Cambridge English Skills Test Schools

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Reading

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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 reading. 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 validity[1]) 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.

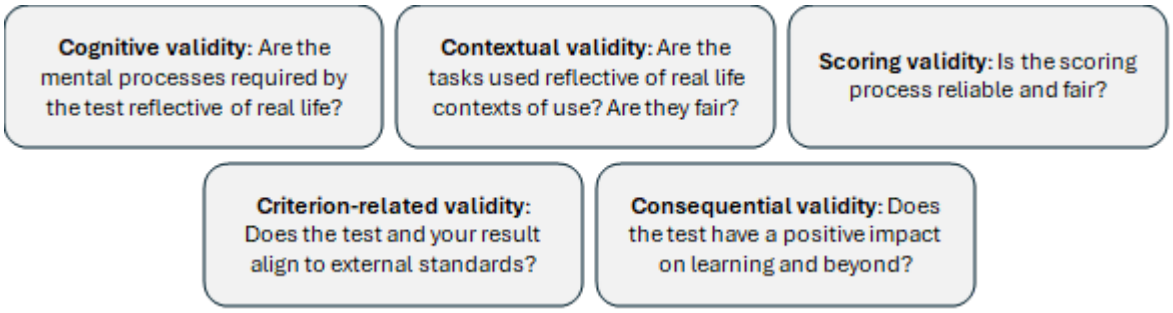

Figure 1 Aspects of validity

These kinds of questions are considered extensively in the design, development and use of the Reading test. In terms of cognition, tasks are informed by established models of cognitive processes during reading (Weir & Khalifa, 2008). This model is summarised in Figure 2.

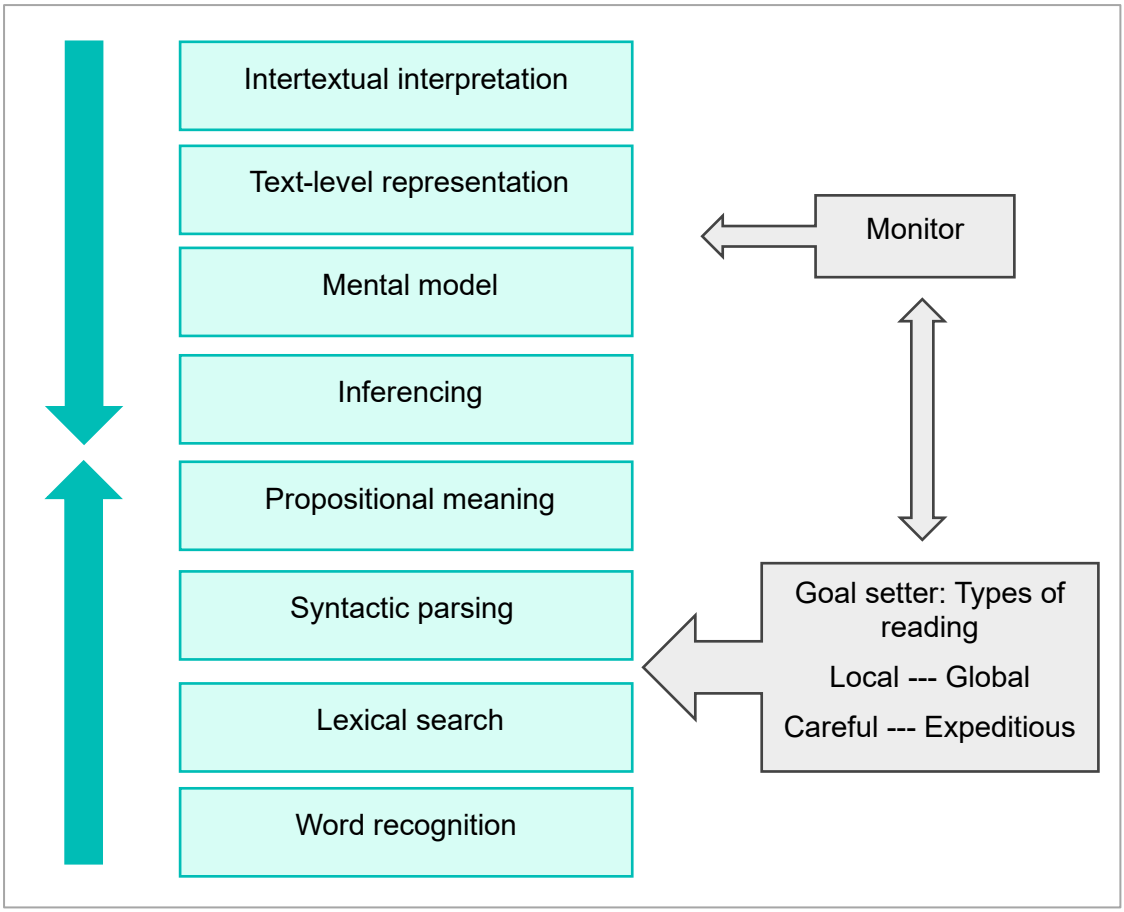

Figure 2 A model of reading, adapted from Weir & Khalifa (2008)

The model portrays reading as a set of metacognitive activities (e.g. deciding the purpose of reading, and whether it needs to be local or global, careful or expeditious) that trigger and monitor the cognitive processes needed to complete a reading task. Various forms of knowledge (e.g. lexical, syntactic, etc.) feed into the cognitive processes to enable successful reading comprehension. The model consists of bottom-up processes, such as word recognition and lexical search, and top-down processes such as text-level representation and building a mental model of the text. As the reader builds up a model of the content and purpose of the text, they engage in monitoring, checking and remediation in terms of their understanding of the text so far. Depending on the level of ability of the learner, and the difficulty of the text, some of the higher level cognitive processes may not be engaged in, for example if the learner is struggling with syntactic and lexical aspects of the text.

