ESB ESOL Skills for Life Assessors' Report 2023-24

Contents

ESB-INFO-C89 ESOL SfL Assessors Report v1 2023/2024
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Introduction

The ESB ESOL Skills for Life Assessors' Report 2023-24 provides a review of learner performance across all levels and modes of the ESB ESOL Skills for Life qualifications. This report aims to highlight strengths, challenges and areas for improvement observed during assessments in Speaking and Listening, Reading, and Writing. Drawing on detailed insights from assessors and markers, it offers guidance to centres and tutors on how to prepare learners for success.

1. Speaking and Listening

1.1 Entry 1

At Entry 1, learners usually show a strong willingness to take part and have simple conversations. In general, they perform well with asking for personal information and responding to questions. Many learners are also good at listening, and can pick out important words and reply appropriately in everyday situations. While responses are usually accurate, they often appear memorised, and the quality of question forms tends to decline in later tasks.

Weaker learners have difficulty with longer turns and using appropriate verbs when describing photographs e.g. *there is/are*. For some, simple answers are easy to give, but continuing conversations, expressing opinions or giving detailed information can be difficult. Another area where students often need extra help is with grammatical forms, especially sentence structure, tenses and noun-verb agreement.

In Task 2, learners don't always use the one minute thinking time although they are encouraged to do so. They are also able to make notes to help them to structure their answers – these can be words, phrases or emojis that remind them of what they want to say and ensure they use all the time that is provided for this task. It is good when learners ask each other a variety of questions relevant to what their partner says, but this is not the case when learners have rehearsed set questions.

Encouraging students to speak in a variety of real-life settings can help them feel more confident and improve their speaking speed, and activities focusing on vocabulary development, pronunciation, and spontaneous questioning are helpful.

1.2. Entry 2

At Entry 2, learners build upon what they have learnt at Entry 1, showing increased confidence and competence in structured conversations. As in Entry 1, they perform well in Task 1, though responses often appear memorised, and later tasks may exhibit weaker grammar and question forms. Most learners use everyday words well, which lets them have simple conversations and answer common questions. Additionally, they usually do well at following clear directions and are getting better at interacting with others in a controlled setting.

In Task 3, learners commonly use descriptive adjectives effectively, although using comparative forms consistently remains a challenge for many learners when they are required to talk about what two pictures have in common and what makes them different.

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As with Entry 1, effective preparation is helpful, particularly for the long turn. Tutors are encouraged to practise picture comparisons and activities focusing on listening for gist to build learners' confidence. As at Entry 1, using the one-minute preparation time in Task 2 is highly desirable.

1.3 Entry 3

Entry 3 learners generally demonstrate stronger preparation and more secure question forms in later tasks, compared to the earlier levels. Many use a wider range of adjectives and are better able to complete ordered tasks. The majority of Entry 3 learners can answer common questions correctly and can take longer turns with support.

Weaker learners struggled to use a range of tenses and express their opinions with reasons. As at earlier levels, learners also don't always use the one minute thinking time in Task 2, although they are encouraged to do so. At Entry 3, learners need to take the time to plan and structure their talks, thinking about what to say in each part and how to link their ideas together so the talk is cohesive, because this is what distinguishes Entry 3 Task 2 from earlier levels.

Task 3 – the role play – is often excellent, with learners settling into the conversation and producing natural language. This task assesses a different form of interactional competence from earlier tasks, as learners are expected to co-construct the interaction and move the conversation forwards. Unlike task 2, which is more structured, learners can use unfinished sentences and backtrack e.g. *Oh I forgot to ask, can I also…* and repeat themselves to check information, thereby creating a natural and informative interaction.

Some learners who were not prepared for this level did not understand the role-play scenarios or did not have the language skills needed for them because they hadn't had enough practice, which makes the exchanges less natural and cohesive. It is vital that learners make a plan in the role play task, so the assessor tells them to make a plan in the introduction to the task, at the end of the scenario, and again after 4 minutes if they have not started to make a plan by that point.

