

Revising the A2 Key and B1 Preliminary Reading exam

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Introduction

At Cambridge Assessment English, we regularly review the performance of our exams to ensure that they continue to be fit for purpose. In the years since the last revision of A2 Key and B1 Preliminary in 2004, there have been changes to our understanding of and beliefs about the General English proficiency construct at the A2 and B1 levels which we wished to ensure were reflected in the new specifications of the exams during this revision process. The introduction of upwards certification, whereby very high-performing candidates can be granted a certificate at one Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001) level above that of the target level of the exam they are taking, means it is necessary for each exam to feature elements of the descriptors for the level above. There has also been a move towards greater standardisation, where appropriate, from one Cambridge English Qualification to the next in order to provide a greater sense of continuity between these exams for the candidates and their teachers. This article will discuss the changes made to the Reading components of the A2 Key and B1 Preliminary exams and the rationale behind these decisions in light of these considerations.¹

It should be noted that while the Reading and Writing components of Preliminary have now been split into two separate papers, there continues to be a combined Reading and Writing paper for Key. For discussion of the writing tasks for Key and Preliminary, see Panagiotopoulou, Lambie and Cheung, this issue.

Refining Reading test constructs

The first language (L1) reading construct, shown in Figure 1, details the types of reading that may be used by L1 readers in the left-hand column. Careful reading involves extracting the whole meaning, while expeditious reading involves reading quickly and selectively (Khalifa and Weir 2009, Urquhart and Weir 1998). Local reading refers to understanding individual sentences, whereas global reading refers to comprehension across sentences or of the overall text. Whatever combination of careful or expeditious and local or global is chosen will depend on the purpose for reading. For example, searching for a particular word in the dictionary will involve scanning, a type of expeditious local reading, while reading the definition will involve careful local reading. Even at A2 level, students have been found to be able to make use of both the expeditious and careful reading types (Pickles 2018). For the revised A2 Key and B1 Preliminary exams, we therefore considered it important to include at least one task that could encourage expeditious reading. The 2004 test specifications for A2 Key did not explicitly feature such a task, but by contrast, the B1 Preliminary test did – the true–false task in Part 3.

However, several issues with the task were identified:

- the response format is naturally amenable to guessing since there is a 50% chance of answering correctly by responding at random; this was reflected in the performance of the items, which typically exhibited poorer measurement characteristics than those of other tasks
- perhaps also as a result of the binary response format, the task itself was rather straightforward, so generating items of the required level of difficulty often resulted in the use of texts which were effectively above the level of the exam, resulting in an imbalanced task.

For these reasons it was considered necessary to revisit the expeditious reading coverage for both sets of revised specifications.

1. Where reference is made to 'A2 Key', this should be read as inclusive of A2 Key for Schools, and likewise the term 'B1 Preliminary' within this article encompasses the standard and the variants for schools. These exams were previously known as *Cambridge English: Key* and *Cambridge English: Preliminary*.

