

Updating the A2 Key and B1 Preliminary vocabulary lists

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Introduction

Since 2006, Cambridge Assessment English has published vocabulary lists for four exams from its Cambridge English Qualifications: A2 Key, A2 Key for Schools, B1 Preliminary and B1 Preliminary for Schools. This article describes the process of updating these lists as part of the revised 2020 specifications for all four exams.

Background to the lists

Cambridge English currently publishes two vocabulary lists for the four Cambridge English Qualifications that target the lower end of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001, 2018) scale: the Key Vocabulary List, which covers both A2 Key and A2 Key for Schools, and the Preliminary Vocabulary List, which covers both B1 Preliminary and B1 Preliminary for Schools.¹

Both lists serve parallel functions. Firstly, they provide item writers with an explicit set of vocabulary that is to form the core of all A2 Key (hereafter, Key) and B1 Preliminary (hereafter, Preliminary) tasks. Secondly, they enable students and teachers to identify the core vocabulary that they should target to help ensure success in the exam. Both functions reflect the more fundamental goal of ensuring that the exams accurately and fairly assess learners at the targeted CEFR levels: A2 in the case of Key and B1 in the case of Preliminary. Learners at these lower CEFR levels tend to have access to a restricted lexical repertoire, and find it harder to go beyond this repertoire to demonstrate higher-level language behaviour, such as the capacity to infer meaning from context (Docherty 2015). Accordingly, the provision of vocabulary lists helps ensure not only that the Key and Preliminary exams draw on an appropriate lexical repertoire for the targeted CEFR level, but that teachers and students have access to the repertoire that candidates can reasonably be expected to draw on.

Historically, the content of the original Key and Preliminary lists was based on the intuitions of language experts, with the Key list primarily drawing on the vocabulary detailed in the Council of Europe's *Waystage 1990* specifications (Van Ek and Trim 1991b) and the Preliminary list drawing on the vocabulary detailed in the *Threshold 1990* specifications (Van Ek and Trim 1991a). As part of the ongoing review process, later versions of the vocabulary lists have increasingly drawn on more objective sources of information; in particular, corpora, which are carefully curated, representative collections of language use (Ball 2002, Street and Ingham 2007). Corpora constitute an invaluable evidence base, enabling assessment specialists to more accurately identify what language use actually looks like when examined in detail and at scale. They also represent a particular strength of the Cambridge English approach to testing, reflecting its long-term commitment to corpus-based methodologies and, more specifically, its extensive investment in developing and maintaining innovative collections of learner language; most notably, the *Cambridge Learner Corpus* and the *Cambridge English Profile Corpus* (Barker, Salamoura and Saville 2015, Harrison and Barker (Eds) 2015). Critically, however, and as has been argued elsewhere, such evidence does not negate the need for expert judgement (McCarthy and Carter 2003). Rather, it provides an empirical foundation on which assessment specialists can base their judgements, underpinning the quality of Cambridge English Qualifications through drawing on multiple, complementary sources of evidence.

1. Throughout, references to the A2 Key and the B1 Preliminary lists should be understood as encompassing the content for both the main exams and their variants for schools, reflecting the fact the lists for the two A2 Key exams are combined within a single document, while those for the B1 Preliminary exams are combined within another.

Updating the lists

Although both lists are generally subject to ongoing review, the immediate prompt for the present update was the specifications for the revised Key and Preliminary exams, due for first administration in 2020.² Accordingly, the purpose of this update was twofold. Firstly, to expand the breadth of lexis that would be available across the range of functions, genres and topics mandated by the revised specifications. Secondly, to help ensure that Key and Preliminary tasks continue to take account of contemporary language use; in particular, by adding words for new technology (e.g. 'app') and removing words for obsolete technology (e.g. 'floppy disk').

As detailed in the following section, a three-stage revision procedure was devised to meet these goals, in line with the longstanding Cambridge English approach of combining empirical data and expert judgement (Ball 2002, Street and Ingham 2007). This procedure was applied in two rounds, reflecting the wider demands of the overall revision process. The first rounds occurred in 2015 for the Key list and 2017 for the Preliminary list, so that item writers could begin producing the new tasks mandated by the revised specifications. The second round occurred in 2018, so that item writers and other assessment specialists could suggest new vocabulary that they felt would aid the item-writing process after extensive practical experience of producing the revised tasks.