Centres could offer role play practice based on active listening and using discourse markers, because simulating real-life situations can help students feel more comfortable speaking out loud, improve their understanding, and make conversations flow better.

1.4 Level 1

Most Level 1 learners can engage in structured conversations, frequently have a wide range of vocabulary and are able to respond to questions about personal information effectively. The majority of learners accurately complete the tasks and understand all the instructions.

Many were very well prepared for Task 2 and performed well in structured tasks, demonstrating a range of subject-specific lexis and the ability to respond to questions thoughtfully and effectively. Learners who choose a topic that lends itself more to informal language limit the potential to show their full range of functions, lexis and grammar, so it is helpful if tutors can support learners when they are choosing their topics.

A PowerPoint is not necessary, but learners benefit from some kind of visual aid, particularly if it is a photograph, diagram or chart. This gives interest and aids memory, and is better than written prompts. Weaker learners rely too much on verbose PowerPoint slides and end up reading, rather

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than speaking from the heart about a topic they know about. Some learners memorise their scripts, which inevitably leads to unnatural intonation, and risks them losing their place and being unable to continue. Memorised talks and questions also mean that in cases when the speaker has lost their place and been unable to continue, the partner askes pre-prepared questions which do not evidence that they have listened effectively. The questions in Task 2 need to show interest and active listening. Note that the assessor asks the listener what they think of what their partner has said, so they need to have listened to all of the talk.

Where learners were unsuccessful, they were not ready for Level 1 and there was no distinction between Entry 3 and Level 1 language used, e.g. no reporting verbs were used and there was evidence of fossilised errors e.g. *I didn't do nothing*, *yesterday I am going*. Task 1 – reporting on the question responses of the other candidate – is difficult for some Level 1 learners who find it challenging to exchange personal information, summarise and reflect. Memorised responses can restrict learners' ability to showcase their language proficiency.

Some learners struggled with the Task 3 roleplay due to lack of practice, and in some cases got so involved in their role play part they forgot to listen to their partner, so needed prompting. As noted for Entry 3 learners, the participants are expected to co-construct the interaction and move the conversation forwards, and can use unfinished sentences, backtracking and repetition, thereby creating a natural and informative interaction.

In Task 4, weaker Level 1 learners have trouble answering gist questions related to listening comprehension. It can be difficult to have follow-up conversations on listening topics when learners don't have the confidence or language to participate.

Learners at this level benefit from practising spontaneous speaking and developing confidence in real-time language use, thereby reducing reliance on scripted responses in Task 2. Learners will also find it easier to reflect on the information provided by others if they practise active listening, work on understanding main ideas and develop strategies for asking pertinent follow-up questions.

1.5 Level 2
Performance at Level 2 varies widely depending on learners' preparation and language experience. Strong candidates demonstrate excellent language abilities, engaging in complex interactions and presenting interesting topics with fluency and confidence. These learners often show very effective use of advanced vocabulary. Many express their thoughts, answer open-ended questions, and hold excellent discussions.

As at Level 1, presentations should be on a topic that the learner really cares about and is interested in, and should not be memorised or rely on a wordy PowerPoint. The partner needs to evidence accurate, effective, active listening and be prepared to reflect on and talk about what their partner has said.

Weaker learners struggled to show the level of language required, e.g. use of reporting verbs and generally using a wider range of vocabulary, functions and grammar. Some level 2 learners struggled with complex vocabulary and communicating abstract ideas, limiting their language competency.

When tutors have an odd number of learners and have to use a non-assessed partner, it is important not to have very different levels so the assessed learner can show off what they can do.

It is evident when Level 2 learners have benefitted from centres using more authentic, conversational language practice with opportunities to interact with expert speakers via community involvement or work placement, which develops their skills and confidence.

