



Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Review of standards in A level French: 1997–2004

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1. Introduction

QCA conducted an enquiry into standards over time in A level French in 1998. The results were published in a report, *Five year review of standards: A level French* (QCA, 2001) which is available on the QCA website (www.qca.org.uk). The key issues identified by the enquiry were considered as part of work on this review.

Between them, the A level syllabuses included in this review attracted all of the 15,000 candidates who took A level French in 2004.

This enquiry provides details about standards in A level French examinations across the awarding bodies AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance), CCEA (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment), Edexcel, OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations) and WJEC (Welsh Joint Education Committee).

2. Examination demand in A level French

The major issue that affected all A level examinations between 1997 and 2004 was the change in design of the A level qualification in line with the Curriculum 2000 reforms. This involved a move to unitised assessment based on a six-unit structure. The overall assessment of the A level qualification was split into the first half, Advanced Subsidiary (AS), and the second half, A2. The AS and A2 sections of the course were each assessed by three units, making six units for the A level overall. The level of demand of the AS qualification was reduced from the former Advanced Supplementary qualification, to allow a smoother transition for students moving from GCSE to A level and to allow the new AS to stand as a 'broadening' qualification in its own right. The main requirement of the changes was to carry forward the full A level standard.

The most significant changes for A level French between 1997 and 2004 were:

- the change to a mandatory six-unit AS/A2 assessment structure, as described above
- a move to less demanding AS unit assessments and more demanding A2 units
- a requirement for synoptic assessment
- a move to much greater use of the target language in question papers and answers
- standardisation in the number of assessment objectives (AOs) to four, with specified weightings, as prescribed by the subject criteria
- an explicit requirement for 25 per cent of marks to be awarded for knowledge and accurate application of grammar and syntax (AO3)
- a list of grammar and structures for French defined in the subject criteria and therefore common to all awarding bodies
- the banning of dictionaries in any external assessment
- differences in the way listening tests were conducted
- an increase in the weighting for speaking and the number of occasions on which it was assessed.

A level French syllabuses in 1997 were developed in the light of the 1993 subject core in modern foreign languages. Subject cores tended to deal with syllabus content but not structure. 2004 syllabuses conformed to the Curriculum 2000 A level Modern Foreign Languages criteria.

Key issues identified in a review of standards in A level French 1977–97

In 1998 QCA conducted the first five-yearly review of standards in A level French in response to the recommendations in Lord Dearing's review of qualifications for 16–19 year olds.

The 1998 study found that changes in A level French examinations between 1977 and 1997 had been influenced by several factors, among the most significant being:

- an increased emphasis on communication skills in foreign language study, which meant that A level courses aimed to develop speaking and listening as well as reading and writing
- the introduction in the 1980s of a prescribed common core
- the introduction in 1988 of GCSE with a set of defined national criteria.

In terms of examination demand there had been a number of changes between 1977 and 1997. These included:

- greater emphasis on aspects of contemporary society and authentic materials, resulting in the use of a far greater range of register and subject matter
- weighting across language skills, resulting in a more equal balance across listening, speaking, reading and writing, with a consequent reduction in the weight given to translation
- a major shift in approaches to marking, with candidates being rewarded for what they knew, understood and could do, rather than being penalised for their errors.

In addition there was an increasing use of the target language in examinations and a wider pattern of options, including the introduction of coursework. The reviewers in 1998 judged that, overall, examinations in 1997 were different but equally demanding. The similarities between awarding bodies in 1997 were generally more significant than differences of detail, although there were some differences that affected the examination demands.

In terms of standards of performance at the key judgemental grades, the review concluded that the judgements on performance were necessarily tentative, given limited evidence available in some years and skills and the greater range of skills being assessed. However, despite this greater range, standards were judged to be satisfactory and to have been maintained in most of the elements assessed. The one exception was writing, where there was evidence of a decline in performance between 1977 and 1997.

Materials available for the 1997–2004 review

The reviewers considered the syllabus documents, examiners' reports and question papers with associated mark schemes from each of the awarding bodies in 1997 and 2004. Details of the syllabuses included in the review are given in Appendix A.

Assessment objectives

In 1997 the assessment objectives related largely to the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – with some weight given to cultural knowledge. Although there was no requirement to give any skill a particular weighting, all syllabuses assessed listening, speaking, reading and writing in a fairly equal balance, with cultural knowledge usually assessed through chosen topics or literary texts, either in a written examination or in coursework. Whether candidates responded to tasks in French or English varied quite considerably across awarding bodies.