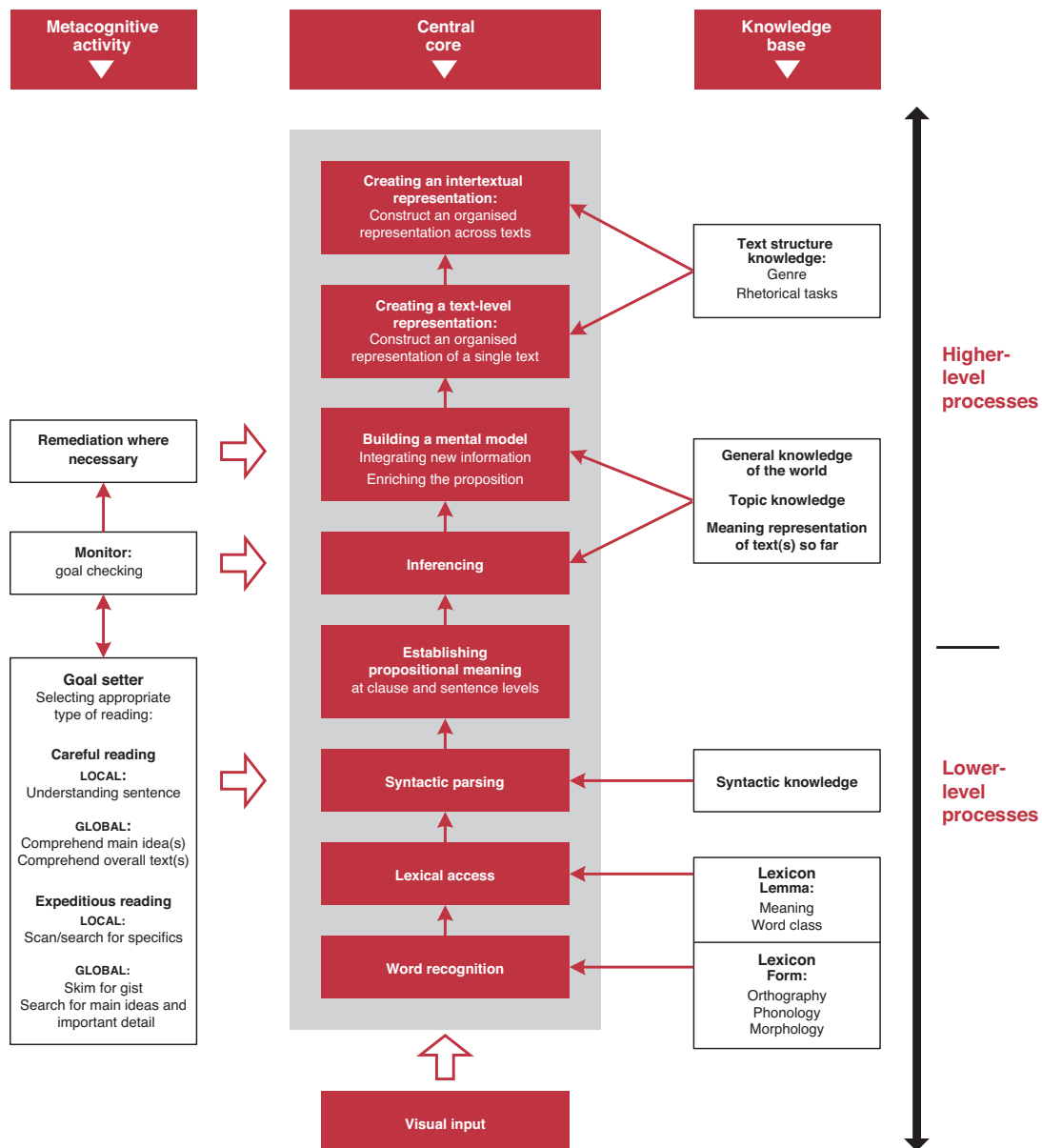


Figure 1: Khalifa and Weir's (2009) model of reading

Source: Adapted from Khalifa and Weir (2009:43) (Brunfaut and McCray 2015:7)

The central column entries in Figure 1 show the cognitive processes involved in L1 reading, which increase in complexity as the list ascends. 'Inferencing', the first of the higher-level processes, is generally considered to come into play at Level B2 and above (Khalifa and Weir 2009). It is the lower-level processes that are relevant for Levels A2 and B1. In the 2004 specifications for A2 Key, 'lexical access' and 'syntactic parsing' are tested through multiple-choice cloze tasks, while 'establishing propositional meaning' is tested through tasks which test the comprehension of both shorter and longer texts. A2 Key also tested syntactic parsing through an open cloze task, but this task type was absent from B1 Preliminary. It was important to address this by adding such a task to the revised B1 Preliminary exam while retaining the existing testing focuses.

Reviewing and revising the tasks

Bearing in mind the priorities described in the previous section, the 2004 specification task types for both A2 Key and B1 Preliminary were reviewed in order to judge to what extent they contributed towards the exams being fit for purpose. Subject specialists with many years of expertise in writing for and reviewing these exams were commissioned to write reports on this, and our internal research department also ran analyses to evaluate the tests' construct coverage and measurement characteristics.

In particular, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was conducted to evaluate the consistency of the tasks within and across components of B1 Preliminary (Elliott, Benjamin and Docherty 2014b), which revealed that Writing Part 1 consistently loaded on Reading rather than Writing. This finding is not entirely surprising since it is a sentence transformation task, a Use of English task type resembling those in B2 First, C1 Advanced and C2 Proficiency, although the fact that they typically involve a single word makes them closer to open cloze items. The Use of English construct overlaps with Reading in that it relies on lower-level reading cognitive processes, and at B1 level, where there are few higher-level cognitive processes involved, the two constructs are close enough to be considered unidimensional. The decision was made to move the task into Reading but to convert it into a standard open cloze task with a single extended text rather than discrete sentences, which brings the added advantage of consistency across all five levels (A2 Key, B2 First, C1 Advanced and C2 Proficiency all feature such a task).

