



## Course report 2019

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

This report provides information on candidates' performance. 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

## Question paper: Listening

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

Candidates performed well in this question paper. Feedback from centres and markers suggests that this question paper was slightly more demanding than the previous year, but still a little less demanding than is required for Higher. Analysis of the overall marks of candidates indicated that they performed better in the listening question paper than in the reading and the writing question papers. Candidates performed well in text 2, but found text 1 more challenging.

The lower level of demand in the listening question paper, compared to the other three components of course assessment, was taken into consideration when setting the grade boundary.

## Question paper: Reading

This question paper involves candidates reading three texts and demonstrating understanding by answering a range of question types, for example multiple choice, matching, gap-fill and short answer questions.

Candidates performed well in the reading question paper. The statistical analysis available demonstrates candidates achieving a wide range of marks across the question paper. The texts covered appropriate topics and overall challenged candidates effectively. This year's paper was in line with the level expected of Higher. The average marks for this question paper were lower than the average marks in the previous two years.

The questions largely performed as expected. Text 1 and text 3 were the most demanding, with candidates finding text 2 more accessible.

## Question paper: Writing

This question paper asks candidates to write two texts, one text from the context of everyday life and one text from the contexts of either work or study.

All topics in the writing question paper allowed candidates to demonstrate a good range of grammar and vocabulary. The writing tasks discriminated well between weaker and stronger candidates. Comments from markers and the marks awarded indicate that the cohort this year was significantly weaker than in previous years.

This year both texts were of equal length, rather than the everyday life task being shorter. This did not appear to impact on candidate performance. Task 1 introduced writing related to social media and online writing, and candidates generally managed this well.

In the optional writing task, generally those who attempted the essay did slightly better than those who attempted the report. Far more candidates attempted the essay than the report

question, with approximately two thirds opting for the study task and one third for the work task.

### **Performance: speaking and listening**

The performance: speaking and listening consists of a discussion on a topic from everyday life, work or study.

Overall, the performance functioned as expected, enabling candidates to perform to the extent of their language ability.

The candidate and the teacher or lecturer agree the topic of the discussion prior to the assessment taking place. The teacher or lecturer then provides an assessment brief on the topic or an aspect of the topic, with some limited support for candidates, 15 minutes before the assessment takes place. The flexibility in the selection of a topic is to allow for personalisation and choice.

In the sample verified, the majority of centres had opted to make use of a speaking assessment brief from an SCQF level 6 unit assessment support pack, for example the news, use of technology in education, healthy lifestyle in a work context, and changing bad habits.

A few centres had adapted these or had produced assessment briefs to allow for a greater degree of personalisation and choice, for example advantages and disadvantages of home schooling, bilingualism and preparing for an interview.

A few of the centres verified produced assessment briefs that were too broad in scope and lacked sufficient scaffolding to ensure the discussion developed. However, the briefs worked well where assessors had carefully considered the level of language that the brief would produce, and written bullet points that would support the development of the discussion. The majority of candidates engaged well with the topics and produced interesting discussions.

It was evident that for most of the teachers and lecturers and internal verifiers, the marking instructions provided sufficient information to accurately identify appropriate bands and marks for candidates. Where teachers and lecturers adopted the general marking principles, the holistic approach outlined, and had a good understanding of the detailed marking instructions, marks were generally awarded in line with national standards.

In some centres, there was evidence that teachers and lecturers did not have a good enough understanding of the detailed marking instructions. As a result, marks were not awarded in line with national standards for speaking. In most of these centres, teachers and lecturers were being lenient across a range of aspects when awarding marks, and some were being particularly lenient when awarding marks for use of a wide range of detailed and complex structures and the accuracy with which they were used.

There was also a tendency to leniency when awarding marks for listening.

## **Section 2: comments on candidate performance**

### **Areas that candidates performed well in**

#### **Question paper: Listening**

Overall, candidates performed well and were not affected by the increase in the number of texts from two to three. Candidates did the sentence completion questions well, and completed questions 7(a), (b), (c) and (d) especially well.

#### **Question paper: Reading**

The increase from two to three texts to be read for this question paper does not appear to have negatively impacted on candidate performance. Candidates managed to complete all three texts within the time limit and overall the range of marks was consistent with previous years.

Candidates clearly knew how to deal with the different question types and there was no one particular question type that candidates completed more successfully than others.

#### **Question paper: Writing**

Many candidates were prepared for writing for an online audience, and captured the style of an online review well. There was a good amount of high level vocabulary related to tourism used in this question.

Task 2, in part 2, demonstrated that most candidates are able to structure an essay appropriately.

#### **Performance: speaking and listening**

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

These candidates performed particularly well in the following aspects.