2. Reading

2.1 Entry 1

At this level, the assessment criteria that unsuccessful learners found most difficult were AC2.1 Identify the purpose of a short text on a familiar topic, and AC1.1 Follow a short text on a familiar topic. These are both expeditious, global reading skills, and the specifications list the functions that can be assessed in AC2.1.

The assessment criteria testing closer, careful reading were significantly more successful, and of these the most problematic for learners were AC1.2 Use language features to work out meaning in short text on a familiar topic, and AC4.1 Identify letters of the alphabet in upper and lower case correctly. The specifications list all the grammar and punctuation requirements of this level, which will assist in preparing learners for AC1.2.

2.2. Entry 2

At this level, the assessment criterion that caused the most issues was AC1.2 Use language features to work out meaning in short straightforward text. The list of grammar and punctuation required at Entry 2, drawn from the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum, is in the specifications. The next criteria that learners found difficult were AC1.3 Understand the meaning of words in short straightforward text, and AC1.1 Trace main events in short straightforward text.

2.3. Entry 3

For Entry 3 learners, the most difficult assessment criterion was AC1.4 Identify the meaning of words and phrases in short straightforward text. Significantly more successful, but still causing some issues, were AC1.3 Use language features to identify meaning in short straightforward text; AC1.1 Identify the main points of short straightforward text, and AC2.1 Identify the purpose of short straightforward text. This mixture of expeditious and careful reading skills suggests that learners at this level would benefit from more practice and exposure to a wide range of reading texts and materials.

2.4 Level 1

The one criterion which was most successful was AC2.1 Identify the purpose of straightforward text. Unsuccessful Level 1 learners found nearly all the other assessment criteria equally difficult. The number and range of criteria that caused difficulties for learners reflects the jump from Entry 3 to Level 1, which tutors are well aware of and which the authors of the 2022 Ofqual report, *Understanding ESOL Skills for Life qualifications: Assessment properties, comparability, core curriculum and CEFR alignment* commented on.

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2.5 Level 2

At Level 2, unsuccessful learners had most problems with AC1.2 Identify the main events of text. This criterion is generally tested using an ordering question, where learners are asked to put events in order or to write the year they happened. The next most problematic criteria were AC1.4 Identify the meaning of vocabulary in text, and AC1.1 Identify the main points of text. It thus appears that unsuccessful learners struggled with both expeditious and careful reading, and were not at the level required for Level 2.

3. Writing

3.1 Entry 1

Successful learners demonstrate a clear understanding of what was required by the tasks. They write simple sentences using the appropriate tense and format.

When learners were not successful, the most common issue was misinterpreting the task, sometimes due to confusion about the intended audience. This often resulted in an inability to convey meaning due to a lack of control over basic sentence structures.

3.2. Entry 2

Successful learners understand the demands of the tasks and produce largely accurate compound sentences with good control of basic tenses.

When learners were not successful, they misunderstood the task and demonstrated poor control of basic grammar, which hindered their ability to express themselves clearly, particularly in use of the simple present and past, and present and past continuous tenses. Examples of errors include *I am go on holiday. Please you visiting house. I can't because it was rain. My neighbours very good.*

It is important for learners to use *and*, *but* and *so.* Examples of good writing were: *But the weather wasn't good and my neighbour was angry. The weather was nice so we had a party in the garden. I got lots of presents so I was happy*. Learners need practice in seeing how they can make compound sentences with different conjunctions, to help them exploit their exam tasks. Please see our self-access materials on the website https://esbuk.org/web/our-teacher-resources/esol-skills-for-life-resources/ , which support learners to do this.

3.3 Entry 3

Successful learners address all elements of the task, demonstrate reasonable control of language, and use vocabulary at Entry 3 effectively.