Differential Item Functioning (DIF) analysis, which is a statistical technique used to identify items which behave differently (i.e. have a different level of difficulty) for different defined groups (e.g. male and female) when ability is accounted for, was conducted to investigate potential bias in particular tasks in A2 Key (Elliott, Benjamin and Docherty 2014a). A2 Key Reading and Writing Part 6 – a vocabulary/spelling task – was found to exhibit DIF across different first languages in some cases. Since there were also construct-related issues with the task (discussed in the next section), the decision was made to remove it from the test.

An overview of the content of the revised A2 Key and B1 Preliminary exams is shown in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. Table 3 lists the tasks from the 2004 specifications which were retired and outlines the reasons for this. A more detailed account follows in the next section.

Table 1: The revised A2 Key Reading paper

<i>Exam part (items; marks)</i>	<i>Task type</i>	<i>Task focus</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Part 1 (6 items; 6 marks)	3-option multiple choice (discrete)	Reading comprehension for detail and main ideas at word, phrase and sentence level.	New. Same task type as B1 Preliminary Part 1.
Part 2 (7 items; 7 marks)	3-option multiple matching	Reading comprehension for specific information at sentence and text level; expeditious reading and careful reading.	New. Adapted from a task type option for A2 Key 2004 specifications Part 4.
Part 3 (5 items; 5 marks)	3-option multiple choice	Reading comprehension for detail and main ideas at sentence and text level; careful reading.	New. Adapted from a task type option for A2 Key 2004 specifications Part 4.
Part 4 (6 items; 6 marks)	3-option multiple-choice cloze	Lexical and lexico-grammatical words in context.	Modified. Given a more lexical focus.
Part 5 (6 items; 6 marks)	Open cloze	Grammatical words in context.	Modified. Number of items reduced.

Note: Writing is part of the same exam for A2 Key and Parts 6 and 7 are writing tasks (see Panagiotopoulou, Lambie and Cheung, this issue).

Table 2: The revised B1 Preliminary Reading paper

<i>Exam part (items; marks)</i>	<i>Task type</i>	<i>Task focus</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Part 1 (5 items; 5 marks)	3-option multiple choice (discrete)	Reading comprehension for detail and main ideas at word, phrase and sentence level.	As B1 Preliminary 2004 specifications.
Part 2 (5 items; 5 marks)	8-option multiple matching	Reading comprehension for specific information at sentence and text level; expeditious reading and careful reading.	As B1 Preliminary 2004 specifications.
Part 3 (5 items; 5 marks)	4-option multiple-choice reading	Reading comprehension for detail and main ideas at sentence and text level; careful.	As Part 4 in B1 Preliminary 2004 specifications.
Part 4 (5 items; 5 marks)	Gapped text	Reading comprehension for main ideas and understanding coherence and cohesion at text level.	New. Added to cover 'building a mental model'.
Part 5 (6 items; 6 marks)	4-option multiple-choice cloze	Lexical and lexico-grammatical words in context.	Modified. Given a more lexical focus.
Part 6 (6 items; 6 marks)	Open cloze	Grammatical words in context.	New. Added for construct coverage.

Table 3: Retired tasks from the A2 Key and B1 Preliminary 2004 specifications

<i>Exam and part</i>	<i>Task type</i>	<i>Task focus</i>	<i>Notes</i>
A2 Key Part 1	Matching	Reading comprehension for detail at sentence level.	Some items were interdependent.
A2 Key Part 3A	3-option multiple choice (discrete)	Reading comprehension and pragmatic competence.	Now tested more authentically in the Speaking paper.
A2 Key Part 3B	Gapped text	Reading comprehension and coherence and cohesion in a dialogue.	Now considered inauthentic for the Reading paper.
A2 Key Part 4	Right–Wrong–Doesn't Say (R–W–DS)	Reading comprehension for detailed understanding and main ideas at text level.	R–W–DS no longer considered cognitively appropriate for A2 readers.
A2 Key Part 6	Spelling and definitions	Vocabulary knowledge and correct spelling.	Now tested more authentically in the Writing paper.
A2 Key Part 8	Information transfer	Identifying specific information from a pair of short texts.	Some items were interdependent.
B1 Preliminary Part 3	True–False	Reading comprehension for specific information; expeditious reading.	Binary tasks no longer desired.

