Cambridge English Skills Test

Schools

Cambridge English Skills Test Schools

Writing

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 writing. 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). Below is an illustration of how the framework focuses on specific aspects of test validity.
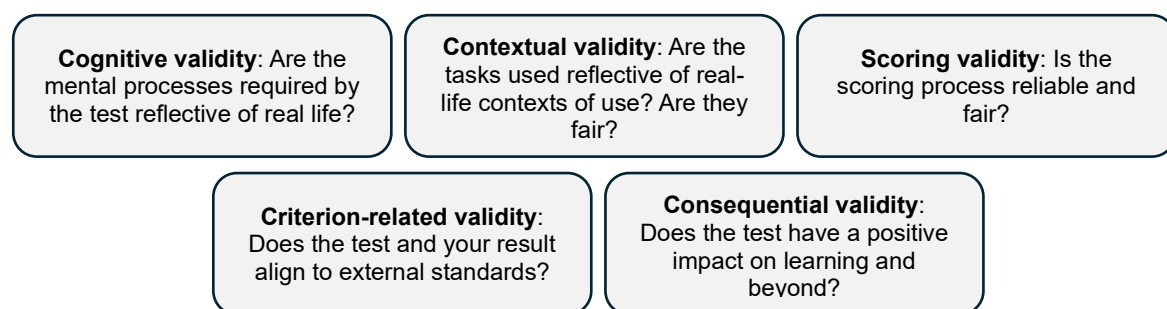
Cognitive validity: Are the mental processes required by the test reflective of real life?

Contextual validity: Are the tasks used reflective of real-life contexts of use? Are they fair?

Scoring validity: Is the scoring process reliable and fair?

Criterion-related validity: Does the test and your result align to external standards?

Consequential validity: Does the test have a positive impact on learning and beyond?

Figure *1* Aspects of validity

These kinds of questions are considered extensively in the design, development and use of the Writing test. In terms of cognition, tasks are informed by established models of cognition in the production of writing (Kellogg, 1996) to reflect the cognitive demands of writing in social contexts.

Table 11 Aspects of writing

Aspects of writing	Narrative writing	Expository writing
Genre description	Agent-oriented, people-oriented, chronological	Topic-oriented, ideas, claims and arguments Persuasive, compare and contrast, argumentative, procedural texts
Lexical features	Personal pronouns, sensory images	Advanced vocabulary, less frequent vocabulary, abstract, complex, multi-syllabic words

[1] See Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework which is used to guide the development of a validation argument for Cambridge English Skills Test Schools.

| Syntactic features | Shorter clauses, less complex phrases, more active voice | Longer clauses, more complex noun phrases, more relative and adverbial clauses, more passive voice |
| Cognitive load | Less cognitive effort | More cognitive effort, more planning time, more sophisticated knowledge-transforming strategy |

Table 1 (adapted from Jeong, 2017) provides a useful contrast between narrative and expository writing research insights. In this schema, the Part 1 message task requires candidates to engage in narrative writing, while the Part 2 essay task encourages candidates to engage in expository writing. The two parts of the test are therefore seen as complementary. In adopting these genre tasks, the Writing component tries to reflect real-world writing (contextual validity) while also giving candidates in the B1–C2 levels appropriate opportunities to show their language abilities[2].

This, in turn, helps ensure that the test is aligned with external standards like the CEFR in that it reflects the potential progression of a learner across the levels. In the Part 1 message task, this progression is characterised as moving from "being able to convey personal information of a routine nature" through "being able to compose basic personal letters describing experiences, feelings and events in some detail" to "using the language fluently and effectively to give detailed descriptions of experiences, pose sympathetic questions and follow up issues of mutual interest" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.82). In the Part 2 essay task this progression goes from being able to produce "simple texts on familiar subjects of interest, linking sentences with connectors like 'and', 'because' or 'then'" through "straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects" to being able to produce "well-structured texts of complex subjects" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.66). The table below provides an overview of functional foci and where the CEFR is an important reference point for what the test elicits.