#### **Speaking**

- ◆ 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

Candidates who performed well in the sample, produced well-structured output, contributed effectively throughout the discussion and were able to explore aspects of the topics in depth. They engaged with the topic, developing their own ideas and supporting the development of their partner's contribution.

Generally, candidates were able to produce a wide range of general and specialised vocabulary during the discussion. This demonstrated that they were familiar with the broad

topic area either through their own experience or because it had been covered during the course.

Many candidates used a wide range of detailed and complex structures to express their own ideas with ease and to respond to their partner in ways which developed the discussion.

Overall, candidates showed that they had used the preparation time well to consider the assessment brief and the specific bullet points.

## **Listening**

Candidates achieved high marks in listening when they:

- ◆ listened attentively and showed a genuine interest in their partner(s) ideas and opinions
- ◆ showed that they had understood fully and in detail what their partner(s) said
- ◆ asked for clarification when they weren't sure they had understood what their partner(s) intended to say
- ◆ responded in a way which effectively develops the interaction

## **Areas that candidates found demanding**

### **Question paper: Listening**

There were no particular areas of the listening question paper that candidates were consistently weaker in. The questions that candidates found most demanding were questions 1, 4 and 18. All were multiple choice questions, suggesting that the distractors used were challenging for candidates and they need to focus on detailed listening skills more.

### **Question paper: Reading**

Candidates struggled with questions 5 and 28 this year. Both these questions asked for candidates to find words or phrases from the text. Candidates are either copying long chunks from the text or picking the wrong words or phrases. This suggests that identifying synonyms and paraphrases is a challenge for many candidates.

### **Question paper: Writing**

Some candidates struggled with the genre and formality of writing, either using language that was too formal in the everyday life section or too informal in the work and study related context tasks.

The everyday life task clearly asked for a review of a tourist attraction but many candidates did not state which tourist attraction, or they chose to write about a destination, for example a city or country rather than a tourist attraction. Candidates need to read the questions carefully and ensure that they fully meet the task.

The report this year was more of a discursive style and didn't need sections, for example information on how evidence was collected or the percentages of people who hold certain opinions. Some candidates attempted to shoehorn this information with memorised chunks of language into their reports inappropriately.

The main issue seen on the essay task this year was that of genre and formality. Many were too informal and read more like a letter than an essay. Candidates should focus on the purpose of the tasks and the intended audience, which will help them to determine style. Some candidates clearly tried to recycle previous study tasks and fit them to the question. As there was no direct fit, this often meant that candidates did not fulfil the task and lost marks.

Some candidates needed to consider structure and paragraphing more. Some scripts showed no evidence of paragraphing, which is a requirement at this level.

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

Punctuation was still weak this year, with a significant number of candidates not using capitalisation or full stops.

### **Performance: speaking and listening**

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

#### **Speaking**

Some candidates had difficulty in expressing their ideas and opinions with ease during the discussion. Although some were able to show a range of general and some specialised vocabulary, they were not able to use a wide range of detailed and complex structures to clearly convey their ideas and opinions. This had a considerable impact on the marks that could be awarded at this level.

Some discussions tended to be repetitive and did not explore aspects of the topic in any depth, but reiterated what had already been said. This limited the range of language that candidates were able to demonstrate throughout the discussion. These candidates may not have had sufficient opportunity to take part in discussions where topics are explored in depth. In a few cases, candidates had not been entered at the correct level and had speaking and listening skills below the national standards for Higher.

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 supported the development of the interaction.

#### **Listening**

Some candidates did not listen attentively or carefully to their partner(s) during the discussion. These candidates were unable to develop on what their partner(s) had said and tended to respond with unconnected points of their own throughout the discussion. This could be a consequence of not fully understanding the aspects of communication being assessed and the descriptions of performance, particularly the marks awarded for interactive listening.

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

## Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

### 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, as long as the word is recognisable and it is clear that the candidate understands the meaning. Checking answers, especially in terms of spelling and context, would benefit some candidates.

Centres should instruct candidates to 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 they will not gain the mark as it is not clear they have fully understood the specific information the question asks for.

Centres should continue to use practice exams and past papers to allow candidates to prepare for the different question types they will encounter in the question paper.

### Question paper: Reading

This year the paragraph reference for each question was removed in order to bring the paper up to the correct level of demand. Some candidates found this a challenge and were unsure where to find answers to questions. It is worth pointing out to centres that unless a paragraph reference is provided, for example in vocabulary questions, then the order of the questions will follow the order of the text. If, for example, candidates find an answer for one question, they will find the answers for subsequent questions after this.

