

Oxford Test of English: Independent CEFR referencing

CEFR Levels and Global Descriptors		Recommended threshold score
B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	111 in each skill
B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.	81 in each skill
A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.	51 in each skill

Independent review of the Oxford Test of English has found it to be well-aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), providing a sound assessment of English language competency in listening, reading, writing, and speaking at CEFR levels A2-B2. Recommended Oxford Test of English scores for CEFR comparability are the same for the Oxford Test of English for Schools.

CONTEXT AND SCOPE

Ecctis has been commissioned to carry out an independent evaluation and benchmarking of the Oxford Test of English, an English language test developed by Oxford University Press and certified by the University of Oxford. It is a computer-based test, available at Approved Test Centres around the world. Oxford University Press maintains a full list of Approved Test Centres on their website.

The aim of the test is to provide a robust assessment of an individual's general English proficiency in a range of social, education and professional settings relevant to support applications for schools,¹ colleges, universities, and employment. Oxford University Press maintains a list of institutions which have accepted the test for the purpose of admission (providing the candidate has met the requisite score(s) set by the individual institution), which today includes over 300 institutions worldwide.²

¹ Please note that the Oxford Test of English and the Oxford Test of English for Schools are the same test (but provide tailored content to better suit the interests and experiences of the test taker), therefore use the same test specifications.

² Selected examples independently checked by Ecctis include: [City University](#); [York St John University](#); [Leeds Trinity University](#); [Nottingham Trent University](#) [correct as of April 2021].

It assesses across the four functional language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Candidates may choose to be assessed in just one of the skills areas, or all four.

The tests in listening and reading are adaptive, adjusting subsequent questions given based on the candidate's preceding responses. Speaking and writing tests are randomised meaning no two candidates receive the same questions at the same time. This allows the test to be offered at Approved Test Centres "on-demand".

ASSESSING THE FOUR SKILLS

Listening

The Oxford Test of English listening module is approximately 30 minutes long and is made up of four parts with a range of tasks, such as multiple-choice questions, matching exercises, and note-completion, which test candidates' ability to listen for detail, listen for gist, and identify cues and inferences. The audio files cover everyday topics such as clothing, travel, hobbies, family.

Candidates hear each audio clip twice, and tasks usually involve listening to dialogues or monologues by speakers with neutral accents and intelligible speech.

At A2, input texts and tasks are designed to ensure that students – in line with the A2 CEFR descriptors – "can understand and extract essential information"³ from audio texts which are delivered slowly and clearly. Input texts are delivered at slower than natural speeds though with some natural features of speech such as hesitation and varied intonation. At this level, tasks require candidates to be able to listen for key words used in the question.

B2 audio texts are delivered at standard speed, reflecting that, at this CEFR level, candidates should be able to "understand announcements and messages on concrete and abstract topics spoken in standard speech at normal speed".⁴ Multiple-choice tasks require careful listening for detail, since the input texts use synonyms and paraphrasing, and there are always at least two other plausible answers to each question. Overall, the tasks provide a robust test of general English comprehension, consistent with skills set out at CEFR level B2.

Reading

The reading skills module for the Oxford Test of English is divided into four parts. The test takes approximately 35 minutes and includes a variety of task types, such as matching exercises, multiple-choice and gap-fills. Tasks in the reading exam are effective at testing candidates' reading comprehension and orientation, plus identifying cues and inferences in the contexts of various texts – such as emails, articles and advertisements.

The adaptive nature of the test means that the length and complexity of text will vary – at A2 level, candidates will have needed to read and answer questions on text lengths ranging from 20-35 words for short text tasks in Part 1, up to approximately 235 words for the longer text task in Part 4. The input texts and questions are well designed to ensure that, in line with expectations at CEFR A2 level, candidates are able to understand

³ Council of Europe (2020) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion Volume*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/common-european-framework-of-reference-for-languages-learning-teaching/16809ea0d4>. Listening to audio media and recordings – A2 descriptor

⁴ Ibid. Understanding announcements and instructions – B2 descriptor.

short, simple texts containing the highest frequency vocabulary and extracting specific information. Texts for B1 and B2 candidates are incrementally longer and by B2, candidates will have had to read several texts ranging from short 40-70-word pieces to 425-word gapped-text articles. The texts at these levels also use a range of vocabulary, tenses, and complex grammatical structures, consistent with expectations at B1 and B2 levels respectively.

