

ESOL Skills for Life 2019 Examiners' report

Introduction

This report has been compiled using the feedback collated from examiners and markers throughout the year.

The ESOL Skills for Life exam is based on the National Standards for Adult Literacy, and is required to assess all aspects of these as detailed in the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum. Tutors need to refer to the Specifications for each level, available online at trinitycollege.com/skillsforlife to see what is being assessed in each task and for guidance on which parts of the curriculum each of the assessment criteria covers.

Speaking and Listening

Task 1 (Candidate-led)

In Task 1 the candidate introduces the topic and the examiner asks questions to elicit further information (apart from Level 2 where the examiner is silent but takes notes to prepare for the debate in Task 2).

This works well when the candidate has prepared a suitable topic/photograph to discuss that they are genuinely interested in and which stimulates discussion at the appropriate level without being upsetting for either the candidate or examiner. Occasionally examiners report candidates bringing in distressing photos or giving presentations on disturbing topics which make it difficult for the examiner to provide cheerful, positive encouragement to the candidate. Please be sensitive to both candidates and examiners by trying to ensure students are prepared to discuss appropriate topics during the exam.

Other than at Level 2, it is important for students to be aware that this task is meant to replicate an authentic conversation. Examiners report weaker performances from candidates who appear to have tried to memorise a piece by rote as they do not respond appropriately to the examiner's questions or comments, and feel off-balance when they are interrupted mid-flow. These students tend to improve throughout the remaining tasks where the conversation is more natural.

Because candidates have the opportunity to prepare and practise this task in class, this is a great opportunity for them to look at the language expected of the level (see Appendix 1 in the specifications) and practise these structures in advance, so that during the exam they come naturally.

Task 2 (Examiner-led)

In Task 2, the examiner introduces the topic and the candidate asks questions to elicit further information (apart from Level 2 which is a debate in which the examiner asks the questions based on the notes they have made during the Task 1 presentation).

Strong candidates are confident in asking questions, are aware that this is primarily a listening task in which they need to elicit information from the examiner and then comment appropriately, and demonstrate excellent interactive listening skills such as nodding, smiling, laughing and using short forms of encouragement ('Really?' 'No way!' 'How interesting!').

Again, it is important that tutors study the specifications carefully so that candidates are aware of what is expected of them. At Entry 2, for example, the photograph the examiner uses in Task 2 always refers to a future event; many candidates mis-hear the examiner's instructions stating this and go on to ask them questions in the past. Well-prepared candidates immediately recognise the format and ask more relevant questions, however.

Task 3 (Role Play)

From Entry 2 upwards, there is a role play in which the examiner outlines an authentic situation the candidate may find themselves in during daily life and takes the part of the person the candidate needs to interact with. The candidate does not need to play a role, but they do need to imagine themselves in that situation. This is usually very well understood and performances are often strong in this section, but weaker performances are usually based on a misunderstanding of the original situation. Examiners recommend practice in asking for clarification and checking understanding, therefore.

Occasionally candidates appear to be unaware of the concept of a role play so it is advisable to practice this thoroughly in class, perhaps using drama as a way of introducing it to them as this is something all cultures can relate to.

Group Discussion

Once again, issues mainly arose from a lack of understanding of the topic or prompt provided by the examiner, and students should be counselled on checking understanding, both with each other and the examiner. Candidates also need to be aware that the purpose of this task is to demonstrate their conversational skills, i.e. asking each other questions, turn taking, listening to other people and agreeing and disagreeing with each other. On the whole, then, it should not be necessary for the examiner to intervene.

Weaker students tend to speak one at a time without interacting with each other a great deal and are more concerned with what they will say next than the interactive nature of the discussion. They also tend to look at the examiner for extra prompting every minute or so.

Examiners also reported that occasionally 'stronger' candidates have a tendency to dominate, but these students should be made aware that their ability to listen, take turns and draw others into conversation is being assessed here.

Entry 1

Stronger candidates understood the requirements of the Group Discussion and did not rely on the examiner to provide repeated additional prompting. Weaker students did not interact well with each other and looked to the examiner for regular support. It is worth remembering that the list of Group Discussion topics for Entry 1 and Entry 2 is published, and candidates would benefit from practising these in class so they are familiar with them, as well as gaining useful practice in the conversational skills listed above.

Entry 2

Examiners reported weaker candidates not using the past tense at all in Task 1.

In Task 2, students who had been well prepared needed little or no prompting to ask questions. Weaker candidates were unable to form questions despite repeated prompting. As noted above, some candidates misunderstood the format of the exam and ask questions about the past, even though this task always relates to a future event.

Task 3, the role play, was mostly well understood but those candidates who are weaker in this area would benefit from being drilled in ways to check understanding and ask for clarification, as this often proved to be the main issue.

