



Course Report 2018

Subject	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
Level	Higher

This report provides information on the performance of candidates. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report 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.

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

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Summary of the course assessment

Component 1 — question paper: listening; reading and writing

Listening

This section of the 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 section of the question paper has 20 marks.

Candidates performed better in this section compared to previous years. Feedback from centres and markers suggests that this section was less challenging than in previous years listening sections. Text 2 was felt to be more accessible for candidates due to the topic of the text being very familiar to candidates, a lower level of grammatical and lexical complexity in the text, and a number of the questions being too straightforward for this level (questions 10, 11, and 13). This was taken into account when setting the grade boundaries.

Reading

This section of the question paper 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. There are 25 marks available for this section.

The reading paper performed well and the statistical analysis available demonstrates a good range of marks being achieved across the paper. The texts covered appropriate topics and sufficiently challenged most candidates. The average marks for this section were in line with the marks for 2016 and 2017.

The questions largely performed as expected, however question 20 was less discriminating than expected, with weaker candidates often managing to achieve more marks in this question than some of the stronger candidates. This was discussed at the grade boundary meeting but it was not felt to have affected overall performance or demand of this section of the question paper.

Writing

This section of the question paper 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 topic. There are 25 marks available for this section.

The writing tasks performed as expected, with no significant difference in marks awarded from previous years. All topics in the writing tasks allowed candidates to demonstrate a good range of grammar and vocabulary. The writing tasks discriminated well between weaker and stronger candidates.

In the optional writing tasks, those who attempted the essay generally did better than those who attempted the report. Far more candidates attempted the essay than the report with approximately two thirds opting for the study task and one third for the work task.

Component 2 — performance: speaking and listening

The performance: speaking and listening, as set out in the coursework assessment task, consists of a discussion, using detailed and complex language, on a topic from everyday life, work or study. The discussion should last 8–10 minutes if conducted in a pair, or slightly longer if in a small group. The performance: speaking and listening has a total mark allocation of 30 marks. There are 25 marks available for speaking and 5 marks available for listening. This is 30% of the overall marks for the course assessment.

The coursework assessment task provides information on assessment conditions, guidance on the general approach to marking, and the detailed marking instructions.

The six aspects of speaking and listening being assessed are:

- ◆ organisation, development and communication of ideas/opinions
- ◆ effectiveness and relevance of contribution
- ◆ accuracy and appropriateness of general and specialised vocabulary in context
- ◆ accuracy and use of structures, including complex structures, to communicate
- ◆ effectiveness of pronunciation
- ◆ understanding spoken English

The assessment brief provided by the assessor, allows topics to be selected that have been covered during learning and/or topics of personal interest to candidates. The topics selected, and the brief provided for candidates, is a key factor in defining the level of challenge presented for the discussion. Examples of assessment briefs with an appropriate level of challenge can be found in the SCQF level 6 unit assessment support packs on SQA's secure site.

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

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

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas in which candidates performed well

Component 1 — question paper: listening; reading and writing

Listening

Candidates performed well overall. Recording 2 responses were completed more successfully than recording 1. Question 8 in recording 1 and question 18 in recording 2 were both done well.

Most candidates were able to manage their time well during this paper.

Reading

Candidates generally performed well in both texts and knew how to deal with the different question types. Questions where students had to complete gaps with words taken from the text were done particularly well this year (questions 7 and 8).

Writing

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

Part 1 — Everyday Life: candidates showed a good range of vocabulary related to the task. Candidates also tried to demonstrate a good range of grammatical structure in this task.

Part 2 — Work or Study: task 2 demonstrated that most candidates are able to structure an essay appropriately.

Most candidates were able to manage their time well in the exam in order to complete the reading texts and both writing tasks.

Component 2 — performance: speaking and listening

Based on the performance: speaking and listening sampled at external verification, the overall quality of the performance was high with candidates generally obtaining marks in the top two bands.

They performed particularly well in the following aspects:

Speaking

- ◆ organisation, development and communication of ideas and opinions
- ◆ effectiveness and relevance of contribution, particularly in terms of initiating and showing sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking
- ◆ effectiveness of pronunciation

Candidates who performed well also used a wide range of detailed and complex structures, contributed throughout the discussion and engaged with the topic. Most candidates showed that they had used the preparation time well and felt confident with the process of being recorded.

