4800-021

Essential Skills

Northern Ireland

Communication Level 2

Chief Examiner's report – January 2024

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1.   Introduction

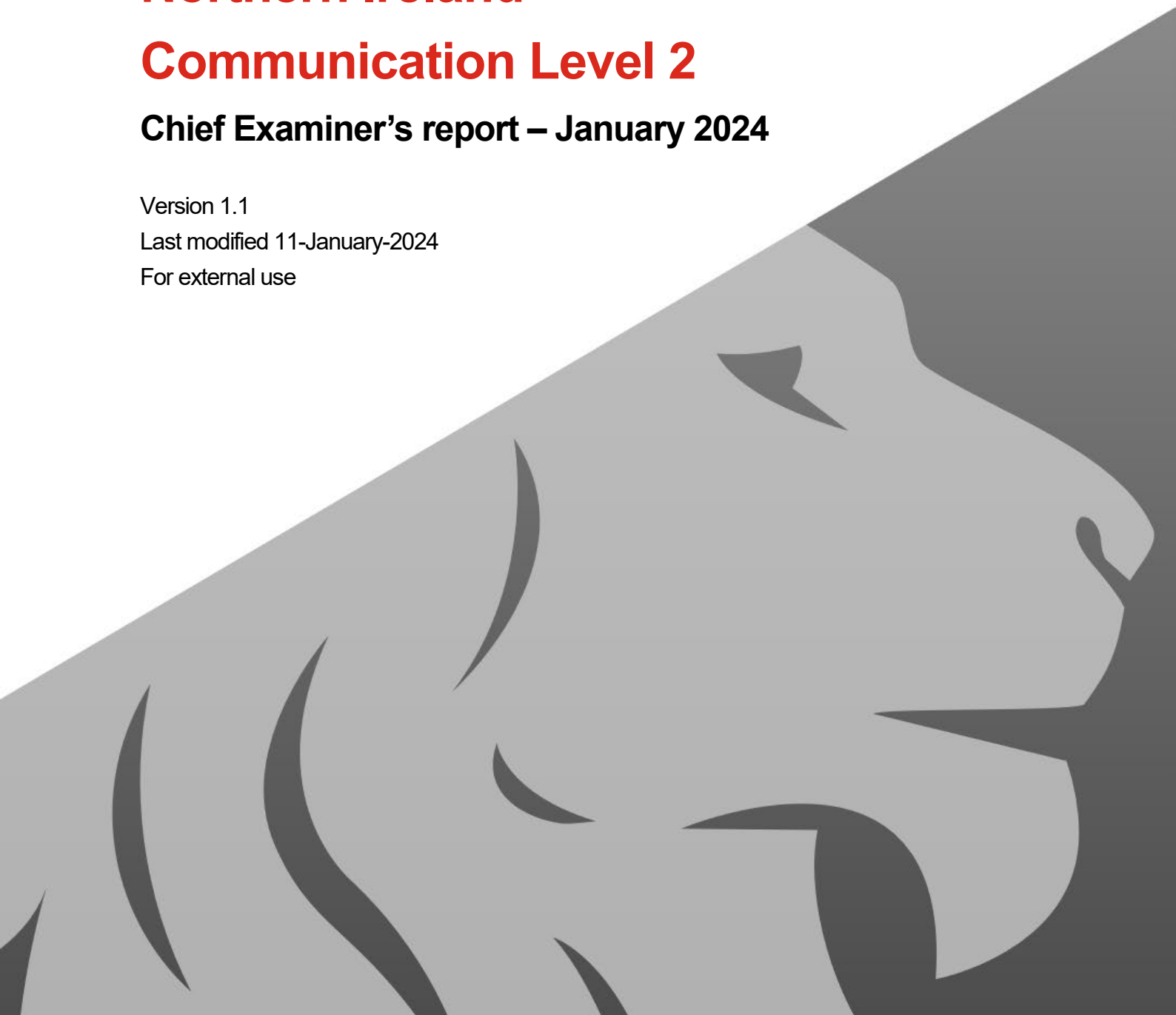The purpose of this document is to provide centres with feedback on the performance of candidates for 4800-021 Essential Skills Northern Ireland Communication Level 2.

