

Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many people without whose input this study would not have been possible:

all our participants, who devoted a lot of their time and enthusiasm to work on this study and share their expertise and opinions

colleagues at Ofqual who have helped in different ways (with IT support, admin, discussions and analytical support, and various ad hoc and last-minute requests for help)

List of acronyms

AO â€" Awarding Organisation

AC â€" Assessment criteria

CBA â€" Competence-based assessment

CEFR â€" Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

CJ â€" Comparative judgement

EAL â€" English as an Additional Language

EFL â€" English as a Foreign Language

ESFA â€" Education and Skills Funding Agency

ESL â€" English as a Second Language

ESOL â€" English for Speakers of Other Languages

FSE â€" Functional Skills English

GCR â€" General Conditions of Recognition

GLH â€" Guided learning hours

IELTS â€" International English Language Testing System

P

LO â€" Learning outcome

MFL â€" Modern Foreign Language

NARIC â€" National Academic Recognition Information Centre

NSAL â€" National Standards for Adult Literacy

NQF â€" National Qualifications Framework

NVQ â€" National Vocational Qualification

SFL â€" Skills for Life

QCA â€" Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

QCF â€" Qualifications and Credit Framework

RQF â€" Regulated Qualifications Framework

SELT â€" Secure English Language Test

VTQs â€" Vocational, technical and other general qualifications

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Background

In the corporate plan 2019–2022, Ofqual committed to considering the effectiveness of the regulatory requirements relating to qualifications covering English for speakers of other languages (ESOL).

This study focuses on the ESOL Skills for Life (SfL) qualifications.[footnote 1] These were developed as part of a suite of basic skills qualifications to help migrants resident in this country to integrate better with English-speaking communities and to access education and employment, helping them to fulfil their potential.

The SfL qualifications were accredited by Ofqual in 2014, against the 2011 ESOL criteria and the rules of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). They must meet the requirements of the National Standards for Adult Literacy (NSAL) (QCA, 2000) and demonstrate a clear relationship to the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum (DfES, 2001). They are government-funded qualifications, offered at levels Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), delivered by several awarding organisations (AOs).

The SfL qualifications operate in a challenging context of language assessment for migration and integration. The challenge is the sheer variety of the experience of the target cohort for these qualifications in terms of literacy levels, language and educational backgrounds, life histories including trauma and other vulnerabilities, aspirations and needs within the UK society. This often calls for flexibility in delivery and assessment approaches. On the other hand, employers, education providers and other users may rely on the results of these qualifications and will need to know there is sufficient comparability between different awarding organisations (AOs).

Study aims and research questions

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of how effective our current regulatory requirements are for

these qualifications in making sure they function as intended in relation to their purposes and to inform decisions on our requirements in future. We explored and evaluated a sample of SfL qualifications in terms of their design and assessment properties, alignment with the core curriculum, inter-AO comparability and validity. Specifically, we wanted to develop a clearer understanding of:

assessment models of SfL qualifications

how AOs approach the development and delivery of SfL qualifications given their understanding of the cohort needs, qualification purposes and the curriculum

how different SfL qualifications align with the core curriculum

how different SfL qualifications align with each other as well as with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in terms of assessment and performance standards

The research involved a sample of 4 AOs, which account for a large proportion of the certifications in ESOL SfL, with 2 additional AOs included in interviews. Due to resource and time limitations, we focused on a subset of qualification levels. The research was conducted in several strands:

Study 1: Assessment review (focus on Entry 1 and Entry 3)

Study 2: Interviews with key members of AO staff

Study 3: Curriculum alignment review (focus on Entry 1, Entry 3 and Level 1)

Study 4: Comparability study involving content mapping and linking of pass grade standards to the CEFR (focus on Entry 1, Entry 3 and Level 1)

Key findings

This report brings together the findings from our 4 studies and suggests some potential areas for improvement. This

section is organised according to the key themes that emerged across different studies or from our background research.

Issues of recognition

It is clear from the views expressed in our interviews with AO staff, as well as from the literature, that the SfL qualifications are seen by practitioners as having enormous value to learners and society as a whole. The AO staff saw the SfL qualifications as similar in their enabling function to ESOL International qualifications. Some of these are widely recognised, at competence levels similar to Entry 3, Level 1 or Level 2, by reputable higher education institutions or for job recruitment.

In contrast, our interview participants felt that the potential of SfL qualifications to enable learner progression was not sufficiently recognised. In our interviews, as well as in the relevant literature, there was also a sense that these qualifications are undervalued in terms of funding. The AOs told us that this affected user attitudes towards the qualifications, including centres, employers, higher education institutions, and learners themselves.

Multiple qualification purposes

The views expressed in our interviews as well as in the literature suggest that the SfL qualifications potentially have multiple purposes and there is insufficient clarity about their relative importance to different users (for instance, learners, centres or employers). Their purposes are currently not clearly articulated in Ofqual ESOL criteria.

Using Newton's (2017) perspectives framework for thinking about assessment purposes, some of SfL qualification purposes can be seen from an engagement perspective, helping to ensure that learning actually occurs, inasmuch as they are seen as valuable for (linguistic) integration of migrants and for removing barriers to accessing employment or education. Given their required alignment with the core curriculum, it appears that some of the purposes relate to the expertise perspective, providing evidence of a level of mastery of the specified content domain, as well as boosting confidence and motivation to build on skills and expand the expertise within the domain. The SfL qualifications are seen as both socially and personally valuable in relation to these 2 perspectives. What is less clear, based on the issues with recognition of these qualifications for progression to employment or education, is how far they have (or

could have) purposes related to information perspective that are valuable to stakeholders beyond learners or qualification providers as the basis for making any decisions.

This situation may indirectly impact on overall quality and appropriateness of provision and reduce the extent to which any of the intended purposes are truly fulfilled, potentially reducing the usefulness of these qualifications to users. It is important to seek clarity about the intended purposes of these qualifications and their relative importance. This is necessary to enable coherent considerations of the most appropriate assessment models, as well as approaches to regulation, and any trade-offs.

Assessment models

A wide range of assessment models and approaches are used across the 4 AOs in our sample. Some of the differences in approaches appear to stem from a desire to offer flexibility of choice to learners and centres. The AOs in our interviews considered the flexibility of the SfL qualification structure, its modularity and the variety of assessment models (such as an option to use internal or external assessment at all levels) as beneficial and justified by the wide range of learner and centre contexts.

Our assessment review, however, highlighted quality issues with some of the assessment approaches and assessment instruments. In some cases, the assessments were not entirely appropriate for the construct of assessment or were poorly executed in practice. The AO interviews suggested that some of the assessment design choices were historical and not always reflective of best practice in language assessment but AOs were not always able to provide a clear rationale for them beyond citing original requirements that had not been updated.

Curriculum alignment

Our reviewers thought that the curriculum was largely fit for purpose, sufficiently clear and indicative of the appropriate qualification levels. However, the review suggests that the SfL qualifications may not be sufficiently well aligned with the curriculum. This was primarily in terms of demand, aspects of coverage (for instance, narrowing of the curriculum) and interpretation of the curriculum messages.

At Entry 3 and Level 1, the demand of assessments and pass grade standards were deemed to be too low in most cases

except in speaking. Entry 1 was seen as broadly appropriate, if occasionally too high in relation to the curriculum standards. The overall quality and appropriateness of coverage and relative demand of the assessments seem to decline from Entry 1 to Level 1 for most of the AOs in our sample, with insufficient stretch at higher levels, suggesting threats to appropriate candidate progression.

CEFR alignment

The CEFR describes second language ability in terms of a "can do" scale that reflects increasing complexity and range of language competence from basic user (A1, A2), independent user (B1, B2) to proficient user (C1, C2) (see Appendix 1 for the CEFR global scale descriptors). The indicative CEFR content mapping produced in our studies suggests there is meaningful alignment of the SfL qualifications with the CEFR in many respects, and thus also with ESOL International qualifications.

The CEFR content mapping placed Entry 1 reading and writing components at A1/A1+ level. Entry 1 speaking was judged to be at A1+/A2 level. For writing, the standard linking exercise additionally indicated that the pass grade standard is at about A1+ level. However, there is a separate question as to whether A1+ level or higher is suitable for an initial Entry level qualification (even if it is deemed appropriate according to the curriculum). Given that Entry 1 pass grade standard appears to be significantly higher than threshold A1 CEFR level at least in writing, this may suggest a potential need for separate qualifications at somewhat lower level ("pre-entry") for learners who are starting from the point of no English at Entry 1.

Entry 3 components were judged in the content mapping to be at B1/B1+ level. However, the results of our standard linking study for reading comprehension suggest that actual pass grade standards of some exams are lower, at A2+, and in all cases closer to B1 threshold level than B1+. Similarly, the standard linking for the writing components indicated that the pass grade performance standard at Entry 3 is A2+/low B1 at most, while Level 1 was mapped to B1+/low B2.