In 2004 the assessment objectives were common to all awarding bodies:

- AO1 – Understand and respond in speech and writing, to spoken language
- AO2 – Understand and respond in speech and writing, to written language
- AO3 – Show knowledge of and apply accurately the grammar and syntax prescribed in the specification
- AO4 – Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of aspects of the chosen society.

The assessment objectives were weighted according to the subject criteria for modern foreign languages, giving a fairly equal balance across the skills. However, there was some flexibility in the weighting, apart from AO3 which was fixed at 25 per cent. This meant that awarding bodies had a choice about the balance of the assessment objectives in their syllabuses and also about in which units particular assessment objectives featured. The wording of AO1 and AO2 required candidates for the most part to respond to tasks in French, with responses in English limited by the criteria to specific transfer of meaning tasks and with a maximum of 10 per cent of the marks at both AS and A2. This followed on from national curriculum developments and the GCSE in Modern Foreign Languages, which required candidates to respond almost entirely in the target language in all skills from 1998 onwards. The creation of the separate assessment objectives AO3 and AO4 meant that there was an explicit weighted requirement for grammatical knowledge and accuracy and for knowledge of France and French-speaking culture and society. There was also a requirement that the assessment objectives be assessed across the syllabus, which resulted in more mixed-skill papers and tasks. The reviewers found that the change in assessment objectives had no significant effect on demand, despite the requirements to respond in French in 2004, but that the main effect of the change was to bring awarding bodies more into line, making syllabuses overall more comparable and transparent.

Syllabus content

Content beyond the required topics and texts was very vague in 1997 and defined by words such as 'contemporary', 'issues' and 'French-speaking society' and the expectation that texts

would be from a range of authentic sources. As a result the range and nature of the topics that examination papers were based on were appropriately demanding. Although there was no defined list of grammar and structures in any of the 1997 syllabuses, there was a general expectation in the syllabus, often defined through the kinds of tasks and the percentage of marks awarded for quality of language, which made the grammatical requirements appropriately demanding.

In 2004, topics were more clearly defined, with different topics at AS to indicate progression from GCSE and more abstract and complex topics at A2. The syllabuses all indicated clearly that topics should be covered in the context of France and French-speaking countries, which meant that candidates had to demonstrate their cultural knowledge explicitly in more components than just the topics and literary texts paper or their coursework. For all the awarding bodies there were more topics than in 1997 that candidates had to research individually and prepare in advance of the examination, over a number of units, including speaking. The grammar and structures expected at AS and A2, defined in the criteria and agreed by all the awarding bodies, appeared in all the syllabuses.

Despite the changes and the far greater level of definition and clarity of the 2004 syllabuses, however, the reviewers judged that the topics, grammatical requirements and overall demand of the content were remarkably similar both over time and across awarding bodies. The requirements for candidates to research more topics individually and in some depth was judged to be a demanding skill, but also potentially motivating, providing candidates with more opportunities to develop research skills and to follow their own interests.

Scheme of assessment

Table 1: Examination structures and timings in 1997 and 2004

Awarding body	1997	2004
AQA	<p>Four components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> written paper on culture and society or coursework – 3 hrs (20 per cent) reading and writing – 3 hrs (40 per cent) listening – 1 hr (20 per cent) speaking – 15 mins (20 per cent). <p>Total: 4 hrs 15 mins with coursework; or 7 hrs 15 mins with exam option</p>	<p>Six units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> listening, reading and writing – 1 hr 30 mins (17.5 per cent) writing (prepared topics) – 1 hr 30 mins (15 per cent) speaking – 15 mins (17.5 per cent) listening, reading and writing – 2 hrs 30 mins (17.5 per cent) writing (topics and texts paper or coursework) – 2 hrs (15 per cent) speaking – 15 mins (17.5 per cent). <p>Total: 6 hrs with coursework; or 8 hrs with exam option</p>
CCEA	<p>Five components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaking – 20 mins (15 per cent) listening – 45 mins (15 per cent) reading, responsive writing and translation – 2 hrs 30 mins (30 per cent) prose translation and essay – 2 hrs 30 mins (20 per cent) literature – 2 hrs 30 mins (20 per cent). <p>Total: 8 hrs 35 mins</p>	<p>Six units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaking – 15 mins (17.5 per cent) reading, listening and translation – 1 hr 30 mins (17.5 per cent) writing literature/society – 1 hr 20 mins (15 per cent) speaking – 15 mins (17.5 per cent) reading, listening and prose translation – 2 hrs 20 mins (17.5 per cent) writing literature/society – 2 hrs (15 per cent). <p>Total: 7 hrs 40 mins</p>
Edexcel	<p>Five components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> listening – 45 mins (20 per cent) texts/topics or coursework – 2 hrs 30 mins (20 per cent) writing essay and prose translation – 2 hrs 30 mins (20 per cent) reading and translation – 2 hrs 	<p>Six units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> listening and writing – 1 hr (15 per cent) reading and writing – 2 hrs (20 per cent) speaking – 12 mins (15 per cent) speaking – 15 mins (15 per cent) writing topics and texts or