There are a number of task types in use for the Cambridge English Skills Test, which link to the types of reading activities (global, local, careful and expeditious) and cognitive processes (lexical access, syntactic parsing etc.) listed in the model. For example, readers engage in careful, local reading to understand sentence-level meaning, whereas careful global reading is required to understand the overall text. Scanning for specific information requires expeditious local reading, whereas searching for important details and skimming for gist require expeditious global reading. The task types in use in the Reading test are listed in Table 1.

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

Task type	Task description	Testing focus	Cognitive processes and CEFR level
Matching pictures to words	Candidates read seven words and five pictures, and match the correct word with the correct picture.	This task is designed to test lexical knowledge.	A1 word recognition and lexical access
Matching words to definitions	Candidates read seven words and five definitions, and match the correct word to the correct definition.	This task is designed to test lexical knowledge.	A1 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level
Discrete multiple-choice with picture	Candidates see a picture and answer a 3-option multiple-choice question about it.	This task is designed to test lexical knowledge.	A1–A2 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level
Discrete cloze	A gapped-sentence task with a single 3- or 4-option multiple-choice question depending on the level.	This task is designed to test lexical and lexico-grammatical knowledge.	A1–C1 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level

Open cloze	A text with five gaps, each to be filled with a single grammatical word. The length of the text may range between 60 and 150 words depending on the level.	This task is designed to test grammatical knowledge.	B2–C1 syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level
Multiple-choice cloze	A text with five gaps each with three or four multiple-choice options. The length of the text may range between 60 and 150 words depending on the level.	This task is designed to test knowledge of lexis/lexico-grammar.	A1–B1 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level B2–C1 inferencing building a mental model
Cross-text matching	Candidates read across four texts on the same topic in order to find the relevant information to match to prompts or questions. The combined length of all texts may range between 500 and 600 words.	This task is designed to test ability to read multiple sources to compare, contrast and synthesise information and views in different sources.	C1 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing building a mental model creating a text-level structure
Reading discrete graphic	Candidates look at a picture or read a short text e.g. a notice or a message and answer a single 3-option multiple-choice question. Some contextual support is available for the presentation of texts including pro-forma templates such as email screens, sticky notes, text	The main testing aim of this task is for candidates to interpret language found in short texts (signs / notices / emails, etc.), sometimes	A1–B2 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing

	messages, notices and labels, and a variety of fonts and text styles.	accompanied by pictures.	B2 building a mental model
Reading discrete text	Candidates read the beginning of an article or other type of longer text and answer a single 3-option multiple-choice question about the remainder of the text.	The main testing aim is for candidates to predict the content of the remaining (unseen) part of the text from the information given in the seen text (an introductory paragraph with heading).	B2–C1 inferencing building a mental model creating a text-level representation

Gapped text, sentences	Candidates read a long text with five gaps representing extracted sentences. Candidates match the extracted sentences to the gaps, selecting from a set of eight options, five of which are keys while three are distractors. The total text length (including sentence options) may range between 340 and 420 words.	This task is designed to test careful reading at a global level, testing the candidate's ability to understand text structure, cohesion and coherence.	B1–C1 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing B2–C1 building a mental model creating a text-level structure
Gapped text, paragraphs	Candidates read a text from which five sections have been removed and fill each gap by choosing the appropriate paragraph from six options, five of which are keys while one is a distractor. The total text length (including paragraph options) may range between 600 and 700 words.	This task is designed to test understanding of cohesion, coherence, text structure and global meaning through reading at a careful global level.	C1 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing building a mental model
Comprehension task with 5 items	This is a reading comprehension text followed by five 3- or 4-option multiple-choice questions. Texts may range between 200 and 625 words depending on level.	This task is designed to test reading for gist and specific information such as opinion, purpose, main idea and implication.	A1–C1 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing B2–C1 building a mental model

			C1 creating a text-level representation
Comprehension task with 2 items	This is a reading comprehension task with a shorter text and two 4-option multiple-choice questions. Texts may range between 200 and 250 words depending on level.	To test reading for gist and specific information such as opinion, purpose, main idea, implication, etc.	B2–C1 word recognition and lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing building a mental model creating a text-level representation

As can be seen in Table 1, tasks cover all the cognitive processes listed in the model, from word recognition up to intertextual representation, thus addressing the social aspect of the socio-cognitive model.

Alongside cognitive validity addressed by the task types, we also consider criterion-related validity, i.e. how well the tasks relate to concepts of language proficiency as illustrated in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020). In terms of criterion-related validity, the following CEFR scales are used during the item-writing process:

- Overall reading comprehension, A1–C1
- General linguistic range, A1–C1
- Vocabulary range, A1–C1
- Reading for information and argument, A1–C1
- Identifying cues and inferring, A1–C1
- Reading for orientation, A1–C1

A more detailed version of the reading model which the Cambridge English Skills Test is based on and the updated CEFR descriptors are both 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

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