

ESOL Skills for Life

2018 Examiners' report

Introduction

This year the qualification transferred from the QCF to the RQF. The move has allowed Trinity to simplify the mark scheme and to remove the problematic 'in work' element. Feedback provided by examiners for Speaking & Listening and markers for Writing was used to produce this report.

At all levels and in all skills, candidates need to be aware of the assessment criteria. To meet the Qualification Framework regulations, the Skills for Life model of assessment relies on candidates covering a specific list of requirements based on the national standards for Adult literacy and closely aligned to the Core Curriculum; these are clearly laid out in the specifications at each level.

Speaking and Listening

Examiners noted that increasing awareness of the expectations of each task boosts candidates' confidence and performance. Although the examiner explains each task clearly, nerves can sometimes lead candidates to misunderstand and attempt to take the task in the wrong direction if they have not practiced each component in advance.

In general, candidates tend to be well prepared to 'speak to communicate' but less prepared to 'listen and respond', as though they expect the exam to take the format of an interview rather than a two-way conversation designed to prepare them for real-life communication.

This is especially relevant in Task 2, which generally focuses more on listening to the examiner and responding appropriately and engaging in discussion with them to move the conversation forward, and the Group Discussion. In this component, at all levels, strong candidates are aware that they need to ask each other questions to keep the conversation going and pay attention to responses in order to make relevant comments. It is worth remembering that grammar is never assessed during the Group Discussion so this is a chance for students to demonstrate conversation skills without needing to hesitate due to perceived lack of perfect language structures.

Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3

In general Task 1 is well-prepared, especially when some consideration has been given to choosing a photograph that lends itself well to discussion using language of the level. Examiners noted that it was evident when a photograph had been chosen just before the examination took place, as the picture was not always relevant to the task and the candidate did not have the vocabulary to discuss it. In this task, candidates who set off with a recital are usually comfortable with interruptions from the examiner which they should expect in order to ensure that an authentic, two-way conversation can take place. At Entry 3, some candidates could perform better if they prepared phrases using a range of language of the level rather than sticking to the past simple.

As noted above, candidates generally seem less prepared for Task 2, often expecting to be asked questions rather than having to ask them. Those who were well-prepared often had a bank of questions at the ready and paid attention to the examiners' responses, making appropriate signals and comments to show that they had understood. At Entry 2, despite the examiner introducing their photo as something they are planning to do in the future, the candidate often asked questions using the past tense. Well-prepared candidates had given thought to the kind of questions and comments which might be appropriate here. At Entry 3, candidates who were keen to give out advice too quickly limited the potential scope of the task. Those who spend a moment or two asking relevant questions to gain more information gave more focussed advice and performed well.

The Entry 2 and Entry 3 Role Play was generally well-performed this year, with examiners noting that the removal of the in-work aspect meant that most candidates felt comfortable with the range of situations. Again, candidates are advised to ask questions, listen attentively, and respond where appropriate rather than feeling obliged to jump straight in with solutions. Those who immersed themselves in the situation performed well. Candidates should be encouraged to prepare ways of asking for clarification if they are unsure about any aspect of the situation explained at the start of the task.

Levels 1 and 2

Strong candidates at both levels came to Task 1 prepared to talk about something they were genuinely interested in themselves. Particularly successful topics mine the background and hobbies of the student and enable them to engage the examiner in a subject they can speak about with enthusiasm.

Level 1

Task 1 is an opportunity to demonstrate a range of language of the level, and well-prepared candidates had clearly given thought as to how best to achieve this, choosing a topic which allowed them to explain how something is done rather than a straightforward description. Many candidates spend a lot of the short time available providing a list of items required (eg a list of ingredients for a recipe) which leaves them without enough time to demonstrate a wide range of language or to describe the process fully. All students should be advised to begin as soon as they can with their explanation, introducing any required items as they come up naturally within the sequence.

In Task 2, strong candidates listen attentively to the examiner's story and have practised making relevant comments and asking appropriate questions to show their interest. Weaker candidates seem to be unaware that the examiner's pauses are an opportunity for them to demonstrate their ability to obtain information and engage in discussion, often simply waiting for the examiner to continue.

