

Cambridge

English Skills Test

General

Consequential validity evidence of the Cambridge English Skills Test 2025



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English

The way a language test, particularly a high-stakes test, is designed is likely to exert influence on how candidates learn a language, how instructors teach the language in the classroom, and people's understanding of what language ability is (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Both test developers and test users share the responsibility to ensure that a test is used appropriately, that the test scores are interpreted correctly, and that the use of the test has a positive impact on the various stakeholders, including teachers, employers, and course admission officers. Gathering ongoing consequential validity evidence is one way of ensuring that these impacts are understood, monitored, and aligned with the intended goals of the test.

Consequential validity, also referred to as test impact, washback or social consequences, can be defined as the potential consequences of the use of test scores on stakeholders (Messick, 1996; Cheng, 2004; 2005). The recognition of the broader effects of tests has led to the distinction between their immediate educational outcomes and their wider societal impacts, introducing the differentiation between "test washback" and "test impact" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

In more general terms, test washback can be defined as the effects of test preparation on learning and teaching that extend beyond the immediate test context (Hughes, 2003; Saville & Hawkey, 2004; Green, 2007). Washback is typically categorised as either negative (harmful) or positive (beneficial). Negative washback typically occurs when a test's content or format is based on a narrow definition of language ability, thereby constraining the teaching or learning environment. In contrast, positive washback occurs when a testing procedure encourages "good" teaching practices. An example of a positive washback is when an oral proficiency test is introduced with the expectation that it will promote and enhance the teaching of speaking skills (Taylor, 2005). The term "impact" is mainly used to conceptualise the far-reaching consequences of tests at the macro (social) level, such as on educational systems, employment, and career progression opportunities or even life prospects (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 29).

Several models aim to merge the micro (classroom) and macro (social) perspectives of language tests. At Cambridge University Press & Assessment, we are guided by the **impact by design model** proposed by Saville and Khalifa (2016), which advocates for an integration of the micro and macro contexts, with one informing the other. The model also makes an explicit link between test impact and actions to be taken in order to achieve the desired positive impact.

As part of an ongoing validation process, the Cambridge English Impact Evaluation team has conducted several studies focusing on the use of the Cambridge English Skills Test¹ in different contexts. For example, Ash and Tahir (2023) investigated the

¹ Cambridge English Skills Test (EST) was previously known as the Linguaskill test.

impact of the Cambridge English Skills Test on test-takers' language proficiency and employment prospects using a questionnaire with 684 respondents across the globe (See Figure 1). Another study was conducted by Ismail et al. (2020), gathering data from 192 final-year undergraduate students in STEM-related faculties at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UTM) and 34 employers from STEM-related companies. Using both questionnaire data and interviews, this study brings evidence of test-takers' perceptions of the test, as well as its perceived impact on their employability.

Figure1. Consequential validity evidence from 684 test-takers: Global survey map



The remaining case studies were conducted in the higher education (HE) sector in India, China, Oman, and the UAE. Employing mixed-methods research, Karakoç et al. (2025) focused on the students' experience with the Cambridge English Skills Test, the fit of the test within the wider EFL curriculum, and the consequences of the test on students' language progress in India. Questionnaire responses from 281 students enrolled in General English and Business English courses, and interviews with 10 lecturers at Dr. Mahalingam College of Engineering and Technology (MCET), Sri Ramakrishna Engineering College, and KLS Gogte Institute of Technology also provide evidence of the test's value for employability purposes.

In a separate study, Bi (2021) explored stakeholder and student expectations of the Cambridge English Skills Test in relation to educational goals, integration into the

curriculum, and perceptions of the test's effectiveness. The study drew on interviews with six students and three key stakeholders from the Learning Centres at Beijing Normal University–Hong Kong Baptist University United International College and Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University.

Another study by Ash et al. (2024), involving a questionnaire completed by 164 students and interviews with five EAP teachers at Nizwa University in Oman, found evidence supporting the test's accuracy in assessing students' English language proficiency levels, as well as insights into students' perceptions of the digital assessment. Further evidence for the test's influence on stakeholders' perceptions of the digital assessment and its adaptive nature was also found in interviews with three lecturers from the American University of Sharjah in the UAE (Séguis et al., 2021). Key findings across these studies are summarised below².

One of the key features of the Cambridge English Skills Test that was singled out in several case studies **is its robust design**, which allows the test to serve as an **accurate measure of students' English language ability**. For example, the test was perceived as a valuable and accurate measure of reading, writing, listening, and speaking by test-takers in India and Malaysia, with more than 70% of respondents agreeing with this statement. Likewise, this was also confirmed by key stakeholders at a university in China, as the example quote demonstrates below:

I think Cambridge University's [Press & Assessment] language assessment technology is very good [...]. It is very accurate based on what I read about the research, so I think from a technical level, I highly advocate [for the EST]. Key stakeholder comment, China

Many students also noted that the test's **digital format felt comfortable and accessible**, contributing to a more **confident test-taking experience**. For example, many test-takers in Malaysia (69.8%) and India (72%) reported feeling motivated to take the EST on a computer. Additionally, students in India reported feeling confident (74%) and comfortable (78%) when taking the Cambridge English Skills Test. Similar experiences were articulated by the test-takers in Oman, with the test perceived as easier than a paper-based test, for example:

It was the first time I took a computer exam, but that's a great experience because for me I think it's easier. Typing took less time than using paper. So, I found it easier in the Writing. Test-taker comment, Oman

I am confident with the test and results. Test-taker comment, Malaysia

² Although the country is named, findings apply only to the institutions studied.

