



Course report 2024

National 5 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 in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

We compiled the statistics in this report before we completed the 2024 appeals process.

Grade boundary and statistical information

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2023: 1,348

Number of resulted entries in 2024: 1,460

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including minimum mark to achieve each grade

A	Number of candidates	414	Percentage	28.4	Cumulative percentage	28.4	Minimum mark required	70
B	Number of candidates	365	Percentage	25.0	Cumulative percentage	53.4	Minimum mark required	60
C	Number of candidates	348	Percentage	23.8	Cumulative percentage	77.2	Minimum mark required	50
D	Number of candidates	208	Percentage	14.2	Cumulative percentage	91.4	Minimum mark required	40
No award	Number of candidates	125	Percentage	8.6	Cumulative percentage	100	Minimum mark required	N/A

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 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: Listening

The Listening question paper performed as expected. The level of challenge of this paper was suitable for candidates at this level.

The topics in the three recordings were noted as being appropriate. The first recording, an Everyday Life topic, was felt to be slightly easier than the other two recordings but this was anticipated as the Everyday Life topic by its nature is the most accessible.

There were no questions that were deemed too challenging and therefore no need to make any adjustments to grade boundaries.

Question paper: Reading

This component contained three different topics/texts with an appropriate level of challenge, the texts were both fair and suitable for the candidates. There was some element of no response across the texts both for gap-fill questions and multiple-choice questions, but this may have occurred a few times if candidates were entered at the wrong level.

This question paper performed as expected. There were no questions that were deemed too challenging and therefore no need to make any adjustments to grade boundaries.

Question paper: Writing

This component contained three tasks on different topics (one of which is mandatory for all candidates) that allowed candidates to demonstrate a good range of grammar and vocabulary. Markers commented that the topics were accessible to all ages. The writing tasks discriminated well between more and less able candidates.

For the optional tasks in part two, the majority of candidates chose to answer the study-based essay question rather than the work report question, but both were attempted, and both functioned correctly. Overall, the paper performed as expected and there were no adjustments to grade boundaries.

Performance: Speaking and Listening

The performance functioned as expected, enabling candidates to perform to the extent of their language ability. Overall, the marks awarded were in line with national standards and assessors made good use of the detailed marking instructions for each of the aspects of performance to determine marks within the bands for both speaking and listening.

In the samples verified, where centres had used assessment briefs from SCQF level 5 unit assessment support packs or prior verified centre produced assessment briefs, the difficulty of the topic and the scaffolding provided was expected for this level of qualification. Some centres produced their own assessment brief, with an appropriate level of challenge, to take account of personalisation and choice.

In a few centres, the assessment briefs used did not provide sufficient challenge for the candidates to fully demonstrate a range of detailed language appropriate to the level.

Most centres had taken a holistic approach to the judgements, following the instructions in the National 5 coursework assessment task, where the general approach described in the marking instructions is to identify the band which best describes the candidate's performance.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper: Listening

This question paper performed as expected despite lower mean marks achieved compared to 2022. Most candidates performed well in questions 1, 2, 16, 17, 18 and 19. These were a mix of gap-fill and multiple-choice questions and strong responses occurred through all three recordings.

Question paper: Reading

Statistics and marker feedback indicate that candidate performance in this paper was at a five-year high. Questions 1, 3, 11, 12, 14 and 25 performed best overall, showing a good response spread throughout the three texts, creating a good balance across the paper.

Question paper: writing

Statistics and marker feedback indicate that candidate performance in this paper was also at a five-year high. There was a noticeable improvement this year in candidate responses to the Everyday Life question (an informal email).

At item writing and reviewing, particular emphasis was placed on ensuring all three writing questions were equally accessible to school-based candidates and mature (Further Education and community based) candidates and this was reflected in improved candidate performance. In contrast to last session, most candidates attempted the study question in part two, but this could be due to the ever-changing nature of the cohort both in terms of what type of centre they come from and indeed, their nationality and first language (particularly in terms of whether they use the Roman alphabet).

Performance: Speaking and Listening

A good range of marks across the bands was seen, with many candidates performing well and fully demonstrating their English language skills.

Most centres assessed candidates in pairs rather than small groups. Overall, candidates were well matched for the assessment and were very comfortable having a conversation with each other. A few centres chose to assess the performance in groups of three, this worked well when the centre had carefully considered the group dynamic beforehand. In most cases the conversation was well balanced, so that sufficient evidence of each candidate's language skills was provided.

It was clear that many candidates had prepared well for the performance throughout their course, and this was evidenced through their contribution to the topic, their competences in initiating and turn-taking, and in considering and responding to their partners' comments. These candidates were very comfortable having conversations with each other, showing well-developed speaking and listening skills in relevant contexts.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Listening

Questions 22 and 24 were found to be challenging by most candidates and were expected as 'A band' questions.

