Cambridge
English
Skills Test

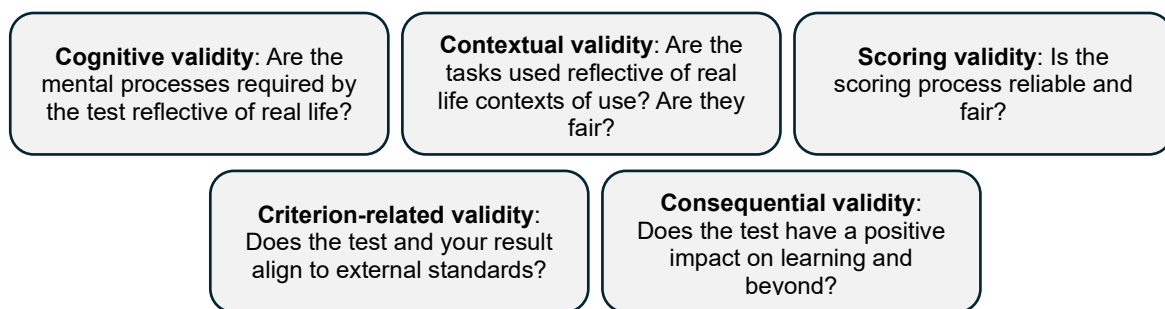General

Cambridge English Skills Test General

Writing

CAMBRIDGE
English

Cambridge English Skills Test is a modular online multi-level test of English language proficiency produced by Cambridge. One of the components is a test of Writing. In order to provide evidence of how well Cambridge English Skills Test 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 is Weir's (2005) socio-cognitive framework for language test validation. The framework is Cambridge English Skills Test 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 Writing. The Writing component comprises two tasks: Part 1 is an email task in which candidates read a short prompt and use the information in the prompt and three bullet points to write an email of at least 50 words. Part 2 is a writing task in which the candidate reads a short text outlining a scenario and responds using the information in the scenario and three bullet points. For Part 2, candidates write at least 180 words to a wider audience and may be asked to produce a variety of text types (e.g. review, article, web post).

In terms of cognition, both tasks are informed by established models of cognition in the production of writing (Kellogg, 1996) to reflect the cognitive demands of writing in personal, academic and professional contexts. 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 produce "straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects" to being able to produce "well-structured texts of complex subjects" (Council of Europe, 2020, p.66). Table 1 below provides an overview of functional foci and where the CEFR is an important reference point for what the test elicits.

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

Table 1 Overview of functional foci and relevant CEFR descriptors

Test part	Task description	Functional foci	CEFR descriptors of relevance
1	*Email* A short email in response to an input text with guidance on content and structure provided.	• Transactional language use • Information exchange	• Overall written interaction (A1 – C1) • Correspondence (A1-C1) • General linguistic range (A1-C1) • Vocabulary control (A1-C1) • Grammatical accuracy (A1-C1) • Thematic development (A1-C1) • Coherence and cohesion (A1-C1) • Propositional precision (A1-C1) • Sociolinguistic appropriateness (A1-C1)
2	*Scenario* A report, email, article or other appropriate form of extended writing based on brief instructions in the rubric.	• Evaluative, problem-solving language use • Creative, interpersonal language use • Describing experience • Presenting a case	• Overall written production (A1-C1) • Reports and essays (A1-C1) • Creative writing (A1-C1) • General linguistic range (A1-C1) • Vocabulary control (A1-C1) • Grammatical accuracy (A1-C1) • Thematic development (A1-C1) • Coherence and cohesion (A1-C1) • Propositional precision (A1-C1) • Sociolinguistic appropriateness (A1-C1)

Cambridge English Skills Test is designed to assess candidates' ability to use language mainly in the public and personal domains (Council of Europe 2001, p.45). As such, the contexts for both parts of the Writing test reflect the everyday needs of language users as members of the general public, including communication with friends and acquaintances, transactions involving goods and services, and other (non-work) interactions with organisations.

External studies have also investigated the cognitive validity of Cambridge English Skills Test. As explained before, 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.

Eberharter et al. (2020) conducted a study to investigate the cognitive validity of the writing component of Cambridge English Skills Test. Specifically, the study investigated the cognitive processes engaged by thirty L2 English learners of various proficiencies when responding to two writing tasks of Cambridge English Skills Test, i.e. the short email in Part 1 and the longer piece of writing in Part 2. An investigation of the test takers' cognitive processes while writing was carried out using triangulated data collected from stimulated verbal recall, keystroke logging, text analysis, and eye-movement analysis.

The study demonstrated that the test takers engaged in a range of planning, translation, execution and monitoring processes during the completion of the two writing tasks. These processes, according to the researchers, reflect the cognitive processes that one typically would engage in real-life writing tasks as specified by the theoretical models of writing. The results also indicate that these processes are in line with the test developer's intentions to elicit various writing behaviours as seen in the real world. For example, eyetracking and keystroke-logging data suggested that the two writing tasks are of appropriate complexity and thus result in different

cognitive processes, behaviours and text features, which help distinguish writers' proficiency levels.

In testing contexts where candidate responses are examiner-marked[2], Cambridge trains, certificates and monitors Cambridge English Skills Test 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 single mark but this is derived from the examiner considering specific criteria (Table 2).

Table 2 Overview of assessment criteria

Criteria	Description
Communicative Achievement	How well does the writing use genre and sociolinguistic conventions to communicate straightforward and complex ideas in ways that are appropriate to the intended audience? For example, a higher-proficiency writer will show greater control, flexibility and sophistication in how they convey ideas in genre-appropriate ways.
Organisation	How well does the writer use organisational devices to create cohesive and coherent texts? For example, a lower-proficiency writer may rely on a more limited repertoire of linking words (e.g., but) whereas at higher levels the writer will use more subtle means to bring themes and points into contrast.
Language	How well does the writer use their knowledge of lexis and grammar to successfully convey meaning? For example, as a writer develops they are more able to use complex lexico-grammatical structures (e.g. the use of more complex noun phrases or more specialised lexis).

These criteria are considered individually and then combined. It is via this process that Cambridge English Skills Test Writing 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 English learners as they progress through their language learning journey. The test design, within practical limits, aims to provide accessible yet challenging communicative tasks which will provide useful insights both to institutions and to individual learners. 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 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.

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,

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[2] For information on automarking see: How the Linguaskill automarker works

the Cambridge English Skills Test reports may cite references that pertain to the original Linguaskill.

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