The Role Play is generally very productive at this level, with the candidate and examiner engaging easily in an authentic discussion to plan their task together. This works best when the candidate treats the examiner as an equal and comes up with suggestions, discusses the merits of each idea and negotiates who will do what, rather than viewing the examiner as an authoritative figure who expects them to take on all the work.

Level 2

At Level 2, candidates are advised to choose a topic which has clearly differing viewpoints and to use persuasive language to make it clear which they favour. This will help them produce a sufficiently discursive presentation using formal language of the level, as well as enabling the examiner to take an opposing stance in Task 2. They should also practise keeping to time - ensuring that a clock will be present in the exam room will help them with this.

In Task 2, giving advance thought to the kinds of questions the examiner is likely to ask has a positive impact on the initial presentation, enabling candidates to take a clearer viewpoint and argue this effectively. This leads to a more natural debate of the issues involved.

The Level 2 Role Play gives candidates a chance to develop their confidence using diplomatic language. Preparing a supply of polite cultural phrases such as 'if you don't mind my saying...' to introduce their complaint will give them the tools needed to negotiate the tricky situation presented. They should also be prepared to respond to a counter-complaint from the examiner during the role play.

Writing

When producing plans, weaker candidates simply re-write the main points of the question with no evidence of any thought being given to addressing these. Good plans show evidence that thought has been given to organisation of ideas and invariably lead to well-structured, well-paragraphed final answers.

At all levels candidates would benefit from understanding when and how to use the correct format. At Entry levels in particular, weaker candidates wrote a letter to their teacher (including 'Dear' and 'from')

when the rubric directed them to 'write an article for your teacher'. At higher levels, responses to the form were sometimes framed inappropriately as a report and so on.

Another area many students need to work on is punctuation. It is important that candidates are aware of the assessment requirements for this at each level, which involve demonstrating an increasing range as they go up.

Entry 1

Markers noted a tendency to write a date of birth instead of the current date where appropriate in the form - candidates should be made aware of the difference. In Tasks 2 and 3 the most common issue this year was where candidates had not addressed the rubric.

Entry 2

It is often noted that some candidates appear to be unaware of the need to use commas in a list (see assessment criteria page 21 of Entry 2 Specifications). As the amplification for assessment criterion 1.4 is quite short this can affect their ability to demonstrate a 'wide range of the features of the amplification', the generic performance descriptor for a 4. The importance of using a range of adjectives, including comparative forms, should also be stressed for the same reason (Assessment Criterion 1.3).

Entry 3

One issue markers often see at this level is a lack of sufficient complex sentence structures. As this is a main feature of the amplification for assessment criterion 2.4 'Use grammar correctly', this can affect the mark given even if the grammar is otherwise accurate and of the level. Paragraphs and sequencing can also cause some issues at this level, both of which are awarded a discrete mark.

Level 1

At Levels 1 and 2 in particular, a wide range of punctuation needs to be demonstrated (i.e., it is assumed that they are able to correctly use full stops by now, so they need to show that they understand how to use the full range of punctuation marks such as dashes, bullet points, apostrophes, commas in complex sentences, rhetorical question marks, exclamation marks for effect, etc.). If candidates are not aware of this, they risk losing marks on this criterion. Candidates should also be made aware that a discrete mark is awarded for appropriacy of language (i.e. level of formality) and for structure (i.e. good use of paragraphing and signposting). See pages 21 and 22 of the specifications for the full assessment criteria.

Level 2

In Task 1, many candidates are relying too heavily on repeating the notes word-for-word, rather than rephrasing the given data to suit the purpose of the task. This affects their performance as it deprives them of the opportunity to demonstrate a range of language and vocabulary. Task 4 is often well completed, with candidates being aware of the need to use informal language here and producing highly appropriate content for the situation provided.

Conclusion

Candidates continue to perform extremely well on the whole. The transfer of the examination from the QCF to the RQF has been particularly successful. Examiners and markers have found that the removal of the 'in-work' requirement especially has proved popular, allowing candidates to relate to all of the tasks more readily. The simpler assessment schemes mean that candidates themselves should now be able to understand more clearly what is required of them.