When learners were not successful, they often had the lexis they needed, but were sometimes overambitious, attempting to express ideas they could not convey accurately, or did not use the language of the level and made frequent grammatical mistakes, e.g. *I am have to travel. This course very help me for got the job. … because very kind and helpful. We want open every time. I was studied for ten months.*

To show progression from Entry 2, candidates should aim to produce a few complex sentences, such as those using *who* or *which*. For example, *The building and facilities are nice, which makes me feel good. I have two teachers, who are very friendly and helpful. I go to the cafe, which is very nice. It*

was £50, which was cheap. Strong learners also use If-clauses, e.g. *If she has time, she goes to the park. If you want to study ESOL you should go to college. If we buy her a present, she will be happy.*

Learners should proofread their responses, and now that these assessments are 70 minutes, there is ample time for this.

3.4 Level 1

Most learners produce well-organised, coherent writing, addressing most or all elements of the task. They use the correct register and demonstrate knowledge of appropriate phrases for the given format.

When learners were not successful, as in Entry 3, some learners copied extensively from the task without sufficient modification or personal input. This affected their ability to gain marks. Some learners showed poor control of basic structures, often due to insufficient grammar revision or practice, e.g. *I and my neighbour to be happy if you will problem solving. I am writing complain a restaurant. Advantages places you can exercise. We writing you to complain. A lot delicious restaurants in the centre. We are had meeting. I would like to council help us. We wants not late night noise. ..about the restaurant, which is there is a problems. We cannot training.*

Time management was an issue, with some learners spending too long on the first task and rushing or skipping later ones, leading to more mistakes. Also, time for proofreading can often make the difference between passing and being unsuccessful.

Teachers might consider providing model answers tailored to learners' language levels, explaining why the response would score highly enough to pass. Revisiting a bank of useful phrases throughout the year can also help learners in exams. Practising specific sentence types, e.g. relative clauses (*There is a lot of rubbish, which is not very nice. You can walk around the lake, which is beautiful. It was very windy, which was scary.*) and however/although, can build confidence.

Encouraging learners to focus on topic sentences and logical sequencing creates a positive impression, e.g. *There are a number of problems. First of all, ... I like the park for a number of reasons. First of all, ... I have two suggestions to improve the area.* The self-access materials on the website support learners to develop interesting, cohesive and accurate texts.

3.5 Level 2

Learners displayed similar strengths to those at Level 1, including well-organised, coherent writing and appropriate use of register and phrases. Strong learners used phrases of probability, e.g. *It is possible/likely that we will lose trees.* Other examples of accurate but not excessively complex language were *Let me give you some positive points that can help you if you ride a bike. I would advise you to go by train or bus. If it is so difficult for you, you could ask classmates ...*

When learners were not successful, as with Level 1, issues often stemmed from a lack of control over grammatical structures rather than a lack of level-appropriate vocabulary, e.g. *Don't forgot using your helmet. And could be we will lose some parks. I am agree with you. I am sorry heard that you…In the other hand…* Misuse of passive voice was a recurring issue and should be addressed with targeted practice, or if learners struggle with the grammar, try to avoid it where possible and use an active alternative, e.g. avoid saying *I was crash a big car* and replace it with *A car hit me.*

Some learners wrote excessively and neglected to proofread, while others didn't complete the task. It is often the best use of time to spend less time on the writing part of Task 1 and go back to it if there is time. Learners should be encouraged to write concisely and use time effectively for planning and proofreading. Plans are not a formality, but essential preparation for the writing task. Plans can also be used to note down key structures or phrases that can be used in the text.

While it is not a good idea for learners to learn introductory paragraphs by rote, it is helpful to be prepared with common phrases e.g*. I look forward to hearing from you* or *Despite the disadvantages,…* It is also helpful if learners use topic sentences, e.g. *There are several ways to improve the situation. First of all, if they....* This gives the learner an easy sentence to write accurately, improves cohesion and creates a favourable impression.

Conclusion

This ESOL Skills for Life Assessors' Report 2023-24 highlights significant achievements as well as areas for development across all levels and skills. Overall, learners and tutors can be proud of how they achieved across the three modes, and should continue to focus on activities that foster spontaneous language use and meaningful and accurate communication. For questions about this report or the content of our assessments, please email us at product@esbuk.org.