2.   Overall Performance

This report covers the period from April 2023 to October 2023.

Candidates' performance across both sections of the paper continues to show good teaching, preparation and practice, with a high number of candidates achieving a pass. Candidates who did struggle tended to find the following areas most challenging:

In the reading section:

1. Reading questions carefully
2. Providing enough information or responses
3. Recognising bias and point of view
4. Providing accurate and explicit comparison between source documents.

In the writing section:

1. Spelling, punctuation and grammar
2. Language, tone and levels of formality
3. Including sufficient detail and expanding on important points
4. Format and structure, including paragraphing and writing in a logical order with a clear beginning, middle and end.

2.1.   Areas of good performance

Overall:

Most candidates appeared to be well prepared for the paper, including a familiarity with different question types and a good ability to understand and engage with different source documents. Candidates generally answered all or most of the questions in the reading section and provided complete responses to both writing tasks. Most maintained a consistent performance across both sections of the paper, and many successful candidates' work showed evidence of checking finished answers. This indicates good exam preparation and time management.

In the reading section:

Most successful candidates were able to accumulate marks across all the assessment criteria (a-e). They read questions and source documents carefully and were able to give accurate information in response to questions. Where more than one response was required, they were able to provide the correct number of responses. They were able to understand the main points and ideas in different texts, as well as to identify more detailed information when required.

While it is not a requirement, many candidates who underlined key words in the questions (such as 'who', 'why', 'examples', 'explanations' and the number of responses asked for) were able to recognise important instructions and give accurate answers.

Many candidates showed an excellent understanding of language techniques used in the source documents; they were able to identify where specific techniques were being used and to provide examples of these. There was also good understanding of the purposes of different texts.

Strong candidates were able to identify point of view and bias, and they could compare opinions found in different source documents.

In the writing section:

Candidates continued to give a strong performance in the writing section, providing clear responses that effectively met the task set.

Successful candidates were able to format their responses appropriately, such as using titles for articles and including addresses and salutations in letters. They were able to use paragraphs successfully and structured their answers in a logical order with a clear beginning, middle and end. They utilised different sentence structures well to add variety and a good sense of flow to their writing, and they included complex sentences where appropriate.

Candidates continued to employ persuasive language and techniques effectively, using these successfully to influence the reader in relation to the task set.

Successful candidates typically showed a good command of at least two of the following categories: spelling, punctuation and grammar.

2.2. Areas for development

Overall:

1. Checking and proofreading answers

Most candidates would benefit from checking and proofreading their responses in both sections of the paper. This may help them to catch simple spelling, punctuation or grammar errors in the writing section, for example. In the reading section, checking might help identify questions that have not been answered fully or that require more responses. In the case of some borderline but unsuccessful candidates, an extra two or three marks gained in this way would mean the difference between a pass and a fail.

In the reading section:

1. Reading the question carefully

Careful reading of the question is key to avoiding simple or careless errors. Many candidates appeared to skim questions too quickly, only picking out certain words and missing clear instructions. This led to inaccurate answers, or to candidates not providing enough information or responses to properly answer the question.

As questions often include more than one important word or instruction, candidates should practice reading and unpicking questions to look for the following things:

- Any **key words** such as 'why', 'what' 'how', or 'who', or instructions or action words such as 'identify', 'compare', 'summarise' or 'explain'.
- **What** exactly they are being asked about, such as a specific topic from the document, or precise information such as names or dates. Candidates who do not pay enough attention to this will often respond with information that does not fully or accurately answer the question.
- **Where** they need to look – which document, whether they are being directed to a specific part of the document, or whether they should get their information from both documents.
- **How many** responses/how much detail they should give. If more than one response is needed, this will usually be stated in the question (e.g. Identify **three** reasons why…). If it is not stated in the question itself, candidates should look to the number of marks available for the question. A question worth four marks, for example, will either need four responses or a more detailed and in-depth answer than a one-mark question.
- Any words that suggest quotations from the text are required, such as 'quotes' or 'evidence'.