Changes to A2 Key Reading – more reading comprehension

As explained in the previous section, it was considered important for the A2 Key exam to feature a task which aimed to elicit expeditious reading of a longer text as well as one that was more focused on careful reading. The multiple-matching and multiple-choice variants of the A2 Key 2004 specifications Part 4 tasks were considered suitable task types for these respective purposes and the first trial tests featured versions of each of these. By contrast, the Right–Wrong–Doesn't Say (R–W–DS) task type was retired on the basis that there was some debate around whether it is appropriate, from a cognitive perspective, to ask A2 candidates to conceptualise the idea of a

text 'not saying' something, as opposed to saying that something is false. Based on the statistics for this task type, the candidates did not appear to have difficulty in completing it, but the question over its cognitive validity, as well as the lack of any comparable task among the rest of the Cambridge English Qualifications, led to its being retired.

The same desire to include more reading comprehension tasks led to the 2004 specifications Part 1, a matching task, being replaced with a lower-level equivalent of the B1 Preliminary 2004 specifications Part 1, a series of discrete 3-option multiple-choice tasks.

After these changes were made, the revised A2 Key Reading test contained 18 reading comprehension items as opposed to eight. However, the inclusion of these denser reading tasks also meant an increase in reading load. For the benefit of the candidates, their exam day experience, and the avoidance of fatigue, it was considered important that the revised exam take a similar amount of time to complete as its predecessor. It was therefore necessary to consider whether any of the remaining 2004 specifications tasks were surplus to requirements in terms of representing the target construct.

Changes to A2 Key Reading – avoiding duplication

It was noted that the 2004 specifications of A2 Key featured two multiple-choice cloze tasks – the 5-item Part 2 and the 10-item Part 5. The former had more of a focus on lexis while the latter had a more grammatical focus. In order to avoid the inclusion of extraneous items where an aspect of the construct was being covered thoroughly in multiple places, it was decided that these tasks would be combined. The revised task became the new Part 4, which is a 6-item multiple-choice cloze task in a text format. Four or five of the items in each task are to focus primarily on lexis and one or two items may have a more grammatical focus. The open cloze task was retained with fewer items focusing primarily on grammar. The revisions to these tasks ensured that construct coverage was maintained with less redundancy.

Changes to A2 Key Reading – construct relevance

There were further tasks within the A2 Key 2004 Reading specifications which added to the length of the exam, but which seemed to target a slightly broader definition of the reading construct than was now conceptualised. Part 3A was a series of five multiple-choice discrete items where students were required to choose the pragmatically appropriate response. Similarly, Part 3B featured a written conversation between two people from which one interlocutor's turns had been removed and the candidates had to put them back into the text in the right order. Something these tasks had in common was that they dealt with issues relating to interaction, but in a purely receptive context. The aspects of language that these tasks were testing were felt to sit more logically within the Speaking component of the exam and in the case of Part 3B, the notion of presenting students with the script of a spoken conversation now seemed somewhat less authentic both interactionally and situationally.

Similarly, the testing of vocabulary definitions and correct spelling, which occurred in Part 6, seemed better suited to the authentic context of writing a text than isolated as a separate task. Furthermore, this particular task format was found to be prone to a degree of DIF, which could be a source of bias, and the dual focus on vocabulary knowledge and spelling (particularly precise spelling, which is not entirely consistent with the performance descriptors for A2) introduced a degree of construct ambiguity. Part 8, which tested information transfer, was also identified for removal from the specifications. It could suffer from interdependency and, as such, the tasks were very hard to write to the extent that it would have bordered on impractical to keep it. Additionally, the candidates found the tasks so easy that Part 8 frequently failed to meet the statistical requirements after pretesting, resulting in a great deal of rewriting, retesting and wastage. On the basis of these considerations, the task was retired.

The changes described above meant that we were able to ensure that each item in the test was more focused on truly testing reading.

Changes to B1 Preliminary Reading

Just as for A2 Key, experienced subject specialists were commissioned to write reports about the B1 Preliminary exam and provide any recommendations for changes alongside our own research department conducting analyses into task performance. The findings revealed that a high proportion of the existing task types within B1 Preliminary were performing as desired. Two changes were considered necessary. The first of these was to remove the true–false task in Part 3. Its binary nature meant it was too amenable to guessing and there was often an imbalance between the difficulty of the task and the complexity of the text.

The other change made was to incorporate 'building a mental model' into the reading construct covered within the test. Building a mental model, even at paragraph level as this task requires, is arguably an upper B1, even a B2 reading ability, and it was felt that the inclusion of this task, if trialling proved successful, may help in discriminating between candidates for the purposes of upwards certification. The task trialled well and it was confirmed that the task was suitable for use at B1 level, provided that the connections within and across sentences were clear and the text followed a simple temporal sequence. A further benefit of the task type was that it tested understanding at a global level, across sentences rather than simply within them. Our subject specialists additionally noted that the inclusion of this task would create greater continuity between B1 Preliminary and B2 First. These two areas constitute the extent of the changes to B1 Preliminary Reading.