Speaking

The speaking module lasts approximately 15 minutes and is made of four parts encompassing an interview of two-three minutes on two different topics; an integrated listening and written production task where candidates must listen to a voicemail and respond with another; a one-minute presentation on a given (unseen) topic and follow up questions on the presentation. This might for example involve talking about the advantages and disadvantages of different types of family holidays, or to express a viewpoint on living with family versus friends during university studies.

Candidates are assessed across key speaking subskills, including fluency, accuracy and range of vocabulary and grammar, their use of turn-taking, presenting and developing arguments, and acknowledging other viewpoints. Marked student answers were reviewed as part of Ecctis' study and were found to reflect expectations within each of the target CEFR levels. Oxford Test of English A2 candidates were able to form short sentences presenting his/her opinions in simple terms, using routine vocabulary and simple sentence structures. Oxford Test of English B1 candidates were able to communicate information with sufficient vocabulary and fluency to express him/herself consistent with CEFR B1 descriptors; and begin – through giving simple reasons – to justify a viewpoint on what is a familiar topic, giving reasons and explanations. By B2, Oxford Test of English candidate responses show the ability to communicate more spontaneously, with good grammatical control and without noticeable restrictions on what he/she wants to say, providing developed arguments, and expanding on points at some length, consistent with expectations set out in the CEFR B2 descriptors.

Writing

The writing module is formed of two parts. The full exam is approximately 45 minutes long, and tasks include writing an email of 80-130 words in response to a brief email (input text); and then writing either an article / review or an essay of 100-160 words. Topics covered in the writing exam largely cover social, educational, and professional areas, for example giving advice in email format to students looking to visit the candidate's country; or for the essay writing a magazine article about friendship. Subskills tested include the ability to adapt writing for different contexts and readers, and grammatical accuracy. Candidates are given the opportunity to demonstrate how they develop arguments, express opinions, make suggestions or recommendations and whether they are able to respond using different degrees of formality.

Marked samples were reviewed by Ecctis at low, mid and high levels within each CEFR level and were found to demonstrate the subskills expected at levels A2, B1 and B2. Across the B2 responses, for example, candidates were able to use appropriate writing conventions and develop arguments clearly, with good grammatical control and accuracy, consistent with expectations in the CEFR that candidates at this level should “not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding”.⁵

⁵ Ibid. Grammatical accuracy – B2 descriptor.

Grading and certification

Candidates receive a score out of 140 for each skill tested. Candidates who choose to take all four skills assessments are issued with an overall score out of 140, comprising the average scores achieved in each skills area. The scores can be aligned to “Below A2”, “A2”, “B1” and “B2” levels on the CEFR.

Candidates are issued with an Oxford Test of English Certificate of Proficiency, bearing the University of Oxford and Oxford University Press logos. This also details the date each skill was tested since skills can be tested on different days. Test takers can ask for their results to be sent to a college, employer, university or other organisation.⁶

Conclusions

This study employed Ecctis’ established methodology for the benchmarking of English language proficiency tests, informed by the Council of Europe 2009 Manual⁷ and the 2020 Companion Volume.⁸ This encompassed a desk-based review of Oxford Test of English test specifications, assessment development procedures, test items, marked student samples, speaking test recordings and relevant mark schemes.

Analysis of sample papers, candidate samples, and mark schemes has highlighted effective use and employment of the CEFR, with the CEFR well integrated throughout the test development, marking and standard-setting process.

For productive skills, the task analysis found questions to be appropriately designed to elicit responses in the target range, whilst an independent review of marked student responses for speaking and writing revealed sound application of marking criteria in task fulfilment; grammar, lexis, pronunciation and fluency (speaking) and organisation (writing), consistent with expectations at each of the respective CEFR levels.

Of particular note is the adaptive feature of the test in listening and reading. There is an appropriate range of items, which are calibrated not only at the target CEFR levels, but also within them, with tasks designed at low-, mid-, and high-levels within each CEFR band. This is of particular benefit to the candidate and the end stakeholder in ensuring that the test provides a fair test of the candidate’s competency in these skills.

Independent review by Ecctis has found that the Oxford Test of English, and therefore the Oxford Test of English for Schools, is well-aligned to CEFR levels A2-B2.

Each of the test papers was found to use appropriate and relevant topic areas and to reward demonstration of a range of skills at A2, B1 and B2 level, providing a sound assessment of general English language proficiency, suitable for multiple purposes.

⁶ More information can be found at: <https://verify.oxfordtestofenglish.com>.

⁷ Council of Europe (2009) *Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) – A Manual*. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/1680667a2d>.

⁸ Council of Europe (2020) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment – Companion Volume*.