

Consultation with English language teaching professionals to inform revisions to A2 Key and B1 Preliminary and their variants for schools

Debbie Howden

Business and Marketing, Cambridge Assessment English

Angela Wright

Business and Marketing, Cambridge Assessment English

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Methodology and respondent profile	3
Findings	3
Test content	3
Length of the tests	5
Task types	7
Score reporting	7
Preparation	8
Conclusions	9

Introduction

At Cambridge Assessment English we review our exams on a regular basis to ensure that they remain relevant to the needs of learners and schools and incorporate evolving approaches to assessment and learning. The first step in the revision process is to consult English language teaching professionals globally, who have experience of running the exams or preparing learners for them. In this article, we report on the stakeholders' consultation survey we carried out regarding the revisions to A2 Key and B1 Preliminary and their variants for schools, which were then known as *Cambridge English: Key* and *Cambridge English: Preliminary*, respectively.

We surveyed a range of professionals in order to understand their satisfaction with the exams and their recommendations for improvements. The survey included some open-ended questions to give respondents the opportunity to explain the reasons for their responses. The survey found that overall satisfaction levels with the exams were very high and did not indicate that significant revisions were required. However, the feedback received from this study helped to inform a wider review of the exams by assessment experts from within Cambridge Assessment English and consultants.

Methodology and respondent profile

907 English language teaching professionals around the world, including Centre Exam Managers, Directors of Studies, Heads of English, teachers and Examination Administrators, participated in an online survey. Over half of the responses (55%) were from English language teachers. 596 respondents were currently running or preparing learners for A2 Key/A2 Key for Schools and 761 were currently running or preparing learners for B1 Preliminary/B1 Preliminary for Schools at their institutions.

Findings

The survey aimed to find out what stakeholders like about the existing exams and what works well, and to identify potential areas for improvement, particularly with regard to:

- test content
- test length
- task types
- results reporting
- preparation material – the amount of preparation material available and the quality.

Please note that where the total percentages shown in the tables below do not add up to 100, this is due to rounding.

Test content

Respondents were asked how satisfied (on a 5-point scale from very satisfied to very dissatisfied) they were with the appropriacy of topics and the variety of topics, to ensure the exams remain fit for purpose for the target audiences of school-age and adult learners. Overall, satisfaction was very high, with 86%+ either quite satisfied or very satisfied

with the appropriacy of topics (see Table 1) and 83%+ either quite satisfied or very satisfied with the variety of topics across each of the exams (see Table 2). Typical comments in relation to the test content were (note comments are unedited to maintain authenticity):

'Topics are suitable for the students' age.' (Teacher, Italy.)

'I like that the topics have to do with the students' daily life, and that it tests the four skills.'
(Teacher, Switzerland)

Table 1: Appropriacy of topics

	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Quite satisfied</i>	<i>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</i>	<i>Quite dissatisfied</i>	<i>Very dissatisfied</i>
A2 Key	29%	61%	8%	2%	0%
A2 Key for Schools	33%	53%	12%	1%	0%
B1 Preliminary	27%	61%	10%	2%	0%
B1 Preliminary for Schools	31%	56%	12%	1%	0%

Base: A2 Key (n=231), A2 Key for Schools (n=374), B1 Preliminary (n=381), B1 Preliminary for Schools (n=471)

Table 2: Variety of topics

	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Quite satisfied</i>	<i>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</i>	<i>Quite dissatisfied</i>	<i>Very dissatisfied</i>
A2 Key	30%	57%	11%	2%	0%
A2 Key for Schools	31%	54%	13%	1%	0%
B1 Preliminary	31%	54%	13%	2%	0%
B1 Preliminary for Schools	30%	53%	16%	1%	0%

Base: A2 Key (n=229), A2 Key for Schools (n=376), B1 Preliminary (n=378), B1 Preliminary for Schools (n=471)

All Cambridge English Qualifications assess all four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). When asked how important it was to assess all four skills, respondents were overwhelmingly in favour of continuing to assess all four skills, with 91% of respondents indicating that this is very important (see Table 3).

Table 3: Importance of assessing all four skills

	<i>Very important</i>	<i>Quite important</i>	<i>Neither important nor unimportant</i>	<i>Not important</i>	<i>Not important at all</i>
All four skills	91%	6%	2%	0%	1%

Base: All respondents (n=840)

Length of the tests

It is important to find a balance between assessing all skills adequately and a length that is appropriate for the level and age of candidates. To establish respondents' satisfaction with the length of the test, we asked them two questions for each of the papers: (1) Is the number of questions too many, just right or too few? (2) Is the time given to complete the exam too long, just right or too short?

