

Cambridge

English Skills Test

Schools

Cambridge English Skills Test Schools Listening



CAMBRIDGE
English

The Cambridge English Skills Test Schools is a modular online multi-level test of English language proficiency produced by Cambridge. One of the components is a test of listening. In order to provide evidence of how well the test measures what it is intended to measure, we aim to show how the test tasks relate to language activities in the real world. This means how well the tasks replicate those language behaviours in real-life situations (a mix of contextual and cognitive validity¹) and how well the tasks relate to concepts of language proficiency as illustrated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (criterion-related validity).

The theoretical framework that guides the test evaluation process for the Cambridge English Skills Test is Weir’s (2005) socio-cognitive framework for language test validation. The framework is described as socio-cognitive in that “the abilities to be tested are demonstrated by the mental processing of the learner (the cognitive dimension); equally, the use of language in performing tasks is viewed as a *social* rather than a purely linguistic phenomenon” (Taylor (Ed.), 2011, p.25). Figure 1 is an illustration of how the framework focuses on specific aspects of test validity.

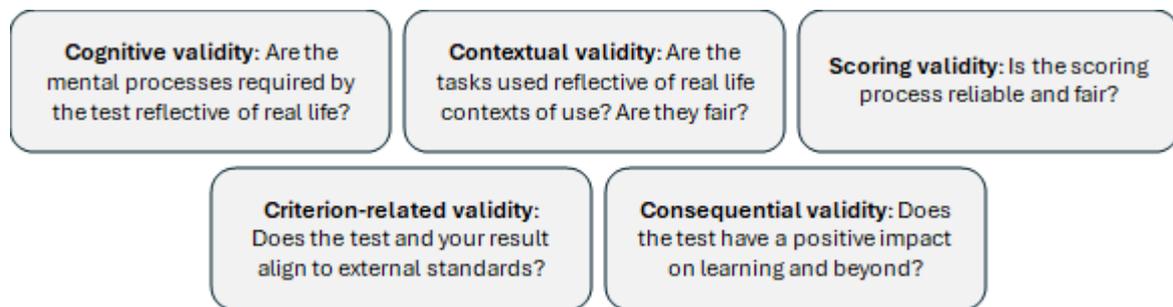


Figure 1 Aspects of validity

These kinds of questions are considered extensively in the design, development and use of the Listening test. Considering cognitive validity, we first need to demonstrate which cognitive processes involved in listening are activated by the test tasks. Our approach to cognitive ability in listening is summarised in the model put forward by (Field, 2013) in Figure 2.

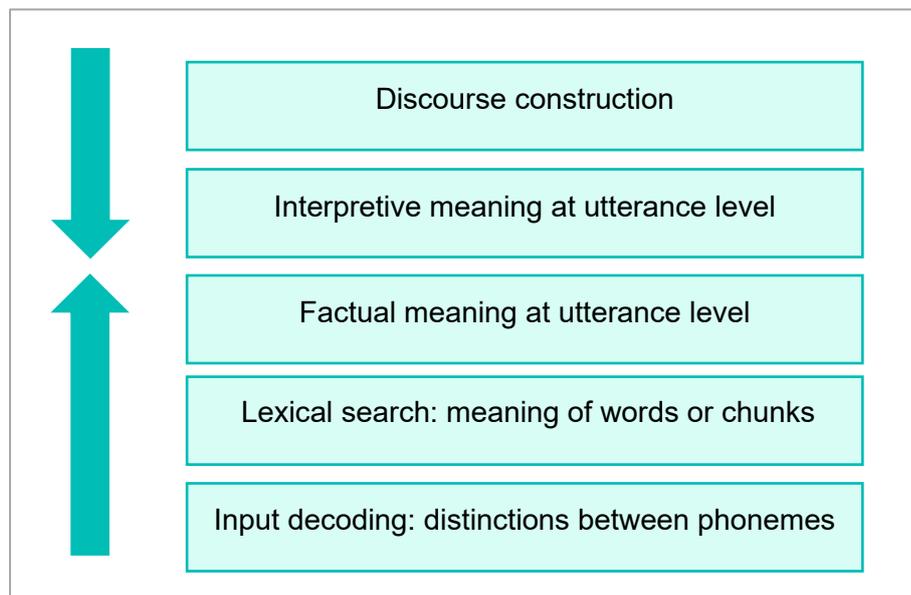


Figure 2 A model of listening based on Field (2013)

There are five major levels of processing in this model. The first level is decoding, which involves converting the incoming acoustic sounds into phonemes and syllables using phonological knowledge of the target language. Decoding includes identifying which syllables carry stress, as this feeds into the next level, lexical search. As listeners decode the input, they begin to search their mental lexicon for the best word match. Listeners also begin to consider what sense or meaning of the words is being used. The next level is parsing, which involves imposing a syntactic structure onto the words to identify the literal meaning of an utterance. These are all bottom-up strategies. At the same time, the listener employs top-down strategies and pragmatic knowledge to identify the intended meaning and purpose of the utterance, and to build a mental model to decide on the overall main message, putting the utterances into a larger discourse structure. This top-down approach supports the other stages of the model¹.