Table 2 Functional foci of the test and CEFR coverage

Test part	Genre	Functional foci	CEFR descriptors of relevance
1	Message	- Creative, interpersonal language use - Describing experience - Reflecting on experience, hypothesising, speculating	- Overall written interaction (A1–C1) - Correspondence (A1–C1) - General linguistic range (A1–C1) - Vocabulary control (A1–C1)

---

[2] As Jeong (2017) suggests, while expository texts can be challenging for lower-level learners, they can also provide a fairer and more stable basis for assessments in multi-level testing situations.

			- Grammatical accuracy (A1–C1) - Thematic development (A1–C1) - Coherence and cohesion (A1–C1) - Propositional precision (A1–C1) - Sociolinguistic appropriateness (A1–C1)
2	Essay	- Evaluative, problem-solving language use - Stating and justifying own view: indicating extent of agreement with proposition statement or question	- Overall written production (A1–C1) - Reports and essays (A1–C1) - General linguistic range (A1–C1) - Vocabulary control (A1–C1) - Grammatical accuracy (A1–C1) - Thematic development (A1–C1) - Coherence and cohesion (A1–C1) - Propositional precision (A1–C1) - Sociolinguistic appropriateness (A1–C1)

In terms of scores, we train, certificate and monitor Cambridge English Skills Test Schools examiners to ensure the scores they provide are accurate and fair. Examiner performance is carefully monitored to prevent inconsistencies in examining. Candidates are awarded a single mark but this is derived from the examiner considering specific criteria (Table 3).

Table 3 Scoring criteria

Criteria	Description
Communicative Achievement	How well does the writing use genre and sociolinguistic conventions to communicate straightforward and complex ideas in ways that are appropriate to the intended audience? For example, a higher-proficiency writer will show greater control, flexibility and sophistication in how they convey ideas in genre-appropriate ways.

Organisation	How well does the writer use organisational devices to create cohesive and coherent texts? For example, a lower-proficiency writer may rely on a more limited repertoire of linking words (e.g., but) whereas at higher levels the writer will use more subtle means to bring themes and points into contrast.
Language	How well does the writer use their knowledge of lexis and grammar to successfully convey meaning? For example, as a writer develops they are more able to use complex lexico-grammatical structures (e.g. the use of more complex noun phrases or more specialised lexis).

These criteria are considered individually and then combined. It is via this process that the Cambridge English Skills Test Schools Writing aims to provide scores that are a fair reflection of both linguistic and broader communicative skills.

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, it is impossible to measure the consequential validity of Cambridge English Skills Test Schools prior to widespread use. However, 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 communicative 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

Crowhurst, M. (1990). Teaching and Learning the Writing of Persuasive/Argumentative Discourse. In *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation 15* (4), 348. The Canadian Society for the Study of Education / La Société canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation. https://doi.org/10.2307/1495109

Ismail, L., Samad, A., Razali, A. & Noordin, N. (2020). *Impact of Linguaskill on STEM Undergraduate Students' Employability Potential* (Funded Research Programme Report Series). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Assessment.

Jeong, H. (2017). Narrative and expository genre effects on students, raters, and performance criteria, *Assessing Writing 31*, 113–125. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2016.08.006

Kellogg, R. T. (1996). A model of working memory in writing. In C. M. Levy & S. Ransdell (Eds.), *The science of writing: Theories, methods, individual differences and applications*, 57–71. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Khalifa, H., Khabbazbashi, N., Abdelsalam, S. & Elmahdy Said, M. (2014). An investigation into the impact of a workplace English language programme in Egypt. *Research Notes 58,* 20–27. Retrieved from https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/Images/182921-research-notes-58-document.pdf

Lopes, S. & Cheung, K. (2020). *Final report on the December 2018 standard setting of the Linguaskill General papers to the CEFR.* Cambridge Assessment English Internal Research Report.

Taylor, L. (Ed.). (2011). *Examining speaking: Research and practice in assessing second language speaking.* Studies in Language Testing 30. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Weir, C. J. (2005). *Language Testing and Validation: An Evidence-Based Approach*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Flexible, reliable assessment for the decisions you need to make

Cambridge
English
Skills Test

Discover more:
cambridge.org/skillstest

Find out more at
cambridge.org/english

We believe that English can unlock a lifetime of experiences and, together with teachers and our partners, we help people to learn and confidently prove their skills to the world.

Where your world grows

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS & ASSESSMENT