	<p>(20 per cent)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaking – 20 mins (20 per cent). <p>Total: 5 hrs 35 mins with coursework; or 8 hrs 5 mins with exam option</p>	<p>coursework – 2 hrs (15 per cent)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> listening, reading and writing – 2 hrs 45 mins (20 per cent). <p>Total: 6 hrs 12 mins with coursework; or 8 hrs 12 mins with exam option</p>
OCR	<p>Five components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> listening, reading, writing – 2 hrs (25 per cent) listening, reading, writing – 2 hrs 30 mins (30 per cent) speaking – 15 mins (15 per cent) speaking extension (or speaking coursework) – 15 mins (15 per cent) writing topic paper or coursework – 1 hr 30 mins (15 per cent). <p>Total: 5 hrs with coursework; or 6 hrs 30 mins with exam option</p>	<p>Six units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaking – 15 mins (15 per cent) listening, reading, writing – 1 hr 30 mins (20 per cent) reading and writing (work/business) – 1 hr 30 mins (15 per cent) speaking and reading – 15 mins (15 per cent) listening, reading, writing – 2 hrs 45 mins (20 per cent) writing on culture and society or coursework – 2 hrs (15 per cent). <p>Total: 6 hrs 15 mins with coursework; or 8 hrs 15 mins with exam option</p>
WJEC	<p>Five components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reading – 2 hrs 30 mins (20 per cent) writing – 3 hrs (20 per cent) listening – 1 hr (20 per cent) speaking – 20 mins (20 per cent) writing – three options: A5 exam (2 hrs 30 mins); or A6 exam (1 hr 30 mins) plus coursework; or A7 coursework (20 per cent). <p>Total: 6 hrs 50 mins plus coursework; or 8 hrs 20 mins plus coursework; or 9 hrs 20 mins plus coursework</p>	<p>Six units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaking – 14 mins (15 per cent) listening and writing – 1 hr 30 mins (15 per cent) reading and writing – 1 hr 30 mins (20 per cent) speaking – 20 mins (15 per cent) cultural studies – three options: FR5a exam (2 hrs) plus coursework; or FR5b coursework; or FR5c coursework (20 per cent) listening, reading and writing – 3 hrs (15 per cent). <p>Total: 6 hrs 34 mins with coursework; or 8 hrs 34 mins with exam option</p>

In 1997 the number of components varied slightly, with most awarding bodies requiring five components and one body requiring four. Components on the whole were single-skill papers or tested a maximum of two skills, for example reading and writing, apart from OCR which offered a range of mixed-skill assessment tasks. Essay questions and answers on topics or literary texts were either all in English or in a mixture of French and English. The exception was again OCR, which required the majority of answers in French in 1997. Overall examining time for candidates taking examination options varied from 9 hours 20 minutes (WJEC) to 6 hours 30 minutes (OCR). The amount of continuous written French required across the components for candidates not doing coursework varied widely, depending on awarding body requirements for a discursive essay, a prose translation and also the language of the literary text or topic essays.

In 2004 the six-unit structure, with the requirement to assess all language skills at AS and A2, meant that candidates were assessed more frequently, including having to be assessed for speaking twice. Except for OCR, all awarding bodies had a higher percentage of marks allocated overall to speaking units in 2004 and the total number of unseen listening and reading texts also increased. The requirement for the assessment objectives to be covered throughout the syllabus in 2004 meant that units were often mixed-skill, for example requiring listening, reading and writing, and candidates had to demonstrate knowledge of French culture and society across a number of units. For all awarding bodies the overall examining time was around 8 hours for candidates not doing coursework.

The amount of continuous written French required (not including coursework) in a variety of situations and registers increased, sometimes to almost double in 2004. At AS, writing was usually assessed in a mixed-skill paper involving listening and/or reading, with the content or topic area of a piece of extended writing unknown in advance to the candidates. However, CCEA assessed extended writing through the study of a literary text or topic, which the reviewers judged to be quite demanding at this level. AQA assessed extended writing in a unit covering aspects of society, with questions based on prescribed topic areas covered by texts in a preliminary booklet that was studied by candidates in advance of the examination. Although the topics were quite conceptually demanding, the reviewers judged that preparation for the paper helped candidates to show what they knew, understood and could do, and supported in-depth study at this level. At A2, the weighting of the topics and literary text units decreased for most awarding bodies, and all awarding bodies required extended responses in French.