Candidates may find it useful to underline or circle important instructions in the question before attempting an answer. Not only does this encourage the candidate to consider the question carefully before answering, but it also may help with checking.

There continued to be some cases in which candidates answered the question they were anticipating rather than carefully reading the actual question in front of them. While it is important for candidates to practise and become familiar with the question types, it is also important to stress that each paper is different. Questions will not necessarily be phrased in exactly the same ways as they appear on practice papers, and nor will particular types of questions appear on every paper or in a set order. The number of marks available for each question also varies.

2. Utilising the source documents accurately

On each paper, there are some questions on Document 1 only, some on Document 2 only, some that require both documents, and at least one that requires the candidate to compare information across the two documents. Candidates should read all instructions on the question paper carefully to ensure they are using the correct document(s) to answer each question.

In questions that required answers to be found in **both** documents, some candidates only looked at one of the texts and so lost the chance to gain full marks on that question. As discussed above, careful reading of the question is key!

In most cases, candidates will be clearly directed to the correct document(s). In some cases, candidates need to select the correct document for themselves; they should practise looking for clues within the question that will help them make the correct selection. For example, if a candidate is asked to give evidence from a particular person, they may need to select the source document written by or about that person.

Some candidates also struggled to find the relevant paragraph or section within a source document to best answer the question. If directed to a specific paragraph or section, all answers to that question will be found within that paragraph or section. When not directed to one area of the source document, answers may be found anywhere, and may even be spread throughout the whole document. Candidates should practise finding answers from multiple places within a document, as well as practise looking for answers contained in one specific paragraph or section.

3. Recognising bias and points of view

Some candidates found questions about bias and/or point of view a challenge. Candidates may be asked to identify biased statements within a text or from a specific area of the text. They may be asked about a specific person's or the document writer's point of view, or asked to identify who holds a particular point of view. Candidates should practise looking for statements that hold implicit meaning or that indicate how a person feels about something, statements that contain biased opinions, statements that exaggerate a particular feeling or

situation, and language that expresses positive and/or negative feelings about something. Candidates should be able to recognise the difference between neutral language and language that expresses feelings or opinions as if they are facts.

4. Comparing information in different source documents

Many candidates still struggled to achieve full marks on comparison questions. Candidates may find it helpful to practise looking for key words in the question that indicate whether they should answer with similarities (such as 'in common' or 'agree on'), differences (such as 'differ'), or similarities and/or differences ('compare').

When asked to compare documents, candidates should be aware that **explicit** comparison is needed. In other words, they need to employ language that makes it clear whether they have identified similarities or differences (eg words such as 'whereas', 'in contrast', 'disagree', 'but', 'both', 'similarly', 'agree', etc). Accurately listing or summarising relevant information from each document is important when answering these questions, but it is not enough on its own to access all the marks available. Candidates should practise giving clear and explicit comparisons of information found in two different sources.

A few candidates were not able to accurately recognise the ideas, information or points of view being presented in the sources, leading to an incorrect comparison. Even if comparison is explicit, it cannot gain marks if it is not **accurate**.

5. Drawing from the candidate's own knowledge and experience

A small number of candidates turned to their own knowledge or experience of a topic rather than using the source documents provided. This may be more likely when a topic is very familiar, such as a subject related to an apprenticeship or course of study. It is important for candidates to remember that all answers in the reading section should be based on the information in the source documents provided; candidates will never be expected to use their own knowledge of a specific topic. Even accurate information cannot be given marks if it is not found in the provided source material.