Perhaps the most significant finding from the CEFR standard linking study for writing is that there does not appear to be enough differentiation between higher levels of the SfL qualifications at the pass grade threshold, particularly between Entry 2 and Entry 3. Both of these levels were mapped onto A2+ CEFR level for some qualifications. This is also the case to some extent between Entry 3 and Level 1 writing qualifications. Thus, the findings from the CEFR

standard linking largely confirm the findings from the curriculum review, namely, that Entry 3 and Level 1 SfL qualifications may not be sufficiently demanding given the demand implied in the curriculum and relative to the demand of the lower levels. This lack of stretch at Entry 3 in particular may be contributing to the perceived “large jump” in standards at Level 1, which was noted by our curriculum reviewers.

The CEFR content mapping highlighted the discrepancies with the CEFR in relation to assessment of literacy in SfL qualifications, for example, assessment of Latin alphabet knowledge, emphasis on orthographic accuracy at Entry 1 or emphasis on awareness of the writing process at Entry 3, which could be seen as too advanced for learners at those levels, particularly in the migration context. Such requirements in the domain of literacy in SfL qualifications are likely related to their link to the NSAL, which are primarily targeted at learners for whom English is their first language. This potentially raises questions about whether mapping qualifications such as SfL, which is an English as a second language qualification, to standards such as NSAL, intended for English as the first language qualifications (for instance, Functional Skills) is entirely appropriate.

Comparability of pass grade standards

Pass grade standards in Entry 3 reading comprehension assessments were broadly comparable and at around threshold B1 level for 3 out of 4 AOs. For one AO, the pass grade standard was mapped to A2+, and is thus lower than the rest. This is despite the overall profile and demand of the tests from the 4 AOs being reasonably aligned.

Similarly, some comparability issues were noted in our CEFR linking study of pass grade standards in writing, at Entry 1 level. All 4 AOs, however, were mapped to A1 level on the CEFR, despite some discrepancies at the pass grade within this level. These comparability issues, therefore, are of somewhat less concern than those identified in reading comprehension.

Potential improvements

In light of these findings, Ofqual (and other relevant stakeholders where appropriate, for instance, the DfE) should consider how the qualifications could be improved to address some of the issues identified. Some areas for improvement are listed below:

The range, relative priority, and interactions of SfL qualification purposes should be clarified. Given the complexity of SfL learner needs and the importance of engagement-related purposes of these qualifications, revisiting the trade-off between these and any information-related purposes seems particularly important as a starting point. This should help to inform the choice of the most appropriate assessment models and any trade-offs between the extent of standardisation and flexibility in assessment design and delivery. There are quality and validity issues in some individual approaches and assessment instruments, which need to be addressed. In addition, appropriateness of approaches that may be historically motivated rather than meaningfully linked to qualification purposes and constructs should be reconsidered. Assessment approaches should be sufficiently justified in terms of validity and best assessment practice. The way the curriculum is covered and interpreted in some assessments may need to be improved to reflect its intention and implied demand. Insufficient comparability between Entry 3 reading comprehension pass grade standards should be addressed if comparability were deemed important for certain purposes of SfL qualifications. Wider checks on comparability (between other components, levels and AOs) may also be warranted depending on the extent of comparability required. Differentiation and progression between SfL qualification levels should be improved to ensure optimal progression for learners. Mapping SfL qualifications to the CEFR might clarify to users how the skills at each RQF level relate to the skills of ESOL International learners, who might be competing for the same jobs or education courses upon entry to this country, and improve recognition of SfL qualifications for similar purposes.

Introduction

In the corporate plan 2019-2022 (Ofqual, 2019), Ofqual committed to considering the effectiveness of the regulatory requirements relating to qualifications covering English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)[footnote 2]. This was originally in response to the government's English Language Strategy (Integrated Communities Strategy green paper, 2019). This work is now feeding into the DfE review of Level 2 and below qualifications.

There are 2 types of ESOL qualifications currently on the Ofqual register:

ESOL Skills for Life (SfL) qualifications . These are suitable for primarily over-16 learners whose first language is not English, who are resident in the UK, and wish to increase their English language knowledge and proficiency for life, work or further study. They were accredited by Ofqual in 2014, against the 2011 ESOL criteria and the rules of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). These qualifications must meet the requirements of the National Standards for Adult Literacy (henceforth, NSAL) (QCA, 2000) and demonstrate a clear relationship to the Adult ESOL

Core Curriculum (DfES, 2001). They are government-funded qualifications, offered at levels Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF).

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The focus of the current research was on ESOL SfL qualifications. This focus was partly motivated by the fact that these qualifications are government funded, as well as by the fact that Ofqual criteria for them are fairly minimal.

The purpose of this research was to explore and evaluate a sample of SfL qualifications in terms of their design and assessment properties, alignment with current regulations/criteria, comparability between awarding organisations (AOs) and validity. We also wanted to learn about the broader context in which these qualifications operate. This would provide us with an understanding of the effectiveness of our current regulatory requirements for these qualifications in ensuring their optimal functioning and validity in relation to their purposes. This evidence base will contribute to policy development and decisions about future regulatory arrangements for SfL qualifications.

More specifically, we wanted to develop a clearer understanding of:

AOs' assessment models for these qualifications

how AOs approach the development and delivery of SfL qualifications given their understanding of the cohort needs, qualification purposes and the curriculum

how different SfL qualifications align with the core curriculum

how different SfL qualifications compare to each other as well as to the CEFR in terms of assessment and performance standards

The research was carried out in several strands:

Study 1: Assessment strategy and design review (focus on Entry 1 and Entry 3)

Study 2: Interviews with key members of AO staff

Study 3: Curriculum alignment review (focus on Entry 1, Entry 3 and Level 1)

Study 4: Comparability study involving CEFR content mapping (focus on Entry 1 and Entry 3) CEFR linking of assessment standards of reading comprehension tests (focus on Entry 3) CEFR linking of writing performance samples (focus on Entry 1, Entry 3 and Level 1)

The research involved a sample of 4 AOs that participated across all of the studies, with 2 additional AOs included for the interviews. In addition, due to resource and time limitations, we focused on particular levels as exemplars, on the assumption that practices would be broadly similar across all levels within one AO.

It is important to note that, although this research identifies qualification properties and practices related to specific, regulated qualifications, it is not concerned with issues of compliance. The findings are examined through the general lens of validity and comparability, and in the context of broader issues in language assessment for migration and integration, rather than in relation to specific regulatory requirements. The research is intended to explore general practices and approaches used for development and delivery of SfL qualifications so that we could learn from this and ensure that improvements are made overall where issues are observed, and that our regulatory approach is such that it can ensure optimal functioning, appropriate standards, and validity of these qualifications.

The report is structured as follows. After presenting some background information about the SfL qualifications, we report on the details of each of the 4 studies in turn. The sections for each study present the relevant methodology and results. This is followed by a general discussion and recommendations section.

SfL qualifications: background information

In this section, we briefly outline some information about the SfL qualifications' purposes and design, cohort, funding, progression patterns and apparent issues with recognition of these qualifications by different stakeholders. We also discuss the implications of the apparent lack of clarity in SfL qualification purposes. This provides a backdrop and context to the findings presented in the rest of the report.

Qualification purposes and design

The SfL qualifications are government-funded qualifications that are currently used to foster and improve linguistic integration of different categories of migrants to the UK. They were previously used to evidence language skills for immigration purposes (for visa, residency and citizenship requirements), but this is no longer the case as this role has been taken over by the SELTs.

In one sense, the SfL qualifications and tests can be considered relatively low stakes, as their results are not used for decisions that directly affect learners' legal rights (for instance, their right to acquire citizenship). On the other hand, they are still intended and funded to serve an important function in relation to integration and promoting the chances of migrants to achieve their full potential within the UK society by removing or reducing language and literacy barriers (DfES, 2001; QCA, 2009). They help migrants already in this country to acquire language skills that might subsequently enable them to achieve the SELTs, perhaps for citizenship requirements, or enable them to access employment or education courses. In this sense, they can still be seen as reasonably high-stakes qualifications, at least for some of their users.

The SfL qualifications were last accredited by Ofqual in 2014, against the 2011 ESOL criteria and the rules of the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). Although the QCF was withdrawn in 2015 and the qualifications now have to abide by Ofqual General Conditions of Recognition these qualifications still currently largely follow, with some exceptions, the original QCF design rules.

The qualifications involve a full certificate in ESOL SfL and separate awards in reading, writing, and speaking and listening. Most AOs use the same QCF units, with 270 GLH (guided learning hours) across 3 units per level, while some have somewhat different units and GLH. The qualifications are offered at RQF levels Entry 1, Entry 2, Entry 3, Level 1 and Level 2. Individual awards can be taken at different levels, depending on candidates' skills profile and needs.[footnote 4]The certificate is awarded where all units are achieved at the level of the qualification. The qualifications from different AOs should be comparable in standards and are intended to be used interchangeably by learners within and between levels.