The reviewers judged that although there were more assessment occasions in 2004 and an increase in the amount of spoken and extended written French required, the fact that the AS units were less demanding meant that the overall demand in 1997 and 2004 was quite similar. In both years, candidates were assessed across all four skills, with a clear emphasis on

contemporary and up-to-date knowledge of French and French-speaking culture and society, although in 2004 the assessment of this knowledge and understanding was spread across the whole syllabus rather than in just one component. The reviewers judged that the common six-unit structure had the effect of ensuring greater comparability across awarding bodies in 2004, with very similar overall examining times and weightings for speaking and coursework, as well as overall requirements for written French.

Options

In both 1997 and 2004 the number of different routes through a syllabus was quite limited. Option patterns were very similar across the two years, with most awarding bodies offering a choice between an externally assessed paper for topics and literary texts or internally assessed coursework. The coursework was in all cases based on a topic rooted in France or French-speaking culture and society, thereby covering very similar content to the externally assessed papers. Both options, however, provided candidates with the opportunity for in-depth study and the opportunity to pursue areas of interest. Variations on this model included: the OCR syllabus, which offered speaking coursework in 1997 and the option for teachers to assess their own candidates' speaking at AS in 2004; and the CCEA syllabuses, which offered no internally assessed options in either year.

Some components offered a choice of subject for essays in French, but for listening and reading tasks there was otherwise very little choice or no choice of questions. All awarding bodies in both years offered a wide choice of literary texts and/or topics to be studied, which the reviewers judged to be comparable over time and across awarding bodies.

There was an issue of comparability between options, particularly in 1997 when many candidates responded in English in the externally set papers and in French in the coursework. For some awarding bodies in 1997, candidates responded to a mixture of English and French tasks in the externally set papers, making comparability more difficult. Tasks in English tended to be more evaluative, whereas tasks in French required a mixture of knowledge and evaluation. This issue was addressed in 2004, when all responses were in French and across awarding bodies candidates were required to demonstrate their knowledge and also to analyse and evaluate aspects of their chosen topic or text, ensuring much greater comparability across awarding bodies. The reviewers judged, however, that the requirement by Edexcel in 2004 for candidates to study two texts in the literary topic made this option more demanding.

Question papers

The main changes to question papers between 1997 and 2004 were the result of the development of AS units to be at an appropriate level of demand for students completing the first year of an A level course and requirements to respond almost entirely in French apart from specific 'transfer of meaning' tasks. This latter requirement also meant that in 2004 all rubrics and instructions were in French. Such rubrics and the range of target language test-types used would have been familiar to candidates from GCSE, but represented an increase in demand from 1997.

In 2004, the requirement that assessment objectives were to be assessed throughout the syllabus resulted in many more mixed-skill papers than in 1997. Although there was some mixed-skill assessment of reading and writing in 1997, listening was assessed as a single skill (with the exception of OCR), often with responses in English. The reviewers judged that the mixed-skill papers in 2004 were demanding because of the range of tasks candidates had to carry out in a relatively short time and the onus, particularly in listening, on candidates organising their time appropriately.

While responses in English often made listening tasks less demanding in 1997, candidates had no control of the tape. In 2004, although responses were in French and sometimes included demanding summary tasks, candidates had control of the tape and could listen as often as they needed to. In both years, candidates had to deal with long, demanding and often authentic reading texts, although in 2004 those in the AS units were shorter and less complex, as was to be expected at AS level.

In 2004, dictionaries were not permitted in any external assessment, whereas in 1997 candidates had access to a dictionary for all OCR papers, for three papers offered by WJEC and for the preparation of the CCEA oral. In the years leading up to the Curriculum 2000 reforms, however, there was a growing culture of dictionary use in intervening syllabuses and the eventual decision to ban them was seen as a big change. In 1997 access to dictionaries meant, for example, that OCR was able to present challenging and unedited authentic texts to candidates, whereas by 2004, in particular at AS, reading texts were edited and key unfamiliar vocabulary was glossed. However, the reviewers judged that the texts were still of a suitable challenge in 2004 and that there was actually no increase in demand caused by the withdrawal of dictionaries from externally assessed components.

In 1997, with the exception of OCR, speaking tasks did not require candidates to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of French-speaking society, whereas in 2004, most awarding

bodies required a presentation, based on a candidate's own research either at AS or A2 and in some cases both. Although the requirement for preparation in advance of the examination gave candidates more control, the assessment of speaking was still considered demanding, as well as helping to develop wider research skills and independence. AO4 requirements were assessed in more components than in 1997, where the knowledge of culture and society was usually confined to the topics and texts paper or coursework. However, the opportunities for preparation were judged to offset the greater demand of AO4 being assessed more frequently.

