

Course report 2026

National 5 ESOL, SCQF level 5

We've written this report for teachers and lecturers. We recommend you read this with the published course assessment documents and marking instructions.

The report:

- provides a summary of how each course component performed
- highlights areas of the question paper and coursework where candidates performed well and areas where they did not perform well
- has advice you might find useful when preparing candidates for assessment

For information about the Performance: Speaking and Listening component you should read the verification summary 2025-26 on the [ESOL](#) page of our website.

We collect and prepare the statistics in course reports before we complete the appeals process.

Statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 1,541

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 1,612

Distribution of course awards (including minimum mark to achieve each grade)

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	472	29.3	29.3	70
B	396	24.6	53.8	60
C	404	25.1	78.9	50
D	237	14.7	93.6	40
No award	103	6.4	100	Not applicable

We've not applied rounding to these statistics.

In this report:

- 'Most' means greater than or equal to 70%.
- 'Many' means 50% to 69%.
- 'Some' means 25% to 49%.
- 'Few' or 'a few' means less than 25%.

You can find [statistical reports](#) on our website.

General commentary on grade boundaries

Our main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels, and to maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, we aim to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

- a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional grade C boundary)
- a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional grade A boundary)

It's very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, we hold a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Senior Qualifications Scotland staff normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors use their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. We can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- We can adjust the grade boundaries downwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- We can adjust the grade boundaries upwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- If levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy](#).

How the course assessment performed

Question paper: Listening

The Listening paper performed as expected. Marker feedback indicated that the level of challenge of this paper was suitable for candidates at this level and that the topics chosen for each recording were appropriate for both school-based and mature candidates.

All questions functioned correctly.

Question paper: Reading

The reading paper contained three different topics and texts with an appropriate level of challenge. Marker feedback indicated that the texts were both fair and suitable for the candidates. Markers commented on the high level of suitability of the content of the three texts.

The paper performed as expected. Text one was the most challenging of the three, and the third text was slightly less challenging and contained more 'C' band questions. Across the three texts there was a good balance and all texts functioned correctly.

Question paper: Writing

The Writing paper contained three tasks on different topics (the first, Everyday Life, being mandatory for all candidates) that allowed candidates to demonstrate a good range of grammar and vocabulary. Markers commented that the topics were very accessible to school-based and mature candidates – particularly the internet-based movie service question. The writing tasks discriminated well between weaker and stronger candidates. Performance of this paper has been extremely similar overall (in terms of marks) for several years, indicating that ESOL candidates at National 5 level generally have a written profile that is weaker than any of their other skills.

For the optional tasks in part two, most candidates chose to answer the study-based essay question on school age commencement rather than the work report question, but both were attempted and both functioned correctly. Overall, the paper performed as expected.

How candidates performed

A noticeable minority of candidates left gap fill questions and multiple-choice questions blank. A high no response rate within an individual paper suggests that the candidate may have been entered at the wrong level by their centre.

Question paper: Listening

The mean mark was an improvement on 2024 and 2025 performance and comparable with 2023.

In the Listening paper, most candidates performed well across the three recordings and across most questions. The ordering of the questions and the range of accents used, in addition to the accessibility of the topics, may have accounted for this.

Question paper: Reading

The mean mark for this component increased this year — a comparable figure with 2023 and 2024.

Questions in text three were the best answered questions overall with high levels of correct responses. This was similar to last year, indicating that perhaps the study-based topics are more accessible for most candidates. It may also indicate that text three was possibly the least demanding of the three reading texts, but this is balanced out by some candidates not reaching the end of this text. Candidates may have been presented at the wrong level or managed their time poorly.

Question paper: Writing

The mean mark for this component was very similar to the mark from 2025 and the trend for the question in part one to be the best answered — the Everyday Life question (a complaint email about a movie service) continued.

Almost 75% of candidates chose to respond to the Part two task two: Study question. This follows last year's trend for more further education candidates to attempt the study-based question. During item writing and reviewing, particular emphasis is placed on ensuring all three writing questions remain equally accessible to school-

based candidates and mature (further education and community based) candidates, and this was reflected in the maintenance of a similar mean mark to last year.

The marks achieved are very similar between questions two and three in this paper, indicating that although the work-based question was the less popular choice, it was answered to an equal standard to the study-based question.

Candidates performed better in component 3 than the other two components because almost all candidates attempted both parts of the writing paper. However, the spread of marks in this paper indicates that there may be some candidates presented for the examination who are not at National 5 level. Candidates' lack of written proficiency suggests they are National 3 or even National 2 level.

Preparing candidates for assessment

You should attend Understanding Standards events and webinars if possible and refer to previously published materials and recordings.

You should use practice exams and past papers to prepare candidates for the different question types they will encounter. You must not enter candidates for the final exam if they have not demonstrated an ability to work at National 5 level throughout the academic year.

Candidates must have been placement tested to confirm they are ready to begin a National 5 course, and they must also have had sufficient taught ESOL input in the form of lessons throughout the academic year.

Question paper: Listening

You should ensure candidates:

- use the allocated time at the end of the listening paper to check their spelling and ensure that the words they have written are relevant to the question
- know that minor spelling errors are acceptable in the listening paper if the word is recognisable and they do not change the meaning of the word
- are aware that synonyms are acceptable answers in the listening paper
- produce clear, legible handwriting in the exam
- adhere to the word limit when a question asks for 'no more than X words'
- are aware that they will not gain marks if they use more than the requested number of words. Even if candidates include the correct information within an answer that exceeds the word limit, they will not receive any marks as it is not clear that they have fully understood the question.
- do not leave any multiple-choice questions unanswered

Question paper: Reading

You should ensure candidates:

- check their spelling carefully, particularly if they finish before the end of the exam time. Words copied directly from the texts are expected to be spelled correctly.
- understand that when the question specifically asks for 'words or phrases from the text', that they should choose only words found in the text and not try to paraphrase for these questions. Synonyms are not accepted in the reading paper.
- take care with short-answer questions — they should not copy long chunks of the text as this suggests they have not understood the specific information the question asks for and therefore they will not gain marks
- work on identifying paraphrasing and synonyms in the classroom. Underlining key words in the questions and then identifying relevant parts of the text would be a useful practice activity for candidates.
- adhere to the word limit when a question asks for 'no more than X words'
- focus more on identifying opinion and overall purpose of the text when developing reading skills in class
- develop a depth of vocabulary across a wide range of topics which will help them cope with the lexical demands of the text in the exam
- understand what to do if they change their mind about an answer. In such instances, candidates should clearly score out the incorrect answer and/or indicate clearly which answer they would like to submit
- do not leave any multiple-choice questions unanswered. It is always better to guess a random answer for a multiple-choice question than to leave it blank.
- use past papers to prepare for the different question types in the paper and to practise at the necessary speed and within a timed limit

Question paper: Writing

You should focus on writing skills and provide guidance on writing tasks.

You should ensure candidates:

- can use punctuation correctly. Providing texts without punctuation and asking candidates to add punctuation will focus attention on the difficulty of following the

message when punctuation is missing, and the importance of accurate punctuation.

- focus more on the purpose, genre and target audience of the written tasks, as style is important in the writing tasks
- understand the expected structure of a report — see the ESOL Understanding Standards section on our secure site for several examples
- spend more time on practising essay structure, for example paragraphing, as well as focusing on the academic language style expected in an essay
- know their work must be legible, and practise writing by hand under test conditions
- know the different types of question that can arise (email — formal and informal, report, essay) and that they can answer all four of these types and genre of question