The language proficiency level of learners has an impact on the cognitive processing they can carry out effectively. For example, lower-level learners may need to spend more time on decoding sounds and searching at a lexical level. This makes it more difficult for them to activate top-down strategies such as identifying the overall meaning or purpose of what they are listening to. The Cambridge English Skills Test tasks are designed to take the level of the learner into consideration. There are a number of task types in use for the Listening test, which link to these different cognitive processes (input decoding, lexical search, parsing, meaning construction, discourse construction) listed in the model. The task types in use in the Listening test are summarised in Table 1.

¹ It should be noted that this model recognises that listening is not a linear process. Listeners move between bottom-up and top-down processes as they create a hypothesis of what is being said and confirm or replace these in real time. For further reading on our institutional approach to Listening see Geranpayeh & Taylor (2013).

Table 1 Task types in Cambridge English Skills Test: Schools, Listening

Task type	Task description	Testing focus	Cognitive processes and CEFR level	CEFR scales B2–C1
5-item comprehension	Five multiple-choice questions about an audio, featuring one, two or three speakers. Depending on level, the task will have three or four options per question and the audio will be between 120 and 650 words.	To test ability to understand and extract information from monologues or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, meaning construction, feeling, attitude etc.	A1–C1 input decoding lexical search parsing B2–C1 meaning construction discourse construction	Overall listening comprehension Understanding conversation between other speakers Understanding audio media and recordings
2-item comprehension	Two multiple-choice questions about an audio, featuring one or two speakers. The task will have three options per question. The audio is between 160 and 260 words depending on the level.	To test ability to understand and extract information from monologues or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, meaning construction, feeling, attitude, global meaning etc.	B2–C1 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction discourse construction	Identifying cues and inferring
1-item comprehension	One multiple-choice question about an audio, featuring one or two speakers. The task will have three written options, or three image options. The audio is between 70 and 150 words depending on the level.	To test ability to understand and extract information from monologues or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, meaning construction, feeling, attitude etc.	A1–C1 input decoding lexical search parsing B2–C1 meaning construction discourse construction	

Note completion	A title and five gapped sentences summarising key points from a monologue. The monologue is between 300 and 400 words. Each gap can be completed with up to three words heard in the audio.	To test ability to understand and extract specific factual information and stated opinion from a monologue.	C1 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction discourse construction	Overall oral comprehension Understanding as a member of a live audience Note-taking (lectures, seminars, meetings, etc.)
One question multi-matching	A series of three or five themed monologues of approximately 30 seconds each. The same question is asked of each monologue and candidates must select the correct answer for each from a list of five or eight options.	To test ability to understand and extract detail, gist, opinion, purpose etc. and differentiate finer points of meaning between speakers.	B2–C1 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction discourse construction	Overall oral comprehension Understanding conversation between other people
				Understanding as a member of a live audience Identifying cues and inferring

As can be seen in Table 1, tasks cover all the cognitive processes listed in the model, from input decoding up to discourse construction. Criterion-related validity is addressed through use of the scales listed in the final column of the table. Tasks are also designed to replicate scenarios and situations learners may experience, thus addressing the social aspect of the socio-cognitive model. Further information on the model of listening which the Cambridge English Skills Test is based on and the updated CEFR descriptors are available as listed below in 'Further reading'.

In addition to CEFR alignment being built into task development (e.g., via standardised item production procedures, pretesting etc.), we routinely conduct standard-setting activities to ensure that exams are monitored for CEFR alignment (e.g., Lopes & Cheung, 2020).

In terms of test impact, every effort has been made in the development of the assessment to accommodate the emerging needs of teenage English learners as they progress through schooling. The test design, within practical limits, aims to provide accessible yet challenging tasks which will provide useful insights to teachers and learners alike. Additionally, and as with any Cambridge product, it will be part of an ongoing programme of research of which the impacts of the test will be a key focus.

Further reading

Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing. Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/lang-cefr>

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