

Cambridge

English Skills Test

General

Cambridge English Skills Test General Reading



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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 Reading. 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.

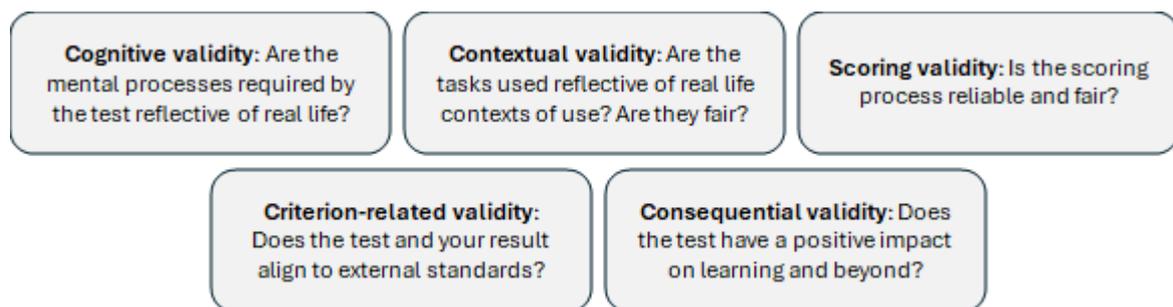


Figure 1 Aspects of validity

These kinds of questions are considered extensively in the design, development and use of Cambridge English Skills Test General Reading. In terms of cognition, tasks are informed by established models of cognitive processes during reading (Weir and Khalifa 2008). This model is summarised in Figure 2.