In the writing section:

1. Punctuation

Most successful candidates showed strengths in at least two of the following categories: spelling, grammar and punctuation. Candidates who struggle in these areas would therefore benefit a huge amount from extra learning and practice.

Out of the three categories of spelling, punctuation and grammar, it is punctuation that the majority of candidates tended to struggle with. Candidates must be able to write in full sentences and to punctuate the beginnings and ends of these correctly. Correct use of punctuation within sentences is also important, including commas, capital letters for proper nouns, and apostrophes. While commas tended to be used well in lists, other comma errors were frequent, including many cases of comma splices.

While speech marks will not be needed in every writing task, when they are used, they should be used correctly. Many candidates incorrectly used speech marks for summaries of what was said, rather than for direct speech – for example: My friend told me "she wanted me to meet her for coffee later."

Although handwriting is not assessed, legibility did have an impact where it was impossible to distinguish between uppercase and lowercase letters (most commonly S and C), or to distinguish between a full stop and a comma. While benefit of the doubt is applied where possible, poorly formed letters may lead to unintended errors.

A small number of candidates wrote their entire answer in capital letters, making it impossible for them to gain high marks in this category. To be able to achieve full punctuation marks, candidates must show that they understand where capital letters are needed and where they are not.

Candidates should be aware that correct punctuation (as well as spelling and grammar) is required in all responses, including speeches and informal emails.

2. Spelling and grammar

As with punctuation, candidates who struggle with spelling and/or grammar would gain a lot from extra learning and practice in these areas.

Common weaker areas included the use of articles, pronouns, subject-verb agreement, and common homophone/near-homophone errors such as here/hear, there/their/they're, to/too/two, were/where/we're, weather/whether, college/collage, passed/past, etc. Other common errors included 'alot', 'writting', 'aswell', 'becuse', 'faitfully', using 'of' instead of 'have' (could of, would of, etc), and 'yous'/'you'se'/'use' instead of 'you'. Switching tense accurately and where appropriate was also a challenge for some candidates.

Learning and preparation should cover these common issues in order to help candidates avoid building up simple errors that can lead to a significant loss of marks. Encouraging candidates to look out for these errors while checking their finished answers is also recommended.

In a few cases, candidates used only simple vocabulary and spellings (Level 1 words and below). Candidates should be aware that using Level 2 words (more complex and challenging spellings and language) is required in order to access higher marks. Evidence of accurate complex sentences is also needed.

3. Language, tone and levels of formality

Some candidates continued to struggle with their use of language, either using language that was inappropriate in tone or level of formality, or making a variety of language errors. These included the incorrect use of common words and expressions, using 'textspeak', excessive use of words such as 'and' and 'also' within one sentence or paragraph, clumsy or confusing phrasing, and a general lack of clarity.

Some candidates struggled to use language appropriate for intended audience. In particular, many candidates employed an incorrect or inconsistent level of formality, perhaps beginning a formal letter with 'Hi Dave', or starting a speech with 'Ladies and Gentlemen' but ending on 'that's it, folks!' As at least one of the writing tasks requires a formal response, candidates should be familiar with formal language and how it is used in different contexts.

4. Relevant detail

Some candidates continued to struggle in this area, writing responses that only briefly touched on or omitted some of the details asked for in the writing task. Candidates should practice writing responses that:

- accurately meet the task given. For example, an article reviewing a restaurant visit should contain a review of a restaurant visit, rather than, say, a request to meet a friend for dinner. Off-topic answers will not be able to access many marks!
- include all the detail asked for in the task. This means candidates should address and expand on all the details in the writing brief.

Utilising the practice papers on the City & Guilds website should give candidates an idea of what to expect from the writing tasks, including how the required details are presented. While at Level 1 all the required details are presented in a bullet point list, at Level 2 they may not appear in this form. Instead, they may be included in one or more paragraphs of the question brief. Candidates need to be able to pick out the important details they are asked to cover, and they must address all of these in their response.

