

## ESB ESOL Skills for Life Assessors' Report 2024-25

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## Introduction

The ESB ESOL Skills for Life Assessors' Report 2024-25 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 & 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

#### General points

Tutors should check that assessors are aware of learners who need reasonable adjustments, that all learners under 18 and vulnerable adults have a centre-approved adult with them at all times, and there is pen and paper in the room. Overall, learners are well-prepared for their Speaking & Listening assessments, and achieve to a high standard.

#### 1.1 Entry 1

Learners demonstrated a range of strengths across the assessments. The majority of learners worked collaboratively and showed strong motivation throughout. Overall, learners were well prepared for Tasks 1, 2 and 3, with Task 1 personal information questions often completed confidently. A number of learners also performed well when asking questions and speaking on a topic for up to one minute. Encouragingly, several strong passes were reported across centres.

Less successful learners experienced difficulties with level-appropriate grammar, particularly question forms and sentence structure, and using the present continuous when talking about the picture. Some did not have the listening skills for the level, with more practice needed with listening for gist. Task 2 proved difficult for some learners due to uncertainty about what was required, while Task 4b (discussion) was frequently identified as an area where learners were underprepared. This final discussion is an opportunity for assessors to elicit any language, and also to end the assessment on a positive, chatty note, so learners should expect to have this final opportunity to speak and listen to the assessor and each other.

During Task 2, some learners still don't take advantage of the one-minute planning period provided. They are allowed to make simple notes, such as words, phrases or visual prompts, to help structure their responses and make effective use of the speaking time available. It is excellent when learners ask varied and relevant follow-up questions, but this is limited when learners rely on pre-prepared or rehearsed questions.

#### 1.2 Entry 2

Assessors reported that learners demonstrated strengths in several areas of the assessments. Many performed well when asking questions, particularly in Task 1 personal information exchanges.

Learners also showed confidence across Tasks 1, 2 and 3, with picture description in Task 3 often completed successfully.

However, a number of challenges were identified. At some centres, learners found making comparisons and using the past tense accurately to be difficult. In Task 3, while learners were generally able to describe pictures effectively, they were less confident when required to compare images or express preferences. This is an integral part of this task, so tutors should ensure that learners expect to give their opinions and compare (*I like working inside and old people. I don't like buses. Trains are faster than buses.*) As with Entry 1, the final discussion stage (Task 4b), was highlighted as an area where learners were frequently unprepared.

At a few centres, learners had not completed sufficient mock practice, which may have contributed to reduced confidence and performance in the later stages of the assessment.

### 1.3 Entry 3

Assessors highlighted a number of positive aspects of learner performance across the assessments. Many learners demonstrated confidence in asking questions and participating in role plays. In Task 1, personal information exchanges were often strong, with learners at many centres asking a wide range of questions using different grammatical forms and a variety of tenses. Learners were also able to express their opinions clearly and, in some cases, use a range of tenses appropriately.

However, several challenges were identified. Listening was a key area of difficulty, particularly listening for gist and maintaining grammatical accuracy.

In a few cases, Entry 3 candidates appeared confused about the requirements of Tasks 1 and 2. In Task 1, some learners attempted to prompt their partner to give extended presentations rather than asking a range of short, focused questions. Examples included asking partners to talk at length about their country, education, or future plans. In these cases, assessor intervention was required to remind candidates to use short questions and short answers.

In Task 3 (role play), learners sometimes found it difficult to fully understand and remember exactly what they were required to do. Tutors can encourage learners to note down the parts of the task they need to achieve using words, phrases or emojis to give them confidence in doing the role play. Task 4b (final discussion) was again highlighted as an area where learners were underprepared.

### 1.4 Level 1

There were a number of strengths across the assessments. Learners generally performed well in Tasks 1 and 2, which were often well prepared. Many presentations were reported to be of a particularly high standard, demonstrating confidence and clear organisation of ideas.

However, in some centres, learners found discussion vocabulary difficult, particularly when required to extend responses or take part in less structured interaction. Listening was also highlighted as an area for development, alongside grammatical accuracy and effective time management in Task 2.

Task 3 (role play) was identified as challenging, with learners—similar to Entry 3—sometimes struggling to fully understand and produce all elements of the task rubric.

Additional comments noted that in some centres learners had not completed mock practice assessments, which may have contributed to difficulties with task understanding and time control.