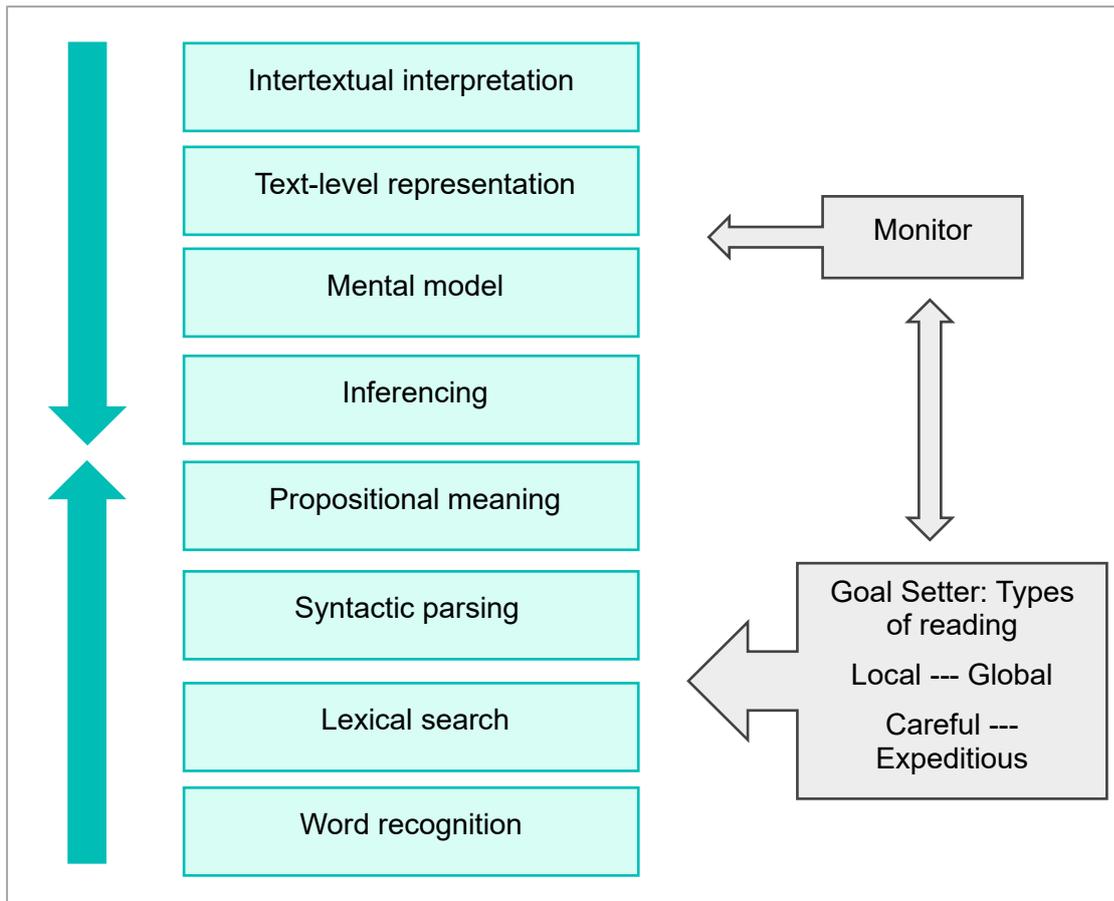


Figure 2 A model of Reading, adapted from Khalifa and Weir (2008)

The model portrays reading as a set of metacognitive activities (e.g. deciding the purpose of reading, and whether it needs to be local or global, careful or expeditious) that trigger and monitor the cognitive processes needed to complete a reading task. Various forms of knowledge (e.g. lexical, syntactic, etc.) feed into the cognitive processes to enable successful reading comprehension. The model consists of bottom-up processes, such as word recognition and lexical search, and top-down processes such as text level representation and building a mental model of the text. As the reader builds up a model of the content and purpose of the text, they engage in monitoring, checking and remediation in terms of their understanding of the text so far. Depending on the level of ability of the learner, and the difficulty of the text, some of the higher level cognitive processes may not be engaged in, for example if the learner is struggling with syntactic and lexical aspects of the text.

There are a number of task types in use for Cambridge English Skills Test General Reading, which link to the types of reading activities (global, local, careful and expeditious) and cognitive processes (lexical access, syntactic parsing etc) listed in the model. For example, readers engage in careful, local reading to understand sentence level meaning, whereas careful global reading is required to understand the overall text. Scanning for specific information requires expeditious local reading, whereas searching for important details and skimming for gist require expeditious

global reading. The task types in use in Cambridge English Skills Test General Reading are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Reading tasks in Cambridge English Skills Test

Task type	Task description	Testing focus	Cognitive processes & CEFR Level
Open Cloze	A text with 5 gaps, each to be filled with a single grammatical word. The length of the text may range between 60 - 150 words depending on the level.	This task is designed to test grammatical knowledge.	A1-C1: syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level
Multiple-choice Cloze	A text with 5 gaps each with 3 or 4 multiple choice options (3 at A1-B1, 4 at B2 and above). The length of the text may range between 60 - 150 depending on the level.	This task is designed to test knowledge of lexis/lexico-grammar.	A1-C1: word recognition & lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing B2-C1: building a mental model
Cross Text Matching	Candidates read across four texts on the same topic in order to find the relevant information to match to prompts or questions. The combined length of all texts may range between 500 – 600 words.	This task is designed to test ability to read multiple sources to compare, contrast and synthesise information and views in different sources.	B2-C1: word recognition & lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing building a mental model C1: creating a text level structure
Discrete Cloze	A gapped sentence task with a single 3 or 4-option (3 options at A1-B1, 4 options at B2 or above) multiple-choice item.	This task is designed to test lexical and lexico-grammatical knowledge.	A1-C1 word recognition & lexical access syntactic parsing

Reading Discrete with a graphic	Candidates read a short text e.g. a notice or a message (or at A1 look at a picture) and answer a single 3-option multiple-choice question. Some contextual support is available for the presentation of texts including pro-forma templates such as email screens, post-it notes, text messages, other templates such as notices and labels, and a variety of fonts and text styles.	The main testing aim of this task is for candidates to interpret language found in short texts (signs / notices / emails, etc.)	A1-B2 word recognition & lexical access syntactic parsing inferencing B2: building a mental model
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Gapped Text, Sentences	Candidates read a long text with five gaps representing extracted sentences. Candidates match the extracted sentences to the gaps, selecting from a set of eight options, five of which are keys while three are distractors.	This task is designed to test careful reading at a global level, testing the candidate's ability to understand text structure, cohesion, and coherence.	B1-C1: word recognition & lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing B2-C1: building a mental model C1: creating a text level structure
Gapped Text, Paragraphs	Candidates read a text from which five sections have been removed and fill each gap by choosing the appropriate paragraph from six options 5 of which are keys while 1 is a distractor. The total text length of the text (i.e. base text plus the six paragraph options) may range between 600 - 700 words.	This task is designed to test understanding of cohesion, coherence, text structure and global meaning through reading at a careful global level.	B2-C1 word recognition & lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing building a mental model
Comprehension Task with 5 items	This is a reading comprehension text followed by five 3- or 4-option multiple choice questions (3 options at A1-B1, 4 options at B2 or above). Texts may range between 200 - 600 words depending on level of difficulty.	This task is designed to test reading for gist and specific information such as opinion, purpose, main idea, implication.	A1-C1 word recognition & lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing B2-C1: building a mental model C1: creating a text level representation
Comprehension Task with 2 items	This is a reading comprehension task but with a shorter text and just two 4-option multiple-choice questions. Texts may range between 200 - 250 words depending on level of difficulty.	To test reading for gist and specific information such as opinion, purpose, main idea, implication, etc.	B2-C1 word recognition & lexical access syntactic parsing establishing propositional meaning at sentence level inferencing building a mental model