The key regulatory requirement for SfL qualifications is that they should meet the requirements of the NSAL and demonstrate a clear relationship to the core curriculum. Unlike ESOL International qualifications, the SfL qualifications are not required to be mapped to the CEFR.

The core curriculum itself is based on the NSAL. According to DfES (2001), the publication of the core curriculum followed national consultation with teachers and managers of ESOL programmes and relevant national bodies. It drew on a wide range of existing curricula from a variety of contexts, including the core curriculum for adult literacy, the National Literacy Strategy in schools and curricula for English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It is intended as a framework for English language learning and defines the skills, knowledge and understanding that speakers of other languages need in order to demonstrate achievement of the national standards in English, providing a reference tool for teachers of ESOL.

Within these parameters, awarding organisations have flexibility in:

mode of assessment, including use of internal or external assessment in all skills areas and at all levels

assessment approaches (such as task type, nature of mark schemes and approaches to grading)

availability of assessments

approach to resits

whether to allow the use of dictionaries for reading assessments

Cohort properties

This level of flexibility in qualification design appears to relate to some extent to the nature of the SfL cohort, which is very diverse, with potentially a wide range of needs and goals in relation to English language learning. According to DfES (ibid., cf. DfES, 2000), the broad categories of learners who SfL qualifications are aimed at are:

settled communities, including communities from the Asian sub-continent and Hong Kong. Some of these learners work long and irregular hours and cannot attend classes regularly

refugees, who sub-divide into: asylum seekers, most of whom are very keen to learn despite the challenges of resettlement and the trauma resulting from their recent experiences settled refugees, many of whom have had professional jobs in the past, though some may have suffered a disrupted education due to war and unrest

migrant workers, mostly from Europe, who are here to work and settle for most or all of their lives

partners and spouses of migrants from all parts of the world, who are settled for a number of years and need to participate in the local community but are prevented by family responsibilities or low income from attending intensive EFL courses

Alongside their lack of familiarity with the cultural context of the UK, these learners have ‘ESOL needs’™ in that they are learning English as an additional language, and their English needs further development, particularly with respect to writing, grammar and vocabulary (Roden & Osmaston, 2021) to enable their effective linguistic integration into the society. In this sense, SfL qualifications, as well as other qualifications for learners who are learning English as an additional language (for instance, ESOL International), have the broad purpose of enabling these learners to develop their English skills and meet their ESOL needs. This fundamentally differentiates them from qualifications such as Functional Skills English (FSE) or GCSE English, which are designed for learners whose first language is English.

Beyond the ESOL needs, DfES (2001; cf. also QCA, 2009; ALTE, 2016) emphasises that within the above-mentioned learner groups the specific needs of learners vary considerably depending on their aspirations, educational background, language and literacy background and aptitude for learning languages. Learners’™ educational and

employment backgrounds are often highly diverse, sometimes even within one teaching group. They may span a wide continuum, ranging from people with no previous education or employment at one end to highly educated professionals, such as doctors or university lecturers, at the other. Many learners already speak and write several languages and can use this knowledge to support their learning of English. Unlike many adult literacy learners for whom English is the first language, they often perceive themselves as successful learners and are very keen to learn. Some ESOL learners have left their countries unwillingly. Some are suffering from culture shock and are experiencing practical difficulties in specific areas of their lives, or racist attitudes and behaviour. Learners are typically settling in the UK and want to learn about the country's systems, such as education, how to apply for jobs, and rules concerning immigration.

More recently, Higton et al. (2019) found the following profile of learners in their ESOL provider survey sample: job seekers, people already in work, refugees, women not seeking work, recent migrants and asylum seekers and people of retirement age. Their survey findings showed that refugees were more likely to access pre-entry and Entry level provision and learners who were already in employment or receiving Jobseeker's Allowance were more likely to access learning at Level 1. They also noted that the profiles/demographics of those accessing English language learning provision changed during the past 10 to 15 years, resulting in the offer of more pre-entry and Entry level courses, to meet the increasing demand from learners. The changes include more asylum seekers and refugees wanting to learn English. Some of the providers they surveyed said they noticed a decrease of economic migrants from Eastern European countries while learners from Italy and Spain had increased. In general, however, it appears that the groups described in DfES (2001), for whom the curriculum and the SfL qualifications had been intended, are largely the same nowadays despite some shifts in the relative proportion of learners from different groups (see also Kings & Casey (2014) and WMCA (2019) for similar findings).

Funding, progression, and recognition issues

The SfL qualifications are publicly funded through a range of funding streams. They were fully funded for all learners until 2007; since then, the funding has gradually decreased (Roden & Osmaston, *ibid.*; Kings & Casey, *ibid.*; Foster & Bolton, 2018). Currently, learners part pay for the course and assessment unless they are 16 to 19 years old, unemployed or on certain benefits, in which case the qualifications are fully funded. There is no funding for ESOL provided in the workplace (Foster & Bolton, *ibid.*).

Most certificates are issued at Entry level.[footnote 5] Furthermore, many of those learners who want to study at Level 1 appear to progress to other qualifications such as Level 1 FSE, either because higher-level ESOL provision is not available, or because they wish to study a mainstream qualification.[footnote 6] This trend is confirmed by Learning and Work Institute (2020) and Roden & Osmaston (ibid.). Roden & Osmaston observe that, even though the majority of the providers they surveyed indicated that most of their learners do progress to ESOL SfL Level 1 from Entry 3, a substantial proportion of learners progress to FSE and GCSE English qualifications. They also observed that this was more common for young people aged 16 to 19. The authors note that this may disadvantage these learners compared to the adults because the FSE/GCSE provision may not be suitable for ESOL learner needs as they are designed for learners whose first language is English and who are familiar with the cultural context of the UK.

Roden & Osmaston (ibid.) suggest the following interrelated reasons for some ESOL learners' progression onto FSE/GCSE English from Entry 3 SfL qualifications despite the former likely having too few guided learning hours for learners with ESOL needs, or being otherwise unsuitable for ESOL learners:

government policy in favour of GCSE and FSE for 16 to 19 study programmes and apprenticeships has led some providers to insist that all young people should take these qualifications, regardless of language need

adult providers may choose to offer FSE rather than ESOL as it is fully funded at higher levels, and they know that many learners are not able to pay for ESOL SfL courses

learners and providers may choose FSE as they believe it is better recognised for future study and employment purposes

In study after study reviewed, spanning more than a decade (QCA, 2009; Kings & Casey, ibid.; the Casey review, 2016; Bell, Plumb & Marangozov, 2017; Foster & Bolton, ibid.; WMCA, ibid.; Higton et al., ibid.; Roden & Osmaston, ibid.; Rolfe & Stevenson, 2021), there are testimonies from qualification providers and other stakeholders about the high demand and need for specialised ESOL provision, as well as calls to improve the funding for all ESOL levels including pre-entry[footnote 7] and to increase the recognition of the SfL qualifications for progression to employment or further study. There are also calls to introduce funded Level 3 ESOL qualifications (or fund existing ESOL International qualifications such as IELTS) to enable learner progression to more specialised, high value-added jobs or higher education.

In this sense, ESOL SfL qualifications appear to stand in contrast with a number of ESOL International qualifications, which are also designed for learners with ESOL needs, and are recognised for direct progression to higher education and employment, as well as for immigration purposes. These qualifications describe their levels both in terms of the RQF and the CEFR. The CEFR levels are used as a proxy for describing the required language skills for progression or immigration. For example, B2 level across all of reading, writing, speaking and listening skills is typically required of international students for entry to UK universities. For a sports person visa, A1 level in speaking and listening is required, while a Minister of Religion visa requires B2 level across all four skills. Skilled worker or health and care worker visas require B1 level across all skills, as do applicants for permanent residency or citizenship in the UK. What this also suggests is that English language skills of speakers of other languages at B1 or B2, demonstrated via some ESOL International qualifications, are deemed to be at an acceptable standard to enable them to engage in skilled work and academic study, respectively. They are not required to provide further or alternative evidence of their knowledge of English, after being admitted to this country, by taking additional qualifications that are otherwise designed for speakers whose first language is English, such as FSE or GCSE English.

Back to qualification purposes

Using Newton's (2017) perspectives framework for thinking about assessment purposes, the fact that the SfL qualifications should help with linguistic integration of migrants, and removing language and literacy barriers to accessing employment and education, would suggest purposes that could be seen from an engagement perspective, helping to ensure that learning actually occurs. From this perspective, the qualification needs to exist because the amount, direction or quality of engagement that it stimulates and shapes is personally, institutionally and/or socially valuable.

