Dynamic Placement Test construct

By Mia Aghajari, Test Development, telc

In developing the test format for the Dynamic Placement Test (DPT), we had clear goals for what we wanted to achieve. As well as being convenient and easy-to-use, the test would deliver results that are accurate and consistent. But beyond providing institutes and schools with an effective tool, we wanted to give added attention to those taking the test: the candidates.

Focus on the candidates

Fairness is a key concern. We therefore had to ensure that the language used and the situations referred to are equally accessible to those who have the opportunity to practise English in daily life, and those whose opportunities to interact with the language are confined to the classroom. As a result, there is no emphasis on idioms or collocations, Americanisms and Briticisms are avoided as much as possible, and a mix of different accents is used in the Listening sections.

Additionally, we wanted to avoid items that ask candidates to focus on specific grammar features, such as 'fill in the gap with the present perfect', or to find definitions for isolated words given out of context. Factors such as the Internet and increased travel among young people for holidays or education mean that our learners are interacting with English in their private lives, using English for communication, entertainment, or to get something done. Their knowledge of grammar may be based more on intuition and experience, rather than on rules learned from a book. We believe that language assessment should somehow reflect these changes.

Test design

This test has two parts: one looks at linguistic range and accuracy, the other offers more task-oriented test items, with all items being as communication-focused as possible.

1 Part 1: Gauge

The first part of the test mirrors a traditional placement test in that it gets progressively harder as the candidate moves through items from A1 level and up. However, instead of relying on multiple choice questions, our goal was to use the affordances offered by today's technology to create something that takes a broader look at the skills the candidate possesses. Sentence reconstruction (which asks you to reorder words to form a sentence) and word placement (where candidates decide where to place a key word in a sentence) take a holistic look at the candidate's English skills by examining knowledge of vocabulary, collocations, grammatical structures and syntax.

In addition to being more interesting (dare we say more fun?) than traditional 3- or 4-multiple-choice questions, from a testing point of view these tasks types offer more complexity, particularly at the higher levels. Not only is it harder for candidates to guess the right answer due to the greater number of possible combinations, but candidates have to interact closely with the sentence when trying to put it back together. It is not possible for someone to skim through the gauge by clicking a, b or c at random in the hope of tricking the test.

2 Part 2: Tracks

When a test-taker has completed the gauge, they are placed within one of three level bands for Part 2, namely Track A, B or C. This part then focuses on real-life tasks, and items include reading emails and articles, and listening to conversations and speeches. The design goal here is to decide where within the level band the candidate lies. In some cases, for those who are placed at the lower or upper end of the band, bonus questions will be triggered to help decide if the candidate can break out of the band, downwards or upwards.

Tasks and the CEFR

The tasks in the Reading, Listening and Language Elements sections of Part 2 are based on a number of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors, such as:

- reading for information and argument
- processing text
- transactions to obtain goods and services
- listening to announcements and instructions
- correspondence
- sociolinguistic appropriateness

Additionally, items in the language elements of Part 2 — along with all Part 1 items — were cross-referenced with texts from telc's vast selection of sample tests, and also the Cambridge Grammar Profile.

1 Listening

The tasks in Part 2 progress in terms of difficulty. For instance, in the A track Listening section, the first set of listening questions tests candidates' ability to
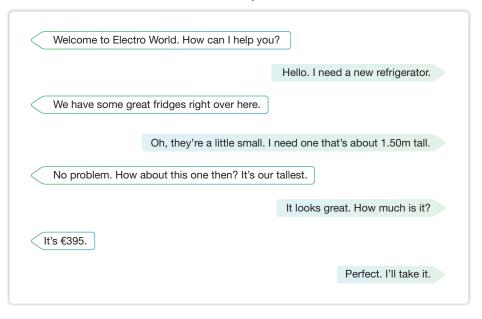
- "understand everyday expressions dealing with simple and concrete everyday needs, in clear, slow and repeated speech"
- "follow speech which is very slow and carefully articulated, with long pauses for him/her to get the meaning"
- "understand numbers, prices and times"

These are skills set out in the CEFR A1 descriptors.

