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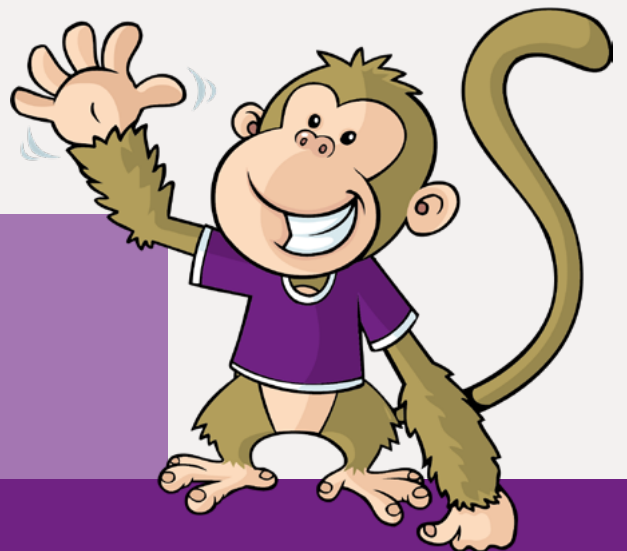
C2

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Pre A1

Cambridge English Qualifications

Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers

Improving Feedback for Young Learners: Introducing the New Statement of Results for Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers

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INTRODUCTION

This article describes why and how changes were made to Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers reporting practices. It outlines the studies undertaken to develop both additional feedback, and its presentation.

THE REPORTING OF RESULTS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

A central philosophy of the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers tests is celebrating children's achievement in English and providing encouragement for their learning journey. Therefore, all Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers candidates receive a certificate – there is no minimum 'pass' mark required. In addition, all certificates display at least one shield for each paper (listening, reading/writing, speaking), recognising that participation is valued as highly as test performance. A maximum of five shields is awarded for each paper, for a possible total of 15 shields. Figure 1 shows an example of a certificate.

Figure 1: Example of certificate

LEARNERS AND TEACHERS' NEEDS

Research was carried out at the start of the revision process with schools, teachers, parents and learners across the world, covering all aspects of the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers tests, including the certificates. The research showed that users were consistently satisfied with the existing certificates, where the shields recognise achievement in the different skills. Respondents felt that the shields provide both encouragement to learners and are easy to understand. However, a majority of respondents also indicated that they would like more detailed feedback. Therefore, it was decided to keep certificates and use of shields unchanged, but to investigate options for providing more information, as outlined below.

FOLLOWING BEST PRACTICE

From the perspective of best practices in learning and assessment, providing more information to candidates was an imperative. Multiple approaches to validating tests and assessments make clear that considering and designing according to the intended and/or likely effects, consequences and impact of tests are a key component of validity arguments (Bachman 2005, Fulcher and Davidson 2007, Weir 2005). A test needs to be fit for purpose, and one way it does this is by facilitating intended outcomes.

For the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers tests, the intended outcomes are an increased joy of learning and a sense of achievement among children learning English, and, for teachers and parents, a sense that they are being supported in their endeavours to teach practical English skills to children. In order to fully meet these intended outcomes – particularly the third – candidates, their teachers and their families needed more information.

Research shows the central role that feedback has within learning processes (Clark 2012, Hattie and Timperley 2007, Jones and Saville 2016, Pintrich 2004, Shute 2008, Zimmerman 2002). Only with information about one's performance, can one know what they should do to progress. More importantly for this age group, with appropriate information and with the support of adults, children will know where they are on their English learning journey, where they are going, and how they are going to get there (Hattie and Timperley 2007). They and their teachers and families can use that information to make learning choices that result in ability to use English in real life.

Note however, that in order for feedback to enhance learning, it needs to be easy to use and offer an appropriate level of control to the learner (Dunlop 2017, Fernández-Toro and Hurd 2014). It was these questions – what amount of detail would be appropriate, and what format would be most easy to use – that were the two main areas of research for this project.

ARRIVING AT AN APPROACH

Several options were considered to improve feedback quality. The options offered different types of information at different levels of detail. In addition to shields, the use of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels (Council of Europe 2001), the Cambridge English Scale, and detailed task-level information were all available options. Stakeholder responses were clear – the more information, the better. Some stakeholders expressed enthusiasm for numeric scores that enabled ranking of children via their overall achievement. However, a very large majority stressed that enhanced feedback should uphold the key features of the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers tests; 'no fail', fun, child-friendliness, and positive encouragement were absolutely essential.

