



Course report 2025

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 with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

For information about the Performance-talking, which is internally assessed, 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: 1,460

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 1,541

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	337	21.9	21.9	69
B	388	25.2	47.0	58
C	392	25.4	72.5	48
D	299	19.4	91.9	37
No award	125	8.1	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: Listening

The Listening question paper performed as expected. Marker feedback indicated that 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 for the varied demographic of the cohort, which is very close to being a 50/50 split between further education (FE) or mature candidates and school-based candidates. The first of three recordings was considered by some markers to have been the most challenging, but it is normal that a paper with three recordings or texts may have one section that is slightly more difficult than the others.

All questions functioned as expected.

Question paper: Reading

The Reading question paper contained three different topics or texts with an appropriate level of challenge; the texts were both fair and suitable for the candidates. As in previous years, there was an element of no response across the texts for both gap-fill questions and multiple-choice questions.

The question paper performed mostly as expected. Statistics indicated that text one was the most challenging of the three, and this formed the basis of discussion for adjustment at the grade boundaries meeting. Some weaker candidates may have spent too much time on the first text as there was a higher no response rate for text three. The order of the questions, with four gap-fill questions appearing at the start of the paper, could also have contributed to the additional challenge of text 1. Bearing this in mind, adjustments were made to the C-band threshold.

Multiple-choice question 15 did not function as expected. After discussion at the markers' meeting, option C was accepted as correct as well as the original correct option B due to perceived ambiguity. During live marking this transpired to be a very

minor issue — most candidates either gave the intended correct answer B or guessed A or D (both incorrect options). This was also considered during the grade boundaries discussion.

Question paper: Writing

The Writing question paper contained three tasks on different topics (one was mandatory) that allowed candidates to demonstrate a good range of grammar and vocabulary. The topics were accessible (restaurant complaint and mobile phone essay) to mature candidates and school-based candidates alike. The writing tasks discriminated well between more and less able candidates.

Performance of this question paper was very similar to previous years.

For the optional tasks in part two, most candidates chose to answer the study-based essay question on mobile phones rather than the work report question, but both were attempted and both functioned correctly. There was a significant increase in candidates who attempted the study-based question when compared to recent years in the same exam.

Overall, the question paper performed as expected and there were no adjustments to grade boundaries.

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 2024. Most candidates performed well in questions 11, 14, 18, 23 and 24. These were a mix of gap-fill questions and multiple-choice questions, although it was noticeable that performance in these questions fell in recordings 2 and 3, which were generally answered slightly more strongly than in recording 1.

Question paper: Reading

The mean mark for this component was down this year. However, it should be taken into consideration that the 2024 mark was the highest it had been in 5 years.

Questions 2, 22, 24, 25 and 27 performed best overall with high levels of correct responses from candidates. Text three was possibly the least demanding, but some candidates did not reach this text due to difficulties with text 1 or possibly because they were presented at the wrong level.

Question paper: Writing

The mean mark for this component, although down from 2024, is still at a higher level than any other year since 2019.

Part one — the Everyday Life question (a formal email complaint to a restaurant) was the best answered question. At item writing and reviewing, particular emphasis was placed on ensuring all three writing questions were equally accessible to school-based candidates and mature (FE and community based) candidates and this was reflected in the maintenance of a high mean mark. Most candidates attempted the

study question in part two — demonstrating that the accessibility of the questions is working. In some previous years, more of the mature candidates would typically have attempted the work-based question. All candidates must be able to access both questions in part two as potential options and it appears that this is successfully being achieved.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper: Listening

Question 8 was found to be challenging by most candidates. This question required a quantifier as part of the answer and many candidates omitted this. Question construction using quantifiers or partitives as part of the required answer will be reviewed for future years. However, this question also had a high no response rate, as did Question 6, when both should have been guessable to some extent by candidates.

Question paper: Reading

Questions 5, 7(i) and 26 were the more challenging questions. Four of the eight most challenging questions came from text 1.

Questions 25, 26, 27, 28 and 29(i) and (ii) had high no response rates. These questions are at the end of the third text, towards the end of the full paper — some candidates may have run out of time prior to answering because they spent too long on the previous texts. This high no response rate for some questions may also be attributed to candidates being presented at the wrong level as with Listening. A lack of preparation and training with past papers may be another factor in a candidate being able to manage timings within the reading paper.

Question paper: Writing

Although overall marks were similar to previous years, some candidates exhibited poor coherence and a weak range of vocabulary and or grammatical structures for

the level. Markers noted that some candidate written work appeared to resemble National 2, 3 or 4 standards — this was commented upon in 2024 and appears to be a worsening problem. This is an issue with the presentation of candidates rather than the paper.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Centres should use practice exams and past papers to prepare candidates for the different question types they will encounter. Candidates must not be entered for the final exam if they have not demonstrated an ability to work at National 5 level throughout the academic year. Candidates must have been placement tested indicating they are ready to begin an ESOL National 5 course, and they must also have had sufficient taught ESOL input in the form of lessons throughout the academic year.

Centre staff are encouraged to attend our ESOL Understanding Standards events and webinars and to make use of previously published materials and recordings.

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 multiple-choice questions unanswered. It is always better to make a guess for a multiple-choice question than to leave it blank.

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 the 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 or within a timed limit at which they need to read the texts in the exam

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 students 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 our 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
- 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

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](#).