While satisfaction levels with the length of the Listening and Speaking papers were very high (85%+), it was felt that there was some room for improvement in the Reading and Writing papers, particularly for B1 Preliminary/ B1 Preliminary for Schools. This has been taken into account with the revised exams. In B1 Preliminary/ B1 Preliminary for Schools, Reading and Writing have been split into separate papers. For A2 Key/A2 Key for Schools, Reading and Writing remains as a combined paper but the format has changed from 56 questions in nine parts to 30 Reading questions in five parts and two Writing parts (see Tables 4–11). There was no significant difference in responses between the exams for schools and the standard exams.

Table 4: Number of questions for A2 Key

<i>A2 Key</i>	<i>Reading and Writing paper</i>	<i>Speaking paper</i>	<i>Listening paper</i>
Too many	14%	1%	5%
Just right	83%	85%	93%
Too few	2%	14%	2%

Base: All respondents (n=303–312)

Table 5: Number of questions for A2 Key for Schools

<i>A2 Key for Schools</i>	<i>Reading and Writing paper</i>	<i>Speaking paper</i>	<i>Listening paper</i>
Too many	18%	2%	8%
Just right	80%	87%	90%
Too few	2%	12%	2%

Base: All respondents (n=447–464)

Table 6: Number of questions for B1 Preliminary

<i>B1 Preliminary</i>	<i>Reading and Writing paper</i>	<i>Speaking paper</i>	<i>Listening paper</i>
Too many	18%	2%	9%
Just right	78%	93%	89%
Too few	3%	5%	2%

Base: All respondents (n=464–474)

Table 7: Number of questions for B1 Preliminary for Schools

<i>B1 Preliminary for Schools</i>	<i>Reading and Writing paper</i>	<i>Speaking paper</i>	<i>Listening paper</i>
Too many	23%	3%	11%
Just right	75%	91%	87%
Too few	3%	5%	2%

Base: All respondents (n=546–555)

Table 8: Exam length – A2 Key

<i>A2 Key</i>	<i>Reading and Writing paper</i>	<i>Speaking paper</i>	<i>Listening paper</i>
Too long	5%	2%	2%
Just right	83%	92%	94%
Too short	12%	6%	4%

Base: All respondents (n= 303–310)

Table 9: Exam length – A2 Key for Schools

<i>A2 Key for Schools</i>	<i>Reading and Writing paper</i>	<i>Speaking paper</i>	<i>Listening paper</i>
Too long	8%	2%	4%
Just right	83%	92%	91%
Too short	10%	6%	5%

Base: All respondents (n=455–460)

Table 10: Exam length – B1 Preliminary

<i>B1 Preliminary</i>	<i>Reading and Writing paper</i>	<i>Speaking paper</i>	<i>Listening paper</i>
Too long	5%	1%	3%
Just right	74%	93%	92%
Too short	21%	6%	5%

Base: All respondents (n=460–473)

Table 11: Exam length – B1 Preliminary for Schools

<i>B1 Preliminary for Schools</i>	<i>Reading and Writing paper</i>	<i>Speaking paper</i>	<i>Listening paper</i>
Too long	7%	2%	5%
Just right	75%	94%	89%
Too short	18%	5%	7%

Base: All respondents (n=533–548)

Task types

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with each task type in each of the papers to identify if there were any that users felt didn't work. Respondents indicated high levels of satisfaction across all of the papers, with at least 70% reporting they were satisfied or very satisfied with almost all task types. Some of the reading and writing tasks in A2 Key/A2 Key for Schools had slightly lower satisfaction levels, and two of the tasks with the lowest satisfaction ratings have been dropped from the revised exams: Part 6 – Word completion (66% satisfied or very satisfied for A2 Key, 68% for A2 Key for Schools) and Part 8 – Information transfer (66% satisfied or very satisfied for A2 Key, 69% for A2 Key for Schools). This feedback supported expert opinion in deciding which task types to include in the revised exams. The revisions also aimed to ensure more overlap of task types between A2 Key/A2 Key for Schools, B1 Preliminary/B1 Preliminary for Schools and higher-level Cambridge English Qualifications, where appropriate, to give learners who progress through the exams a greater sense of development.

Score reporting

The survey also asked about overall satisfaction with results reporting and about which aspects of reporting are most important for users.

Most respondents were satisfied with how results are reported across each of the exams (67%+). Respondents indicated that it is important to provide not only an overall result (94%), but also scores by skill (91%), Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) level (89%) and an indication of which skills require improvement (85%). A majority also felt it important to keep reporting results at the CEFR level above (77%) and below (70%). We decided, therefore, to keep results reporting as it is now (see Tables 12 and 13).

