

ESOL Skills for Life – 2022 Examiners' report

INTRODUCTION

This report has been compiled using feedback obtained throughout the year from both Speaking and Listening examiners and Writing markers.

The ESOL Skills for Life exam is based on the National Standards for Adult Literacy and it assesses all aspects of these as detailed in the *Adult ESOL Core Curriculum*. Teachers should refer to the specifications for each level, available online via the [individual level web pages](#) 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

Assessment of speaking and listening by Zoom video conference was introduced in December 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The number of exam tasks and the task focus remains unchanged in the online version of the exam, and examiners report that centres and candidates have embraced the move to online exams. Over time and as centres have become more familiar with the online mode of delivery, there has been a clear improvement in the flow of exam sessions: pairs of candidates are set up and ready to start and dummy candidates are only used where there are uneven numbers.

Examiners appreciate centre staff logging into Zoom ahead of the scheduled start time to discuss the timetable and any absent candidates. Examiners ask that centres continue to do this, even if the first one or two candidates are absent and there is a delay to the scheduled start time, as it avoids unnecessary confusion. Examiners also appreciate centre staff coming back online before the last candidate is examined, therefore making it clear when the session is coming to a close.

Towards the end of 2021, face-to-face exams restarted, with Trinity examiners once again visiting centres. The modifications that were made for online delivery (online photo bank of candidate images and reduced timings for the group discussions) were carried over into the delivery of face-to-face exams.

Task 1 (Candidate-led)

In Task 1 at Entry 1 to Level 1, the Trinity online photo bank of images is used and candidates are therefore no longer required to bring in their own pictures for both online and face-to-face exams. Instead, candidates choose in advance a picture from the photo bank which represents the theme of what they wish to talk about in Task 1, and the examiner asks questions to elicit further information. For face-to-face exams, centres are reminded that examiners have copies of all the images for Entry 1 to Level 1 and so centres don't need to print these for candidates to take into the exam.

To prevent delays in searching for picture numbers during the exam, examiners ask that candidates know their picture numbers when they come into the exam room (both online and face-to-face exams) and can say them clearly. Some centres provide candidates with a Post-it note with their picture number written on it and this helps Task 1 to start smoothly.

Candidates are well-prepared for Task 1 overall and use one of the Trinity supplied images as a stimulus, making the link clearly between the photo bank image and their own account (Entry 1 to Entry 3) or process at Level 1.

Centres are reminded that candidates at Entry 2 to Level 1 can bring a small object into the exam room as a stimulus to talk about their event/experience/process instead of using an image from the Trinity photo bank if this would better represent what the candidate wishes to talk about.

Entry 1

Examiners report that weaker candidates describe the picture in Task 1 rather than relating it to themselves. Candidates therefore have difficulty answering the examiner's questions. Centres should give candidates plenty of practice in class with the photo they have chosen, as well as the opportunity to respond to different questions.

Entry 2

In Task 1, strong candidates are well-prepared to talk about the theme of the picture they have chosen from the photo bank and 'own' the picture by making it specific to themselves. Candidates who are less well prepared tend to only describe what is in the photo, without making the link between the theme of the photo and their own past event. Strong candidates use a wide range of past simple verbs accurately. Weaker candidates use present simple or present participle to talk about their event, rather than past simple. Examiners feel that candidates would benefit from more pronunciation practice of past simple regular endings as clear pronunciation of these endings confirms to the examiner that the candidate is using past simple.

Entry 3

Examiners report that some weaker performances are where candidates talk about a custom that is depicted in the photo they have chosen, rather than a specific experience of that custom. Similarly, candidates describe the photo they have chosen without linking it to their past experience. In both cases, this leads to a limited use of Entry 3 language for the narrative, which is a focus of assessment in this task.

Level 1

At Level 1, examiners note that, following the introduction of the photo bank, candidates are choosing to talk about a wider range of processes, creating a genuine information gap between the examiner and candidate.

