



Course report 2025

Higher English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

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. You should read the report with the published assessment documents and marking instructions. For information on the internally assessed component of this course: Performance-talking, please refer to the 2024-25 [Qualification Verification Summary Report](#) on the subject page of our website.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2025 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 1,081

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 1,017

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

| Course award | Number of candidates | Percentage | Cumulative percentage | Minimum mark required |
|--------------|----------------------|------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| A | 306 | 30.1 | 30.1 | 70 |
| B | 271 | 26.6 | 56.7 | 60 |
| C | 249 | 24.5 | 81.2 | 50 |
| D | 149 | 14.7 | 95.9 | 40 |
| No award | 42 | 4.1 | 100% | Not applicable |

We have not applied rounding to these statistics.

You can read the general commentary on grade boundaries in the appendix.

In this report:

- 'most' means greater than or equal to 70%
- 'many' means 50% to 69%
- 'some' means 25% to 49%
- 'a few' means less than 25%

You can find statistical reports on the [statistics and information](#) page of our website.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper 1: Listening

Feedback from centres and markers suggests the question paper was of the standard expected at Higher level.

Recording 3 was felt to be the most demanding of the three listening sections. The topics covered by the recordings were felt to be appropriate and accessible as well as current and relevant to candidates. Overall, the question paper performed as expected and no changes to grade boundaries were made.

Question paper 2: Reading

Feedback from centres and markers suggests this question paper was of the standard expected at this level.

Text 2 appeared to be the most challenging for candidates. The topics covered by the texts were felt to be appropriate, accessible and current. Most question types were attempted well with the exception of the short answer questions in text 2. Overall, the question paper performed as expected and no changes to grade boundaries were made.

Question paper 3: Writing

All topics in the writing tasks allowed candidates to demonstrate a good range of grammar and vocabulary. Markers felt that topics were accessible to all candidates. The writing tasks discriminated well between weaker and stronger candidates. Comments from markers and the marks awarded indicate that the cohort this year was similar to last year.

A small number of candidates misunderstood what 'grouping tasks' meant, interpreting this as doing tasks with other people rather than categorising tasks in order to complete them more efficiently.

For the optional work and study tasks in part 2, most candidates attempted the essay question with few candidates attempting the report. Those candidates who attempted the report gained very slightly lower marks compared to those who attempted the essay.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Analysis of the overall marks of candidates indicate that there was broad consistency in candidate performance across all three question papers, although performance was a little stronger in reading than in writing or listening.

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper 1: Listening

The questions that most candidates performed well in were questions 8, (gap fill), 10 (gap fill) 12 (multiple choice), 13 (multiple choice) and 17 (gap fill).

Question paper 2: Reading

Questions 3 (gap fill), 6 (multiple choice), 8(iv) (multiple matching) and 17 (gap fill) were the most successfully completed.

Question paper 3: Writing

Candidates were generally better at writing in an informal rather than a formal style. Many candidates were able to add support for the bullet points provided and add their own ideas in some cases.

Most candidates were familiar with the conventions and layout of both discursive essays and evaluative reports.

Most candidates completed reports this year without excessive use of formulaic language and bullet points.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper 1: Listening

Recording 3 was found to be the most challenging. Across the three recordings, gap-fill questions were found to be slightly easier than multiple-choice questions. The questions that candidates found most demanding were question 9 (gap fill) ,11 (multiple choice),18 (gap fill),19 (gap fill) and question 22 (multiple choice).

The spelling of some candidates was poor this year, and some candidates struggled to complete their responses within the three-word requirement.

Question paper 2: Reading

Text 2 was the piece that candidates found most challenging. The most demanding questions were questions 4 (gap fill), 12 (multiple choice), 13 (gap fill) and 28 (multiple choice). In terms of question type, the matching questions were found to be the easiest, followed by multiple choice, then gap fill and finally short-answer questions (the average mark for these was only 50%).

Some candidates struggled with following the instructions on the question paper and used more than the three words requested or used their own words rather than using words from the text.

Question paper 3: Writing

Many candidates struggled with the genre and formality of writing, using language that was too informal in the work and study-related context tasks and struggling with the genre of a blog in the everyday life question. There was a lack of paragraphing, with some scripts showing no evidence of paragraphing, which is heavily penalised at this level.

Punctuation was weak this year, with some candidates not using capitalisation or full stops. Handwriting was an issue with some candidates — some responses were difficult to read.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Teachers and lecturers should refer to the published Understanding Standards materials available for all components of the Higher ESOL course on our Understanding Standards website.

Question paper 1: Listening

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

- use the allocated time at the end of the listening paper to check their spelling to ensure that the words they have written are relevant to the topic of the questions
- know that minor spelling errors are acceptable in the listening paper as long as the word is recognisable, and it is clear that they understand the meaning
- use 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 they include the correct answer within this, they will not gain the mark as it is not clear that they have fully understood the question
- work on recognising and identifying paraphrasing and synonyms when listening, which helps them to complete all question types
- work on identifying key words in the questions, brainstorming synonyms and listening to check, which will support them in the exam

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

Question paper 2: Reading

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

- get regular practice at short-answer questions alongside the other question types of gap fill, multiple choice and multiple matching
- 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 asks for 'words or phrases from the text' they should choose words found in the text and not try to paraphrase for these questions
- are careful not to copy long chunks from the text when answering questions that ask for short answers, as this suggests they have not understood the specific information the question asks for and therefore they will not gain the marks
- work on identifying paraphrasing and synonyms in the classroom, as this will benefit them in the exam. Underlining key words in the questions and then identifying relevant parts of the text would be useful for candidates
- adhere to the prescribed word limit when given in a question
- 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 that will help them cope with the lexical demands of the text in the exam
- clearly score through incorrect answers to highlight which answer they would like to submit
- use past papers to prepare for the different question types in the question paper and to practise at the speed or within a timed limit at which they need to read the texts in the exam

Question paper 3: Writing

Centres should focus on writing skills and provide more guidance on writing tasks.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

- can use punctuation correctly. Lack of capitalisation or inconsistent use of full stops will significantly reduce the available marks for a piece of writing at this level. 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
- spend time working on the structure of a paragraph and how and when a new paragraph should be used. Teachers and lecturers could provide texts without paragraphing and ask them to identify topic sentences and paragraph breaks or identify the structure within a paragraph
- practise the use of discourse markers, linking, and signposting in longer writing tasks, especially the essay task in part 2. Clear and correct use of these features can improve a writing task considerably
- focus more on the purpose, genre and target audience of the written tasks, as style is important in the writing tasks at this level
- have opportunities to use online writing tasks such as authentic blog and social media posts, as this genre may be part of future question papers
- work on comparing different writing styles. Rewriting a formal written task in an informal style or vice versa helps them develop the ability to use both types of registers and highlight the importance and impact of different styles
- spend more time practising different essay structures, for example discursive essays and for or against essays, as well as focusing on the academic language style expected in an essay
- ensure their work is legible, and practise writing by hand under test conditions
- try to produce answers within the recommended word count and be aware of how much they have written so that time is not wasted on counting words
- are aware that more is not always better and at times a longer piece of work receives fewer marks as candidates get tired, and lose focus on the communicative quality and accuracy of their work

- can proofread and edit their work, and are advised to factor in time for this during the exam
- practise reading (and re-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 exam

Appendix: 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 is 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 to make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Members of our Executive Management Team normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors utilise 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.

- The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- Where levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

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](#).