However, based on a separate survey with a similar audience of nearly 1,000 teachers, Heads of English and Centre Exams Managers, which looked at how grades are reported, it was decided to change from Pass with Distinction/Pass with Merit/Pass to grades A/B/C, in line with higher levels of Cambridge English Qualifications. A typical response was:

'Since students tend to do not only KET [A2 Key] or PET [B1 Preliminary] exams but normally work towards FCE [B2 First] or CAE [C1 Advanced] you should have the same grading scales for all exams.'
(Head of English, Portugal)

Table 12: Satisfaction with how results are reported

	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Quite satisfied</i>	<i>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</i>	<i>Quite dissatisfied</i>	<i>Very dissatisfied</i>
A2 Key	29%	40%	15%	9%	6%
A2 Key for Schools	28%	39%	17%	11%	5%
B1 Preliminary	27%	41%	15%	11%	5%
B1 Preliminary for Schools	27%	42%	16%	11%	5%

Base: A2 Key (n=319), A2 Key for Schools (n=474), B1 Preliminary (n=484), B1 Preliminary for Schools (n=566)

Table 13: Importance of reporting

<i>Across all exams</i>	<i>Very important</i>	<i>Quite important</i>	<i>Neither important nor unimportant</i>	<i>Not important</i>	<i>Not important at all</i>
Overall result on all skills	83%	11%	5%	1%	0%
Scores broken down by skill	77%	14%	7%	1%	1%
CEFR level	73%	16%	9%	2%	1%
An indication of which skills require improvement	70%	15%	11%	2%	2%
Reporting results above CEFR level	57%	20%	16%	4%	3%
Reporting results below CEFR level	47%	23%	20%	5%	5%

Base: All respondents (n=537–575)

Preparation

Respondents were fairly satisfied (59%+ satisfied or very satisfied) with the amount of preparation material available (see Table 14). They were also fairly satisfied (56%+ satisfied or very satisfied) with the quality of free preparation materials available (see Table 15). However, it was clear that there was room to improve both the availability and quality of the free materials to help learners prepare for the exams. A separate large-scale survey of preparation centres for Cambridge English Qualifications has suggested that the issue is lack of awareness of the support materials available rather than not enough support. Work is, therefore, being undertaken to make the support more easily accessible and to keep schools and teachers informed about new materials. All exam support materials are being updated to reflect the exam revisions and to ensure that they are of appropriate quality.

Table 14: Amount of preparation materials available

	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Quite satisfied</i>	<i>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</i>	<i>Quite dissatisfied</i>	<i>Very dissatisfied</i>
A2 Key	24%	35%	25%	15%	2%
A2 Key for Schools	22%	45%	21%	10%	2%
B1 Preliminary	25%	41%	23%	9%	1%
B1 Preliminary for Schools	22%	46%	22%	9%	1%

Base: A2 Key (n=232), A2 Key for Schools (n=379), B1 Preliminary (n=377), B1 Preliminary for Schools (n=471)

Table 15: Quality of free preparation material

	<i>Very satisfied</i>	<i>Quite satisfied</i>	<i>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied</i>	<i>Quite dissatisfied</i>	<i>Very dissatisfied</i>
A2 Key	18%	38%	28%	11%	4%
A2 Key for Schools	22%	36%	27%	12%	4%
B1 Preliminary	23%	39%	26%	10%	2%
B1 Preliminary for Schools	22%	40%	26%	10%	2%

Base: A2 Key (n=223), A2 Key for Schools (n=365), B1 Preliminary (n=367), B1 Preliminary for Schools (n=471)

Conclusions

Overall, there was very high satisfaction with A2 Key/A2 Key for Schools and B1 Preliminary/B1 Preliminary for Schools among the English teaching professionals who use the exams. Most of the changes made to the exams for the 2020 revisions are, therefore, based on expert opinion and latest thinking in testing methodology rather than user feedback to ensure they remain relevant.

In addition to the statistical data, respondents commented on reasons why they like the exams. For example:

'I like Key because it provides an international standard; students like the experience of doing the test and using real, every day English.' (Centre Exams Manager, Brazil)

'The exam gives the students a good first-hand experience at exam taking and allows their growth in self-confidence towards higher levels.' (Teacher, Argentina)

'It's what students and parents choose. Not only do they want to learn English but it is important to gain a qualification that will help them with further studies.' (Centre Exams Manager, Italy)

'It is a reliable exam that allows institutions and universities have a clear idea of their students' English level.' (Centre Exams Manager, Colombia)

'Key for Schools makes candidates feel ready to take on the world.' (School English Coordinator, Bolivia)

The main area where it was felt that improvements could be made was not in the exams themselves but with the support material. This is being addressed through a review of all the exam support materials, and ensuring that the full range of support offered is promoted more effectively and made more easily accessible.