

Cambridge

English Skills Test

General

Cambridge English Skills Test General Listening



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English

Cambridge English Skills Test General is a modular online multi-level test of English language proficiency produced by Cambridge. One of the components is a test of Listening. In order to provide evidence of how well Cambridge English Skills Test General measures what it is intended to measure, Cambridge 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 Cambridge English Skills Test General 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, 2011, p.25). Figure 1 is an illustration of how the framework focuses on specific aspects of test validity.

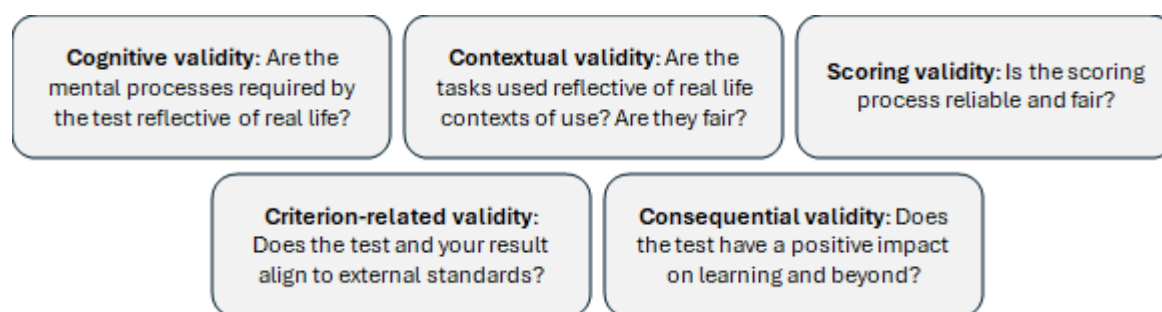


Figure 1 Aspects of validity

These kinds of questions are considered extensively in the design, development and use of Cambridge English Skills Test General Listening. Considering cognitive validity, we first need to demonstrate which cognitive processes involved in listening are activated by the test tasks. Our approach to cognitive ability in listening is summarised in the model put forward by (Field, 2013) in Figure 2.

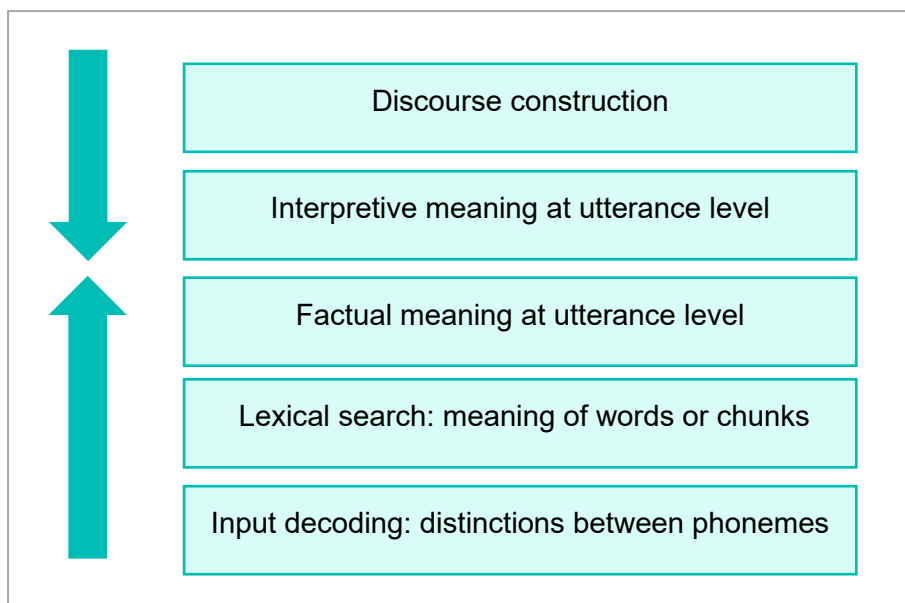


Figure 2 A model of Reading based on Field (2013)

There are five major levels of processing in this model. The first level is decoding, which involves converting the incoming acoustic sounds into phonemes and syllables using one's phonological knowledge of the target language. Decoding includes identifying which syllables carry stress, as this feeds into the next level, lexical search. As listeners decode the input, they begin to search their mental lexicon for the best word match. Listeners also begin to consider what sense or meaning of the words is being used. The next level is parsing, which involves imposing a syntactic structure onto the words to identify the literal meaning of an utterance. These are all bottom-up strategies. At the same time, the listener employs top-down strategies and pragmatic knowledge to identify the intended meaning and purpose of the utterance, and to build a mental model to decide on the overall main message, putting the utterances into a larger discourse structure. This top-down approach supports the other stages of the model¹.

The language proficiency level of learners has an impact on the cognitive processing they can carry out effectively. For example, lower-level learners may need to spend more time on decoding sounds and searching at a lexical level. This makes it more difficult for them to activate top-down strategies such as identifying the overall meaning or purpose of what they are listening to. Cambridge English Skills Test General tasks are designed to take the level of the learner into consideration. There are a number of task types in use for Cambridge English Skills Test General Listening, which link to these different cognitive processes (input decoding, lexical search, parsing, meaning construction, discourse construction) listed in the model. The task types in use in the test are summarised in Table 1.

¹ It should be noted that this model recognises that listening is not a linear process. Listeners move between bottom-up and top-down processes as they create hypothesis of what is being said and confirm or replace these in real time. For further reading on our institutional approach to Listening see Geranpayeh & Taylor (2013).