			C1: creating a text level representation
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As can be seen in Table 1, tasks cover all the cognitive processes listed in the model, from word recognition up to intertextual representation. The majority of test takers are likely to be at B2-C1 level, and so the majority of tasks are designed to cover syntactic parsing, establishing propositional meaning at sentence level, inferencing, and building a mental model. Tasks are also designed to replicate scenarios and situations learners may experience, thus addressing the social aspect of the socio-cognitive model.

External studies have also investigated the cognitive validity of 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 strategic reading and scanning.** For example, C1-level participants frequently used skimming strategies to get a general sense of the text before focusing on specific questions. Eye-tracking showed broad scanning patterns across paragraphs before narrowing in on relevant sections. This reflects top-down processing and strategic reading, which are essential in real-world reading tasks, supporting the test’s cognitive validity.
2. **Test takers were involved in integrating information.** For example, in tasks involving multiple paragraphs or sections, B2 and C1 students often moved back and forth between different parts of the text to compare or confirm information. This behaviour indicates integrative processing, a cognitively demanding skill that mirrors authentic reading scenarios, such as reading reports or articles.
3. **The tasks were cognitively challenging.** For example, B1-level students tended to focus on individual sentences or words, often spending more time on decoding vocabulary or re-reading short segments. While this shows limited global comprehension, it still reflects genuine cognitive effort and highlights how the task elicits different levels of processing depending on proficiency.
4. **Test takers used contextual clues for support.** For example, test takers often read the question first, then used it to guide their navigation through the text, matching question keywords with relevant parts of the text. This demonstrates goal-directed reading, a key aspect of cognitive validity, as it mirrors how people read with a purpose in real-life contexts.

5. **Test takers engaged in monitoring and self-correction.** For example, C1 students revisited earlier parts of the text after selecting an answer, especially when they felt uncertain. This was often followed by answer changes based on re-evaluation. This reflects metacognitive awareness and monitoring, which are higher-order cognitive skills expected in authentic reading tasks.

These findings support the validity argument for the Linguaskill Reading test by showing that it engages test takers in authentic, cognitively demanding processes, especially at higher proficiency levels.

Alongside cognitive validity addressed by the task types, at Cambridge we also consider criterion related validity, i.e. how well the tasks relate to concepts of language proficiency as illustrated in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020). In terms of criterion related validity, the following CEFR scales are used during the item writing process:

- Overall reading comprehension, B1-C1
- General linguistic range, B1-C1
- Vocabulary range, B1-C1
- Reading for information and argument, B1-C1
- Identifying cues and inferring, B1-C1
- Reading for orientation, C1-C1

A more detailed version of the reading model which the Cambridge English Skills Test General exam is based on, and the updated CEFR descriptors are both available as listed below in Further Reading.

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 Cambridge English Skills Test General exam 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

Council of Europe. (2020). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing. Retrieved from www.coe.int/lang-cefr

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

Latimer, N. and S. Chan (2020). *The cognitive processes of B1, B2 and C1 students performing the Linguaskill extended listening and reading tasks: an eye tracking investigation* (Funded Research Programme Report Series). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Assessment.

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

Taylor, L. (2011). *Examining Speaking: Research and Practice in Assessing Second Language Speaking* (Studies in Language Testing 30), Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

Weir, C J and Khalifa, H (2008) A cognitive processing approach towards defining reading comprehension, *Research Notes* 31, 2–10.

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