Mark schemes in 2004 were clearly linked to the assessment objectives and therefore, in particular when addressing AO1 and AO2, gave more credit for response, structure of responses and for responding to spoken and written French, as well as for the quality of the language and accuracy. In 1997 the emphasis was often more focused on grammatical structure and accuracy, and this was reflected in the long prose translation tasks set by most awarding bodies. In 2004, apart from CCEA, the prose had given way to the translation of short extracts or looser 'transfer of meaning' tasks.

Although question papers and mark schemes were quite different in structure and in how they addressed the assessment objectives, the reviewers judged that the actual demand was very similar across the two years. The requirement to follow instructions and respond in French was found to be demanding in 2004, but this was offset by other factors, such as candidate control of the listening tape, the opportunity to prepare some aspects of the assessment in advance, and the emphasis on communicative responses as well as on grammatical structure and accuracy.

In the appearance and structure of question papers and mark schemes there was much greater comparability across the awarding bodies in 2004. In terms of demand, however, the OCR papers were judged to be the most demanding, particularly for lower-attaining candidates. Edexcel, AQA and CCEA were judged to be accessible across the range of ability, with opportunities in all skills for candidates to demonstrate what they knew, understood and could do, although the topics and texts unit for CCEA at AS was found to be difficult for this level. The WJEC papers were judged to be the least demanding in 2004, particularly in listening and reading where the reviewers judged that there were few questions which required inference, detail and more complex ideas and that the listening tape was quite slow and unnatural.

Coursework

Writing coursework was offered as an alternative in most cases to the external topics and texts paper and was not compulsory in either year. In terms of word length, coursework requirements were often greater in 1997, particularly for AQA and Edexcel, which raised issues of

comparability across awarding bodies and also with the topics and texts examination papers. By 2004 all awarding bodies required between 1,200 and 1,500 words in total, either via two shorter pieces or one extended piece. This reduction in word length made the externally assessed and internally assessed options more comparable in 2004, as well as ensuring greater comparability across awarding bodies. In 1997, OCR offered speaking coursework, but this was no longer offered in 2004. CCEA did not offer a coursework option in either year and WJEC required a small coursework element in 2004, even from candidates sitting the external examination option. However, tasks and topic areas required in writing coursework were very similar overall and the reviewers judged that the changes had no significant impact on demand.

3. Summary of findings from review of syllabuses

The most significant factors affecting examination demand between 1997 and 2004 were the changes in the design of the A level qualification in line with the Curriculum 2000 reforms and the requirements set out through the criteria and the assessment objectives that instructions and responses should be almost entirely in French.

The reviewers found that:

- in 2004, syllabuses and their schemes of assessment were more comparable across awarding bodies than in 1997, ensuring greater transparency and clarity about what was expected of candidates
- candidates had greater control in some areas over their examination in 2004, which supported the development of research skills and independence
- overall, although the appearance and structure of A level French syllabuses and their related assessment instruments had changed quite significantly, there was no corresponding significant change in demand.

4. Standards of performance

Materials available

The reviewers considered candidates' work in components with listening, reading and writing from all the awarding bodies in 1997 and 2004. Oral examinations were reviewed separately (see 'Standards of performance in speaking', below). Details of the materials reviewed are provided in Appendix B.

Performance descriptors

The reviewers were asked to identify key features of candidate performance in 2004 based on the work seen at each of the key grades. Performance descriptors for each grade boundary were drawn up, focusing on the assessment objectives, as well as allowing for additional features of performance.

Standards of performance at AS grade A

Table 2: AS grade A performance descriptors

<p>Understand and respond in speech and writing, to spoken language</p> <p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show clear understanding of spoken language over a range of stimuli • respond appropriately, retrieve both detailed and gist information and sometimes infer meaning • understand some abstract language and opinions • respond mostly accurately and unambiguously in written French when required • respond naturally in speaking, showing some initiative and respond generally accurately with good pronunciation and intonation.
<p>Understand and respond in speech and writing, to written language</p> <p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show clear understanding of a range of written texts • respond appropriately, retrieve both detailed and gist information, sometimes infer meaning and transfer meaning mostly accurately into English • understand some abstract language and opinions • respond mostly accurately and unambiguously in written French, showing the ability to manipulate language and structure responses, selecting relevant information • respond naturally in speaking, showing some initiative and the ability to transmit information, structure their response and develop ideas.
<p>Show knowledge of and apply accurately the grammar and syntax prescribed in the specification</p> <p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apply straightforward prescribed grammar and syntax generally accurately,

<p>including a variety of tenses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • start to apply more complex structures confidently, but with some errors • use a range of vocabulary and structures in their speech and writing • manipulate language where required.
<p>Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of aspects of the chosen society</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate sound knowledge of some aspects of French or French-speaking society and begin to evaluate that knowledge in context • provide relevant information and begin to justify opinions.