Although Task 1 is allocated 4 minutes, examiners commented that some candidates appear to have 4 minutes of material prepared (because of detailed background information) and therefore have too much to say once the examiner has interrupted to ask questions. Level 1 is not a recited presentation of the process and so candidates require a little more practice explaining their process to each other under timed conditions, allowing their partner to comment and ask questions as they go along.

Stronger performances in Task 1 tend to use a range of Level 1 language, while weaker ones are often descriptive, using the present simple tense or imperatives. Centres are advised to check the specifications for the language expectations of Level 1 and support candidates to integrate a wider range of Level 1 language into the process task, eg present simple passive. Examiners also note that candidates miss the language cues from the examiner which aim to prompt Level 1 language.

Candidates could anticipate the types of questions the examiner may ask as part of their preparation. Candidates can spend a long time listing the ingredients or tools they need for a process. While this may at times allow them to demonstrate some less common lexis, it generally results in a narrower range of structures being used.

Examiners find that specialist lexis is often used very well in the process task. However, in some cases, mispronounced technical vocabulary can sometimes be a barrier to the examiner's understanding in this task. Candidates and centres should bear this in mind when preparing more specialised processes.

Level 2

Overall, candidates have prepared a range of interesting presentations on topical issues for Task 1.

Stronger candidates give well-structured presentations which include advantages and disadvantages, using a range of more complex language and expressions flexibly and with a high degree of accuracy. These presentations are also well-timed. Weaker presentations, however, either fall short of time or are longer than the allotted time, meaning examiners need to interrupt and stop candidates before they have finished. Candidates should practise their presentations under timed conditions which will help them to gauge the amount of material required for the time and edit accordingly. Other weaker performances are where the presentations are overly descriptive or only present one side of the topic chosen, which makes it difficult for the examiner to take the other point of view in Task 2. Weaker performances are also characterised by a limited range of language.

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 presentation in Task 1).

Stronger candidates are confident in asking questions and are aware that this is primarily a listening task in which they need to elicit information from the examiner and respond appropriately to what is said. Examiners feel that weaker candidates may benefit from more in-class practice where they listen to information, follow details and then ask questions about the content of what they have heard, thus replicating Task 2.

At Entry 1 and Entry 2, weaker candidates ask questions that elicit a description of the examiner's picture rather than questions about what the examiner says. At Entry 2, weaker candidates may mishear the examiner's instructions that the picture is about a future event and therefore ask past simple questions.

At Entry 3, candidates sometimes appear to jump to conclusions about the examiner's choice in Task 2, without listening to what the examiner has said and the options available to them.

At Level 1, Task 2, better candidates show their understanding of the details of the examiner's past story by using phonological features such as stress and intonation to show surprise etc. While stronger candidates are prepared to ask questions and make comments, weaker candidates are less able to follow the examiner's cues for turn-taking (pausing to seek a comment or reaction), which can mean that candidates don't make any comments or ask any questions during this task.

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 across the levels and candidates have adapted well to this task in the online format.

At Entry 2 and Entry 3, weaker candidates appear to not completely understand the role play situation provided by the examiner. To help, examiners recommend candidates practise ways to check information and ask for clarification.

The role play task at Level 1 is a collaborative one with the examiner, where they both share responsibility for completing the task. Better-prepared candidates take a more proactive role, by making suggestions and planning action to drive the interaction forward. Weaker performances in this task tend to involve the examiner taking the lead and candidates are therefore less able to meet the assessment criteria.

At Level 2, the examiner presents a situation in which the candidate is not happy with something the examiner has done. The examiner tries to blame the candidate for the problem. This is to allow the candidate to demonstrate the full range of language functions expected at this level. Candidates should be prepared to challenge the examiner's points and to defend their actions.

Group discussion

The format for the group discussion is for two candidates to talk together about a topic provided by the examiner. Although the timings for the group discussions have been shortened, and for online exams the candidates are not in the same physical room, candidates have adapted well to the changes. Even with two candidates taking part in the discussion, it remains an interactive task using the skills of listening, taking turns, interrupting politely, asking questions, expressing views, following up on what their partner has said etc. Weaker candidates would benefit from more practice of these skills. Stronger performances in this task are where candidates take part in a conversation, listening carefully to one another and responding to what the other has said, rather than taking turns to make unrelated points.