The revision procedure

Stage 1: Identifying prospective vocabulary

For the initial stage, a list of prospective vocabulary for each exam was assembled from two sources: expert knowledge and the wordlists for two of the Young Learners exams.

Regarding the first source, item writers, item writer chairs, and other assessment specialists with particular expertise in A2 and B1 language suggested vocabulary items which they felt would expand the breadth of available lexis across the Key and Preliminary tasks that candidates would encounter when sitting the revised specifications. Secondly, the existing lists for two exams from Young Learners were reviewed: A1 Movers and A2 Flyers. Here, the principle was both to identify vocabulary that would expand the breadth of available lexis, and to establish a greater degree of conformity across the lists. Accordingly, these two Young Learners lists were selected on the basis of their targeting CEFR levels adjacent to those of Key and Preliminary, and hence constituting vocabulary that should be within the range of Key and Preliminary candidates.³ Note, however, that no systematic reconciliation exercise was conducted; that is, not all items in the Young Learners lists were selected as prospective items for the Key and Preliminary lists. This primarily reflects the differing candidature of the Young Learners exams, with the Key and Preliminary exams assessing vocabulary and contexts more suitable for older candidates (Papp and Rixon 2018). It also reflects the fact that each Cambridge English Qualification aims to assess learner development relative to that exam's targeted CEFR level. Accordingly, candidates for the higher-level Preliminary exam are expected to have already mastered the lower-level Key vocabulary and to access the Key list should they wish to review any vocabulary not also present on the Preliminary list.

2. Detailed information regarding the fully revised specifications can be found at: keyandpreliminary.cambridgeenglish.org

3. Since no general English vocabulary lists are provided for Cambridge English Qualifications above the B1 CEFR level, no B2 targeted list was available as a source of vocabulary for this level.

Stage 2: Collating the evidence

Once identified, the list of prospective words was sent for analysis by corpus specialists in the Research and Thought Leadership Group at Cambridge English. The aim of this stage was to provide empirical evidence regarding the vocabulary that Key and Preliminary candidates could reasonably be expected to know in contemporary English language contexts. With this in mind, it was decided to draw on three sources of evidence: two providing evidence of language use by English learners (the English Vocabulary Profile and the Cambridge Learner Corpus), and one providing evidence of language use in L1-speaking contexts (the Spoken British National Corpus 2014). These sources were analysed in the following sequence:

- a. Check whether each prospective vocabulary item already appears on the existing lists.
- b. Determine the CEFR level for each item according to the English Vocabulary Profile.
- c. Calculate the frequencies for each item as found in the Cambridge Learner Corpus.
- d. Calculate the frequencies for each item as found in the Spoken British National Corpus 2014.

Existing vocabulary lists

The initial step involved checking each prospective word against the existing Key and Preliminary lists.

First, a redundancy check was performed to see whether each prospective Key item was already present on the existing Key list, and each Preliminary item present on the existing Preliminary list. As with all steps, this procedure was performed using the specific sense and part-of-speech of the prospective vocabulary item. In the case of the Preliminary list, for example, the prospective verb 'doubt' was retained for further analysis since it was already present only as a noun, whilst the phrasal verb (to) 'deal with' in the sense of 'to deal with somebody' was also retained for further analysis since it was already present only in the sense of 'to deal with something'.

Second, each prospective item was reviewed against the vocabulary list for which they were not a candidate. The primary rationale here was to record the degree of potential overlap between lists that might result from adding any prospective words. As noted above, although some degree of overlap is appropriate, the Preliminary list is not intended to function as a superset of the Key list, since Preliminary candidates are expected to have already mastered the vocabulary appropriate to Key.

English Vocabulary Profile CEFR level

The next step involved looking up the CEFR level of each prospective item within the English Vocabulary Profile (EVP). Developed through a rigorous programme of lexicographic research, the EVP is a publicly available resource that sets out the typical words and phrases that English learners can be expected to know at CEFR Levels A1–C2 (Capel 2015).⁴ It thereby offered an invaluable resource for gauging whether prospective vocabulary items were appropriately pitched for the exam at hand.