Candidates may find it useful to track which details they have included, such as by ticking off each point in the question brief as they cover it, or by creating a plan before beginning their answer.

Candidates should also consider any extra details they need to include to meet the **purpose** of the task. For example, if they are writing an article to persuade people to attend a meeting, they will need to say where and when the meeting will take place. If they do not, their reader will not be able to attend the meeting even if the candidate has successfully persuaded them to do so! If the candidate asks for a response or reply, they should provide contact details for this. They should be aware that they do not have to include their own name, address, email or any other personal details in their response, but can include fake details instead, e.g. John Smith, Fake Street, Fake Town, FT6 1FT.

5. Format and structure, including use of paragraphs

Most candidates are formatting and structuring their responses well, but there are still some cases where important formatting elements are omitted, such as titles for articles or addresses for letters.

It is important candidates are familiar with the correct format and structure of:

- letters
- emails
- speeches
- articles.

While most candidates showed a good ability to structure their responses in a logical order with a good beginning or introduction, there were still some cases where no ending or conclusion had been attempted. Instead, responses ended abruptly without any attempt to 'wrap up', or with no closing salutation or sender's name. Candidates should be aware that ending their responses appropriately is important, even when they have covered all the required detail.

Most candidates are showing a good understanding of paragraphing, but there are still a few cases where answers are presented as one block of text with no paragraphs at all. Candidates should be aware that paragraphs are required in all responses, even speeches.

6. Writing too little

It was encouraging to see that the majority of candidates wrote responses of an appropriate length to fully answer the task set, showing excellent teaching and exam preparation. However, there were still a few candidates who wrote answers that were too short, therefore not providing enough information to properly address the task or to demonstrate writing ability. In a few rare cases, candidates only wrote one or two sentences for each task.

There are two writing questions on the paper, one worth 6 marks and one worth 9 marks. Candidates should aim to write 100-120 words on the 'short' question and 140-200 words on the 'long' question. Responses that are too short are penalised across certain categories.

7. Only answering one of the writing questions

It was rare to see only one writing question attempted, but there were still a few examples of this issue. Candidates who only answer one writing question cannot gain any marks on the unanswered question, and they are also penalised across spelling, punctuation and grammar. It is therefore extremely difficult to pass if only one writing question is attempted. Exam preparation should ensure that candidates can write two responses in the set amount of time. Candidates should be advised that if they are running out of time, a brief summary or bullet point answer is preferable to no answer at all.

3. Recommendations and Advice for Centres

1. It is vital that adequate learning and practice has taken place before a candidate is entered for the exam.

2. Familiarity with the question types is essential. Making use of the sample papers on the City & Guilds website is strongly recommended.

3. As the assessment contains both reading and writing sections and involves a substantial amount of reading of source documents and questions, it is recommended that preparation includes time management techniques.

4. Candidates should be aware that in the **reading** section they do not need to answer in complete sentences or to repeat the stem of the question in their answer (although answers do need to be legible). This can help with managing time during the exam.

5. It is essential that candidates are taught to read all questions fully and carefully consider what is being asked of them before attempting to answer. Candidates may find it useful to underline important instructions on the question paper, particularly key words such as 'why', 'how', 'who', 'language', 'layout', 'compare', 'biased', 'persuade', etc, as well as any instructions to give a certain number of responses in their answer, eg 'give two facts'. Marks are easily lost due to not reading questions carefully.

6. Many candidates would benefit from checking their finished responses in both the reading and writing sections. The extra marks that can be picked up in this way can mean the difference between a pass and a fail.

7. As part of the learning process, candidates should be exposed to all types of source documents, including websites, internet forums, articles, business reports, formal letters and emails, leaflets, promotional material and advertising, amongst others. Any of these may be encountered as source documents in the reading section. In addition, candidates should be shown documents with similar or different points of view and should become familiar with the process of comparing these.