As the primary function of Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers tests is to support learning, a learning-first approach to feedback was adopted. Any new information to be provided would not consist of more scores, but rather substantive information about what learners showed they can do and are still mastering, and practical suggestions on how to move forward. This information would be personal to individual candidates and based on their performance on their test.

At the same time, the relationship between shields, CEFR levels and Cambridge English Scale scores was to be shown visually in a figure, so that parents and teachers would easily know where their child was both on an international scale (the CEFR) and on their journey through Cambridge English Qualifications. In this way, new 'big picture' information would be available for interested adults, and it would be presented in a way that serves learning and development purposes.

DEVELOPMENT OF SUBSKILLS AND DESCRIPTORS

To provide the additional information desired by learners, their families and teachers, a review of the tests was conducted. The review aimed to identify what information was available over and above a diagnosis of overall achievement in a skill, which is already provided in the shields. A key issue was to identify subskills that were tested often enough to provide a reasonably confident diagnosis of learners' abilities in those subskills.

The review found that subskills were tested at task level, and that tasks focused on functional, communicative subskills such as making and understanding descriptions, holding and understanding conversations, and understanding instructions. In addition, some tasks require candidates to demonstrate their ability to use level-appropriate vocabulary and grammar knowledge accurately.

Two or more tasks typically assessed subskills at each level. These tasks often appeared on different papers, showing how the subskills were tested for both productive and receptive skills and print and oral mediums. The initial list of subskills and associated test tasks are listed in Table 1.

Level	Subskill (testing focus)	Tasks*
Pre A1 Starters	Descriptions	RW2, RW4
	Conversation	Speaking test
	Using words	RW1, L1, L4
	Writing words	RW3, RW5, L2
A1 Movers	Descriptions	RW1, RW6, L3
	Story	RW3, RW5
	Conversation	RW2, L2, L4
	Using language knowledge	RW4, L1
A2 Flyers	Understand descriptions by reading and listening to information	RW1, L1
	Understand and tell stories by reading and writing	RW3, RW5, RW6
	Use your grammar and vocabulary knowledge accurately	RW4, RW6
	Understand conversations	L2, L3, L4
	Describe things and events using speaking	Speaking test
	Pronunciation	Speaking test

*RW = Reading/Writing paper; L = Listening paper; Numbers 1-6 = part number, e.g. RW2 = Reading/Writing part 2.

Table 1. Initial identified subskills: summary

Five assessment specialists, who were also experienced teachers of young learners, then separately developed descriptors for each of the subskills. The five submissions were combined to create the first full draft of the descriptors.

Next, these descriptors were sent to one researcher and five specialist teachers of young learners based in Latin America, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe and the Middle East. These instructional specialists reviewed the descriptors for clarity to children and their families, and for representativeness of the construct to which each descriptor referred. The specialists also wrote a selection of practical suggestions that children could use to practise and improve English.

Based on the suggestions and comments from teachers, the descriptors were reorganised and their wording refined through a further four rounds of revision. At the same time, the teachers' suggestions for learning were organised according to the subskills that they were most associated with (see Table 2). At this time, the suggestions were also revised for readability and appropriateness to as many children as possible.

Level	Subskill (testing focus)	Tasks*
Pre A1 Starters	Understanding conversation	L3
	Understanding basic descriptions	RW2, RW4
	Writing words/spelling	RW3, RW5, L2
	Using vocabulary knowledge	RW1, L1, L4
	Conversation	Speaking test
A1 Movers	Understanding conversation	RW2, L2, L4
	Understanding spoken descriptions	L3, L5
	Using written descriptions	RW1, RW6
	Reading and understanding stories	RW3, RW5
	Using grammar and vocabulary knowledge accurately	RW4, L1
	Conversation	Speaking test
A2 Flyers	Understanding conversation	RW2, L2, L3, L4
	Understanding descriptions	RW1, L1, L5
	Understanding and telling stories by reading and writing	RW3, RW5, RW7
	Using grammar and vocabulary knowledge accurately	RW4, RW6
	Describing things and events using speaking	Speaking test

*RW = Reading/Writing paper; L = Listening paper; Numbers 1-7 = part number. E.g., L3 = Listening part 3.

Table 2. Final identified subskills: summary

Three further areas of work remained. The first was what information to provide to candidates who had not yet mastered any of the subskills, and to those who had mastered them all. This was an important issue, because children not only need to feel a sense of achievement, but also be provided with sufficient challenge and pathways to move on to the next phases of learning.