Listening

Many of the candidates who achieved high marks in speaking were also awarded 5 marks for their interactive listening skills. They listened attentively, showing a genuine interest in what their partner(s) had to say, and responding to their partner(s) with a high degree of fluency and spontaneity which effectively developed the discussion.

Areas which candidates found demanding

Component 1 — question paper: listening; reading and writing

Listening

There were no particular areas of the listening task that candidates were consistently weaker in. The most demanding questions were questions 6 and 17, which were both multiple choice, asking candidates to identify specific information from the texts.

Reading

Candidate performance was slightly weaker this year in questions where they had to identify synonyms or paraphrasing between the texts and the questions. For example in questions 18 and 19. This was mainly a result of candidates copying out complete sentences rather than pinpointing the phrase only.

Questions 12 and 21 were also completed less well this year. These questions asked candidates to identify the overall purpose of the texts.

Writing

Some candidates struggled with the genre and formality of writing, either using language that was too formal in Part 1 — Everyday Life, or too informal in Part 2 — Work and Study. The everyday life task clearly asked for a letter but many candidates did not include any form of greeting or closing of a letter. Candidates need to focus on the purpose of the tasks and the intended audience, which helps them to determine style.

Some candidates need to consider structure and paragraphing more. Some scripts showed no evidence of paragraphing, which for this level no marks can be awarded.

In terms of cohesion, some candidates were trying to use different discourse markers and conjunctions but these were often used illogically or incorrectly. Many other candidates failed to use these at all.

Punctuation was noticeably weaker this year with a significant group of candidates not using capitalisation or full stops.

The report (Part 2, task 1) was not done as well as Part 1 — Everyday Life or Part 2 — Work and Study task 2, 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. They copied too much of the question rubric into their answers without adding their own supporting points or information in order to demonstrate their range of language.

The report this year was more of a discursive style and did not need sections such as information on how evidence was collected or the percentages of people who hold certain

opinions. Some candidates inappropriately attempted to shoehorn this information, with memorised chunks of language, into their reports.

Component 2 — performance: speaking and listening

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

Speaking

Some candidates had difficulty in clearly expressing their ideas and opinions during the discussion. These candidates were not able to use an appropriate range of complex structures to achieve marks in the top three bands for speaking. Many of these candidates did not show a level of accuracy in the use of complex structures which clearly communicated their ideas.

A few discussions tended to be repetitive and did not explore aspects of the topic in any depth. This may be because they had had little opportunity to take part in recorded discussions and reflect on these during the course. It could also be the result of not using the preparation time effectively. These discussions did not achieve marks in the top three bands because they tended to be repetitive and lacked organisation and cohesion.

A few candidates dominated the discussion and did not achieve marks in the top two bands as they were unable to show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking which fully supported the development of the interaction.

Listening

Some candidates did not listen attentively or carefully to their partner(s) or to other members of their group. This could be a consequence of not fully understanding the aspects of communication being assessed and the detailed descriptions of performance, particularly the marks awarded for listening.

A number of these candidates were not able to achieve high marks in the listening as they had not fully understood the detail of what their partner(s) had said and did not ask for any clarification.

Section 3: advice for the preparation of future candidates

Component 1 — question paper: listening; reading and writing

Listening

Candidates should be encouraged to check their spelling and to make sure that the words they have written are relevant to the topic of the questions. For example in question 2, the answer is '*council website*.' A few candidates wrote '*cancel*', but some more thought would have helped them realise that '*cancel*' 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. Teachers and lecturers providing training on checking answers, especially in terms of spelling and context, would benefit some candidates.

Centres should ensure candidates adhere to the word limit when a question asks for 'no more than X words'. Many candidates lost marks as they used significantly more than the requested number of words. Even if the correct answer is included within this, candidates are not awarded marks as it is not clear to markers that they have fully understood the specific information the question asks for.

Centres appear to be using practice exams and past papers well in order to prepare candidates for the different question types candidates encounter in this section of the question paper.

Reading

Candidates should be encouraged to check their spelling carefully, as words taken from the texts are expected to be spelled correctly. Again, some training on checking answers, especially in terms of spelling, would benefit some candidates.

Centres should ensure candidates understand that when the question asks for '*words or phrases from the text*', they should choose words found in the text and not try to paraphrase for these questions. Centres should also ensure candidates adhere to the word limit when a question asks for '*no more than X words*'.