Performance at the AS grade A boundary

Performance by candidates from CCEA and WJEC at this grade boundary was of a similar standard. However, candidates from AQA and OCR demonstrated slightly stronger performance, and candidates from Edexcel showed the weakest performance. AQA and OCR candidates demonstrated better comprehension skills and their written French was more accurate, with a wider range of vocabulary and structures. Edexcel candidates were judged to be weaker across the range of skills.

The reviewers commented on the difficulty of comparing work from AQA candidates with work from the other awarding bodies. This was because AQA had a distinctive scheme of assessment at AS, in which candidates had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with pre-release material on a topic for unit 2 and tended to produce more extended writing as a result.

Standards of performance at AS grade E

Table 3: AS grade E performance descriptors

<p>Understand and respond in speech and writing, to spoken language</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show some understanding of spoken language over a range of stimuli dealing with familiar topics • identify some straightforward factual information • respond occasionally in written French when required, but often inaccurately • respond in speaking, sometimes hesitantly and with errors, but convey meaning, sometimes with anglicised pronunciation.
<p>Understand and respond in speech and writing, to written language</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show some understanding of written texts dealing with familiar topics • retrieve some relevant information and transfer meaning into English, but with gaps and inaccuracies • respond in written French, but often relying on lifted material (not always relevant) from the text and their language contained many basic errors

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respond in spoken French, but with limited ability to structure their response and with a restricted range of language.
<p>Show knowledge of and apply accurately the grammar and syntax prescribed in the specification</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand and apply some of the straightforward prescribed grammar and syntax, but with a high level of very basic errors • demonstrate some understanding, but with very limited use of more complex structures • use a limited range of vocabulary and structures in their speech and writing, often influenced by their first language.
<p>Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of aspects of the chosen society</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate a limited knowledge of some aspects of French or French-speaking society and use description rather than evaluation in their responses.

Performance at AS grade E boundary

Standards of performance across CCEA, Edexcel and OCR were broadly comparable at this grade boundary. Candidates from AQA demonstrated a higher level of performance than other awarding bodies, and WJEC candidates were judged to be weaker than other awarding bodies.

The reviewers commented that AQA candidates tended to demonstrate greater accuracy and a wider range of vocabulary and structures in their written French. They also showed better knowledge and understanding of aspects of French-speaking society.

WJEC candidates performed less well across the range of skills. In particular, the reviewers found that they produced less extended writing in French, which was less accurate and with fewer complex structures. They also demonstrated less in-depth knowledge of aspects of French-speaking society.

Once again, the reviewers commented on the difficulty of comparing work from AQA candidates with work from the other awarding bodies. This was because AQA had a distinctive scheme of assessment at AS, in which candidates had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with pre-release material on a topic for unit 2 and tended to produce more extended writing as a result.

Standards of performance at A level grade A

Table 4: A level grade A performance descriptors

<p>Understand and respond in speech and writing, to spoken language</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show clear and often in-depth understanding of spoken language over a wide range

<p>of often authentic stimuli, including abstract language and points of view</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retrieve detailed information, infer meaning, draw conclusions and transfer meaning into English • respond unambiguously and mostly accurately in written French, including summarising what they heard and developing ideas • respond fluently and mostly accurately with good pronunciation and intonation in speaking, interacting very well and often taking the initiative.
<p>Understand and respond in speech and writing, to written language</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show clear and often in-depth understanding of a wide range of authentic written texts, including abstract language and points of view • respond appropriately, retrieve both detailed and gist information, infer meaning, draw conclusions and transfer meaning accurately into English • respond unambiguously and mostly accurately in written French, sometimes at length, showing the ability to manipulate language and produce well-structured responses which develop ideas • respond fluently and mostly accurately in speaking, showing the ability to develop ideas, express points of view and structure their responses using a wide range of language.
<p>Show knowledge of and apply accurately the grammar and syntax prescribed in the specification</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand and apply the prescribed grammar and syntax mostly accurately, including more complex and idiomatic language • use a wide range of vocabulary and structures in their speech and writing • manipulate language confidently and use a range of register • transfer meaning into French with a high degree of success.
<p>Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of aspects of the chosen society</p>
<p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate in-depth knowledge of a range of aspects of French or French-speaking society and effectively relate it to the context • provide a range of information to justify their opinions and support argument • demonstrate a high level of analysis and in many cases evidence of personal research and enquiry.