Given their required alignment with the core curriculum, it appears that some of the purposes relate to the expertise perspective, providing evidence of a level of mastery or the acquisition of expertise of the specified content domain, as well as boosting confidence and motivation to build on skills and expand the expertise within the domain. The acquired expertise can be seen as personally, institutionally and/or socially valuable in terms of enabling individuals to assume particular roles or responsibilities in the relevant communities of practice or perhaps more broadly in the society.

What is less clear from the literature is the extent to which these qualifications serve purposes related to the

information perspective, and which, if any, specific purposes within that. The information perspective can be seen as focusing on the use of assessment results to make decisions, where assessment results provide information that may be personally, institutionally and/or socially valuable as the basis for making decisions. As noted above, these qualifications are no longer used for high-stakes decisions that directly affect learners' legal rights. However, given apparent issues with recognition of these qualifications by employers or education institutions, it is less clear whether these qualifications provide any information that is valuable to stakeholders beyond learners themselves or qualification providers as the basis for making any decisions.

The lack of recognition of SfL qualifications by certain key stakeholders such as employers or further education institutions suggests that the SfL qualifications may not have or may not fulfil some of the information-related purposes that they should or could have. This, in turn, may be driving their own or their qualification providers' choices regarding the most appropriate language qualifications for them. Directing potential SfL learners to qualifications that might have a more well recognised and socially valuable information purpose (for instance, Functional Skills English) while not serving the engagement or expertise purpose in terms of providing expertise of the most appropriate content domain (ESOL rather than English as the first language) may be detrimental for both ESOL learner engagement and their ultimate expertise and potential for progression.

This could also be seen as a situation where a qualification justifiably has multiple (competing) purposes (cf. Newton, *ibid.*), but where there is not enough clarity about their relative importance to different stakeholders, and no simple answer to the question of why these qualifications are actually needed. This situation may indirectly impact on overall quality and appropriateness of provision and reduce the extent to which any of the intended purposes are truly fulfilled, potentially reducing the usefulness of these qualifications to users.

It would be important to seek clarity about the intended purposes of these qualifications and to clearly acknowledge whether there may be multiple purposes and their relative importance to stakeholders, as well as what the nature of interaction is between these multiple purposes. This would help considerations regarding the most appropriate assessment models, as well as approaches to regulation, and any trade-offs that might need to be acknowledged.

Study 1: Assessment review

Introduction

The focus of this study was to review high-level curriculum coverage, assessment models and assessment instruments from the 4 AOs in our sample in order to understand the range of approaches currently in use, and to consider whether there are any potential threats to comparability, reliability and validity in current approaches.

Method

The review was conducted as a desk-based exercise by an Ofqual senior manager with expertise in qualification and assessment design supported by an Ofqual researcher. Initially, a review of assessment approaches was carried out based on qualification handbooks and specification documents. Following this, a detailed analysis of 2 publicly available sample assessment instruments per AO and component at Entry 1 and Entry 3 was conducted. This was subsequently cross referenced with an analysis of 2 live assessment instruments per AO and component to confirm that these were not substantially different from publicly available sample materials. Where there were some differences, the characteristics of the live assessments were considered in the analysis.

Results

Summary of findings

SfL qualifications consist of 3 components (certified as either individual awards, or overarching certificate if all components are achieved at the same level):

reading comprehension

writing

speaking and listening

Reading comprehension is typically assessed via objectively marked written papers. The papers tend to involve 3 to 4 tasks which consist of a stimulus text and a number of selected or short-answer response items which probe the comprehension of each text.

Writing is typically assessed via written papers typically involving 3 tasks. One of these tasks is always a form that needs to be filled in, while the other 2 tasks typically involve longer open written responses to designated topics (often an email or a descriptive written piece).

Speaking assessment involves performance assessment usually through 3 to 4 tasks. Usually, one of these tasks involves a candidate speaking uninterrupted about a particular topic or might involve exchanging personal information with the assessor. This is then typically followed by a role play on a given topic, which might involve the assessor and the candidate, or 2 or more candidates. At Entry 3, there is usually a task that involves some form of discussion about a given topic, often with the assessor, and sometimes with other candidates.

Listening comprehension of the interlocutor in face-to-face communication is assessed as part of the speaking assessment. Most AOs also have additional listening comprehension tasks involving listening to audio recordings and accompanying written or oral questions probing candidates' listening comprehension ability.

The assessments for these qualifications are summative, typically delivered 'on demand' or with several assessment windows during an academic year, and with opportunities for re-sits. The candidates are normally entered for assessments when deemed ready by their course provider.

The written exams (including reading comprehension and writing, and in some cases listening comprehension) are delivered in paper-based format. The speaking exam is typically delivered face-to-face in qualification providers' premises, though, more recently, it has been increasingly delivered online, via video link.

All exam papers and assessment tasks are externally set by the AOs (although some allow centres to modify some of the tasks). All AOs in our sample implement a competence-based approach (CBA) to assessment, in that they specify detailed learning outcomes (LOs) and assessment criteria (ACs) for each component/unit. This approach is consistent with the requirements of the QCF framework, which was in operation when these qualifications were accredited (for more details and discussion on CBA see Newton, 2018; Newton & Lockyer, (2022).

The ACs specified in this approach represent the backbone of assessment specifications.[footnote 8] The ACs are linked to the curriculum content statements, typically sampling the curriculum fairly exhaustively. In terms of the coverage of specific curriculum statements, the AOs appear to be highly similar, according to our initial curriculum mapping

based on their published specifications. There are a small number of differences where certain AOs choose not to specifically assess certain curriculum statements.

Beyond these similarities, which themselves are not without exceptions, our review demonstrates that there is a range of different assessment strategies and approaches implemented across the AOs in our sample, and that there are a variety of "hybrid" approaches, with some elements inherited from the QCF era, and some perhaps influenced by the traditions of ESOL International/EFL approaches or approaches to assessment of other subjects within specific AOs.

Some of these approaches may be more or less appropriate or defensible in terms of validity, while some may be remnants of historical (regulatory) approaches and frameworks that may not entirely suit the construct of assessment. In addition, there are potential threats to comparability between SfL qualifications springing from the sheer range of approaches. These differences can be grouped into the following broader categories:

Overall approach use of internal (centre-marked) vs. external (AO-marked) assessment

Grading use of mastery vs. compensatory model of aggregation requirement to pass each task vs no requirement requirement to pass hurdle questions vs no requirement types of ACs and/or marking criteria, for example, binary (met/not met) vs. graded (best-fit) component percentage pass mark differences

Assessment design task and response strategy complexity use of role play and/or discussion between candidates vs. between candidate and assessor only use of role play/discussion between pairs of candidates vs. 3 or more candidates use of written vs. oral questions to assess listening comprehension varying number of questions in reading and listening comprehension assessments predominant item types in reading comprehension tests (selected vs. open-ended response) the extent of the guessing factor in selected response items in reading and listening comprehension assessments, both in relation to the overall pass and individual criteria language demands (of stimulus materials and questions) amount of language production required (in writing and speaking)

Assessment delivery whether centres can amend the tasks or not whether assessment has to be completed in one sitting or not time allowed per task and component

Quality of some approaches, assessment instruments, etc.: varying quality of questions in reading and listening

comprehension assessments (implausible distractors, ambiguities, demand targeting) clarity of mark schemes/markings criteria for writing and speaking assessments extent of task administration guidance for speaking and listening assessments

With respect to curriculum coverage, there was evidence of the content areas included in the curriculum being differentially interpreted in terms of how much weight/emphasis is placed on certain aspects, how they are contextualised or how they are addressed with specific assessment approaches. A detailed curriculum alignment review is presented in Study 3 results section.

The range of approaches is perhaps unsurprising given the lack of clarity with respect to SfL qualification purposes, as well as given that there are no regulatory requirements for the AOs to implement any specific approaches, as long as these comply with Ofqual GCR. The GCR do not specify design requirements for qualifications in detail, thus permitting variation within the bounds of appropriate validity considerations for individual qualifications (Newton, *ibid.*).

It should also be noted that a degree of flexibility in assessment approaches may be beneficial to learners with such diverse needs and backgrounds as SfL learners and may contribute to overall validity of their assessment results even where it might pose some threats to comparability. This was also highlighted in the AO interviews (Study 2) and has been acknowledged in previous research (Lockyer & Cadwallader, 2020). Flexibility in assessment models may also benefit centres, depending on their resources and expertise (for example, centres might choose an AO offering an external assessment model because internal assessment might take up too much of their resources), although, arguably, such choices may contradict what some learners might find more suitable.

Some careful consideration of learner needs, qualification purposes and their relative weight as well as centre motivations, is necessary before suggesting ‘one size fits all’ approaches, even where certain threats to comparability may remain. Nevertheless, the different assessment models should be sufficiently justified in terms of validity and best assessment practice, as well as appropriate for the stated qualification purposes.

