

A Guide to English Tests and Proficiency Frameworks



The measurement of English language proficiency is needed by individuals and organizations for career development, training evaluation, needs analysis, recruitment, and other purposes. English language tests are administered in different regions around the world to meet this need. However, test results and scores can only be relevant when they are interpreted and understood. Only then can users of test scores achieve their specific goals for the measurement of English language proficiency.

By giving an overview of the main language proficiency frameworks and standardized tests, this paper will help test takers and organizations answer the following questions:

- ▶ What do English language tests aim to measure?
- ▶ Which standardized test best suits my needs?
- ▶ What do my test results mean? With the wide range of measurement options and systems, is there a globally accepted interpretation?

English language proficiency

Proficiency in the English language continues to be in great demand as organizations seek internationally competent communicators for the workforce. With English language proficiency more and more emerging as a valuable tool or requirement for individuals and organizations, it is necessary for such a skill to be measurable and thus recognizable and interpretable across institutions and regions around the world.

While there is no single globally adopted system of measurement for English language proficiency, standardized English tests have been produced and administered by international testing organizations for various purposes. The wide range of assessment methods has proven to be an advantage to English language users, teachers, and evaluators, all of whom have distinct goals for the recognition of proficiency levels. Test results have been used for university admissions, career improvement, training needs analysis, and immigration, among other things.

An action-oriented approach: CEFR and ALTE

Proof of English language ability through a standardized test makes proficiency a portable achievement in the

Q What do the test scores mean in terms of the test takers' ability to use English in real-world situations?

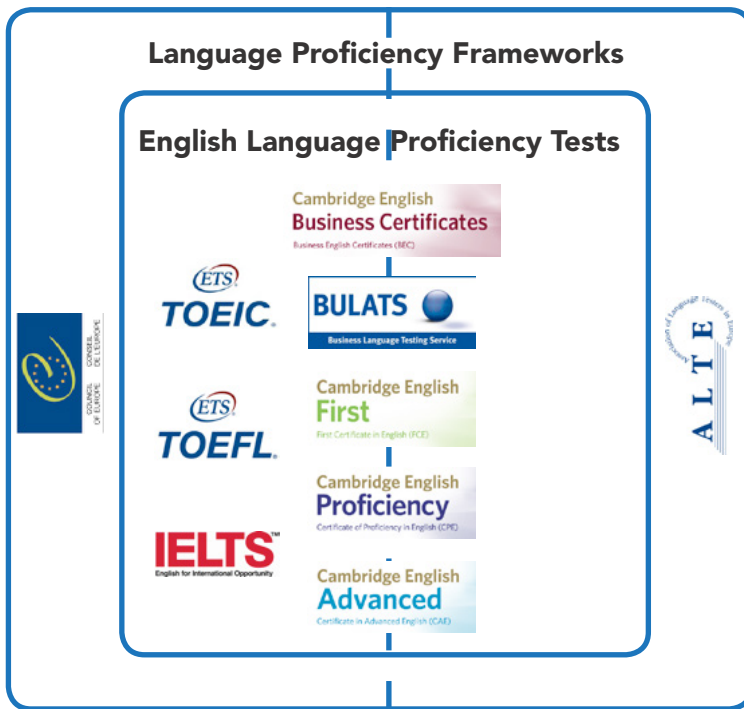
sense that the qualification is recognized by governments, employers, and educational institutions worldwide. One critical component and goal of measurement, however, is the interpretation of results: What do the test scores mean in terms of the test takers' ability to use English in real-world situations?

Is the qualification gained from one test comparable and understandable from the perspective of other systems? This need for interpretation and its standardization across the different systems of measurement has resulted in the development of language frameworks which aim to establish a common reference for the description of proficiency levels.

A number of language proficiency frameworks have been developed since the 1970s as a response to major shifts in the approach to language assessment. For the purpose of understanding proficiency in light of standardized test qualifications, familiarization with two major language frameworks is recommended: the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) developed by the Council of Europe (COE) and the ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe) Framework.

Both the CEFR and ALTE are especially popular among language testers in Europe. Cambridge ESOL, one of the leading providers of English exams, is a founding member of the ALTE. All Cambridge ESOL exams are

linked to the ALTE Framework and the CEFR. Despite the more common use in Europe, testing organizations in other regions have recognized the value and growing need for the alignment of their standardized tests to these two frameworks. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), for example, has mapped both the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) to the CEFR. Most of the internationally recognized EFL tests are linked to either the ALTE or CEFR, or both.



- > Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)
- > Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)
- > International English Language Testing System (IELTS)
- > Business Language Testing Service (BULATS)
- > Cambridge ESOL Business English Certificates (BEC) – Preliminary, Vantage, Higher
- > Cambridge ESOL Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)
- > Cambridge ESOL Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)
- > Cambridge ESOL First Certificate in English (FCE)

English Language Test Providers

> Educational Testing Service

ETS develops and administers standardized tests for elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education as well as international English tests such as the TOEIC and TOEFL. ETS also conducts educational research, analysis, and policy studies.

> Cambridge ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)

Cambridge ESOL is part of Cambridge Assessment, a nonprofit department of the University of Cambridge. They provide assessment for general, academic, business, legal, and financial English. Cambridge ESOL also provides assessment for teaching qualifications.

> British Council

The British Council is an international organization that specializes in cultural relations by providing educational opportunities in the areas of English, the Arts, Education & Society.

> IDP: IELTS

IDP Education offers international educational opportunities and English language proficiency services. IDP:IELTS Australia manages IELTS test centers in more than 35 countries.

The CEFR and ALTE Framework describe language ability using an action-oriented approach. Both on a six-level scale, the frameworks provide “can-do” statements for the four language skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The statements describe the receptive and productive tasks that language users can perform at a corresponding level. ALTE has confirmed the alignment of its leveling scale to the CEFR levels. Below is an overview of the CEFR and ALTE levels for general language ability.

| CEFR Level | ALTE LEVEL | CEFR Sample Description* | ALTE Sample Description* | |
|------------------|------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| Proficient user | C2 | ALTE 5 | Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations | Can advise on or talk about complex or sensitive issues, understanding colloquial references and dealing confidently with hostile questions |
| | C1 | ALTE 4 | Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes | Can contribute effectively to meetings and seminars within own area of work or keep up a casual conversation with a good degree of fluency, coping with abstract expressions |
| Independent user | B2 | ALTE 3 | Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party | Can follow or give a talk on a familiar topic or keep up with a conversation on a fairly wide range of topics |
| | B1 | ALTE 2 | Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest | Can express opinions on abstract/cultural matters in a limited way or offer advice within a known area, and understand instructions or public announcements |
| Basic User | A2 | ALTE 1 | Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters | Can express simple opinions or requirements in a familiar context |
| | A1 | ALTE | Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type | Can understand basic instructions or take part in a basic factual conversation on a predictable topic |

* Descriptions are incomplete. Examples were taken from the general language ability can-do statements from the CEFR and ALTE.

The two frameworks expand the descriptions to specific contexts and activities. The ALTE Framework categorizes its can-do statements into three areas: Social and Tourist, Work, and Study. The statements answer the question “What can language users do in these contexts (i.e., in general social/tourist situations, in the workplace, in the academe)?” ALTE also enumerates the specific activities and environments covered by the statements for each area (e.g., shopping, participating in meetings, following a lecture, etc.). The CEFR, on the other hand, is more comprehensive in scope. The scales cover specific communicative tasks (e.g., listening to the radio, obtaining goods and services) as well as communication strategies (e.g., identifying cues and inferring, taking the floor) and language competence (e.g., vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, phonological control).

The descriptions of language ability listed by the two frameworks are useful for self-assessment, curriculum development, and test creation. With standardized tests aligned to the CEFR and/or the ALTE Framework, users of test scores can be guided on the interpretation and significance of test results.

For more information on the CEFR, visit the Council of Europe's Language Policy Unit online at www.coe.int/lang. For more information on the ALTE Framework, visit www.alte.org.

An overview of standardized tests

The focus on language as a communication tool rather than a body of knowledge has influenced the design and development of standardized tests. One example would be the TOEIC, which has been a popular standard for the assessment of English proficiency in Asia and other regions for more than 30 years. The emergence of an action-based approach to language testing resulted in significant changes in the design of the TOEIC in 2006. Modifications aimed to achieve a more valid assessment of language proficiency, in which the utilization of everyday communication strategies became necessary for test takers. For emphasis on language use rather than language knowledge, one of the modifications made to the test was the elimination of the error recognition section. This question type was replaced with a text completion section. Another major development was the creation of a TOEIC Speaking and Writing test for the assessment of productive language skills.