## 1.5 Level 2

Assessors highlighted several strengths in learner performance. Many learners demonstrated effective interaction with each other, particularly during paired tasks, and showed confidence when delivering presentations. Tasks 1 and 2 were often well prepared. Strong presentations were characterised by clear structure, appropriate language for the level, and a focus on the chosen subject matter. Successful learners selected topics they were familiar with, which enabled them to speak more confidently and develop ideas with relevant detail. Effective presentations demonstrated good organisation, logical sequencing, and the ability to stay on task while communicating ideas clearly and accurately. Learners also performed well when asking questions, and most were assessed as clear and confident passers.

However, weaker, less well-prepared learners found extended discussion and communicating abstract ideas difficult. Listening for gist and aspects of grammatical accuracy were also noted as areas for development. As seen at Entry 3 and Level 1, some learners struggled in the role play task to fully understand, remember, and produce all of the required elements of the task rubric. In addition, insufficient control of pronunciation and intonation at this level prevented a small number of learners from achieving a successful outcome.

## 2. Reading

### 2.1 Entry 1

The assessment criteria that unsuccessful learners found most difficult to achieve were, in order:

AC1.2 Use language features to work out meaning in short text on a familiar topic

AC2.1 Identify the purpose of a short text on a familiar topic

AC1.1 Follow a short text on a familiar topic.

AC1.2 tests careful, close reading, where understanding of a small section of text depends on applying grammatical knowledge. At all levels, questions about language features test awareness of how grammar and punctuation contribute to the meaning of a text, and represent the component skill and knowledge and understanding at the sentence level. Meaning, not grammar terms or metalanguage, is tested. The Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (AECC) references for this criterion are: Rs/E1.1a – read and recognise simple sentence structures, and Rs/E1.1b – use punctuation and capitalisation to aid understanding. The grammatical structures and punctuation expected at (the end of) Entry 1 are listed in the Specifications, and include:

prepositions

pronouns

capital letters for names, dates, places and personal pronoun I

full stops for grammatical boundaries and reading across sentences  
 recognising instructions that start with the verb, e.g. Keep left. Press the button.  
 apostrophes for contractions.

AC2.1 Identify the purpose of a short text on a familiar topic assesses global, expeditious reading strategies, and learners have to use their understanding of the text and their knowledge of the world to identify why the text was written. The specifications list the functions that are expected at this level, e.g. ask, describe, invite, as well the types of text or genres. The texts in the Reading assessments are formatted to look as realistic as possible, although simplified for the level, so learners should be able to recognise an email, a note, a poster, an advertisement and should know these words as listed in the specifications.

AC1.1 Follow a short text on a familiar topic also assesses expeditious reading, and while these questions test skim reading for gist, they can also rely on scanning. They often ask the question, 'what is this text about?' in an MCQ format, e.g. This is about Navid's job / friend / country / house.

## 2.2 Entry 2

The assessment criteria that caused the most issues were, in order:

AC1.3 Understand the meaning of words in short straightforward text

AC1.2 Use language features to work out meaning in short straightforward text

AC1.1 Trace main events in short straightforward text. This is different from previous years where the global reading strategies proved the most challenging.

AC1.3 Understand the meaning of words in short straightforward text is a measure of vocabulary knowledge in context, and requires careful reading of the word and the surrounding text. At all levels, the word tested is at the level and the distractors are at or below the level, in this case A2 on the CEFR.

AC1.2 Use language features to work out meaning in short straightforward text tests close, careful reading, where understanding of a small section of text depends on applying grammatical knowledge. The AECC references for this criterion are: Rs/E2.1a use grammatical structures that link clauses and help identify sequence; Rs/E2.1b use knowledge of simple and compound sentence structure to work out meaning; Rs/E2.1d use punctuation and capitalisation to aid understanding. The grammatical structures expected at this level are listed in the AECC and the specifications. They include:

pronouns and pronoun referencing

commas, question marks, exclamation marks, commas to separate items in a list  
 sequence in the past and prepositional phrases of time

simple present, simple past with 'ago', future with present continuous

compound sentences with and, but, or to join clauses with the same or a different subject  
 dates

comparatives

AC1.1 Trace main events in short straightforward text requires expeditious reading skills and identifying the main idea of a text. For example, in the question: Text **A** is about a special day / a birthday cake / new neighbours / some bad weather, a cake, neighbours and weather are all referred to in an email about a birthday party, but it is the party and inviting the friend to attend that is the overarching idea of the text.

### 2.3 Entry 3

For Entry 3 learners, the most difficult assessment criteria were, in order:

AC1.4 Identify the meaning of words and phrases in short straightforward text.