We discuss some of the more prominent discrepancies observed between AO approaches below, grouped into sections according to the broader categories outlined above.

Overall approach: Internal vs. external assessment

Some AOs implement internal (centre marked) and some external (AO marked) summative assessment models across all their components and levels, while some have different models for different levels, and sometimes for different component. The internal model involves a greater degree of administration flexibility compared to external, with assessments scheduled when candidates are ready and both candidates and assessors are available, rather than during specified assessment windows, which are more common in external assessment models.

Within the internal model, there are differences in the details of implementation between the AOs in our sample (for instance, how much flexibility in the choice of topic there is, whether assessment has to be completed in one sitting or not, whether, if completing in multiple sittings the candidates can see all parts of the assessment in the first sitting or not, whether the same task may be continued on different occasions).

The practice of internal administration of summative assessment as discrete tasks in multiple sittings has been observed in other research into internal assessment within the CBA tradition in the VTQ sector. Lockyer & Cadwallader (ibid.) cite studies finding evidence of an assessment-driven approach with BTEC (Carter & Bathmaker, 2017) and GNVQ assessors (Garland, 1998; Ecclestone, 2002; Wahlberg & Gleeson, 2003). In this approach, the assessors were focused on "getting students through" (Carter & Bathmaker, ibid.) through extensive formative feedback and the use of numerous discrete and accessible tasks. Some authors suggest this can create a scenario where candidates are coached to comply rather than learn (Garland, ibid.; Ecclestone, ibid.). Lockyer & Cadwallader did not replicate these findings in their own study, and even found that in some vocational sectors there was an emphasis on delivering learning above and beyond the course requirements to best prepare learners for employment. However, they did find evidence of a variation in the level of support and feedback provided to learners when completing internal summative assessments.

While our research did not specifically focus on this aspect nor investigate centre practices, the assessment approaches available to centres for some SfL qualifications may lead to some of the above-mentioned practices. This situation might be of more concern where the same qualification, such as SfL, can be assessed using either external or internal assessment. In such a situation it would be important to have sufficient confidence in the controls around each assessment approach in order to reduce disparities in candidate experience and potential threats to comparability of standards.

Grading

There are different approaches taken by the AOs to establishing pass grade cut scores/standards on SfL assessments. Consistent with the CBA tradition, most AOs implement a mastery measurement model, where overall competence is defined as competence across all of the specified ACs, and where competence in each AC has to be demonstrated a minimum number of times and to the required (minimum) degree. However, some AOs implement a compensatory model, without a requirement for each AC to be met.

In addition, among those that implement a mastery model, some define the pass standard purely in terms of each AC being met once across the assessment. Some define pass thresholds at individual task level, alongside a requirement for some hurdle questions to be answered correctly in the reading assessment. Some use a semi-compensatory model where, in addition to the requirement for all ACs to be met once, a numerical pass mark that is compensatory must also be achieved in some components.

There are potential validity issues with some of the above-mentioned approaches. Sometimes the models where the pass threshold is defined by each AC being met once only can result in cut scores that might be considered too low, for instance, in some reading comprehension tests (see more on this in Study 4). In other cases, the use of hurdle questions without clear construct justification may create inappropriate barriers for achievement of the pass grade. If mastery measurement models were deemed appropriate given the construct of assessment, then it would be necessary to implement them in ways that reflect best practice in using such models, ensuring valid assessment results. It is questionable whether mastery models with very low pass grade standards genuinely represent reliable evidence of mastery.

This kind of variability in measurement models has been observed in previous research into grading in vocational and technical qualifications, which are all originally based on the CBA (Newton, 2018). Arguably, this variability (assuming that individual models were implemented validly) may be more justified across qualifications with different subject matter, which constituted Newton's sample. It is less obviously justified in the context of qualifications which are based on a specific shared curriculum and the same construct, such as SfL. Different approaches to defining the pass standard could interact in important ways with the construct of assessment, potentially unnecessarily leading to disparities in standards or disparities with respect to interpretation of results.

Another question that this situation raises is whether the compensatory or the mastery model are more appropriate for measuring language acquisition more generally. This is a high-level issue crucially related to how the construct of assessment is defined more broadly and is also potentially related to assessment purposes. As Newton (ibid.: 77) notes, CBA and its mastery model of aggregation may be an inappropriate template for those qualifications whose domains are not characterised by large sets of critical (emphasis added) micro-competencies, or for qualifications that would be better served by a measurement model more akin to compensation or configuration. It should be possible to determine which of these measurement models is best suited to the nature of the SfL construct and content domain as well as the purposes of these qualifications rather than perpetuating certain models for historical or other inappropriate reasons.

Assessment design

Across all components, but particularly in writing and speaking, there is evidence that task demands between assessment versions within one AO and component may not be sufficiently comparable in terms of topic demand, vocabulary complexity, and other aspects. There are also differences in reading stimulus text complexity between AOs. For instance, some texts include noticeably fewer complete sentences at Entry 1 than others, or fewer paragraphs than others at Entry 3.

There is also disparity between the AOs in the number of questions in the reading comprehension assessments, with some including noticeably fewer questions than others. This could have an effect on reliability and classification consistency (especially in interaction with the high guessing factor of some items or implausible distractors).

Duration of writing and speaking assessments also varies, sometimes considerably. Furthermore, there are differences in the guidance regarding the number of words and/or sentences that the candidates are required to write. At Entry 3, for example, the amount of writing required varies by more than 100 words between some AOs.

Speaking assessment approaches also vary in several respects. There are differences in the amount of speech that is required from candidates at the same level between AOs. In addition, some AOs require candidates to produce a monologue at each level, while some do not. There are further differences in the duration of the required monologue between AOs that do require it.

There are important differences in the use of role play and discussion in the speaking assessment too. Some AOs require candidates to only interact with the assessor/tutor across all tasks, while others require them to interact with other candidates too in some tasks. Within that, some only require interaction between 2 candidates, while others require 3 or more candidates to interact. There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these approaches in speaking assessment, but the demands that they are likely to place on candidates and the nature of performance that is elicited by each task type, as well as the demands on assessor consistency, are likely to be different.

Listening comprehension is assessed alongside speaking, and some of the listening comprehension ACs are assessed via the speaking assessment (for instance, understanding the interlocutor). However, at both levels reviewed, some AOs also include a separate audio comprehension task, while others do not. This is discussed further in Study 3 in relation to construct validity and curriculum alignment of these approaches.

Most AOs assess across different topic areas within each assessment component, meaning that a range of topics is sampled in each component and across components within one level (for instance, family-related issues, shopping, course application, news articles on different topics, advertisements, tourist guides). In contrast, some AOs pre-define a range of topics and each component is assessed within each of those topic areas only rather than across topic areas. For instance, a whole reading comprehension paper would relate to the context of a single topic. This is intended to allow centres to choose the appropriate and relevant topics for the candidates to be assessed on, though with the requirement that at different levels a candidate is assessed on different topics. While there might be good reasons for this given how diverse the SfL cohort of learners is, it might limit the curriculum in terms of the range of vocabulary covered and evidenced at each level.

Assessment delivery

Several differences in assessment delivery were noted, mostly with the AOs that implement the internal model of assessment. Those AOs give some flexibility to their centres to amend the reading comprehension tests in particular, but also offer more flexibility in relation to the topics of speaking and writing assessments, compared to the AOs implementing the external model. In relation to potential amendments of the reading tests, it was noted in our interviews (see Study 2) that this opportunity is rarely taken by the centres, however, as the work involved to implement changes is usually prohibitive.

Among other flexibilities, the option to complete an assessment in multiple sittings is offered by some AOs but not others. Potential issues with such flexibilities were discussed earlier in the context of internal assessment approaches more generally.

Some variation was observed in relation to the time allowed by different AOs for different tasks or components, which could have some implications for task demand and comparability of candidate experience. For example, for Entry 3 reading tests, AOs varied between 2 and 4 minutes per mark. In Entry 1 writing assessments, the time allowance across the 4 AOs varied between 10 minutes and 20 minutes per task, with some allowing around 15 minutes per task. There were similar discrepancies in the speaking component.

Quality issues

A range of quality issues were noted with the questions in reading comprehension assessments, and, to some extent in the listening comprehension assessments where these were designed as written tests. It should be noted that our reviews did not involve statistical analyses of item and test functioning as we did not have access to AO's data for this research[footnote 9]. Our qualitative review, however, strongly suggests a need to obtain evidence from the AOs that their written tests function appropriately.

One of the most common issues noted with some tests was the potential for getting the selected response items right by guessing. The guessing factor was variously increased by a high proportion of true/false items in some tests, or implausibility or cues in distractors of multiple-choice questions in others. On the other hand, some tests were designed effectively to reduce the potential for guessing. Instances of items with implausible distractors, ambiguities, and apparently too low or too high demand for the level of the qualification were noted across most reading and listening comprehension tests to varying extent.