Creating continuity between the exams

In addition to the considerations detailed above with regard to the test construct, the revision of A2 Key and B1 Preliminary was viewed as an ideal opportunity to revisit the structure of the exams and enhance a sense of continuity between the levels. In terms of the 2004 specifications, both A2 Key and B1 Preliminary featured task types that were unique to each exam. For instance, A2 Key Reading featured a task about definitions and spelling (Part 6) and B1 Preliminary Reading contained a true–false task (Part 3). In order to help learners and teachers by reducing the variety of task types where possible and aligning the structure of the exams, both of these task types were removed and a number of additional changes were made. It has been noted that although students' preferences for task types are often diverse, certain formats are believed to cause less anxiety than others, which are usually reflective of their preferred learning style (Birenbaum 2007). However, the effect of task *familiarity* on test-takers was particularly relevant when revising these exams. Candidate performance may be improved if familiar task types are encountered (Révész and ZhaoHong 2006), which therefore had to be considered during the exam revision process.

The order of the revised A2 Key exam was modelled after that of B1 Preliminary, with Parts 1 and 2 mirroring each other. This resulted in both exams beginning with multiple-choice discrete tasks followed by a multiple-matching task geared towards eliciting expeditious reading. In both exams, Part 3 is a multiple-choice reading comprehension task with a longer text. B1 Preliminary then features a gapped text task for which there is no A2 equivalent. Both Reading exams are concluded with a multiple-choice cloze followed by an open cloze. The structures of the exams are therefore now aligned. At one stage, consideration was given to attempting to replicate the order of tasks in B2 First, C1 Advanced and C2 Proficiency. This would have meant beginning the exam with the multiple-choice cloze task. However, it was felt that the discrete reading comprehension tasks would make for a more appropriate introduction to the exam for these lower-level learners, and that it would be beneficial for those teachers and students already familiar with the structure of B1 Preliminary.

Trialling the new specifications

There were two trials for A2 Key Reading. Between Trials 1 and 2, changes were made to the format of the tasks, the rubrics for the tasks, and the number of items in each task.

Revised A2 Key trial outcomes

The second trial of the revised A2 Key Reading paper in August 2016 formed part of a report which explored the validity and reliability of the revised Listening, Reading and Writing components, in addition to the suitability of time provisions for candidates (Vidaković 2018a). Although Reading and Writing sections are combined in one paper in A2 Key (see Table 1), it was straightforward to separate findings related to reading constructs as required. The performances of a sample of candidates (330 from 12 test centres) were analysed, and surveys about their perspectives on the test conducted (294 responses). A small sample of teachers and invigilators (N=9) were also surveyed, to explore perspectives on the revised test. In terms of participant characteristics, most candidates were of the target age group of the live exam for schools (11–14 years old). Regarding CEFR level, most participants (63%) were of A2 (the target level) and 25% were one band below at A1, which accurately reflected the expected live candidature.

Results of statistical item analysis indicated that there were no significant issues with the difficulty of the revised Reading test. Supporting this data, the candidates' survey responses indicated that most (90%) agreed that the test allowed them to demonstrate their reading ability. The majority of participants (67%) perceived the difficulty of the paper as they would have expected it to be. The time taken by candidates was also compared to their reported CEFR level, indicating that timing was appropriately accounted for in the new test version. Results supported the finding that timing was not a considerable issue. In the survey, 81% of respondents felt that they had enough time to complete the test. Finally, the teacher and invigilator survey responses were also largely positive, further supporting the overall outcome of the trial.

Revised B1 Preliminary trial outcomes

The second round of trialling was also conducted for B1 Preliminary between August and September 2016, to further investigate the validity and reliability of the revised test, and the adequacy of time allowed (Vidaković 2018b). For the Reading part of the exam, the performances of 443 candidates were analysed. In terms of CEFR level, test-takers were broadly similar to those expected to take part in the live candidature – although some were slightly weaker. 40% of participants were B1 (target level) and 40% at A2 (one level below the target band). 285 candidates also completed a survey about their experiences of the test, including 77% aged 15 years old or below, which reflects the younger target age group for B1 Preliminary, and compared favourably to the live candidature. Other characteristics of the trial participants were reflective of actual candidates; most were preparing to take the real test (74%), had not taken it before (88%) and intended to do so within the next 12 months (90%). In addition to the candidates, a group of 11 teachers and invigilators also completed a survey about their perceptions of the test.