AC1.3 Use language features to identify meaning in short straightforward text

AC2.1 Identify the purpose of short straightforward text

AC1.1 Identify the main points of short straightforward text

This combination of expeditious and careful reading suggests that Entry 3 learners need both a broad and deep exposure to reading texts and tasks: a challenge given curriculum constraints. AC1.4 Identify the meaning of words and phrases in short straightforward text, as at earlier levels, requires the learner to demonstrate vocabulary knowledge in context, and requires careful reading of the word and the surrounding text. The word tested is at the level and the distractors are at or below the level, in this case B1 on the CEFR.

AC1.3 Use language features to identify meaning in short straightforward text. Here, the language features tested in context require careful reading of the area of text, and the application of grammatical awareness. Learners may have to read across sentences for referencing, e.g. Who is **her** in this sentence? "I wanted to buy **her** something unusual." All the people in the options are mentioned in the text, but the reader has to read before this sentence and refer back to establish if it is the person writing the letter / a woman in the lift / the manager / a friend.

AC2.1 Identify the purpose of short straightforward text requires awareness of genres and functions, and global reading strategies, including applying knowledge of the world. Genres and functions are listed in the specifications, and some knowledge of metalanguage can assist learners in answering these questions.

AC1.1 Identify the main points of short straightforward text tests expeditious reading, and both skimming and scanning.

Some learners did not achieve 4.1 Use first and second placed letters to order words in alphabetical order. This is arguably not a test of reading, but it is a technique which can be taught and tested in class. At Entry 3, second placed letters are tested e.g. filming/from/followed/famous. Preparing learners for these relatively predictable questions would avoid unnecessary disappointment.

### 2.4 Level 1

The most problematic criteria were, in order:

AC1.2 Identify the main events in straightforward text.

AC1.4 Identify the meaning of words in straightforward text

AC1.3 Use language features to identify meaning in straightforward text, and equally problematic was AC1.1 Identify the main points in straightforward text

AC3.1 Obtain relevant specific information from straightforward text.

AC1.2 Identify the main events in straightforward text is generally tested using an ordering question, where learners are asked to put events in chronological order or to write the year they happened. It requires a mixture of global reading (scanning) and local, careful reading to establish which event happened before another, so is understandably the most challenging criterion. Learners should practise putting events in chronological order and understanding time markers, e.g. the last stage/before this/finally.

As at lower levels, the contribution of lexical and grammatical knowledge to understanding is assessed in AC1.4 and AC1.3 respectively. The grammatical features and punctuation of the level are listed in the specifications, and vocabulary is assessed at Level 1/B2 on the CEFR, with distractors at the level or below.

Proving to be as difficult as AC1.3 is AC1.1 Identify the main points, which requires skimming and scanning. Where this is tested in Task 2, with three texts, the learner should read the question and then scan the three texts to find the key words and, more likely, their synonyms. They should then check their choice by skim reading the text to understand the meaning.

Some learners were unsuccessful on AC3.1 Obtain relevant specific information from straightforward text (the learning outcome is 'to be able to find information in text'). This also tests both expeditious reading; specifically scanning, and then careful reading to find the detail required. For example, What two things can affect the development of food crops? Requires scanning to find the section on development, and then careful reading to find the answer.

## 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 a chronological ordering question, where learners are asked to put events in order or to write the year they happened. Just as at Level 1, this criterion requires a mixture of global reading (scanning) and local, careful reading to establish which event happened before another, so is understandably the most challenging criterion. Learners should practise putting events in chronological order and understanding time markers, e.g. the last stage/before this/finally.

The next most difficult criteria were equally AC2.1 Identify the purpose of text, AC1.1 Identify the main points of text, AC1.3 Use language features to identify meaning in text and AC1.4 Identify the meaning of vocabulary in text. We can therefore see that both expeditious and careful reading strategies need to be improved at this level. Level 2 differs from earlier levels, because the assessment criteria now refer to 'text' not 'straightforward text'. Learners therefore need to be taught inferencing and encouraged to identify attitude and bias in texts, e.g. in Task 2 where there are three texts on the same issue, but all written for different purposes.

## 3. Writing

### 3.1 Entry 1

The most problematic assessment criterion at this level was AC1.1 Construct simple sentences correctly for an intended audience. This criterion actually has two parts – the use of appropriate grammar (e.g. subject-verb agreement, the verb ‘to be’, present simple and continuous, can/can’t and others listed in the specifications) and addressing the question. This means that no credit is given for sentences learnt by heart that don’t apply to the rubric or address the task. Also, sentences or phrases copied from the prompt are not credited, but a grammar change is given credit. E.g., if the prompt says ‘you are in a café’ and the learner writes ‘I am/I’m/we are/We’re in a café’ then they will get credit for this. AC1.2 Use full stops correctly and AC1.4 Spell words correctly were also unsuccessful, albeit with much less frequency, showing the importance of working on the building blocks of written text.