Our review also found that there was a range of approaches to and level of detail in assessor guidance in relation to the administration of speaking assessments. There were also varying approaches in relation to how assessment criteria were elaborated for both writing and speaking assessments. Some external assessments appear to provide more guidance than some internal assessment. This is of concern as internal assessors are likely to depend more on this guidance compared to external assessors. This finding echoes previous research which identified potential vulnerabilities in the delivery of internal assessments related to assessor guidance and training, and their potentially differing

interpretation of AO-set standards (Lockyer & Cadwallader, *ibid.*).

Issues with a lack of detail and clarity of mark schemes and criteria were also noted with some external assessments. While it is possible that further clarity is provided to assessors during standardisation and training, arguably it would be preferable to provide clearer, publicly available criteria as far as possible. Furthermore, variability in assessor standardisation itself may pose threats to validity and comparability, particularly in those approaches that involve the mastery model for specifying grade standards (see Newton, 2018.: 69).

Study 2: AO interviews

Introduction

This study sought to explore the perceptions and views of 6 AOs who offer SfL qualifications. The overarching research questions for these interviews, outlined below, are deliberately broad, allowing us to explore the perceived purposes of the qualifications and how they are developed and delivered to meet those purposes.

What do AOs perceive as the purposes of SfL qualifications and who, therefore, are the learners that AOs seek to support? How do AOs who offer SfL qualifications develop their specifications and assessment materials with regard to their purposes, the core curriculum and any other external frameworks or guidance?

Ofqual regulates such that qualifications are valid with respect to their established or known purposes and reliably indicate the knowledge, skills and understanding students have demonstrated. Understanding the purpose(s) of a qualification provides the foundation from which to understand the validity of the assessment (and, as part of that, its reliability). The above research questions therefore complement the wider research report by providing important context for understanding ESOL SfL qualifications.

Method

Given the open and explorative brief, a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was selected. Group interviews were conducted with small groups of employees from 6 different case study AOs.

Interviews typically involved 2 or 3 Ofqual colleagues and between 2 and 5 employees of the AO. The AO selected their own panel of interviewees, seeking to provide expertise across all areas of the development and delivery of their SfL qualifications. Interviews were conducted using a flexible interview schedule and took place via video conferencing software, typically lasting for 2 hours. Each interview was recorded (video and audio) and the audio elements were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview schedule was developed to explore the AOs' perceptions of the purpose and constraints for SfL qualifications within the market, their broad processes for the development and delivery of qualifications within that context, and their broad processes for setting and maintaining standards.

A flexible thematic approach was taken to analysing the data, with the goal of identifying patterns across the 6 interviews and making comparisons between them in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We did not therefore conduct a full 'line by line' thematic analysis of the data and instead undertook a broader comparative analysis of our case studies. The lead researcher used NVivo qualitative analysis software to code the written transcript with patterns and themes. The researcher had access to the audio files while doing this, allowing them to clarify the tone of an extract, or otherwise verify the accuracy of the transcription, where necessary.

Some of the codes that were used within the process had already been broadly identified following discussion between the Ofqual staff who attended the meetings, while others emerged more organically through the analysis process. The researcher usually coded sections of the transcripts rather than individual sentences, the aim of which was to take account of the context of a comment and to avoid analysing statements in isolation. The researcher revisited transcripts they had initially coded to ensure that the coding scheme had been applied thoroughly and consistently, focusing on transcripts that had been coded earlier in the analysis process at a point where the coding scheme may have been partially incomplete. At the end of this process, a second researcher scrutinised a sample of the transcripts to confirm that they agreed with the coding and provide challenge where they did not.

It is worth noting that this research does not capture the views of all AOs who offer ESOL SfL qualifications but rather it seeks to illuminate the key issues and how they may be influenced by the context of the AO. This will help us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the perceived purpose for these qualifications and how that influences how they are developed and delivered in practice.

Key themes emerging from interviews

Below, we outline the key themes that emerged from the analysis. We have selected quotations to illustrate these themes. We begin with a short summary of the overall findings.

Summary of findings

It is clear from the views expressed in our interviews with AO staff that the SfL qualifications are seen as having enormous value to learners and society as a whole. The AOs emphasised the breadth of purposes of SfL qualifications as well as a wide variety of learner background and needs.

There was a sense, however, from all AOs that these qualifications were undervalued in terms of funding. They also said the qualifications were not sufficiently recognised for their potential to enable learner progression, for instance to apprenticeships, or T Levels, particularly in comparison to Functional Skills English (FSE) qualifications. Practitioners told us that this affected stakeholder attitudes towards the qualifications, including centres, employers, higher education institutions, and learners themselves. They thought that this was also partly to do with a lack of understanding, on the part of some stakeholders, that ESOL qualifications have an enabling function in terms of developing broad language skills of learners with ESOL needs, from very basic to advanced, rather than just focusing on literacy skills.

They emphasised the need to recognise the unique value of these qualifications for addressing ESOL learner needs, while recognising their parity with similar qualifications such as FSE. The SfL qualifications were not seen as dissimilar in their enabling function to ESOL International qualifications, some of which are widely recognised at competence levels similar to Entry 3, Level 1 or Level 2 by reputable higher education institutions as well as for job recruitment.

The AOs discussed the flexibility of the SfL qualification structure, its modularity and the variety of assessment models that can be used as beneficial and justified by the needs of cohort and centres. They described how learners and centres required flexibility of choice and adaptability of assessments to accommodate the wide range of contexts in which these qualifications are delivered. All our interviewees referred to the flexibilities offered in the context of speaking assessments in particular. However, AO staff in our interviews suggested that the flexibilities offered to centres in terms of the possibility for written reading comprehension assessment adaptations are rarely taken up, although the AOs themselves offered some choice of context across different assessment versions in some models.

Furthermore, the choices that centres make, for instance, in relation to using internal versus external assessment models, do not seem to always be tailored to the learners, and sometimes appear to be driven by centre needs (for instance, availability of assessors).

Our interviews with the AOs suggested that some of the assessment design choices, noted in our assessment and curriculum alignment reviews as potentially sub-optimal or not entirely appropriate for the construct of assessment, were partly historical, and linked to the requirements of the QCF (the previous regulatory framework). These design choices were not always considered by our interviewees to be reflective of best practice in language assessment (for instance, atomistic assessment criteria, certain content aspects enshrined in the units, choice and implementation of measurement models, weighting of certain curriculum aspects). However, those we interviewed thought that the QCF has provided a helpful mechanism for ensuring a degree of consistency of approach, construct and standards across AOs, particularly because it allowed the units of qualifications to be interchangeable across AOs. This was seen as important for learners who often need to move and complete different units with different centres and AOs, though there was acknowledgment that other mechanisms may exist for achieving this.

The AOs were keen to emphasise that, although they saw the SfL qualifications, as well as the core curriculum on which they are based, as generally effective and appropriate, there was room for improvement and suggested aspects that may benefit from it. Within that, though, they strongly recommended retaining sufficient flexibility in qualification design and assessment models, which would ensure that there were no additional barriers to participation and learner progression.

Breadth of purpose

The AOs we interviewed were keen to explain that there is no such thing as a "typical" ESOL SfL learner. Learners appear to choose SfL qualifications for a wide range of reasons.

It's really for everyone, there's no such thing as a typical ESOL learner. It's people who want to stay in the country and to progress and to integrate really into British society. So, some of them may have been here for a while and have suddenly decided, yes, the children are going to school now, and I need to be able to help my children, or it might be that they now want to get into work, or they've been told that they will progress more if they can speak better English, it's really all sorts of things. A04 Learners will take ESOL qualifications for integration

purposes, for job or career development, for further development in education, for helping their children in school provision, for their day-to-day life, for social reasons. There isn't one specific reason why people would take them and quite often it's across the range and it's predominantly obviously to enhance their life. A01 So, whilst it is predominantly a language qualification, the ESOL teaching community is very much versed in the wider issues and the wider needs of people learning English as a second language. So predominantly what these people want, people taking ESOL qualifications, they want to be able to take a full part in working life. They want to be able to live independently in the UK without the need for interpreters or translators, whether that's informal family or formal services. [â€|] But we also have secondary schools, sixth form colleges and further education where we have learners between 14 to 19 or 16 to 19 on study programmes, and they're learning English in order to help them achieve in other qualifications, such as GCSEs, functional skills, which may be a progression route for them, A levels, routes into higher education, apprenticeships, a whole range of academic opportunities. A03

The AOs also noted that ESOL learners are a highly diverse group in terms of their background, and that the cohort profile can fluctuate over time, partly depending on geopolitical factors.