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

Candidates should 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. However, centres should instruct candidates to adhere to the word limit in questions in the reading question paper that ask for '*no more than X words*'. When the question asks for a word or phrase from the text, candidates should not be copying complete sentences from the text, they need to be able to pinpoint the phrase only, and demonstrate that they have really understood the phrase rather than only identifying the area of the text that fits the question.

For more open questions, centres should ensure candidates either choose words 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 lose marks.

Most candidates are now paying attention to the correct number of boxes to tick. 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 could focus more on paraphrasing skills to help candidates identify synonyms in the texts and questions. Centres could also focus more on identify opinion and the overall purpose of the text.

### **Question paper: Writing**

Candidate responses this year were significantly weaker than previous years. Centres could help candidates improve by focusing on writing skills and providing additional guidance on writing tasks. The following areas could be beneficial in preparation for the writing question paper.

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

Paragraphing was also a problem this year. Centres could spend time working with candidates on the structure of a paragraph, and when a new paragraph should begin.

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.

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

When teaching different genres, for example reports, essays or letters centres should take care 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 remember that there is a range of appropriate reporting styles. Candidates should not be encouraged to memorise fixed phrases out of context which they may then use inappropriately.

The essay responses this year suggest that centres need to spend more time highlighting different essay structures, for example discursive and for and against essays, and focusing on the academic language style expected in an essay.

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

Centres should advise candidates to try to produce answers within the recommended word count and ensure candidates are aware of how much they have written so they do not waste time counting words. More is not always better and at times a longer piece of work receives fewer marks. Candidates should focus on communicative quality and accuracy of their work.

Candidates need to be able to proofread and edit their work, and centres should advise them to factor in time for this during the question paper. Further guidance in this area would be of benefit to many candidates.



Centres should also train candidates in reading the questions carefully, fully understanding what is expected of them, and fulfilling the task required rather than trying to recycle previously completed writing tasks to fit the question paper.

### **Performance: speaking and listening**

Centres are reminded of the exemplar understanding standards packs available on SQA's secure site for the Higher performance: speaking and listening. These contain audio and/or video recordings of candidate performances, and detailed commentaries with examples of candidate language. The commentaries and examples of language relate directly to the marking instructions. Discussing candidate performances with the internal verifier, or another ESOL teacher or lecturer who is familiar with the ESOL assessment of speaking and interactive listening will also be of benefit.

Teachers and lecturers should focus candidates on the development of their speaking and interactive listening skills from the beginning of the course. They should explain to candidates what will be required of them for the performance, introducing the six aspects of speaking and listening to be assessed, and the marking instructions.

Making use of the marking instructions throughout the course supports candidates in developing their skills. Centres should support candidates through feedback to identify their strengths and the aspects they need to further develop. Using the marking instructions will provide them with consistent feedback on how they are progressing.

There should be a particular focus on the need to demonstrate a wide range of detailed and complex structures in their spoken English. This is essential if they are to achieve high marks in the performance at this level. Encourage candidates to review their speaking and listening skills and consider how best to develop their use of detailed structures when communicating. They should consider how they are linking their ideas and explore aspects of the topic in some depth. For more information on the range of language structures appropriate at Higher, refer to the course specification appendix 1: course support notes and appendix 2: illustrative language tables.

When providing feedback to candidates it is important to also 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 points made by their partner(s). Early feedback on interactive listening skills should enable them to achieve high marks in listening.

Centres should provide candidates with guidance in how to use the 15 minutes preparation time effectively, on their own, 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. They must not attempt to script or rehearse the discussion.

Providing opportunities for candidates to practice conversations and discussions, using assessment briefs with a sufficient level of challenge, and recording these interactions is an essential part of preparing for the performance. Using or adapting speaking tasks available in the unit assessment support packs, or modelling tasks on these, should provide candidates with an appropriate level of challenge.

When candidates are used to recording conversations and discussions throughout the course, they tend to approach the performance with less anxiety about this aspect of the assessment.

Candidates must be aware that lengthy monologues or overlong turns during the interaction make it more difficult for their partner(s) to respond. This reduces the possibility of achieving high marks in listening and in speaking for 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.

## Grade boundary and statistical information:

### Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	732
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Number of resulted entries in 2019	784
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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
<b>Maximum mark</b>				
<b>A</b>	32.1%	32.1%	252	72
<b>B</b>	29.0%	61.1%	227	62
<b>C</b>	23.5%	84.6%	184	52
<b>D</b>	10.5%	95.0%	82	42
<b>No award</b>	5.0%	-	39	-

## 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 that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary)
- ◆ 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 head of service and statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. Members of the SQA management team chair these meetings. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper has been more, or less, challenging than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper is more challenging than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question 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 question papers set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the question papers that they set themselves.