Table 1 Task types in Cambridge English Skills Test General Listening

Task type	Task description	Testing focus	Cognitive processes & CEFR level	CEFR scales A1 – C1
5-item comprehension	Five multiple choice questions about an audio, featuring one, two or three speakers. Depending on level the task will have three or four options per question and the audio will be between 120 and 650 words.	To test ability to understand and extract information from monologues, or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, meaning construction, feeling, attitude etc.	A1 – C1 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction B2-C1 discourse construction	Overall listening comprehension Understanding conversation between other speakers Understanding audio media and recordings
2-item comprehension	Two multiple choice questions about an audio, featuring one or two speakers. The task has three options per question. The audio is between 160 and 260 words depending on the level.	To test ability to understand and extract information from monologues, or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, constructing meaning, feeling, attitude, global meaning etc.	B2 – C1 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction discourse construction	Identifying cues and inferring
1-item comprehension	One multiple choice question about an audio, featuring one or two speakers. The task will have three written options, or three images. The audio is between 70 and 150 words depending on the level.	To test ability to understand and extract information from short monologues, or dialogues in a range of settings. Items might focus on detail, inference, constructing meaning, feeling, attitude etc.	A1-C1 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction B2-C1 discourse construction	

Note completion	A title and five gapped sentences summarising key points from a monologue. The monologue is between 300 and 400 words depending on the level. Each gap can be completed with up to three words heard in the audio.	To test ability to understand and extract specific factual information and stated opinion from a monologue.	C1 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction	Overall oral comprehension Understanding as a member of a live audience Note-taking (lectures, seminars, meetings, etc.)
One question multi-matching	A series of five themed monologues of approximately 30 seconds each. The same question is asked of each monologue and candidates must select the correct answer for each from a list of eight options.	To test ability to understand and extract detail, gist, opinion, purpose etc and differentiate finer points of meaning between speakers.	B2-C1 input decoding lexical search parsing meaning construction discourse construction	Overall oral comprehension Understanding conversation between other people Understanding as a member of a live audience Identifying cues and inferring

As can be seen in Table 1, tasks cover all the cognitive processes listed in the model, from input decoding up to discourse construction. The reporting range of the test is Pre-A1 to C1, and so the majority of tasks cover all five cognitive processes in the model. Criterion related validity is addressed through use of the scales listed in the final column of the table. Tasks are also designed to replicate scenarios and situations learners may experience, thus addressing the social aspect of the socio-cognitive model. Further information on the model of listening which the Cambridge English Skills Test General exam is based on, and the updated CEFR descriptors are available as listed below.

External studies have also investigated the cognitive validity of Listening tasks of the Cambridge English Skills Test. This type of validity investigation concerns the extent to which the cognitive processes required to complete test tasks resemble those that a test-taker would normally employ in non-test situations (Weir 2005). This notion can also be referred to as 'authenticity' of the test tasks as authentic tasks prompt test takers to demonstrate language use behaviours as would be observed in real life.

Latimer and Chan (2020) completed a study on the cognitive validity of the Cambridge English Skills Test Listening and Reading tasks. The researchers studied the cognitive processes of 65 B1, B2 and C1 level students who were English as a Second Language (ESL) learners studying at British universities, including University of Bedfordshire, University of Northampton, University of Essex and University College London. Eye-tracking, stimulated recall interviews and questionnaires were used to provide insight into students' cognitive processes involved in completing the Cambridge English Skills Test Listening and Reading tasks.

The study found that the cognitive processes elicited by the Linguaskill tasks were broadly consistent with those used in real-world language use, supporting the test's cognitive validity, as follows:

1. **Test takers engaged in goal-oriented listening.** For example, C1-level participants often anticipated the type of information they needed to extract from the audio and focused their visual attention on relevant parts of the screen (e.g., answer options) *before* the information was heard. This reflects top-down processing and strategic listening, which are key features of real-world listening and support the test's cognitive validity.
2. **Test takers processed and integrated information.** For example, in extended listening tasks, higher-level students (especially B2 and C1) were observed revisiting earlier answer options after hearing new information, suggesting they were integrating information across the listening passage. This behaviour aligns with inferencing and synthesis, which are cognitively demanding and typical of authentic listening scenarios.
3. **The tasks were cognitively demanding.** B1-level students showed longer fixation durations and more frequent regressions (i.e., going back to re-read options), indicating higher cognitive load and less efficient processing. While this suggests difficulty, it also shows that the task elicits genuine cognitive effort, which is a positive indicator of cognitive validity, especially when the task is appropriately challenging for the level.
4. **Test takers used contextual clues.** Participants often read the written answer options while listening, especially when the audio was dense or fast-

paced. This reflects dual-channel processing (visual and auditory), which is common in real-life listening tasks where listeners may rely on contextual cues or notes.

5. **Test takers carried out monitoring and self-correction.** C1 students were more likely to monitor their comprehension and change their answers based on new information, whereas B1 students tended to stick with initial guesses. This shows that the task allows for metacognitive engagement at higher levels, a hallmark of cognitively valid assessments.

These findings support the validity argument for the Linguaskill Listening test by showing that it engages test takers in cognitively appropriate ways, especially at higher proficiency levels.

In addition to CEFR alignment being built into task development (e.g., via standardised item production procedures, pretesting etc.), Cambridge routinely conducts standard setting activities to ensure that exams are monitored for CEFR alignment (e.g., Lopes & Cheung, 2020).

While it is impossible to measure the impact of Cambridge English Skills Test General prior to it going live, studies of the original Linguaskill test point to positive consequences in terms of achievement of career goals and increased employability (Khalifa et al., 2014) also ease-of-use and accuracy of reporting (Ismail et al., 2020). Research into the impact of the test will be routinely conducted as it grows in use to ensure it is having a positive influence on stakeholders.

Note:

The Cambridge English Skills Test shares the same test construct, design and tasks with the original Linguaskill test which was administered up until 2024. As a result, the Cambridge English Skills Test reports may cite references that pertain to the original Linguaskill.

Further Reading

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