In determining the appropriateness of prospective vocabulary, it was important to note that, whilst all Cambridge English Qualifications target a particular CEFR level, each exam is also designed to reliably assess candidates at adjacent levels using the Cambridge English Scale. Specifically, according to the strength of their performance, the Key exam allows for candidates to be assessed at A1, A2, or B1 level, whilst the Preliminary exam allows for candidates be assessed at A2, B1, or B2 level. This capacity for assessment at adjacent levels is reflected in the vocabulary which item writers have licence to draw on for each exam. Thus, for example, in the Key Listening paper, whilst the majority of the available grammar and lexis is specified so as to be characteristic of A2 language, the rubric in the more demanding Part 4 of the paper allows for up to 5% of the grammar and lexis drawn on to be characteristic of B1 language. The same is true for Preliminary, where the rubrics of Parts 2, 3 and 4 of the Reading paper, for example, are specified so as to include up to 5% B2 grammar and lexis.

Accordingly, this capacity to reliably assess Key and Preliminary candidates at adjacent levels was incorporated into the EVP review. Specifically, a prospective Key word was recommended for inclusion where identified by the EVP as characteristic of A1, A2, or B1 learner language. Conversely, a prospective Preliminary word was recommended for inclusion where identified as characteristic of A2, B1, or B2.

Frequencies in the Cambridge Learner Corpus

The third step involved determining the frequency of each prospective word at pre-determined CEFR levels using the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC). Developed over a period of two decades in conjunction with Cambridge University Press, the CLC comprises a systematic, regularly updated collection of written scripts produced by candidates of Cambridge English Qualifications from all over the world (Boyle and Booth 2000, Barker et al 2015).⁵ Currently standing at over 50 million words of learner writing, it constitutes a crucial source of evidence, not just of the characteristic language produced by English language learners at various CEFR levels, but the language specifically produced in response to Cambridge English Qualifications such as Key and Preliminary.

To enable direct comparison at the relevant CEFR levels, the relative frequencies of each prospective vocabulary item were calculated for those levels. Relative frequency is defined as the number of times an item occurs in a given subset of a corpus, expressed as a proportion of the total number of instances per million. For example, the relative frequency of 'password', a prospective word for the Preliminary list, has 0.75 instances per million words in the Key subset of the CLC but 0.94 instances per million in the Preliminary subset. Relative frequencies were used instead of raw frequencies in order to avoid distorting effects due to the differing sizes of each corpus subset, as is standard corpus practice (e.g. Leech, Rayson and Wilson 2001).

Regarding the specific CEFR levels checked, and in line with the principle of assessing Key and Preliminary candidates at adjacent levels, the relative frequency for each prospective word was calculated across three exams. These were: the exam for which it was a prospective word (i.e. Key or Preliminary), the exam targeting one CEFR level below, and the exam targeting one CEFR level above. For Key, this meant also calculating the relative frequencies for both Skills for Life Entry 1 (A1) and Preliminary (B1). For Preliminary, this meant also calculating the relative frequencies for Key (A2) and B2 First (B2).

Once their relative frequencies had been calculated, prospective vocabulary was recommended for inclusion as follows. For the Key list, vocabulary was recommended for inclusion where its relative frequencies were (a) low in Skills for Life Entry 1 but higher in Key and Preliminary, or (b) low in both Skills for Life Entry 1 and Key but had markedly increased so as to be more characteristic of Preliminary responses. For the Preliminary list, vocabulary was recommended for inclusion if their relative frequencies were (a) low in Key but higher in Preliminary and B2 First, or (b) low in both Key and Preliminary but had markedly increased so as to be more characteristic of B2 First responses.

Frequencies in the Spoken British National Corpus 2014

The final source of evidence was the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 (Spoken BNC2014). This is an 11.5-million-word corpus of spontaneous conversations between L1 speakers of British English, collected between 2012 and 2016 by Lancaster University and Cambridge University Press (Love, Dembry, Hardie, Brezina and McEnery 2017).⁶ Constituting the most up-to-date source of information on contemporary L1 English, it offers strong evidence regarding the vocabulary that L2 learners can currently expect to encounter in L1-speaking contexts.

5. The CLC is available for research purposes, and researchers interested in accessing the CLC are invited to do so via the following link: languageresearch.cambridge.org/academic-research-request-form

6. As with the EVP, the Spoken BNC2014 is publicly available, and can be accessed free of charge at: corpora.lancs.ac.uk/bnc2014

Using the Spoken BNC2014, prospective vocabulary items were evaluated as follows. Firstly, items representing technological phenomena were recommended for consideration where present with a corpus frequency equal to or more than one instance per million words. Secondly, it was recommended that items not representing technological phenomena should be excluded from the final vocabulary list where present with a frequency of less than one instance per million words. In both cases, the principle was to avoid burdening candidates with vocabulary that they are unlikely to require, whilst highlighting vocabulary of contemporary salience that might not yet have translated through to learner responses; at least as evidenced in the CLC at the point of revision.