As an example, settled minorities, economic migrants, whether from Europe or whether from the rest of the world, we have a lot of refugees, asylum seekers. We have foreign victims of trafficking who've been brought into the country, or modern slavery, brought in against their will, and a lot of younger learners too. Most of these are adults, most of the ESOL cohort is 19 plus. A03 I would say that we've seen the types of learners flex according to what's happening in the wider world, so in recent years we've seen a larger influx of refugees who needed a lower level and in fact ESOL starting at entry 1 wasn't always accessible to them, they needed something below that level, so we've seen quite a big increase of that recently and yet that has changed, we've seen a bit of a circle, and it depends on where they are in the country as well because of local areas tending to focus their support on different things. A04 [â€|] I think maybe more younger learners, if we're talking over 20 years, there's more access by 16 to 19s. A01

The AOs noted that ESOL learners vary considerably in terms of their education and employment background. For example, while some learners may not be literate in their native language, others may be highly skilled professionals who wish to develop their English to improve their job performance and further their career. Learners also vary in terms of how much direct interaction they might have on a daily basis with native English speakers, with some not getting much interaction beyond their ESOL classes.

I have had in the same class people that you are literally teaching how to hold a pencil because the only time they went to school was under a tree somewhere in their village, sitting next to somebody that might have a PhD and just because they have lack of English doesn't mean they have lack of intelligence. A01 [â€|] they may be well-educated Europeans who simply want to gain, for example, a medical qualification in the UK and therefore need to develop the language and skills in order to be able to do that. So economic migrants such as doctors, nurses, anyone in the healthcare profession [â€|] and in all sorts of different professions. A03 [â€|] a lot of the time we're talking about situations where ESOL learners haven't had the opportunity to speak English in an environment, in many cases they live in an area where it's very easy to fall back into your mother tongue. A05

Our interviewees told us that ESOL SfL learners completed their courses in a wide variety of settings, from sixth form and FE colleges through to prisons and community groups. The latter of these, community groups, appeared to be particularly important for some AOs. The emphasis, from a teaching and learning perspective, is on providing a reassuring and supportive environment for entire community groups who were seeking to learn English, with ESOL provision being integrated within wider educational and social programmes.

I think the community provision seems to be the key for [us] and where our audience is, in that it's delivered in a community environment where the learners tend to be of a similar ethnicity within a class size and generally a similar age. A06 â€|a lot of it is delivered within community groups where people feel more secure, where maybe the teachers share a first language with the learners, where there is a lot of support, not just language development, and often that helps to get across the barriers. [â€|] So, we have things like, in the voluntary sector there are things like cookery clubs where trained professional teachers will actually integrate the cookery with the language teaching and that way people feel safer and more secure to participate and achieve. A03

Given the breadth of purpose for ESOL SfL qualifications, and the diversity of learners taking them, the AOs told us that they tended to form close and dynamic relationships with their centres to support them in meeting the specific, and often changing, needs of their learners.

The Adult ESOL Curriculum and the other frameworks that govern these qualifications kind of lay out what our rules are. So, the navigation and negotiation happen in the classroom and that's where we often have to support the teachers with respect to how to help their learners get to a point where they can travel through the gateway that we have set up. A02 So there are centres that have been doing things that focus on childcare because they know that's

whatâ€™s relevant and we do have centres more and more who say to us, can we do ESOL in a vocational context [â€¦] So we were having discussions with a very large college about how we could support them in terms of adaptation, not needing new quals because they still have to use the same language structures, itâ€™s still the same ESOL Core Curriculum, but putting in contexts that make them more relevant A05 [â€¦] we do a lot of networking activities and a lot of centre-facing support. We have a plan of centre-facing support activities, so, much of our knowledge of our centres and their cohorts comes from there, as well as the changes, because learners come and go and patterns of the types of learners really do change, and I would just say it has flexed over time. Weâ€™ve seen all sorts of cohorts come through and need ESOL for slightly different reasons and it has been able to adapt to that, which I think is probably quite important and, similarly, I think a lot of our learners or candidates use the qualifications very flexibly. A04

This flexibility was considered particularly important and is discussed in further detail under a separate theme below. Overall, it was clear that those we interviewed felt that ESOL qualifications had a broad remit and could therefore meet the needs of a wide variety of learners.

Language as a key facilitator

The AOs were keen to stress the important role that language skills play in providing people with opportunity. Language skills were considered to be a bridge into society, allowing individuals and groups to integrate better with their communities and to access education and employment, helping them to fulfil their potential. Indeed, ESOL SfL qualifications were considered vital for unlocking the potential in learners commensurate with their capability in their native language, allowing them to use existing skills for employment in the UK where previously their lack of English language skills had been a barrier.

They may well start off in an ESOL class thinking I need to learn just to be able to interact and things, and then suddenly think, actually, this can take me a lot further. And theyâ€™ll go onto a different educational course and that may lead them into education, and theyâ€™ll end up doing something that they never envisaged, just because it empowers them to move forward with their life. A01 [â€¦] many of those learners come to college with quite low levels of English language but quite high ambitions about what they want to do, whether itâ€™s to go to university or do an apprenticeship or something similar. And they run a study programme where they will actually take their learners through the ESOL courses in order to give them the language skills to be able to access GCSEs in their second year,

you know, in a subsequent year of the study programme, or the access to HE qualifications that will enable them to then move up. And these are young teenagers or 14- to 19-year-olds who come from a range of different backgrounds and for whom without that language development as part of their study programme they would not be able to achieve the other qualifications and they would not have the progression opportunities. A03 So, if you're, for instance, an engineer from the Sudan, it would be, in my view, in the government's interests to get to the point where we could access your engineering skills, not just your ability to be a taxi driver, personally. A02

All RQF levels of the ESOL SfL qualification were considered to have a purpose for language learning. The Entry level qualifications were considered to be an important foundation for some learners, helping them to master the basics and gather confidence for further study. They were deemed justifiably divided into 3 sub-levels. On the other hand, access to specialist ESOL qualifications at levels 1 and 2 was also seen as important for unlocking higher-level skills as well as, consequently, employment and other progression opportunities.

Actually, when you're learning a language and you know nothing about it, not even a single word, it is a continuum, but it is a necessary continuum. Even if you have a really high goal and some high aspirations, you're really aware that you cannot achieve and attain those goals and you need to take everything a step at a time. So certainly Entry 1 qualification probably cannot unlock great job opportunities, but maybe it can unlock some when there's no interaction with someone, with a native speaker or with people speaking the target language. I would expect that Level 1 and 2 and Entry 3 qualifications would unlock different employment opportunities, but I would not be able to categorise in terms of importance the Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications and say that the entry qualifications are not as important. They are an important steppingstone. A02 [] I think this is absolutely a qualification area that is needing that recognition of the 3 [Entry level] sub-levels. A05 I would argue that ESOL Level 1 and ESOL Level 2 better equip learners for working life, because it gives them the grammatical structures, the formal versus informal language, the vocabulary, the range of comprehension and understanding that they need to perform in technical training, higher education, skilled employment progression opportunities, whereas if they're only at Entry 3 then their education and training and work opportunities are limited to lower skills. A03

As hinted in the quote above, AOs highlighted the need for ESOL provision at higher levels and emphasised that learners at higher levels do not benefit in the same way from FSE courses.

So sometimes we're seeing people who should be doing ESOL qualifications probably doing other qualifications, is

what I mean to say. So, we often see people moving towards Functional Skills where probably application is more the purpose than language acquisition. So that causes some challenges I think for learners. A04 [â€¦] in my experience not only do ESOL learners not fit functional skills, itâ€™s square peg, round hole, [â€¦] it just doesnâ€™t work, a lot of ESOL learners at Level 1 and Level 2 are actually at a higher level with their functional skills and quite often their reading and writing skills than native speakers doing Functional Skills. A01

There were suggestions across all AOs that the current funding landscape, particularly for higher levels, may be driving some of the patterns of provision, where ESOL learners may be directed onto FSE courses for funding reasons. This was seen as limiting the potential for ESOL SfL qualifications to be as valuable and impactful as other qualifications at similar levels (for instance, FSE).

In my opinion there should be parity between functional skills and ESOL Level 1 and Level 2, because second language learners are disadvantaged by the lack of grammar and vocabulary content in the functional skills qualifications as they currently exist. Now, this also is a funding issue really, you know, because functional skills is part of the entitlement but ESOL is not and therefore employers donâ€™t necessarily recognise ESOL Level 1 and Level 2 as having parity with functional skills because itâ€™s not part of the entitlement. A03 [â€¦] providers didnâ€™t necessarily choose the qualification that was right for the learners, they chose the qualification that was more accessible for them in terms of drawing down funding and things. Itâ€™s a lot easier to deliver a qualification where itâ€™s all being funded by the government than chasing learners for money. A06

There were clearly some concerns about the nature of the qualification landscape, specifically around funding, and how this might affect take up and progression. There were also concerns around ensuring fitness for purpose of the qualifications that were made available for learners.