[The Cambridge English Skills Test] is user-friendly as it is an online test. Test-taker comment, Malaysia

The positive experience with the test was also attributed to the speaking section, which allows the test-takers to speak in front of a computer without hesitation, as illustrated in the example quotes below by teachers:

They don't need to do the speaking activity in front of the faculty members like us. They are very much comfortable doing it through the microphone. They are very eager to talk since it is the computer they come up with new ideas and they talk boldly without hesitation. Teacher comment, India

They have even gained the confidence to speak in front of people, and they are practising more than twice or thrice, because it's an app [computer-based demo test], and they can make use of the same many times. Teacher comment, India

The positive test-taking experience is further enhanced by the test's **computer-adaptive** nature, whereby the difficulty of the questions is adjusted in real time based on student responses. This approach ensures that **each learner is challenged appropriately**, increasing the precision of the proficiency estimate and making the assessment feel more personalised. For instance, at the American University of Sharjah, the adaptive nature of the Cambridge English Skills Test had a particularly notable effect on the weaker students. The fact that the test difficulty level is tailored to the students' level of ability means that weaker students do not have to go through a series of more challenging questions, which can have a negative impact on their confidence and can have a knock-on effect that carries over throughout the rest of the test. This can be seen in the example quote below:

Students don't walk away from [the adaptive test] feeling awful. Teacher comment, UAE

Similar views were also found in the Chinese and Malaysian contexts, where test-takers perceived the adaptive nature of the test as convenient, which is demonstrated in the example quotes below:

This is the first time I took the computer-based exam. It was quite convenient to navigate. I could feel the test started with easier questions and got more difficult afterwards. I like this design as it didn't make me anxious. Test-taker comment, China.

I like the adaptive test where it depends on our answer to one question. Test-taker comment, Malaysia

Evidence for positive consequences of the adaptive feature of the test was also found in Indian HE institutions. According to the teachers, the adaptive nature of the Cambridge English Skills Test is widely appreciated by students. This feature also ensures a personalised testing experience, where the difficulty of questions adjusts based on their responses, making the process fair and comfortable.

Since it is an adaptive test, the students themselves conclude that the assessment is made properly, as they are able to understand their level. Teacher comment, India

With the Cambridge English Skills Test being introduced in HE institutions, research has also examined how the test fits within the broader curriculum. When integrated with regular classroom learning, the test can **indirectly support language progress**, particularly for lower-level learners who benefit from structured, level-appropriate input. According to the global candidature survey (Ash, 2024), candidates reported an improvement in their confidence to communicate effectively in English (80%) as a result of taking and preparing for the Cambridge English Skills Test. Moreover, evidence from Indian HE institutions also shows that nearly 80% of students reported progress in their English skills. When investigating the enabling factors, teachers highlighted the importance of teaching skills beyond the test, focusing on activities such as presentations and problem-solving scenarios. These skills not only prepare students for academic and professional success but also enhance language development, test awareness, and broader skill growth. This is illustrated in the quote below:

The exercises, the content of [the test], doesn't have negative consequences on the day-to-day, continuous implementation of the curriculum, and the curriculum already includes the skills, like, you know, business content, business vocabulary or grammar, listening and speaking skills, the topics which are similar to [Cambridge English Skills Test]. So, there is sort of this alignment. Teacher comment, India

Building on its role to support the broader skill development, the Cambridge English Skills Test is also viewed as **enhancing test-takers' employability prospects**. In Malaysia, for example, 60% of test-takers reported that the test results would support their job applications, and over 80% said they felt motivated to apply for a job with the Cambridge English Skills Test results. Employers also saw the test results as an “additional bonus”, offering valuable insight into candidates' language abilities:

I think it is an additional bonus point but so far... We would be interested to call them for an interview. Employer comment, Malaysia

Likewise, as demonstrated in the quotes below, the employers value the test as a screening tool for candidates' language skills when used in combination with job interviews:

Having outstanding [Cambridge English Skills Test] results would increase an applicant's chances of working at this company. [Also,] we need to interview the person [for the job]. Employer comment, Malaysia

[I] could see that it is quite useful in a sense that this provides at a glance, a quick overview of what this person is able to do given the four sets of skills... I think it is a useful screening tool. Employer comment, Malaysia

Similar findings emerged in Indian HE institutions, where 82% of test-takers expressed trust in the value of the test and 79% believed it would strengthen their job applications. These insights are further supported by teacher comments, for example:

A student from third year met me occasionally, and he told that only because of the [EST] test certificate he was able to get his [work] placement. Teacher comment, India

Overall, these studies support the Cambridge English Skills Test's consequential validity, highlighting its accurate measurement of language ability, reduced test anxiety through adaptive design, positive digital test-taking experiences, and its role in facilitating language development and enhancing employability prospects. As test validation is an ongoing process, further investigation and evidence will be gathered to support the Cambridge English Skills Test's consequential validity and impact.

More information on Cambridge University Press & Assessment's approach to impact monitoring and evaluation can be found here: [Impact Monitoring and Evaluation | Cambridge English](#)

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