The results of the statistical item analysis highlighted several potentially problematic items across the tasks. However, these results were found to be due to issues with individual items rather than the tasks themselves. Part 6 (the new open-cloze section) had a higher than acceptable range of item difficulties for B1 Preliminary. Nonetheless, erratic item difficulties such as these do not appear to suggest a systemic problem, and would be possible to address through familiarisation and training of item writers. However, indications were that – overall, at least – the timings were appropriate. Candidates taking more than 45 minutes to complete the test were 4.4% at B2, 14% at B1, 29.2% at A2 and 31.8% for below A2. As the expected proficiency level of most test-takers was B1/A2, the timings were demonstrated to be appropriate.

Candidates' survey feedback about the test was largely positive, with 89% agreeing that it was a good means of demonstrating their reading ability, and 92% indicating that the instructions were clear. The perceived difficulty of the paper revealed mixed responses, but it was apparent that the two new tasks (Parts 4 and 6, the gapped text and open cloze, respectively) were viewed as the most challenging. Part 4 (which involved removed sentences) was believed to be particularly difficult, with 36% of candidates reporting it as difficult or very difficult. This finding supported the earlier item-level statistical analysis, which found Part 4 to be the most complex. This may have been as it was a new and unfamiliar task type at the level, as will be subsequently discussed. However, the overall difficulty of the revised test was as expected for the majority of test-takers (67%). Regarding timing, most participants felt this was 'OK' (76%). Teachers and invigilators were also mostly enthusiastic about the revised Reading test, with eight (N=11) identifying as 'positive' or 'very positive', and two were neutral. All of these participants agreed that the tasks were important and worth students' time to prepare for; nine (N=11) believed that they were motivating and that the instructions were clear. With regard to timing, the teachers and invigilators mostly agreed with the candidates, as most (seven, N=11) reported the overall timing to be 'OK'. They also supported the findings from candidates' scores and survey responses reported above. This particularly focused on the new Part 4 as being too difficult (six, N=11, reported agreement of its appropriateness) for students based on its unfamiliarity, in addition to the new Part 6, albeit to a lesser extent (eight, N=11, agreed that it was at the appropriate level). Finally, as was the case with the A2 Key revision trial, several teachers and invigilators also commented that rudimentary practical aspects of the test such as shading the boxes might have been challenging for some learners. They also recommended a wider range of topics available to candidates in order to increase fairness. Overall, however, their perspectives on the test were largely favourable.

Conclusion

The revisions of A2 Key and B1 Preliminary have improved each exam in several ways, each of which is evidently advantageous to the test-taker. Rigorous trialling of these revisions has indicated that although making such changes can present certain unforeseen challenges at times, the overall outcome in each case was generally highly positive. Including new task types allowed both exams to better reflect contemporary understanding of the reading construct, for example. Adding a task (in the A2 Key exam) which encouraged expeditious reading had not been done previously, and removing the binary expeditious task in B1 Preliminary was equally important to maintain fitness for purpose in a contemporary assessment context. Changing the order of the parts (A2 Key Parts 1 and 2, for example) to standardise the structure of the two exams was another principal objective. However, in each case the difficulty of the items and the overall timing of the test had to be investigated, if the impact of the revisions was to be thoroughly understood. Furthermore, it had to be determined if this would affect stakeholder experiences; exploring candidate and teacher perspectives on these modifications was an essential part of understanding the value of the changes.

In summary, the latest trial results for both revised exams were largely positive. The timing of each test was found to be unproblematic, and candidates generally appeared to have had enough time to complete the exam. Respondents mostly felt that instructions were clear, the tests allowed candidates to demonstrate their reading ability, and that the overall difficulty was as expected in each case. In terms of specific tasks, difficulty was not a significant issue with A2 Key, and each of the revised items performed as expected. For B1 Preliminary, there were a few relatively minor issues highlighted by the later trial. In particular, the two new tasks (Parts 4 and 6) contained items that were found to be more difficult than others, as explained above. However, this did appear to be as a result of a lack of familiarity with the individual items in question, and it was concluded that item writer

training could be used to overcome this. The latest revisions of both the A2 Key and B1 Preliminary exams – and the subsequent trials to determine their impact – have evidently produced largely favourable results, which indicate that the revisions to the Reading papers will be beneficial to candidates and teachers.

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