Entry 3

In Task 2, more confident performers were prepared to ask the examiner several questions to find out more about their dilemma before offering appropriate advice. Weaker students did not always understand the task, either confusing it with the role play or believing they had to make the choice themselves.

Level 1

In Task 1, Examiners commented that some candidates do not seem to be aware of the need to explain a process within the short time frame of the exam, often using up the whole time allocation on long background information. This can manifest as a long list or in-depth description of the objects required to complete the process, or as an over-length contextualisation of the process which leaves no time for describing the process itself. Students are advised to practise explaining their process to each other under timed conditions, allowing their partner to comment and ask questions as they go along.

Level 2

Examiners noted that the presentations for Task 1 at this level did not always lend themselves to being challenged by the examiner in Task 2. The presentation should be a formal one with pros and cons, and it is important that the examiner be able to take an opposing stance in Task 2 in order for a debate to take place, so avoid allowing students to choose subjects with no viable alternative (or only an extreme alternative that the examiner would feel uncomfortable arguing in favour of). The focus of the presentation must be a topical issue with clearly opposing viewpoints, with the aim of the candidate being to persuade the examiner. Weaker performances are characterised by a use of below-level language throughout, a lack of discursive nature to the presentation and an inability to provide a persuasive argument. Some candidates were under-prepared and fell well short of time.

Reading

At all levels, please ensure that students have sufficient practice of transferring their answers to the official answer sheet (examples are provided on our website). It is not possible to mark the work of candidates who have not done this. Please also remind them that they won't be allowed to use correction fluid in the exam.

At Entry 2 and 3 it is worth practising the alphabet task as performance is not always as high as tutors might expect in this section.

At Levels 1 and 2, timings are important. Candidates should not spend time trying to understand every word in Task 1, which is intended to assess their ability to skim for gist and scan for details.

Writing

Overall, it was noted that answers were generally of a very high standard, particularly at the Entry levels. For Levels 1 and 2, many candidates displayed a clear aptitude for writing with the sophistication required by the National Standards and produced genuinely interesting responses to the tasks set which were a pleasure to read and mark. However, at these higher levels, it is also relatively common to find candidates whose style is confident but basic and overly conversational. These students are often good speakers who need to focus on how written technique differs from spoken.

All students would benefit from being aware of what they are being assessed on. The exam criteria follow the National Standards. As these are very detailed and specific to each level, tutors are advised to consult the Specifications carefully in order to be able to explain to students what skills they are expected to demonstrate in each task.

Below we have looked at marker feedback in relation to each of the Assessment Criteria for Entry 1 and Entry 2 as we have a large amount of data for these levels. For Entry 3 - Level 2, comments were often relevant across the board and therefore we have conflated these, specifying those which only related to one level.

Entry 1

Some candidates (sometimes entire cohorts) have been known to miss off Task 3 completely, as it is found on the back page of this slim exam paper. Please ensure that all of your students are aware that this paper has three tasks and that they need to turn to the back page in the actual exam.

1.1 Construct simple sentences correctly for an intended audience

Answers which did not meet this criterion tended to be in note form or bore little or no relation to the task set. Another issue arose from candidates attempting to write using compound sentences (an above-level skill) and therefore not being able to control word order.

Candidates who did extremely well wrote in simple sentences using correct word order. One or two candidates misinterpreted the rubrics and wrote a response relating to the future - at this level they are only required to demonstrate present tenses (simple and continuous).

1.2 Use full stops correctly

This criterion was often well met, with most candidates being aware that full stops are used to block off sentences.

1.3 Use capitalisation correctly

While almost all candidates are aware of the correct use of the capital 'I' to refer to themselves, capitalisation of the first letter of a sentence is not always in evidence. Additionally, some candidates capitalise a specific letter in all instances, wherever it appears in a word (e.g. 'exAminAtion prActice').

1.4 Spell words correctly

Markers felt that this was generally well achieved at this level, with the majority of candidates showing a good knowledge of vocabulary relating to familiar contexts. Where issues with spelling did arise, they were most often found to relate to candidates missing out the final 'e' (the magic e in phonics) or not doubling letters when adding 'ing' (e.g. get > getting).

2.1 Record personal details in a simple form correctly

Markers gave a lot of feedback relating to the form (Task 1). Frequent remarks related to missing out fields completely (particularly the postcode), writing their date of birth instead of the date (or vice versa) and difficulties completing the field 'nationality'. The biggest concern is where a candidate has completed the majority of a form relatively well but missed out all key information, (for example a house number, incomplete phone number and inaccurate email address), leading to an award of 1 because the communicative purpose is not met (i.e. they cannot be contacted in any way). See p20 of the specifications for more details.