The core curriculum and the NSAL

The AOs were generally positive about the nature of the core curriculum and suggested that it was a helpful tool to inform assessment context and standards. The curriculum was also viewed as an important resource for teachers and learners for guiding and gauging their progress, as well as for teachersâ€™ skill development.

The core curriculum is the bible for anybody really involved in ESOL right from, I mean, when you do your teacher

training you learn about the core curriculum and then when you go on to teach you use the core curriculum, knowing that they're going to be assessed against the core curriculum. So, it's just the foundations for everything and you know what sort of level the learners are going to be at, whether you're teaching or assessing. A01 The simplistic answer is that those frameworks, the core curriculum and the adult literacy frameworks, informed the specifications, the test specifications. And then we are governed by our test specifications, which are our interpretation of those other documents. A02 [â€¦] learners do appreciate the fact that there is a curriculum. They do really like the fact that there is a framework and there is a clear progression route and, irrespective of which awarding body or which college they're in or which provider they're in, they can see their progress in a very real and tangible way. And I think it's absolutely essential to have that as part of a national strategy for ESOL. A03

The benefits of the curriculum were perceived to extend to helping ensure a consistent approach was taken across qualifications and over time.

You've seen our specifications [â€¦], there's an entire table at each level which says, this is the criteria, and this is obviously from the curriculum it comes from, so we have been as faithful as we can be, partly to support the teaching and learning process, but also partly because we want to be able to ensure that walk across from our qualifications to any of the other AOs and, as I said, this sharing of terminology and a common language, that's the way you ensure it. A02 [â€¦] when we wrote the initial samples, they were all very clearly based on the core curriculum, the learning outcomes mapped to the core curriculum and every paper links back to it. So, when our writers are writing the assessments, they know that they've got to follow the same template, we've got extensive guidance which reminds them about the core curriculum, which reminds them about our requirements, which reminds them about contexts so that they are comparable. A05 Yeah. Nothing's perfect, but on the other hand it's an entity that's there and I think that's why in many ways these suites of qualifications are successful and why there's a group of them. So, a learner who goes from one college and says they've got an entry 3 from one AO and then they go to another college that does another AO, they know what that means. There is this strong comparability [â€¦] it's like the bedrock, but it does need to be looked at again, it needs an examination, but it's there, it's not perfect, but it's there and it's clear, people know what it means. A01

However, views on precisely how effective this was varied somewhat between AOs. Some comments suggested that differing interpretations of the curriculum were possible, something which has the potential to lead to a degree of inconsistency between AOs.

So, the learning objectives and the assessment criteria are directly based on the core curriculum. There was a lot of discussion about what they meant in relation to the core curriculum and the relationship, there was a lot of teasing out of what the writers of the core curriculum had intended. A01 There of course are arguments for having an explicit assessment of listening and I would say that we decided for ESOL Skills for Life to prioritise two things: one is the interactive listening with someone who is in a slightly different social position from you, that relationship thing, and the other is the discussion among peers where (a) you have a decision-making responsibility, (b) those social layers are removed, but you have the overlay of having to manage perhaps accents that you're not as familiar with, varieties of English you're not as familiar with. So, we chose to prioritise those within the time constraints of the exam. [â€|] there are also aspects of that curriculum that justify our decision [â€|] So we felt that this is better or more easily operationalised through a live context instead of having the typical recording and listening to the contrived recording twice or three times or as many times as you feel. A02

Those interviewed felt the curriculum was fundamentally fit for purpose, if in need of modernisation and refinement. The general view was that evolution over revolution would be recommended. The AOs thought that there was certainly room to improve the curriculum but that this could be achieved with careful revision rather than needing a fundamental reform.

Well, the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum in itself can be either a barrier or a support. So, when there is such a close relationship between an assessment and the curriculum on which it's based, that symbiosis is affected by whoever is in charge of making decisions. So, when [it] is next reviewed and revised, it might actually be a really good idea for the assessment organisations to be included so that it is learning, teaching and assessment, rather than just learning and teaching. Because then we can actually fold in some of the really new approaches to thinking about the role of assessment and bring in concepts like assessment for learning, which I think are really exciting because they have the potential to engage the learner much more in their process. A02 Yeah, I think some of the referencing to the digital world is a tiny bit out of date. That crops up quite a lot. I think it would be really nice to make more reference to employability in it, that would be really helpful, and actually just broadening out, in the examples broadening out some of the contexts would be really helpful. A04 So, I think if you were to say to me, should the ESOL core curriculum change, I would say probably it's more a tweak than anything else. [â€|] maybe it's some of the actual examples that need changing and activities, [â€|] it needs a refresh. A05

Some AOs pointed out that the link between the core curriculum and the NSAL is a complex one. On the one hand, the

nature of the ESOL cohort, with many learners not having basic literacy skills in either English or their first language justifies explicit emphasis on teaching and assessing literacy within ESOL SfL qualifications. On the other hand, the AOs were keen to point out that ESOL SfL qualifications go beyond teaching and assessing literacy, because the language learning needs of the ESOL cohort are much broader and very different from those for whom English is their first language. Some AOs drew our attention to the link between the core curriculum and the NSAL with regard to issues around the recognition and parity of esteem of ESOL SfL qualifications and other English qualifications.

I think the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum followed on from the national literacy standards and that move was to, it was actually to increase the standing of ESOL by putting some parity there and not having it as ESOL qualifications or ESOL learners as a lesser thing than these national literacy standards, which were the important thing at the time. A03 ESOL learners are not being taught literacy. It may well be they're not literate in their own language, but primarily it's about language and it's about language in realistic contexts that are relevant to them. A05 I think I would still say that the core curriculum, while being linked to the national literacy standards, is not just literacy, the core curriculum at the moment is language and literacy [â€¦] we would still need something like it, not necessarily to the literacy standards, but something like the core curriculum. [â€¦] Language development is very important, and it differs from other English qualifications such as GCSE and Functional Skills because there is that focus on developing a lexis, developing comprehension and developing the grammatical skills that underpin the use of languageâ€¦ A03

Some AOs suggested that basic literacy, in terms of learning the Latin alphabet and letter formation, are skills that may benefit from being taught prior to Entry 1 level courses, with Entry 1 courses deemed too high level to easily accommodate learners who have no basic literacy skills whatsoever. On the other hand, it was pointed out that learning of these skills is sometimes complex and non-linear, and hence may need reinforcement and repeated assessment, particularly at lower entry levels.

So, I think it's just a really complicated area and we used to have the pre-entry curriculum, didn't we, years ago which took more of a stepping stone, milestone-type approach. [â€¦] I think the other thing at this end, which is often overlooked, is the need to relearn. Learners will come and they will learn the alphabet, let's say, or they'll learn parts of it, or they'll learn to form letters or whatever it is, and it might be even speaking, listening or reading, but they won't necessarily remember it and they might have to redo it and redo it again even before they're comfortable moving forward. A04 It's important that [the alphabet is] explicitly tested at lower

levels, specifically at Entry 1, because obviously it is important to differentiate between the lower- and upper-case letters. I think itâ€™s implied that learners will have that skill as they move up the levels, although itâ€™s not necessarily always the case. A01

Several AOs pointed out what they saw as an unfortunate interplay between the use of an atomistic QCF-based approach to specifying assessment criteria and a mastery model of assessment with the approaches to assessment of literacy in SfL qualifications. Generally, the AOs were of a view that knowledge of alphabet, spelling, punctuation or text purpose may need to be assessed more holistically and communicatively than they currently are.

Itâ€™s a more holistic thing than saying I can understand alphabetical order, I can understand upper and lower case, I can understand the purpose of a text, itâ€™s more holistic than that, but that was the way the QCF we felt led usâ€¦ A03 We know that as part of the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum there is some attention paid to spelling conventions and punctuation. We also know that in real life spelling almost never interferes with the understanding of the text. And Iâ€™d love anyone on this call to be able to say they absolutely 100% know how to use punctuation. A02

The interplay with the QCF is discussed in more detail below.

The QCF legacy

The SfL qualifications were accredited by Ofqual in 2014 against the rules of the QCF. Awarding organisations are no longer required to adhere to the (now defunct) QCF, but it remained prominent for many of those we interviewed. As is implied in some of the quotations in previous sections, our interviewees told us that, in some cases, the structure of current ESOL SfL qualifications is a legacy of the QCF, though also pointed out that the similarities between qualifications are also there due to them being based on the core curriculum and the NSAL.

The hangover of the QCF is still very much within our ESOL products and I think there could be a lot more efficienciesâ€¦ A04 [â€¦] when the RQF was introduced in 2018, some of the AOs have changed their units, but fundame

Reference

[Introduction to Aerospace Engineering: Basic Principles of Flight](#)

[Designing Software Architectures: A Practical Approach \(SEI Series in Software Engineering\)](#)