Sometimes, weaker candidates at Entry 1 and Entry 2 need to be reminded of the topic as they talk about a different subject. Topics for Entry 1 and Entry 2 are published in the specifications and are known in advance so candidates should have sufficient practice of these topics. For Entry 3 where the subject is not known in advance, examiners recommend that candidates seek clarification if they are unsure whether they have understood the topic.

WRITING

Answers are generally of a high standard, particularly at the Entry levels. For Levels 1 and 2, many candidates display a clear aptitude for writing with the sophistication required by the assessment criteria, producing texts that are a pleasure to read. In response to tasks set, candidates produce interesting personal accounts and responses that include insight into their communities. 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 language differs from spoken, and how to include complexity and ambition in structures across different registers.

Below we look 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 to Level 2, comments are often relevant across the board and therefore we have conflated these, specifying any that relate to particular levels.

Entry 1

Most candidates attempt all the tasks, but a number have been known to miss Task 3 completely. This is possibly where candidates run out of time to complete the final task. Please ensure that students are aware that this paper has three tasks and that they need to turn to the back page in the actual exam and plan their time accordingly.

1.1 Construct simple sentences correctly for an intended audience

Answers that do not meet this criterion tend to be written as a wrong text type. For example, in Task 3, candidates write a note directly addressing the audience (eg starting with Dear Teacher...) or not addressing the rubric. Another issue arises from candidates attempting to write using compound sentences (an above-level skill) and therefore being unable to control word order. This is particularly common when attempting to use the present continuous tense. Some candidates misinterpret the rubrics and write a response relating to the past or future, particularly in Task 2, although at this level they are only required to demonstrate present tenses (simple and continuous). Candidates who do extremely well, write in simple sentences using correct subject-verb-object word order, mostly in present continuous tense in Task 2 and present simple tense in Task 3.

1.2 Use full stops correctly

This criterion is often well met, with most candidates being aware that full stops are used to block off sentences. Occasionally candidates use a comma instead of a full stop to mark the end of the sentence.

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. This is often the case when candidates don't use full stops correctly to mark the end of the sentences. Additionally, some candidates capitalise a specific letter in all instances, wherever it appears in a word (eg 'I Enjoy my English ClassEs').

1.4 Spell words correctly

This criterion is generally well achieved at this level, with the majority of candidates showing a good knowledge of vocabulary relating to familiar contexts and often demonstrating a wide range of lexis. Where issues with spelling do arise, they are often linked to candidates attempting

more ambitious vocabulary, sometimes above the level. Spelling errors are most often found to relate to the vowel sounds (eg red > read), and candidates missing out the final 'e' or not doubling letters when adding 'ing' (eg get > getting).

2.1 Record personal details in a simple form correctly

This criterion is often well met, with most candidates completing all or almost all of the form correctly. Where errors or omissions occur, these are in most cases related to the address – missing out fields completely (particularly the postcode), not using appropriate format or not including key information. Very few candidates miss 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 (ie they cannot be contacted in any way). See page 20 of the specifications for more details.

Entry 2

1.1 Present information in an appropriate format for the intended audience

Candidates who don't achieve full marks on this criterion tend to broadly write on-topic but go off task. For example, if the rubric asks them to write what they did at a place, they might describe the place or write about the entire day and either neglect to mention the visit to the place at all or mention it only in passing. Another issue at this level is in interpreting the rubric 'Write an article for your teacher'. While 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 is that candidates don't always appear to be aware of the requirement to produce compound sentences (using conjunctions such as 'and', 'but' and 'or') or might only use one of the conjunctions rather than the range expected at this level. Word order and basic verb forms are generally well achieved, but noun phrases, articles, adverbs and prepositional phrases are not always demonstrated. Past verb forms, particularly irregular ones, are sometimes an issue.

1.3 Use adjectives correctly

Markers often note that some students don't 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. Very few candidates include comparative adjectives in their writing. Stronger candidates who have been well prepared use several adjectives with correct word order.

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. Candidates who are well prepared, use a list separated by commas effectively in both tasks. 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. Use of full stops as sentence boundary markers is generally well controlled at this level.