### 3.2 Entry 2

By far the most frequently unsuccessful criterion at Entry 2 is AC1.2 Construct simple and compound sentences. Poor control of basic grammar means learners are unable 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 live in Manchester. Please you visiting house. My teacher very good. I am can cook England food.*

It is important for learners to use *and*, *but* and *so*. Examples of good writing were: *I live in Manchester and I like my place. I want to learn English and you know more than me. The weather was hot so we went to the park.* Successful learners understand the demands of the tasks and produce largely accurate compound sentences with good control of basic tenses, as well as simple sentences.

Other assessment criteria that caused difficulties were AC 1.1 Present information in an appropriate format for the intended audience, AC1.4 Use punctuation, and AC1.6 Spell words. AC1.1 requires learners to address the task and the audience, i.e. to read the prompt carefully and write accordingly. They should use the appropriate layout and conventions for the task, and include relevant information to achieve the required purpose. An email should begin with ‘Hi (name)’ and have a suitable ending. A note or message could start with a name or ‘Hi’. Content should fulfil the requirements of the prompt, i.e. be relevant to the question and address all the points. Learners can still achieve this criterion if they address 2 out of 3 points, but they are missing an opportunity to shine if they leave something out.

AC1.4 requires consistent use of full stops and question marks at Entry 2, and 1.6 requires accurate spelling of words of the level. There can be errors, but they do not impede communication. Any common misspellings and attempts at higher level words are not penalised, and a repeated misspelling is counted as one error, not a repeated error.

### 3.3 Entry 3

Successful learners addressed all elements of the task, demonstrated reasonable control of language, and used vocabulary at Entry 3 effectively. Most learners did well with AC2.1 Produce content for the intended audience, but by far the least successful criterion at this level is AC2.4 Use grammar. This reflects the increased demands at Entry 3 from Entry 2. Markers are looking for a few complex sentences, such as those using *who* or *which*, and evidence that learners can write 4 sentences correctly using Entry 3 grammar, e.g. simple, compound and complex sentences with correct subject-verb agreement. Good responses include Entry 3 tenses that are used accurately, including simple and continuous past, present and future tenses, as appropriate to the task. There may well be errors, but they do not impede communication. If the learner has used a more complex sentence which may contain errors, then the correct clauses are taken into account. Spelling and chronology are not considered in these sentences, as they are assessed in ACs 2.6 and 2.3.

After AC2.4, the next criteria that caused issues were AC2.5 Use punctuation, and to a lesser extent, AC2.6 Spell words. These reflect the need for these micro-skills at Entry 3 level in order to achieve all the criteria.

Whilst a handful of learners did not achieve AC1.1. Plan text, this was generally achieved securely, showing a significant improvement on previous years and a good grasp of the requirements of the task.

### 3.4 Level 1

Most learners produced well-organised, coherent writing, addressing most or all elements of the task, using appropriate register and phrases for the given format. Like Entry 3, by far the least successful criterion was AC2.4 Use grammar, reflecting the need for texts at this level to showcase both accuracy and range. There should be at least 5 accurate sentences using Level 1 grammar, i.e. simple, compound and complex sentences with correct subject-verb agreement. Successful learners use Level 1 tenses and voice correctly, e.g. simple and continuous past, present and future tenses, and the active and passive voice as appropriate to the task. If the learner has used complex sentences which contains errors, then correct clauses are taken into account. Chronology and spelling are not considered in these sentences because they are assessed in AC2.3 and 2.6, and learners in fact did relatively well with these criteria.

### 3.5 Level 2

As with Entry 3 and Level 1, AC2.4 Use grammar was the least successful, with a lack of control over grammatical structures of the level, or no attempt at Level 2 grammar. On the other hand, AC2.3 Structure text coherently for purpose was well achieved, showing good control over discourse markers, coherence and cohesion. All learners who attempted Level 2 Writing succeeded in completing the form and achieving AC3.1 satisfactorily.

## Conclusion

The ESOL Skills for Life Assessors' Report 2024–25 highlights a range of positive achievements, as well as suggestions for further development across all levels and skills. Tutors and learners can take pride in their performance across the three modes and should continue to prioritise activities that encourage natural language use and meaningful, accurate communication. Should you have any questions about this report or our assessments, please get in touch at [product@esbuk.org](mailto:product@esbuk.org).