Cambridge English Skills Test

Business

Alignment of Cambridge English Skills Test to the CEFR through Standard Setting

CAMBRIDGE
English

Standard setting is a process carried out by a panel of expert judges, in order to decide what the pass marks and grade boundaries for an exam should be, by looking at test items, tasks and candidate performances. It is a judgement process, in which qualified experts determine what a minimum level of competency on the test consists of. This minimum level of competency is defined operationally as the *cut score*, and the process of recommending the cut score is called *standard setting*. These cut scores help divide examinees into proficiency groups based on their test performances. In the case of the Cambridge English Skills Test, cut scores are used to divide examinees into different proficiency groups in line with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001; 2020) commonly shortened to CEFR. This process of linking test results to a theoretical framework of language proficiency is part of the alignment process to an external framework, i.e., aligning the Cambridge English Skills Test to the CEFR.

Historically, Cambridge English exams were the basis for defining some CEFR levels. Brian North, one of the co-authors of the CEFR, points out that:

'… the process of defining these [CEFR] levels started in 1913 with the Cambridge Proficiency Exam (CPE) that defines a practical mastery of the language as a non-native speaker. This level has become C2. In 1939, Cambridge introduced the First Certificate (FCE), which is still seen as the first level of proficiency of interest for office work, now associated with B2.' (North, 2006, p. 6)

Because Cambridge English exams informed the development of the CEFR from the beginning, the links between these exams and the CEFR levels have always been well established. Similarly, new descriptors published in an update of the CEFR in a Companion volume (Council of Europe, 2020) were informed by Cambridge English's scales of score reporting. Therefore, Cambridge English's focus has been on maintaining the standards.

The alignment of Cambridge English Skills Test to the CEFR has been carried out by Cambridge English as part of our regular review and validation of Cambridge exams. Standard setting at Cambridge English is routinely carried out following the stages recommended by the Manual for Aligning Tests to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2009). These stages are also listed and exemplified in an updated Handbook for educators (British Council, UKALTA, EALTA and ALTE, 2022). These five stages are as follows:

1. Familiarisation (equipping expert judges with robust knowledge of the CEFR)

2. Specification (expert judgement on the relevance of the Cambridge English Skills Test to the CEFR)

3. Standardisation training (achieving consensus on performances and test tasks associated

with each CEFR level)

4. Standard setting (determining cut scores)

5. Validation (collecting procedural, internal and external evidence about the standard setting).

The standard setting approach used for the Reading and Listening parts of the Cambridge English Skills Test, which assess receptive skills, is test-centred. In the test-centred approach, the judges review tasks and items in the test and decide what level of performance on these tasks and items would indicate a minimal level of competency for a specific CEFR level. For example, judges consider how a candidate who is just good enough to attain a B1 CEFR level would perform on particular items in the test. For the Writing and Speaking parts, which assess productive skills, the commonly used method is examinee-centred. Examinee-centred methods are based on the performance of a representative sample of real candidate performances. Judges review these performances and decide what level of performance indicates a minimal level of competency for a specific CEFR level.

Cambridge English views standard setting as a regular ongoing process in which the links between the exams and the CEFR are constantly monitored and maintained. The most recent standard setting panels are:

2022: Standard Setting for Cambridge English Skills Test - General: confirming A1 to C2 cut scores for Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking

2023: Standard Setting for Cambridge English Skills Test - Business: confirming B1 to C2 for Reading and Listening, and levels B2 and C1 for Writing and Speaking

Note:

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

References

British Council, UKALTA, EALTA and ALTE. (2022). *Aligning Language Education with the CEFR: A Handbook.* Retrieved from https://www.alte.org/resources/Documents/CEFR%20alignment%20handbook%20layout.pdf

Council of Europe. (2009). *Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). A Manual.* Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

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

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flexible, reliable assessment for the decisions you need to make

Cambridge
English
Skills Test

Discover more:
cambridge.org/skillstest

**Find out more at
cambridge.org/english**

We believe that English can unlock a lifetime of experiences and, together with teachers and our partners, we help people to learn and confidently prove their skills to the world.

Where your world grows

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS & ASSESSMENT