Course Report 2016

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

Component 1: Question paper — Listening

This question 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. This question paper carries a total of 20 marks.

Candidates performed better in this section than in previous years. It was felt that the topics of the two texts were familiar to candidates which contributed to the majority of candidates performing well in this section. The questions relating to the first listening text were completed more successfully than those relating to text two.

Overall, the component was slightly easier than intended and this was taken into account when setting the grade boundary.

Question paper — Reading & Writing

This question paper is split into two sections. Section one 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. 25 marks are awarded for this section.

Section two asks candidates to write two texts, one shorter text on an everyday life topic and one longer text on either a work or study related subject. This section carries a total of 25 marks. This question paper carries a total of 50 marks.

Reading

This section of the question paper performed well, with a good range of marks being achieved across the paper. The texts were appropriate and challenged candidates more than in the previous year, evidenced by a lower average mark compared to 2015, bringing the paper more in line with the standard required at Higher level.

Most questions performed as expected and challenged candidates sufficiently. However, Q15 was not as challenging as intended, and Q18 proved slightly more challenging than intended. Overall, there was a slight increase in difficulty in this section of the paper compared to last year. The overall slight increase in demand was taken into consideration when setting the grade boundary.

Writing

The writing tasks performed as expected with no significant difference in marks awarded from previous years. In terms of the optional writing task, those who attempted the article generally did better than those who attempted the report question.

Component 2: Performance

The performance functioned as expected at Higher level, and enabled candidates to perform to the extent of their ability. Assessors were able to award marks in line with national standards.

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 longer if in a small group. There are 5 marks allocated to Listening and 25 marks allocated to Speaking — a total of 30 marks for this component.

The course assessment task states the length of the discussion and the assessment conditions, and also provides guidance on the aspects to be assessed. The level of demand of the actual task undertaken by each candidate depends, to a large extent, on the topic selected by the assessor or candidate and the 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.

In Verification Key Messages, at Understanding Standards Course events and in the Higher Course report for 2015, guidance has been provided on developing briefs with a sufficient level of challenge for Higher by modelling them on the discussion speaking briefs available in the Unit Assessment Support packs. An assessment brief with an appropriate level of challenge will allow candidates to fully demonstrate their language skills.

From the performances sampled 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

Candidates performed well and were able to complete the listening tasks with relative ease. Average marks were high.

Overall, the questions on text one were answered more accurately than those relating to text two. Q5 and Q6d were done especially well, and these all focused on listening for specific information.

Question paper — Reading & Writing

Reading

Candidates generally performed well in both texts and knew how to deal with the different question types. Candidates performed well in questions that required them to read for detail.

Writing

There was a good spread of marks awarded in the writing tasks and overall candidates responded well. Candidates tried hard to demonstrate a good amount of vocabulary relevant to each task.

Component 2: Performance

Overall, candidates performed well in all aspects of the performance component, generally obtaining marks in the higher bands. 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.

Candidates mainly produced natural and spontaneous discussions, and demonstrated the ability to initiate well and a sensitivity to turn-taking. There was a particularly noticeable improvement in listening skills in this second year of the Higher, demonstrated by the interest shown in their partner's ideas and development of these ideas during the discussions.

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

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

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

♦ Q3 and Q9, which required candidates to listen for detail
♦ Q12, which required candidates to identify the overall purpose of the text

Question paper — Reading & Writing

Reading

Candidate performance was slightly weaker in:

♦ Q10 and Q18, which asked candidates to identify overall attitude

Writing

Some candidates did not demonstrate the full range of their ability in task 1: possibly because the topic was familiar to them. Candidates need to use a good range of language for all tasks, regardless of the topic.

Some candidates struggled with the formality of writing, either using language that was too formal in the everyday life task 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 think more carefully about structure and paragraphing, and provide clear support for each point made. There were a number of scripts that showed no evidence of paragraphing, which was surprising at this level. 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.

Part 2, task 1 (report question), was not done as well as Part 1 (email) or Part 2, task 2 (article). Candidates did not use appropriate language, style or layout for report writing.

Component 2: Performance

Candidates who performed less well tended to do so across a majority of the aspects assessed, showing that generally their language skills were at a lower level of competence.

Some candidates participated well in the discussion but were not able to use an appropriate range of structures, including complex structures.

Some 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. These discussions tended to be repetitive and did not explore the topic in any depth.

When the discussion was carried out in groups of three or four, there was some evidence that a few candidates, usually one in a group, 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. A few candidates dominated the discussion and didn't listen attentively or carefully to their partner when in a pair or to other members of their group when in a small group.