Entry 2

1.1 Present information in an appropriate format for the intended audience

Candidates who did not achieve full marks on this criterion tended to go off the topic. For example, if the rubric asked them to describe a special purchase, they might write about the entire shopping trip and either neglect to mention the purchase at all or mention it only in passing.

Another issue at this level is in interpreting the rubric 'Write an article for your teacher'. Whilst Trinity has an obligation to specify the 'appropriate format' and 'intended audience' in order for the candidate to be able to achieve this criterion, candidates should be advised that this phrasing is simply intended to reflect the ordinary short piece of text they might produce in class. Therefore, writing a letter to their teacher is not an appropriate format, but one solid paragraph of writing is completely acceptable.

1.2 Construct simple and compound sentences correctly

A frequent comment from markers was that candidates did not always appear to be aware of the requirement to produce compound sentences (using conjunctions such as 'and', 'but' and 'or'). Word order and basic verb forms were generally well achieved, but noun phrases, articles, adverbs and prepositional

phrases were not always demonstrated. Past verb forms, particularly irregular ones, were sometimes an issue.

1.3 Use adjectives correctly

Markers often note that some students do not appear to be aware that this is a discrete assessment criterion. In these cases an otherwise strong candidate may inadvertently use no adjectives at all, preventing them from receiving any mark for this criterion. Stronger candidates who had been well prepared used several adjectives with correct word order and included a comparative.

1.4 Use punctuation correctly

The main comment from markers here is that in order to differentiate this level from Entry 1, it is important for students to be aware that they need to use commas in a list. If the format required is a postcard, email or letter, they should be advised to take the opportunity to ask a question to demonstrate their ability to use a question mark.

1.5 Use upper and lower case letters correctly

At this level, candidates are expected to use capital letters correctly for proper nouns (in addition to the sentence boundaries expected at Entry 1). These aspects are almost always well executed but the issue of randomly capitalising entire words or capitalising a single letter of the alphabet throughout persists, and it is usually in these areas where marks are lost.

1.6 Spell words correctly

Markers are consistently impressed by the range of lexis demonstrated by candidates of this level, showing that low level learners who live in the UK tend to pick up vocabulary at a rapid rate. Spelling ability is also generally high; at this level, it is often only very advanced vocabulary which is spelled incorrectly.

2.1 Record personal details in a form correctly

Again, markers noted that it is relatively common to leave fields blank, resulting in a loss of marks. Tutors should teach candidates the use of N/A to help them overcome any cases where no answer is applicable (exactly as they would use in real life). Occasionally the form asks for two sets of names (for example, an emergency contact) and candidates need to be aware of the need to enter different details here. Occasionally entire parts of the form are missed off, especially where a different format is required (e.g. circle the appropriate option).

Entry 3 - Level 2

Plans

Markers comment on how frequently they see no plan at all, meaning that candidates cannot achieve any mark for this criterion. There is usually a clear correlation between sound planning technique and final answers; i.e. evidence of a couple of minutes spent brainstorming ideas for a final answer almost invariably results in higher marks on criteria such as content, structuring and sequencing. Occasionally markers are disheartened to see a weak answer when marks for these criteria would have been higher if the candidate had followed their own plan.

Common situations which will result in a 0 being awarded:

- ▶ No plan at all
- ▶ Plan bears no relation to any question
- ▶ Plan for final task only (informal).

Reasons for a 2 being awarded:

- ▶ Plan relates to rubric but little more.

Good plans likely to achieve a 4:

- ▶ Marker can see a clear relation to one (OR more) task and can identify the basis of a final answer; if only one task planned this is not the informal task
- ▶ Enable candidates to achieve higher marks for paragraphing, structure, coherence etc, in the actual answer for whichever task(s) they have chosen to plan.

Forms

At E3 - L2, the form will always include two or three closed fields and one or more open response fields. Markers noted that candidates did not always stick to the point of the question on the form (sometimes over-focussing on the overarching question in the rubric provided for context above the form and ignoring the questions on the form itself).

Additionally, at Entry 3 in particular, not all candidates appeared to be familiar with the concept of using a form to provide feedback. For example, if the form asked for feedback on their college course, the candidate may have responded by summarising their own progress. In other cases the candidate may have focussed on other aspects of the college, such as the café or the building facilities.

The form at Level 2 is often a missed opportunity. At this level the candidate is required to use given data to produce their response. A high proportion of candidates copy the data given word for word, leaving themselves no room to demonstrate any of the range of skills required at this level. It is important to practise paraphrasing notes and adapting data and information to suit the purpose of their writing while demonstrating the range of skills expected of them in the amplification.

