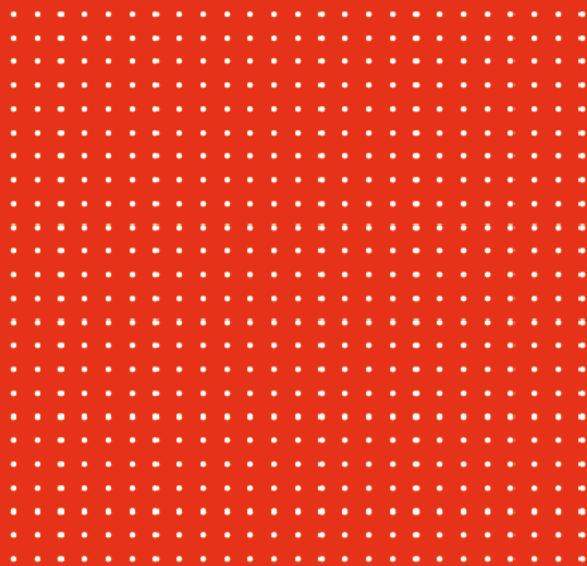


Language Cert



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LanguageCert: A Multilingual Language Testing System



Background

LanguageCert, a part of the *PeopleCert* group, is a leading international assessment company. It administers a suite of language examinations, currently across several languages, that includes examinations for primary/elementary school students, secondary school students, young adults in the workplace or study and adults in the workplace. The *LanguageCert* system has been operating since 2015 and in that time has established a number of examinations across three languages (English, Spanish, Turkish) in the first instance. Central to *LanguageCert's* mission is a strong focus on quality, validation and research to support the development and use of its examinations.

The initial focus of *LanguageCert's* research and validation programme is the *LanguageCert* International ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) examination, a set of English Language qualifications, each targeting a different level of the CEFR – from CEFR A1 to C2. These examinations are intended for teenagers and adults or those preparing for entry to higher education or professional employment.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)

The CEFR emerged as a recognised framework for learning and assessment in Europe in the 1990s. The Framework classifies language learners into three broad levels: Basic Users, Independent Users and Proficient Users, with each level then broken down into two sublevels.

The CEFR aims to encourage and facilitate reflection and communication in language education; and, in the context of examinations, the CEFR is intended to assist assessment providers, publishers, teachers, learners and other relevant stakeholders to articulate both content standards (the nature of the skills being tested) and performance standards (levels of proficiency).

***LanguageCert* and the CEFR**

There are six examinations in the *LanguageCert* International ESOL suite, all aligned to the six CEFR levels: Preliminary (A1), Access (A2), Achiever (B1), Communicator (B2), Expert (C1) and Mastery (C2). The examination specifications reflect the requirements of the CEFR; test materials writers represent the highest international standards and have extensive expertise in, and knowledge and understanding of, the CEFR.

Importance of the CEFR

The CEFR has come to be accepted across Europe (and indeed beyond, with many countries linking their language curricula, syllabuses and examinations to the CEFR) as a specification of common standards across many different European languages. The Framework lays out a set of common standards which permit employers and educational institutions to evaluate the language qualifications of test takers applying for employment or admission to education.

Alignment of *LanguageCert* and the CEFR

One of the most widely applied and helpful uses of the CEFR is to facilitate the comparison of language curricula, syllabuses and examinations. Given that many international language assessment systems claim alignment to the CEFR, this provides a useful way of comparing language examination levels.

Communicative Language Testing

LanguageCert's English language examinations follow a rigorous test development process to ensure that validity – possibly the most crucial aspect in communicative assessment – is achieved. In the context of language tests supporting judgements made with respect to certain *Target Language Use* domains (see e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 2010), what might be expected of test takers in real world language use needs to be considered and defined. In this context, the CEFR has been taken as the driving force determining the constructs underpinning *LanguageCert*'s examinations. Its illustrative descriptors across a range of language domains and contexts have been used as a starting point and extensively inform the test development processes employed in the development of the examinations.

Testing Language as Communication

The task types used in the *LanguageCert* examinations have been selected to ensure they have interactional authenticity and can be related to real-world performance. They have been developed to directly sample the cognitive skills, strategies and language knowledge that support judgements made regarding the potential ability of test takers in real-world interactional situations.

For example, in the receptive skills, reading tests are carried out using real-world notices and signs that students are likely to encounter to show their understanding of them. Reading also focuses on aspects of comprehension of texts at the appropriate level using a variety of task types, such as multiple-choice selection, matching, and providing open responses to prompts. The degree of challenge and sub-skills required in the reading tests start with:

- relatively simple tests of understanding at 'Basic User' A levels
- text interpretation and understanding writer intention at the 'Independent User' B levels

complex interpretation strategies required at the 'Proficient User' C levels that require inferring the meaning of unknown lexis from context and the ability to sift through lengthy reading inputs to identify key information and to show awareness of text cohesion.

The Importance of Testing Communication

Validity may be defined as the extent to which a test measures its intended purpose. As the intended purpose of the *LanguageCert* tests is communicative English language proficiency, the appropriateness and meaningfulness of results are key factors. This is because they demonstrate that, along with reliability, test takers have obtained results that validly reflect their real-world performance. These factors are important in the context, for example, of *LanguageCert* being an approved provider of language proficiency for UKVI purposes. *LanguageCert* is now recognised by government bodies, test takers, teachers and the public at large as trustworthy, reliable and valid examinations.

The Place of Research

Although a comparatively new entrant in the language assessment arena, *LanguageCert* considers research – into systems, communication as well as its examinations, tasks and items – a key underpinning factor in its makeup. Since acquiring the suite of examinations from City & Guilds in 2015, research, validation and development have been high on *LanguageCert's* agenda. Internally, there is a research and validation team which investigates the consistency of the materials as well as their setting and the marking.

Validation

Construct validation activities are carried out by *LanguageCert* beginning with test and task design. Experts analyse examination tasks and content in an ongoing manner to ensure they are fair, have interactional authenticity and sample the appropriate language skills for any given level and skill.

Different test forms in the *LanguageCert* International ESOL suite may be considered comparable in terms of content and difficulty due to robust item-banking following the pretesting and trialling before use of all appropriate examination material. In order to ensure quality and the validation of levels, examinations are monitored through ongoing independent external research.

A Framework for Validation

The Weir (2005) Framework provides a useful way of structuring a research and validation programme, where the six categories in the framework allow for a range of characteristics and factors to be taken account of. These include test taker characteristics; contextual characteristics in terms of fairness; cognitive processes required to complete tasks; how far scores may be depended on; the impact of the tests; and external evidence to show that the test is doing what it is intended to do. Weir's framework provides a comprehensive structure by which the different factors and elements associated with the test-making and test-taking process may be coherently presented – with the structure allowing access by different users (test taker, teachers, academics, for example).

***LanguageCert* Use of the Weir Framework**

At a basic level, the Framework has been useful in the setup of the *LanguageCert* website, with the categories driving the ways users navigate through the website. External validation has already been conducted on certain examinations in the IESOL suite (a comprehensive evaluation of the B2 test, with shorter evaluations of other tests); the relevant reports are then located under appropriate Framework headings. The makeup of the Framework also allows for sensible location of internal validation documentation such as marker standardization data and comparability data on different tests forms; similarly, background documentation such as Item Writer Guidelines, Marker Guidelines – which *LanguageCert* makes transparently available – fit cleanly into the Framework.

References

- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (2010). *Language assessment in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weir, C.J. (2005). *Language Testing and Validation*. Palgrave MacMillan: London.

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