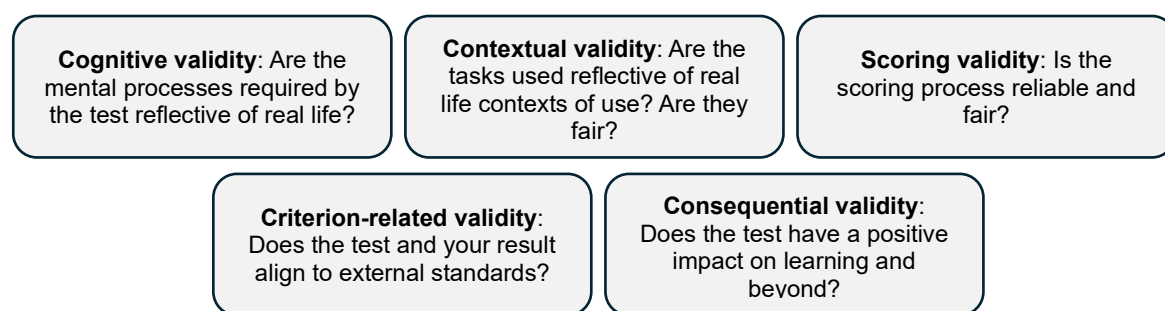# Cambridge English Skills Test

General

Cambridge English Skills Test General

Speaking

CAMBRIDGE
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 Speaking. 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 validity[1]) 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). Below is an illustration of how the framework focuses on specific aspects of test validity.

Cognitive validity: Are the mental processes required by the test reflective of real life?

Contextual validity: Are the tasks used reflective of real life contexts of use? Are they fair?

Scoring validity: Is the scoring process reliable and fair?

Criterion-related validity: Does the test and your result align to external standards?

Consequential validity: Does the test have a positive impact on learning and beyond?

These kinds of questions are considered extensively in the design, development and use of Cambridge English Skills Test General Speaking. 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 so as to reflect the cognitive demands of real speech. The test design is intended to accommodate candidates from across the CEFR A1-C1 range of ability as much as possible (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Overview of expected candidate output across test parts

CEFR Level	Expected candidate output
A1	
A1+	Part 1 Part 2
A2	
A2+	Part 3
B1	
B1+	Part 4
B2	Part 5
B2+	
C1	

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[1] See separate *Overview* document for more information on these terms and Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework.

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 move from a more personal and concrete focus to a more abstract one. 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 produce more extensive and detailed spoken language on increasingly complex subjects (Council of Europe, 2020). Table 1 below provides an overview of the tasks and functional foci and relevant CEFR descriptors.

Table 1 Overview of tasks and functional foci

Part	Task	Description	Functional foci	Response length	Preparation time	Marks
1	Interview	The candidate answers eight questions about themselves.	NA	4 x 10 secs & 4 x 20 secs	None	20%
2	Reading Aloud	The candidate reads aloud eight sentences	NA	8 x 10 secs	None	20%
3	Presentation	The candidate speaks on a given topic.	Providing context and describing an event/experience	1 minute	40 secs	20%
4	Presentation with visual information	The candidate gives a presentation based on the graphic information given.	Presenting information effectively Making a recommendation with justification	1 minute	1 minute	20%
5	Communication Activity	The candidate gives opinions on five questions related to a scenario.	Stating and justifying an opinion or reasoning Using speculative language in answer to a hypothetical scenario	5x 20 secs	40 secs	20%

In terms of scores, Cambridge trains, certificates and monitors Cambridge English Skills Test General 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 2 Overview of assessment criteria

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 then balanced against the extent to which the candidate has met the functional competencies inherent in the task (Table 1). It is via this process that Cambridge English Skills Test General Speaking aims to provide scores which are a fair reflection of both linguistic and broader communicative skills.

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; Lloyd et al., 2022, 2023).

In terms of test impact, every effort has been made in the development of the assessment to accommodate the emerging needs of learners of English as they progress through education and employment. 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. Studies of the original Linguaskill exam, on which the Cambridge English Skills General test is based, 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.

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