As a result, basic and advanced descriptors were developed for each of Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers. Analyses of pretesting data indicated that children who were still in the process of mastering all the descriptors could typically, as a minimum, use English in several ways, so these ways were described in the basic descriptors. For the advanced descriptors, candidates were encouraged to develop skills represented in the exam the next level up. For example, the A2 Flyers advanced descriptor encourages candidates to use English at an A2 Key for Schools level of proficiency.

The second issue was to decide when candidates could be considered to have mastered each subskill. Data from pretesting was gathered and analysed to determine a 'mastery' threshold – the point at which a subskill becomes classified as a strength. As is always the case in educational testing, different versions of tests contain items of somewhat varying difficulty. Therefore, applying a fixed raw score mastery threshold would result in variation of the standard from version to version. To deal with this issue, a fixed Rasch ability threshold was agreed, thereby allowing variations in difficulty between test versions to be accounted for.

Finally, it was crucial to develop reporting that was as accessible as possible to candidates and their families. One way to do this was to provide the Statements of Results in languages other than English where desired and possible. Therefore, Statements of Results will be provided in some languages in addition to English.

DEVELOPMENT OF LAYOUT

While development of descriptors that represented detailed candidate mastery was underway, the other key piece of the Statement of Results was also in development: the layout of the information. This issue was important because feedback must always be as intuitive and easy to understand as possible, otherwise people cannot use it effectively (Dunlop 2017). Three options were initially discussed, two of which were chosen for international trialling based on their clarity. The two options are presented in Figure 2.
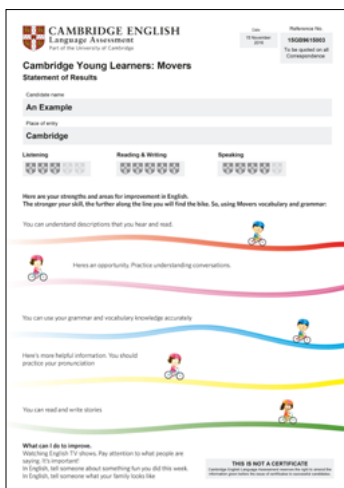
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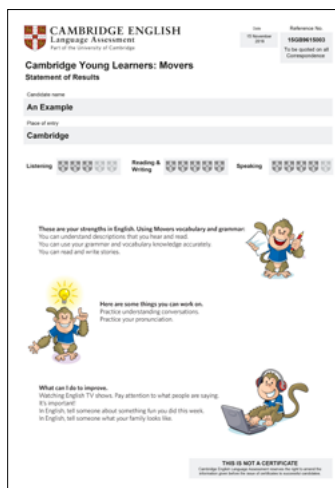
Figure 2: Trialled options

Ten countries representing Latin America, Europe, South Asia and Southeast Asia participated in the trial, consisting of over 200 teachers, school staff, parents, and children. It was made clear to the respondents that the artwork used was indicative and not final. With nearly three quarters of the vote, the preferred version was Version 2, where the information was presented in categories.

Looking at the feedback on the versions, there were a number of factors which had led to why Version 2 was more popular – the information architecture was much more intuitive and easy to understand. The strength noted for Version 1 was that the lines with the bikes clearly showed candidates' progress/abilities. However, the weaknesses were that the lines require interpreting, and it was difficult to understand at a glance. In contrast, several strengths were noted for Version 2. These included the clean appearance, its visual appeal, the well organised presentation of information, that it was easy to understand (if in a known language), the presence of the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers monkey, and the clear presentation of strengths and areas to improve. Weaknesses noted for Version 2 addressed only the choice of graphics, and not the core information design. A few respondents preferred using boys and girls to the monkey, and a handful felt that A2 Flyers candidates might find the monkey a little 'young'.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers philosophy of celebrating achievement and encouraging learning is highly valued by teachers, parents and children. The certificates and shields are recognised as a key part of this philosophy and remain unchanged in the revised tests which were introduced in January 2018. However, users of these tests recognised the need for more information that would serve children's learning. Second language learning experts have already conducted substantial research into what kinds of assessment information best serve learning purposes and these principles were applied to developing additional feedback for the Pre A1 Starters, A1 Movers and A2 Flyers tests.

Additional feedback will be provided in a new Statement of Results that will complement candidates' certificates. The Statement of Results will be provided in local languages where possible, so that parents can read them. The Statement of Results will show what kinds of communicative activities children have shown they can do, and which kinds of activities they still need to work on. The Statement of Results will also provide some suggestions for how children can improve their English skills.

These more detailed, descriptive and personalised reporting practices are designed specifically to support children, teachers and families in learning English. It is hoped that test users will find them useful, and that children will be even more enthusiastic and confident in their English studies.

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