4%	218	62
C	14.4%	89.8%	113	52
D	5.0%	94.8%	39	47
No award	5.2%	-	41	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

♦ While SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which will allow a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary) and a well prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary), it is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.

♦ Each year, SQA therefore holds a grade boundary meeting for each subject at each level where it brings together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The Principal Assessor and SQA Qualifications Manager meet with the relevant SQA Business Manager and Statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. The meetings are chaired by members of the management team at SQA.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the exam is more challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual, allowing the pass rate to be unaffected by this circumstance.

♦ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

♦ An exam paper at a particular level in a subject in one year tends to have a marginally different set of grade boundaries from exam papers in that subject at that level in other years. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set in centres. If SQA has already altered a boundary in a particular year in, say, Higher Chemistry, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter boundaries in their prelim exam in Higher Chemistry. The two are not that closely related, as they do not contain identical questions.

♦ SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.