Stage 3: Reviewing the evidence

Once collated, the resulting evidence base was passed to a team of assessment specialists at Cambridge English, who met to evaluate the evidence and make any final decisions. These specialists comprised Assessment Managers currently working on the various Key and Preliminary products, as well as specialists with wider expertise in learner language at A2 or B1 levels.

Throughout this stage, the default decision-making principle was to accept all prospective items where the empirical analysis had recommended them for inclusion on the basis of (a) their CEFR level in the EVP or (b) their CLC frequencies. Thus, of the prospective Key vocabulary, the adjective 'delicious' was accepted, for example, since it is identified by the EVP as characteristic of B1 language, and its CLC frequencies evidence a substantive increase in Key and Preliminary writing. However, the adjective 'mean' was rejected, since the EVP characterises it as B2 language, and its CLC frequencies evidence no clear increase in Key or Preliminary writing. Conversely, of the prospective Preliminary vocabulary, the adjective 'enjoyable' was accepted, since it is identified by the EVP as characteristic of B1 language, and its CLC frequencies evidence a marked spike in the writing of B2 First candidates. However, the adjective 'suited' was rejected, since the EVP identifies it as characteristic of C1 language, and the CLC frequencies indicate that it is effectively absent from Preliminary or B2 First writing.

Nevertheless, reflecting the wider principle of combining empirical data and expert judgement, prospective vocabulary was also accepted where a clear justification could be made for its inclusion. For example, the noun 'superhero' would otherwise have been rejected as a prospective word for the Preliminary list, due to its very low CLC frequencies and its complete absence from the EVP. However, it was decided to include this word as it was deemed to be an internationally recognised word with a high contemporary salience that would support item writers in creating engaging tasks for the Preliminary candidature.

As a final step, the resulting vocabulary lists were also reviewed to eliminate vocabulary that was obsolete from the specific perspective of Key and Preliminary candidates, such as 'floppy disk'. Again, this step underlines the value of combining empirical analysis and expert judgement, since corpus-based frequencies may not easily distinguish generally obsolete words from those that may still be useful to Key and Preliminary candidates. For example, both 'floppy disk' and 'CD player' have relatively low frequencies according to the Spoken BNC2014 (respectively, 0.44 per million and 0.96 per million). Nevertheless, there was a clear argument for retaining 'CD player' in the Key vocabulary list, since CD players are still widely used in various educational contexts, and indeed Key Listening tests are still also made available on CD. Hence, this is a word that Key candidates may well need to know.

The revised 2020 vocabulary lists

The fully revised vocabulary lists were published in 2018 ahead of the revised 2020 Key and Preliminary specifications, and remain freely available on the Cambridge English website.^{7,8} In terms of overall vocabulary size, the 2020 Key Vocabulary List now contains 1,599 words and phrases, representing an increase of 76 items (or 4.99%). Conversely, the 2020 Preliminary Vocabulary List now contains 3,046 words and phrases, representing an increase of 70 items (or 2.35%). These are relatively small increases, representing a balance between (a) providing item writers with enough lexical variety to design a range of appropriate Key and Preliminary tasks, whilst (b) providing Key and Preliminary candidates with an expanded set of vocabulary that they can target without being unduly burdened.

As is standard practice, the revised Key and Preliminary vocabulary lists will be subject to ongoing review and updates by assessment specialists at Cambridge English, taking advantage of contemporary developments in language testing and corpus-based research. Indeed, a further review is currently planned for 2021, in order to address any improvements that are identified following the release of the revised specifications. A likely focus of updates in the longer term will be the salience of formulaic language such as collocations and lexical bundles, reflecting the increasing awareness and understanding of specific word combinations as a key dimension of L2 proficiency (Gyllstad 2013, Henriksen 2013, Siyanova-Chanturia and Pellicer-Sánchez (Eds) 2019). Whatever the specific focus and outcomes, however, the core purpose of future updates will remain the same: to ensure the ongoing currency of the Key and Preliminary exams so as to maximally support the evolving learning and assessment needs of A2 and B1 learners.

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