The many aspects of language ability make measurement a complex task. But when assessment is conducted for qualification, language ability tends to be anchored to a set of language goals or communication needs. In other words, it is important to ask: For what purpose is the language needed? More than the mastery of all grammatical and lexical structures, the level of a user's proficiency is determined by his or her ability to meet specific communicative goals.

Therefore, evaluating and measuring English proficiency first requires an understanding of the scope and



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purpose of assessment, which then determines the kind of test or qualification needed by the language user. Scope and purpose is influenced by several factors including the English-

speaking environment in which the user is expected to interact, the communicative tasks he or she will need to accomplish, and the subject matter that is likely to be encountered. For example, a foreign student applying for admission to a university in the United States is likely to be immersed in a purely English-speaking community

and will need a good grasp of academic vocabulary. The notion of language proficiency in an academic context is not entirely equivalent to language proficiency in general social settings. Most universities, therefore, require a qualifying score from either the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or the IELTS (International English Language Testing System), two exams most commonly used for academic purposes.

Below is an overview of some common academic and professional EFL tests.

| Test | Purpose | Skills and Tasks | Score and CEFR Level |
|--------|---|--|---|
| TOEIC* | English for the workplace and business communication. For qualification for work and admission to business-related academic programs | Listening – responding to questions, comprehension of conversations, announcements, reports, etc. | A1 – 60 A2 – 110 B1 – 275 B2 – 400 C1 – 490 |
| | | Reading – text completion (vocabulary and grammar), comprehension of emails, announcements, advertisements, etc. | A1 – 60 A2 – 115 B1 – 275 B2 – 385 C1 – 455 |
| | | Speaking – reading aloud, describing pictures, responding to questions, proposing solutions, expressing opinions (relevance and completeness of content) | A1 – 50 A2 – 90 B1 – 120 B2 – 160 C1 – 200 |
| | | Writing – writing sentences (grammar), responding to requests (sentence construction and quality, vocabulary, organization), writing an opinion essay (completeness, grammar, vocabulary, organization) | A1 – 30 A2 – 70 B1 – 120 B2 – 150 C1 – 200 |
| TOEFL | English for academic settings For admission to educational institutions, immigration; also accepted by employers | Listening – comprehension of lectures, classroom discussions and conversations | B1 – 8 B2 – 21 C1 – 26 |
| | | Reading – comprehension of academic texts | B1 – 8 B2 – 22 C1 – 28 C2 – 29 |
| | | Speaking – expressing opinions on familiar topics, speaking based on listening and reading tasks | A1 – 8 A2 – 13 B1 – 19 B2 – 23 C1 – 28 |
| | | Writing – writing essay responses based on reading and listening tasks, supporting an opinion | A2 – 11 B1 – 17 B2 – 21 C1 – 28 |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|
| <p>IELTS</p> | <p>General and academic English</p> <p>Two test formats for reading and writing: General Training and Academic</p> <p>For admission to educational institutions and immigration; also accepted by employers</p> | <p>Listening – comprehension of conversations, talks, interviews, note taking and form completion</p> <p>Academic reading – comprehension of academic passages and completion of diagrams</p> <p>General reading – comprehension of essays, articles, announcements, and completion of flowcharts</p> <p>Speaking – talking about oneself, talking about familiar topics, expressing opinions</p> <p>Academic writing – describing graphs, charts, diagrams or tables, expressing opinions</p> <p>General writing – responding to situations by writing letters or giving explanations, expressing opinions</p> | <p>B1 – 4–5</p> <p>B2 – 4–6.5</p> <p>C1 – 6.5–8</p> <p>C2 – 8–9</p> |
| <p>BULATS</p> | <p>English for the workplace</p> <p>For work qualifications, admission to business-related programs, assessment of training</p> | <p>Listening – taking down notes or telephone messages, comprehension of short extracts and long recordings</p> <p>Reading and language knowledge – comprehension of texts like notices, articles, advertisements, and brochures, correcting errors</p> <p>Speaking – interview (talking about personal information, interests or hobbies), presentation (business-related speaking task)</p> <p>Writing – responding to situations in writing, writing reports or letters</p> | <p>A1 – 0–19</p> <p>A2 – 20–39</p> <p>B1 – 40–59</p> <p>B2 – 60–74</p> <p>C1 – 75–89</p> <p>C2 – 90–100</p> |
| <p>BEC Preliminary</p> | <p>English for the workplace in three proficiency levels</p> <p>For work qualification and admission to business-related programs</p> | <p>Listening – comprehension of conversations and monologues for specific information and main ideas</p> <p>Reading – understanding short messages, advertisements, leaflets, and lists, interpreting visual information, reading for details, grammar and text structure</p> <p>Speaking – general social conversations, giving information in short presentations, discussion</p> <p>Writing – giving instructions, asking permission and giving information through short letters or emails</p> | <p>Certificate is equivalent to B1</p> |
| <p>BEC Vantage</p> | <p>English for the workplace in three proficiency levels</p> <p>For work qualification and admission to business-related programs</p> | <p>Listening – comprehension of monologues and conversations, identifying topic, context and purpose</p> <p>Reading – scanning for information, understanding gist and structure in articles, reports, and informational materials, vocabulary, sentence structure and error identification</p> <p>Speaking – giving personal information, expressing opinions, giving short presentations on business topics, expressing and justifying opinions in a discussion</p> <p>Writing – giving instructions and explanations, summarizing and describing in business correspondence</p> | <p>Certificate is equivalent to B2</p> |