Section 3: Advice for the preparation of future candidates

Component 1: Question paper — Listening
Candidates should use the checking time to check their spelling and to make sure that the words they have written are relevant to the topic of the questions. Minor spelling errors are accepted in the listening paper, so long as the word is recognisable and it is clear that the candidate understands the meaning. If the spelling changes meaning it cannot be accepted. For example, in Q6d the answer was 'gardening' — 'gardning' was accepted but 'gaurding' was not.

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

Question paper — Reading & Writing

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

Candidates should understand that when the question asks for words from the text, 'NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS', they should choose words found in the text; they should not paraphrase for this type of question.

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

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. The full range of marks cannot be accessed where a candidate ticks more boxes than is required.

Candidates should be instructed to adhere to the recommended word limit in open answer questions in the reading sections.

Practitioners 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 identifying overall purpose and tone in texts.

Writing

Candidates should be encouraged to 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 this. Many candidates lost marks through being overly formal or informal.

Generally, centres are covering different genres well, eg reports, essays, letter etc. Care should be taken not to be over-prescriptive with some formats, as this 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 out of context which may then be used inappropriately.

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.

Candidates should be advised to try to produce answers within the recommended word count and to be aware of how much they have written so that time is not wasted on counting words. More is not always better, and at times a longer piece of work receives fewer marks as candidates go off-topic. Candidates should focus on the communicative quality and accuracy of their work.

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

Component 2: Performance

To prepare candidates effectively, assessors should continue to refer closely to the *Higher ESOL Performance Assessment Task* document to ensure they are fully familiar with the task, ie a discussion, and the accompanying guidance and marking instructions.

Some practitioners combine the course assessment performance in listening and speaking with unit assessment. This is acceptable practice where candidates are undertaking the course, and reduces the overall amount of assessment required. However, assessors should take note of the following points:

♦ When adopting this practice, assessors should ensure that, for unit assessment, only the assessment standards are applied when making assessment judgements.

♦ For the performance, candidates should be assessed, and marks awarded, using the marking instructions in the course assessment task.

♦ If candidates are being assessed for the unit and the performance at the same time, they should make sure that candidates have had the opportunity to develop their speaking and listening skills, and are being assessed at an appropriate time in the year to maximise the opportunity of obtaining the best marks possible in the performance.

♦ Assessors should also ensure that the assessment conditions as stated in the course assessment task are fully implemented. Candidates can only do a particular speaking

task once, so if candidates are assessed at different times for a unit and the performance, different tasks should be used.

♦ Assessors should be aware that for candidates to prepare adequately for the discussion, providing them with only a topic as a brief, with no scaffolding (such as suggested bullet points), could result in a discussion that lacks cohesion and becomes repetitive. Candidates can choose topics that are of personal interest, but when this is the case the assessor should provide some bullet points/sub-headings that candidates can, if they wish, explore during the discussion. Models for appropriately challenging briefs can be found in the Speaking tasks in the Unit Assessment Support packs.

♦ In Verification Key Messages, at Understanding Standards events, and in the Higher Course Report for 2015, guidance has been provided on developing briefs with a sufficient level of challenge for Higher by modelling them on the discussion speaking briefs available in the Unit Assessment Support packs. An assessment brief with an appropriate level of challenge will allow candidates to fully demonstrate their language skills.

If assessing candidates in small groups of three or four, consideration of the group dynamic is essential to ensure that no candidate is disadvantaged. If you believe that a candidate could have performed better, the candidate can be assessed again in a different pairing or group with a different discussion task.

Assessors should make candidates aware that lengthy monologues during the discussion reduce the opportunities for spontaneity, for candidates to demonstrate their skills in turn-taking, and for responding to their partners' comments.

Providing candidates with the opportunity to become familiar with the centre's chosen method of recording the assessment (audio or video) early in the course is advisable. They should be encouraged to record and discuss their interactions. Regular feedback to candidates on their progress in speaking and listening skills and the areas for them to develop is essential.

Candidates should be trained in the most effective ways to use the allocated preparation time to consider their ideas for each of the bullet points and possible relevant specialised vocabulary. They should apply note-taking skills and at all times be discouraged from writing a lengthy text on the topic as a way of preparing on their own. They should not rehearse the discussion with anyone during the preparation time but prepare on their own.

Candidates should be made aware of the need to demonstrate a wide range of structures and specialised vocabulary early in the course. This development is essential to being awarded high marks in the speaking.

Early feedback on listening skills will enable them to achieve high marks in the Listening element. Candidates who achieve high marks in the listening respond to and develop points made by their partners.

Assessors should make use of the Understanding Standards packs available on the SQA Secure site for the Internally Assessed Component of the Course Assessment (IACCA) 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 2015	232

Number of resulted entries in 2016	689

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	44.8%	44.8%	309	74
B	28.7%	73.6%	198	64
C	14.2%	87.8%	98	54
D	5.2%	93.0%	36	49
No award	7.0%	-	48	0

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.