When a question asks for a word or phrase from the text, teachers and lecturers should advise candidates they need to be able to pinpoint only the phrase required, and should not be copying complete sentences from the text. This demonstrates to the marker that they have fully understood the phrase, rather than only identifying the area of the text that fits the question.

For more open questions, teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates know to either choose words and/or 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 as this suggests they have not understood the specific information the question asks for and will lose marks.

Most candidates are now paying attention to the correct number of boxes to be ticked. However, if a candidate changes their mind about an answer, they should clearly score out the incorrect answer and highlight which answer they would like to submit.

Centres appear to be using practice exams and past papers well to prepare candidates for the different question types they will encounter in this section of the question paper, but could focus more on paraphrasing skills to help candidates identify synonyms in the texts and questions. Centres could also focus more on identifying opinion and overall purpose of the text.

Writing

Centres should ask candidates to focus more on the purpose, genre and target audience of the written tasks. Style is important in the Higher writing tasks and candidates need to pay attention to this. Many candidates lost marks through being overly formal or informal.

When teaching different genres, for example reports, essays, letters 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. Centres need to bear in mind 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.

Centres should give greater importance to the use of discourse markers, linking and signposting in longer writing tasks, especially the essay task in Part 2. Clear and correct use of this can improve a writing task considerably. Many candidates are either not using this at all or are using them incorrectly.

Paragraphing was also more of a problem this year, centres could usefully spend time working on the structure of a paragraph and when a new paragraph should begin.

At Higher, correct punctuation is expected. Centres should be checking that all candidates are able to use punctuation correctly. Lack of capitalisation or full stops significantly reduces the mark for a piece of writing at this level.

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 candidates to be aware of how much they have written so that time is not wasted on counting words. More is not always better. Candidates should focus on 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. Training in this area would benefit many candidates.

Component 2 — performance: speaking and listening

From the beginning of the course, candidates should focus on the development of their speaking and interactive listening skills. Sharing and using the aspects to be assessed and the descriptions of performance with candidates at the beginning of the course, is an ideal way for them to identify their strengths, the aspects they need to further develop, and their progress. This can also form the basis of formative assessment throughout the course and enable teacher or lectures to give candidates consistent feedback regularly on how they are progressing.

There should be a particular focus on the need to demonstrate an appropriate range of structures, including complex structures, in their spoken English. This is essential if they are to achieve high marks in the performance at this level. For more information on the range of and complexity of language that is appropriate at Higher, refer to the course specification: 'Appendix 1: course support notes' and 'Appendix 2: illustrative language tables (ILTS)'

Teachers and lectures should provide candidates with advice as to how to use the 15 minutes preparation time effectively on their own, how to consider the assessment brief, the points they want to make, and any useful vocabulary for the topic. This approach enables candidates to participate in the discussion with confidence. Candidates should not attempt to script or rehearse the discussion.

Providing opportunities to practice discussions using assessment briefs with a sufficient level of challenge and recording the discussions is essential for Higher candidates. Using or adapting the speaking tasks available in the unit assessment support packs, or modelling tasks on these, should provide candidates with an appropriate level of challenge. If candidates are comfortable recording conversations and discussions throughout the course, and analysing and receiving feedback on some of these, it removes the apprehension about being recorded for the performance. When providing feedback to candidates, it is important to focus on the aspects of listening being assessed, as well as those of speaking. Candidates who achieve high marks for listening ensure that they listen attentively and develop the points made by their partner(s). Early feedback on interactive listening skills will enable them to achieve high marks in the listening aspect.

Teachers and lecturers should make candidates aware that lengthy monologues during the interaction reduce the opportunities for achieving high marks in listening and in effectiveness and relevance of contribution.

If assessing candidates in groups of three, consideration of the group dynamic is essential to ensure that no candidate is disadvantaged.

Teachers and lecturers should make use of the understanding standards packs available on SQA's secure site for the performance at Higher. These provide detailed commentaries on audio/video recordings of candidate performances and 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 2017	783
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Number of resulted entries in 2018	732
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Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	39.8%	39.8%	291	73
B	31.4%	71.2%	230	63
C	18.6%	89.8%	136	53
D	3.8%	93.6%	28	48
No award	6.4%	-	47	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

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.

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions which 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.

Therefore SQA holds a grade boundary meeting every year for each subject at each level to bring 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.

Grade boundaries from exam papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for exams set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the corresponding practice exam paper.