Performance at A level grade A boundary

Standards of performance across CCEA, Edexcel and OCR were broadly comparable at this grade boundary. Candidates from AQA demonstrated a higher level of performance than other awarding bodies, and WJEC candidates were judged to be weaker than other awarding bodies.

The reviewers commented that AQA candidates demonstrated a high level of competence across the range of skills. In particular, their coursework showed in-depth knowledge and

understanding of aspects of French-speaking society along with strong analytical skills. They also used a wide range of vocabulary and complex structures with a high level of accuracy in their written French.

The reviewers judged that WJEC candidates tended to adopt a more descriptive and narrative approach in their coursework, with less analysis and evaluation evident than in coursework from the other awarding bodies. Their knowledge and understanding of aspects of French-speaking society were also weaker and their extended writing was less sophisticated.

Standards of performance at A level grade E

Table 5: A level grade E performance descriptors

<p>Understand and respond in speech and writing, to spoken language</p> <p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show a limited understanding of spoken language over the range of stimuli presented to them • understand the gist, retrieve some detailed factual information and transfer meaning into English when required, but with omissions and inaccuracies • respond in written French, but often with ambiguity and language containing grammatical and lexical errors • respond quite confidently, with reasonable pronunciation and intonation in speaking, and sustain the conversation, but without taking the initiative.
<p>Understand and respond in speech and writing, to written language</p> <p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • show a limited understanding of the range of written texts presented to them • retrieve some detailed and gist information of a mostly factual nature and transfer meaning into English, but with omissions and errors • respond in written French, sometimes at length, showing some ability to structure their response, but often with language containing many basic errors • respond quite confidently, with reasonable pronunciation and intonation in speaking, convey factual information and simple opinions with some ability to structure their responses.
<p>Show knowledge of and apply accurately the grammar and syntax prescribed in the specification</p> <p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand and apply some of the prescribed grammar and syntax but with a high level of inaccuracy even in more straightforward language • use a range of vocabulary and structures in their speech and writing, but not always appropriately or accurately and sometimes influenced by their first language • transfer meaning into French with limited success.
<p>Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of aspects of the chosen society</p> <p>Candidates at this level could normally:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrate a range of mostly relevant factual detail about aspects of French or

French-speaking society

- provide some opinions about their chosen aspects and occasionally use information to illustrate ideas
- demonstrate a limited level of analysis and in many cases use narration or description with little evaluation.

Performance at A level grade E boundary

Standards of performance across CCEA, Edexcel and OCR were broadly comparable at this grade boundary. Candidates from AQA demonstrated a higher level of performance than other awarding bodies, and WJEC candidates were judged to be weaker than other awarding bodies.

The reviewers commented that the AQA question papers provided borderline grade E candidates with good opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills. AQA candidates showed better comprehension skills and their written French was more accurate with a wider range of vocabulary.

WJEC candidates' comprehension skills and written French were weaker than candidates from the other awarding bodies. In their writing they demonstrated a more limited range of vocabulary and were less accurate, and coursework was often descriptive, with little analysis.

Standards of performance over time

The reviewers commented on the difficulty of comparing candidates with many answers in English in 1997 with candidates whose answers were almost entirely in French in 2004. They also noted the impact of widespread access to the internet on the improved quality of coursework produced in 2004.

A level grade A

Performance at the grade A boundary was comparable within all awarding bodies between 1997 and 2004 and the reviewers judged that standards of performance had been maintained.

A level grade E

Overall, the reviewers judged that there was a slight decline in the standard of performance at grade E between 1997 and 2004. The reviewers commented that candidates' comprehension skills and their control of language were better in 1997 than in 2004.

This trend was common to all awarding bodies with the exception of AQA, where the reviewers found the standard of performance tended to be slightly higher in 2004. The reviewers found

that AQA candidates performed consistently better in 2004 across the range of skills. In particular they commented on an improvement in the quality of candidates' written French and in their listening skills in 2004.

The reviewers judged the decline in the standard of performance at grade E to be particularly marked among OCR candidates, where they found performance in 1997 to be stronger across the range of skills.

Standards of performance in speaking

Materials available

The reviewers considered AS and A2 speaking examinations from all the awarding bodies in 2004 and A level examinations from Edexcel in 1997. There was no 2004 A2 grade E oral work from OCR. Details of the materials used are provided in Appendix B.

The reviewers commented that the demands made by awarding bodies were very different and that this made comparison difficult. The reviewers had to balance the merits of highly competent, pre-prepared work against more spontaneous responses to (sometimes unpredictable) questions.

