

Cambridge

English Skills Test

Schools

Cambridge English Skills Test Schools Speaking



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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 speaking. 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). Below is an illustration of how the framework focuses on specific aspects of test validity.

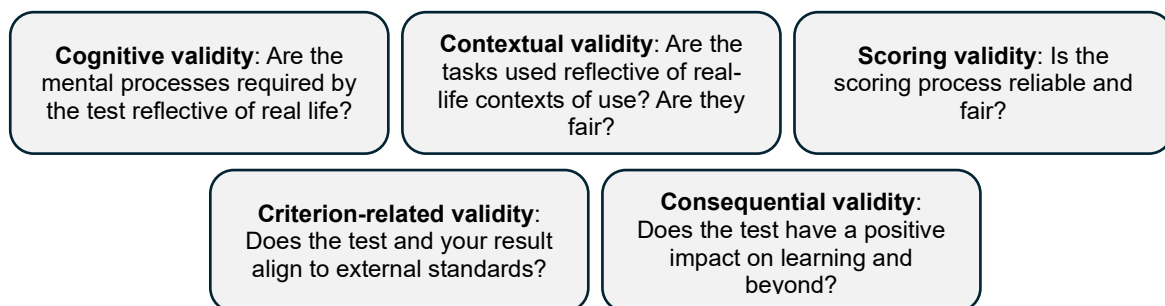
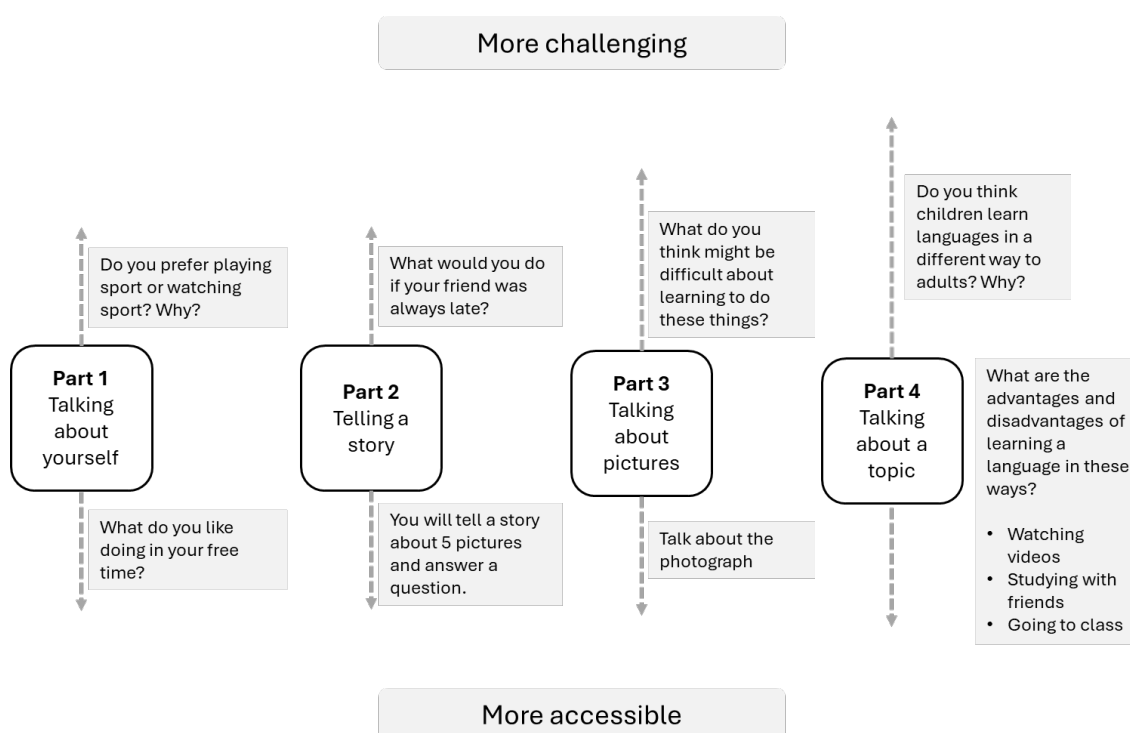


Figure 1 Aspects of validity

These kinds of questions are considered extensively in the design, development and use of the Speaking test. In terms of cognition, tasks are informed by established models of cognition in the production of speech (Field, 2011) and provide a balance of more planned / unplanned tasks to reflect the cognitive demands of real speech.

¹ See Cambridge.English.Skills.Test;Schools.Overview document for more information on these terms and Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework which is used to guide the development of a validation argument for the Cambridge English Skills Test: Schools.

Figure 2 Overview of tasks with exemplar questions



In terms of contextual factors, the tasks are carefully designed to elicit a range of discourse in different communicative contexts appropriate to the A1–C1 range. This can be seen in how the tasks attempt to balance being accessible and yet challenging across the test as a whole. For example, in Figure 2 we can see how within each test part there is a mix of elements within a task that allows lower-level candidates to speak about more concrete and personal matters while also affording stronger candidates to use more evaluative, abstract or impersonal discourse. This, in turn, helps ensure that the test is aligned with external standards like the CEFR in that it reflects the shift from a learner being able to describe themselves, their everyday experiences etc. to being able to provide detailed descriptions on complex subjects (Council of Europe, 2020). The tables below provide an overview of functional foci and where the CEFR is an important reference point for what the test elicits.

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

	Part 1 Talking about yourself	Part 2 Telling a story	Part 3 Talking about pictures	Part 4 Talking about a topic
Cognitive processes	Conceptualisation Grammatical encoding Phonological encoding Phonetic encoding Self-monitoring	Conceptualisation Grammatical encoding Phonological encoding Phonetic encoding Self-monitoring	Conceptualisation Grammatical encoding Phonological encoding Phonetic encoding Self-monitoring	Conceptualisation Grammatical encoding Phonological encoding Phonetic encoding Self-monitoring
CEFR scales	Overall oral production Sustained monologue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describing experience Giving information Linguistic competence	Overall oral production Sustained monologue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describing experience Putting a case Linguistic competence	Overall oral production Sustained monologue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describing experience Giving information Putting a case Linguistic competence	Overall oral production Sustained monologue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Describing experience Giving information Putting a case Linguistic competence
# of speaking opportunities	5	2	3	3
Total response time	120 sec	105 sec	120 sec	130 sec

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 holistic mark for each test part but this is derived from the examiner considering specific sub-criteria (Table 2).

Table 1 The three sub-criteria considered in the awarding of scores for Cambridge English Skills Test: Schools, Speaking.

Sub-criteria	Description
Pronunciation and Fluency	How clear and smooth is what the person is saying? For example, at a lower level a speaker might hesitate or have a strong accent which makes them less easy to understand. At a higher level, their speech will be more fluent and easier to follow.
Language Resource	How good is the person's use of grammar and vocabulary? For example, at a lower level a speaker may use only single words or short phrases while at higher levels they are more able to use idiomatic expressions and collocations with increasing sophistication.
Discourse Management	How well does the person organise what they are saying for a listener? For example, at a lower level a speaker may struggle to link utterances together but at a higher level the contributions a speaker makes are part of a more complex string of ideas.

These sub-criteria are considered and an overall holistic score for the test part is assigned.

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 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>

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

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.



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