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

Candidates of this level demonstrate a very impressive range of lexis. Spelling ability is also generally high; it is often only ambitious vocabulary that is spelled incorrectly.

2.1 Record personal details in a form correctly

Markers note that it is relatively common to leave fields blank, resulting in a loss of marks. Where fields are left blank, these often include an email address or emergency contact details. Teachers 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. Another common mistake at this level is providing date of birth instead of the current date or vice versa.

Entry 3 to Level 2

Plans

Although it is relatively rare to see no plan at all, the quality of planning varies, often from cohort to cohort. There is usually a clear correlation between sound planning technique and final answers; 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 that 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 task (or more) and can identify the basis of a final answer; if only one task is planned this is not the informal task
- ▶ Plans that 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 Entry 3 to Level 2, the form always includes two or three closed fields and one or more open response fields. Candidates do not always answer the question on the form (sometimes over-focusing on the overarching question in the rubric that is provided for context above the form and ignoring the questions on the form itself). Sometimes candidates miss out the closed responses or do not include the full details required (eg first name only).

Additionally, at Entry 3, not all candidates appear to be familiar with the concept of using a form to provide feedback and the purpose of such a form. For example, if the form asks for feedback on one aspect of college life, they should limit their feedback to this rather than talking about college in general.

At Level 2, the candidate is required to use given data to produce their response. Candidates who achieve a high score for this section demonstrate that they are able to successfully paraphrase this information. This allows them to demonstrate the range of skills required at this level.

Text production

From Entry 3 upwards, the range of grammar, lexis and punctuation does not always reflect the national standards as described in the core curriculum (and Trinity's specifications). Weaker scripts often respond to the question adequately in terms of content and length of text, but fail to show off the complex grammar, full range of punctuation and breadth of vocabulary that they have learnt during their course.

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. Most candidates are aware of the need to structure their writing, but especially at Level 1 and Level 2, candidates rely on a very limited range of discourse markers, conjunctions and connectives. Candidates often perform better in the informal tasks, particularly at Entry 3. Level 1 and Level 2 candidates are increasingly more confident with producing more formal texts, with letters of complaint being the text candidates are most familiar with.

Content

Many candidates respond to all parts of the rubric, with the right level of expansion and appropriate detail. Where issues arise, it may be because the candidate has read the question too quickly and/or not taken the time to plan their answer. This results in parts of the question being missed out (eg at Level 1 candidates often include effective description but do not suggest improvements or give recommendations) or the focus of the response not matching the question asked (eg 'Write a review for a website' becomes a review of a website). Candidates who produce overly long or short responses often do not achieve full marks in this area, and while this is formally only assessed once per task (eg '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 doesn't have the opportunity to demonstrate a wide enough range of structures.

Register

This concept is introduced at Entry 3, with 'identify appropriate register for task and audience' being seen within the content criterion. At this level, it is generally achieved well. 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, Task 3 (the formal task) being overly informal, or Task 2 (which should be neutral in style) often showing an overly conversational style. Candidates should identify both the target reader and the text type in order to inform the chosen register.

At all three levels (Entry 3 to Level 2), the final task on the paper is an informal communication. The response to this is often strong, with candidates 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.

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. 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, many 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. At all levels, candidates would benefit from using a wider range of connectives, cohesive devices, discourse markers and conjunctions.

Grammar

Many candidates could be more ambitious in the structures used rather than basic and repetitive language, and while there may be a good level of grammatical accuracy when using language below the level, candidates do not demonstrate the full range of grammatical items required at the level. Occasionally, candidates don't 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.

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. In weaker performances, while punctuation is mostly used accurately, it is limited to the start and end of sentence marks expected of an Entry 2 candidate. Markers note that as sentences become more complex at higher levels, commas are more important to aid the reader.

Lexis

At Entry 3, most candidates display a good 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. Excellent performances at Level 2 show the use of specialist lexis, and appropriate use of collocations, idioms and colloquialisms. At all levels, spelling is fairly well controlled and where errors occur, they do not impede understanding.