The reviewers noted the impact of good and poor examiner technique on performance. There were instances where candidates' performance was hampered by the examiner's style, as they were not always given the chance to develop their ideas or show the full range of their language.

Performance in speaking

Overall, on the evidence available, standards of performance were comparable within Edexcel between 1997 and 2004.

The reviewers judged that work from OCR demonstrated the highest standards of performance in 2004 at both grade boundaries at AS and at A2 grade A. There was evidence of well-prepared research and sound knowledge of the chosen topics, along with analysis, though as expected this was more simplistic at grade E. The reviewers noted that candidates had quite a high degree of control over their test, as they had to cover only one topic of their choice at AS and A2, in addition to role-play (AS) or discussion about a text (A2). This meant that they tended to demonstrate in-depth knowledge and a range of vocabulary and structures within that topic area, rather than breadth of knowledge and language across a range of topics.

Of the four awarding bodies available at A2 grade E, work from AQA was found to demonstrate the highest level of performance. There was evidence of good knowledge across the four topic areas covered, with appropriate vocabulary. Structures tended to be simple but accurate, and there was evidence of research and some analysis, though little evaluation. Performance was characterised by a lack of independence, with examiner support required to sustain and develop the discussion.

Work from WJEC was consistently found to demonstrate a lower standard of performance than that from the other awarding bodies at all grade boundaries. At AS, the reviewers found that there was limited evidence of progression beyond GCSE, particularly in the presentation and general conversation. At both AS and A2 the range of language used tended to be limited compared to candidates from other awarding bodies. While the reviewers found evidence of research and thought on topic areas, performance was also affected by poor choice of topics, leading to displays of rather superficial factual knowledge. The reviewers commented that the level of performance was disappointing, given that candidates had quite a high degree of control over their test. For example, at A2, candidates choose the topic for discussion in the 'Exposé' section and are allowed to take a list of five to 10 subheadings into the examination.

5. Summary of findings from review of performance

Overall in 2004, in all components except for speaking, the performance of CCEA, Edexcel and OCR candidates tended to be comparable at AS and A level. AQA candidates demonstrated a higher level of performance than candidates from the other awarding bodies at each grade boundary. WJEC candidates were judged to demonstrate a lower level of performance than the other awarding bodies, except at AS grade A.

The reviewers found that between 1997 and 2004 standards of performance within all awarding bodies had been maintained at grade A. There was a slight decline in performance at grade E within all awarding bodies, with the exception of AQA, where the reviewers found that performance was stronger in 2004.

In speaking in 2004, work from OCR was judged to demonstrate the highest level of performance at both grade boundaries at AS and at A2 grade A. At A2 grade E, the reviewers found that work from AQA demonstrated the highest level of performance. Work from WJEC was judged to be of a lower standard than that from the other awarding bodies at all grade boundaries.

On the limited evidence available for the speaking component, standards appeared to have been maintained at both grade boundaries between 1997 and 2004.

Appendix A. A level syllabuses reviewed

Year	Awarding body and syllabus				
	AQA	CCEA	Edexcel	OCR	WJEC
1997	4211	A32	9190	9920	0026
2004	6651	5650	9190	7861	007190

Appendix B. A level scripts and oral examinations reviewed

Numbers of A level scripts reviewed at grades A and E

Awarding body	AQA		CCEA		Edexcel		OCR		WJEC	
	1997	2004	1997	2004	1997	2004	1997	2004	1997	2004
AS		A: 10 E: 10		A: 10 E: 10		A: 10 E: 10		A: 10 E: 10		A: 10 E: 10
A level	A: 10 E: 10	A: 10 E: 10	A: 10 E: 10	A: 10 E: 10	A: 10 E: 10	A: 10 E: 10	A: 10 E: 5	A: 10 E: 5	A: 10 E: 10	A: 10 E: 10

Oral examinations reviewed

Awarding body	AQA		CCEA		Edexcel		OCR		WJEC	
	1997	2004	1997	2004	1997	2004	1997	2004	1997	2004
AS grade A		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
AS grade E		✓		✓		✓		✓		✓
A level grade A		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
A level grade E		✓		✓	✓	✓				✓

Appendix C. List of reviewers

<i>Review team</i>	
Coordinator	Bridget Smith
Syllabus reviewers	Nancy Brannon Janet Searle Gary Woods
Script reviewers	Claude Coulton – OCR Mary Culpan Irene Hawkes Eleanor Houston – CCEA David Howe – AQA Malcolm Johnson – Edexcel Beverley Lott – Association for Language Learning (ALL) Andrew Portas Gareth Roberts – WJEC

Note: where participants were nominated by a particular organisation, the awarding body is shown in brackets after their name.