Text production

From Entry 3 upwards it was noted that the range of grammar, lexis and punctuation did not always reflect the national standards as described in the core curriculum (and Trinity's specifications). These levels also all have an increasing focus on structuring and sequencing of texts to various effects, as well as requiring students to demonstrate an ability to distinguish between differing registers. These features are introduced at a relatively basic level at Entry 3, where the majority of candidates show an ability to get to grips with them. However, not all Level 1 candidates respond to the need to demonstrate increasing levels of sophistication in these areas. Weaker scripts often respond to the question adequately in terms of content and length of text, but fail to show off the complex grammar, nuances of register, full range of punctuation and breadth of vocabulary that they have learnt during their course.

Content

This is often good, with many candidates responding to all parts of the rubric. Where issues arise it is usually because the candidate has read the question too quickly and/or not taken time to plan their answer (either in the space provided or mentally). This results in parts of the question being missed out or the focus of the response not matching the question asked (e.g. 'Write a review for a website' becomes a review of a website).

Overly long or short answers are another potential risk here, and while this is formally only assessed once per task (e.g. 'judge level of detail to write and what to include') it can have an impact on all other criteria; this is especially true in the case of short answers, where the candidate does not have the opportunity to demonstrate a wide enough range of structures.

Tone of language

This concept is introduced quite subtly at Entry 3, with 'identify appropriate register for task and audience' being seen within the content criterion. At this level, this is by and large well executed, although markers report that Task 3 (the informal correspondence task) can sometimes be over-formal, with candidates not always taking the opportunity to show off their ability to use contractions, friendly greetings and/or sign offs, slang expressions, emoticons and other standard features of informal correspondence.

By Levels 1 and 2, language tone is an Assessment Criterion in its own right. At Level 1 the focus is on getting the right level of formality to suit the context. Once again, most candidates display a clear

understanding of the concept. Where performances are weaker, this is usually due to an inability to differentiate clearly, with Task 4 (the informal task) being overly formal, or Task 3 (the formal task) being overly informal, or Task 2 (which should be neutral in style) often showing an overly conversational style. Candidates would be well advised to de-personalise Task 2, in particular, especially in the case of reports where the use of the first person is rarely appropriate.

At Level 2, effective use of language covers more than just choice of register, and stronger candidates show good awareness of the subtleties of different lexical and grammatical choices and how these affect the reader.

At all three levels (Entry 3 - Level 2), the final task on the paper is an informal communication. Markers comment that the response to this can vary a great deal, with stronger performances showing a wide range of informal text features appropriate to a typical email to a close friend, such as emoticons, friendly greetings, contracted forms, colloquial language and laid back sign offs including formatting such as kisses. Weaker performances use structures, formatting and language more appropriate to a formal letter or email.

Structuring and sequencing

The introduction of paragraphing at Entry 3 is by and large well responded to, although not all candidates grasp the concept of separating ideas out in this way, with some simply chunking their text at random. Markers noted that candidates often miss out topic sentences and go straight into detail, so we would advise practising the idea of 'a general statement followed by details'.

At Level 1, the need to format appropriately is usually well responded to, but some candidates would benefit from giving thought to typical ways of laying out a report, for example using headings and subheadings to separate the points to be made (consider showing them this report).

By Level 2, the nuances of using sequencing and linguistic features appropriately to develop a persuasive argument are clearly in evidence in stronger performances.

Grammar

Occasionally markers found candidates did not use the tense required by the rubric, so make sure students read this carefully. Great performances in the exam are characterised by the deployment of a wide range of grammatical structures with a reasonably consistent level of control. Candidates who play it safe with repetitive, basic language structures that do not match those expected at the level will score a low mark, even if their text is largely accurate.

Punctuation

Good performances show that candidates have clearly understood the importance of showing off their knowledge of the full range of punctuation marks to enhance meaning in their work and to aid clarity. Weaker performances continue to use the same punctuation expected of an Entry 2 candidate, even as high as Level 2; markers noted that some candidates at this level were not even confident in the use of commas, making increasingly complex sentence structures quite difficult to decipher.

Lexis

It is important to remember (at all levels) that this covers far more than simply 'spelling', and that by Levels 1 and 2 in particular, candidates are expected to display an increasing range of vocabulary to differentiate between nuanced meanings.

At Entry 3, most candidates display an adequate range of lexis to meet the purpose of the text, but the weaker performances at Levels 1 and 2 tend to be characterised by a limited, repetitive vocabulary. Occasionally candidates use the wrong word or phrase completely.

Excellent performances at Level 2 show natural-sounding phrasing, with a use of collocations, idioms and colloquialisms which demonstrate that the learner has made the most of the resources available to them in the UK such as TV, radio and magazines, and that they have a natural ear for picking up the phrasing of those around them.