| | | | |
|-------------------|---|--|--|
| BEC Higher | <p>English for the workplace in three proficiency levels</p> <p>For work qualification and admission to business-related programs</p> | <p>Listening – comprehension of monologues, interviews and discussions for note taking, identifying context, opinion, and attitudes</p> <p>Reading – understanding gist and global meaning of authentic texts, vocabulary, sentence structure and error identification</p> <p>Speaking – giving personal information and expressing opinions, giving information in short presentations on business topics, expressing and justifying opinions in a discussion</p> <p>Writing – making inferences, describing and explaining in short reports, proposals or business correspondence</p> | <p>Certificate is equivalent to C1</p> |
| FCE | <p>Assessment of upper-intermediate users of English</p> <p>For work qualification and admission to business-related programs</p> | <p>Listening – comprehension of conversations, announcements, instructions, speeches, lectures, or stories, listening for the main ideas, opinions, and purpose</p> <p>Reading – locating information, comprehension of short and long texts like articles, reports, fiction, and informational materials, text completion</p> <p>Speaking – short exchanges and discussion, describing and comparing, expressing opinions, exchanging and evaluating ideas</p> <p>Writing – writing letters or emails as a response to given texts and notes, writing articles, essays, letters, reports, reviews or stories</p> <p>Use of language – word choice, sentence completion, word formation, vocabulary</p> | <p>Certificate is equivalent to B2</p> |

* TOEIC and TOEFL scores indicated are the minimum score requirements for each level. For example, to reach level B2 for listening, you must get a score of at least 400 in the listening test.

The goFLUENT testing approach



Despite the availability of a variety of language proficiency tests in the corporate testing context, companies occasionally still face the difficulty of finding the right standardized test for their employee evaluation needs. To help these organizations, goFLUENT offers a more flexible approach that is based on language competence requirements specific to companies and their employees.

While remaining linked to the CEFR and the TOEIC can-do descriptors, goFLUENT's testing process includes a customized speaking assessment conducted by a trained evaluator who evaluates the test takers' performance according to the proficiency levels required by their company.

Summary

English language proficiency has become a strategic tool for professionals and businesses worldwide. This has made the measurement of language proficiency necessary. Assessment of language ability, however, has always been a complex task because of the many aspects of communicative competence.

Therefore, to evaluate the proficiency of non-native speakers, proficiency must be defined in context.

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When assessed for qualification purposes, language users are evaluated based on their ability to accomplish language tasks for specific communication needs. Different standardized tests have been designed for this purpose,

and the use of such tests along with a common framework of reference allows language users and evaluators to view proficiency with more concreteness and consistency.

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About goFLUENT

goFLUENT offers distance Business English training combining eLearning, telephone lessons and written practice solutions. Each year, goFLUENT assists more than 100,000 employees in over 2,000 companies across the world to enable them to perform better in their international relations. goFLUENT is present in ten countries and has 560 employees, of whom 400 are trainers. NTT Communications (NTT Group) holds 30% of shares in the company. For more information, visit goFLUENT online at www.gofluent.com.

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