Questions 6, 13 and 24 had high 'no response' rates. This could partly be attributed to candidates who may have been presented at the wrong level.

Question paper: Reading

Question 21 was the only question that proved particularly challenging and again, can be considered as an 'A band' question. Text 3 proved more challenging than the first two texts.

Questions 5, 26, 31 and 32 had high 'no response' rates. Questions 31 and 32 had higher 'no response' rates perhaps because they fell at the end of the paper and some candidates simply ran out of time. This high 'no response' rate for some questions can also partly be attributed to candidates who may have been presented for the exam at the wrong level.

Question paper: writing

Most candidates had been entered at the right level, however, some candidates exhibited poor coherence and a weak range of vocabulary and/or grammatical structures for the level. A few candidates had work that was closer to National 2, 3 or 4 writing standards, and this is an issue due to presenting candidates at the wrong level rather than the National 5 paper content.

Performance: Speaking and Listening

A few centres had conducted the assessment as an interview with the interlocutor rather than a conversation with another candidate or peer, disadvantaging candidates from displaying fully their ability to take part in the conversation.

In a few centres, candidates were overprepared for the conversation and used scripted dialogue or had rehearsed what they were going to say. This disadvantages candidates from demonstrating their ability to initiate with spontaneity and show sensitivity to the norms of turn-taking, as well as to respond with fluency and to support what their partner has said.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Teachers and lecturers are reminded that there are published Understanding Standards materials available for all components of the ESOL National 5 course on [SQA's Understanding Standards website](#).

Question paper: Listening

Teachers and lecturers 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. It is always better to make a guess for a multiple-choice question than to leave it blank

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

Question paper: Reading

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates:

- ◆ check their spelling carefully, particularly if they finish before the end of the exam time. Words copied directly from 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 be awarded the marks
- ◆ work on identifying paraphrasing and synonyms in the classroom, as this will benefit candidates in the exam. 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 make a guess 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 at which they need to read the texts in the exam

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

Question paper: writing

Centres need to focus on writing skills and provide more guidance on writing tasks.

Teachers and lecturers 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 examples available on the ESOL Understanding Standards section on SQA's secure site for several examples
- ◆ spend more time on practising essay structure — paragraphing, 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
- ◆ can proofread and edit their work, and are advised to factor in time for this during the exam
- ◆ practise 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
- ◆ use past papers to prepare for the different question types in the paper and to practise at the necessary speed to produce two pieces of writing

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

Performance: Speaking and Listening

Teachers and lecturers should ensure candidates focus 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.

Centres can support candidates to develop their skills by making use of the marking instructions throughout the course. Centres should provide candidates with 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.

Providing opportunities for candidates to practise conversations, 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.

Centres should ensure that candidate pairings or groups facilitate a balanced conversation with opportunities for equal participation, taking into consideration candidate strengths and personalities. If the assessor believes that a candidate has been disadvantaged by a pairing or group, that candidate can be re-assessed in a different pairing or group at the time of the assessment or at a later date with a different assessment brief. Using peer interlocutors when there is not a suitable candidate pairing and where this is possible is good practice. Candidates can also be paired with a candidate who has already been assessed and is not being re-assessed.

Centres should provide candidates with guidance on how to use the 15-minute 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 conversation with confidence. They must not attempt to script or rehearse the conversation.

Most centres benefitted from the series of webinars that have been offered by SQA over the past few years and where assessors and internal verifiers had participated in these webinars there was a good level of understanding of the assessment standards. Centres are reminded that recordings of these webinars are available on SQA's secure site. There are also Understanding Standards packs available on SQA's secure site for the National 5 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.

Appendix: general commentary on grade boundaries

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

For most National Courses, SQA aims 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, SQA holds 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 SQA's 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. SQA 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.

During the pandemic, we modified National Qualifications course assessments, for example we removed elements of coursework. We kept these modifications in place until the 2022–23 session. The education community agreed that retaining the modifications for longer than this could have a detrimental impact on learning and progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. After discussions with candidates, teachers, lecturers, parents, carers and others, we returned to full course assessment for the 2023–24 session.

SQA's approach to awarding was announced in [March 2024](#) and explained that any impact on candidates completing coursework for the first time, as part of their SQA assessments, would be considered in our grading decisions and incorporated into our well-established

grading processes. This provides fairness and safeguards for candidates and helps to provide assurances across the wider education community as we return to established awarding.

Our approach to awarding is broadly aligned to other nations of the UK that have returned to normal grading arrangements.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the [National Qualifications 2024 Awarding — Methodology Report](#).