

Cambridge

English Skills Test

Schools

Cambridge English Skills Test Schools Overview



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English

This overview outlines the overall purpose of the Cambridge English Skills Test Schools and the Cambridge approach to test validity, demonstrating how we ensure the test is valid and fit for the purposes it was designed for.

Test purpose

The Cambridge English Skills Test is a modular online multi-level test of English language proficiency that reports results on an internationally recognised reference framework called the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The Cambridge English Skills Test Schools is aimed at secondary school students aged 12–16.

The test can be used for placement progress measurement, as a mid-course or end-of-course test or as an exit test for higher education institutions and pathway programmes. The Cambridge English Skills Test is designed to have a positive influence on language teaching and learning. The following key features provide a sound foundation for the test results to be used in the contexts mentioned above:

- During test construction, tasks for all skills are carefully designed and based on CEFR descriptors and research into cognitive and contextual factors
- Rigorous test content review performed by language testing professionals ensures high-quality test questions that assess critical language knowledge and skills that institutions and employers are interested in
- Trial studies have confirmed that the test assesses language knowledge and skills that are essential for real-world communication
- Regular checks are conducted on test reliability of the computer-adaptive Reading and Listening modules
- Quality assurance and monitoring of examiners and the automarker for Writing and Speaking components ensures results are fair and unbiased

The validity framework

Frameworks allow for the systematic description of test tasks for the purpose of language test design, test validation and research. The theoretical framework selected to guide the test evaluation process is Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework for language test validation¹. The framework allows for a systematic and comprehensive critical evaluation of construct definition and operationalisation using an evidence-based approach.

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

¹ This approach has proven to be not only theoretically sound but also practically useful. This is evidenced in a number of validation activities and research projects undertaken by Cambridge for over two decades and documented in a series of ‘construct’ volumes on writing (Shaw & Weir (Eds.), 2007), reading (Khalifa & Weir (Eds.), 2009), speaking (Taylor (Ed.), 2011) and listening (Geranpayeh & Taylor (Eds.), 2013).

purely linguistic phenomenon” (Taylor, 2011, p.25). The framework is very much in line with the use of language for social purposes as defined in the CEFR. It defines language ability as a combination of both cognitive abilities and the interaction of these abilities with the surrounding social and contextual factors.

The framework consists of several components that together present a unified approach to collecting validity evidence for a given test (Figure 1).

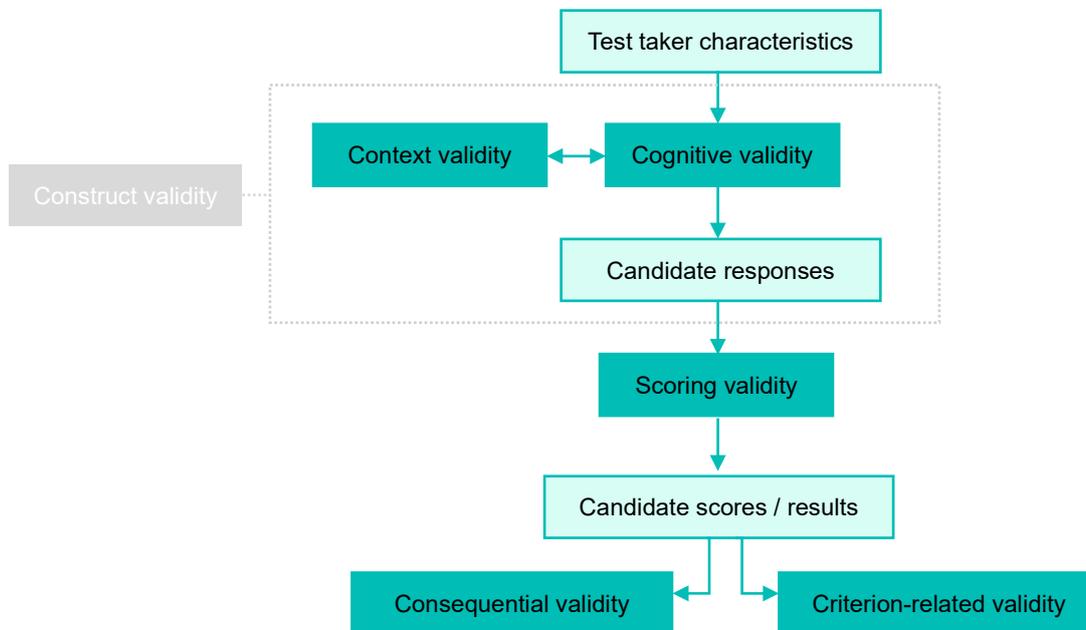


Figure 1 A socio-cognitive framework (based on Weir, 2005, pp.44–47)

In our evaluation process, we focus on five main components of validity as presented in the socio-cognitive framework, namely cognitive, context, scoring, criterion-related and consequential validity². These guide our investigation of test validity and are defined as follows:

- **Cognitive validity:** it examines the type of cognitive processing that is activated by the test task(s) and the extent to which the cognitive processes required to complete the tasks are appropriate for the language level of the learners and reflective of real-world mental processes.
- **Context validity:** traditionally used to refer to the content coverage of tasks, the term is used more broadly to refer to characteristics of test tasks and the extent to which they are appropriate and fair to learners taking the tests.
- **Scoring validity:** in the Weir (2005) framework, scoring validity is used as a superordinate term to include all aspects of reliability and refers to the extent to which we can depend on the scores that result from a given test.

² It should be noted that construct validity is not listed explicitly in the model, but is represented by the box surrounding the interplay between context validity (the content of the test), cognitive validity (what learners need to complete the tasks on the test) and candidate responses (how learners perform on the test).

- **Criterion-related validity:** it can relate to three basic types of comparison (Khalifa & Weir, 2009, pp.7–8): a connection between test scores and external criteria which purports to measure the same ability, demonstrative evidence of qualitative and quantitative equivalence across different test versions or linkage to an external standard (e.g. the CEFR).
- **Consequential validity:** it looks into the uses of the test results, and whether these are valid. It investigates the impact of the test at different micro and macro levels: on learners, on the classroom, on the school and on educational systems, and on society as a whole.

Further reading

Geranpayeh, A. & Taylor, L. B. (Eds.). (2013). *Examining listening: Research and practice in assessing second language listening*. Studies in Language Testing 35. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Khlaifa, H. & Weir, C. J. (Eds.). (2009). *Examining reading: Research and practice in assessing second language reading*. Studies in Language Testing 29. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Shaw, S. D. & Weir, C. J. (Eds.). (2007). *Examining writing: Research and practice in assessing second language writing*. Studies in Language Testing 26. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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