> Welcome to Electro World. How can I help you?
>
> Hello. I need a new refrigerator.
>
> We have some great fridges right over here.
>
> Oh, they're a little small. I need one that's about 1.50m tall.
>
> No problem. How about this one then? It's our tallest.
>
> It looks great. How much is it?
>
> It's €395.
>
> Perfect. I'll take it.

The second set of listening questions tests candidates' ability to

- "understand enough to manage simple, routine exchanges without too much effort"
- "understand enough to be able to meet concrete needs in everyday life provided speech is clear and slow"
- "understand phrases and expressions related to immediate needs"

as set out in the A2 descriptors.

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Recently she has been focusing on combining her specialty with her interest in learning technologies, creating online content for various digital projects.

"Hi James, this is Tom from work. I need the key for the large conference room. Karl lost his and I know you have an extra one. Can you please bring it here to the office before 12? We have a meeting at 1 so it is urgent. Thanks."

A. James should call the speaker.

B. James should send email with some information.

C. James should go the office.

While the CEFR sets out that learners at A2 "can understand and extract the essential information from short recorded passages dealing with predictable everyday matters that are delivered slowly and clearly" (A2 Listening to radio audio & recordings), there is no descriptor for A1, confirming that this task would be slightly too challenging for learners at A1.
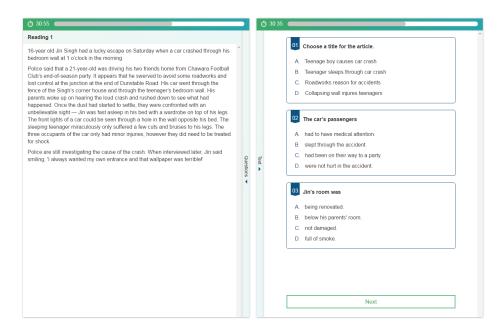
2 Reading

The questions in the Reading section not only require candidates to read sentences, but also test a variety of skills, including making inferences and distinguishing fact and opinion. There is a range of fictional and factual texts. The skills required to answer the questions correspond to a selection of skills set out in the CEFR and thus distinguish between the lower and the higher level within the band (e.g. B1 tasks and B2 tasks within the B track).

For instance, the B1 Reading task requires candidates to read short newspaper articles or personal accounts to prove their ability to

- "read straightforward factual texts"
- "understand the description of events, feelings"
- "scan longer texts in order to locate desired information, and gather information from different parts of a text"

The B2 Reading task, on the other hand, requires them to "understand lengthy, complex instructions in their field, including details on conditions and warnings", which is a task that B1 candidates generally wouldn't manage as they "can (only) understand clearly written, straightforward instructions for a piece of equipment" (see CEFR B1 descriptor Reading instructions).

⏱ 30:55

Reading 1

16-year old Jin Singh had a lucky escape on Saturday when a car crashed through his bedroom wall at 1 o'clock in the morning.

Police said that a 21-year-old was driving his two friends home from Chawara Football Club's end-of-season party. It appears that he swerved to avoid some roadworks and lost control at the junction at the end of Dunstable Road. His car went through the fence of the Singh's corner house and through the teenager's bedroom wall. His parents woke up on hearing the loud crash and rushed down to see what had happened. Once the dust had started to settle, they were confronted with an unbelievable sight — Jin was fast asleep in his bed with a wardrobe on top of his legs. The front lights of a car could be seen through a hole in the wall opposite his bed. The sleeping teenager miraculously only suffered a few cuts and bruises to his legs. The three occupants of the car only had minor injuries, however they did need to be treated for shock.

Police are still investigating the cause of the crash. When interviewed later, Jin said smiling, 'I always wanted my own entrance and that wallpaper was terrible!'

⏱ 30:35

01 Choose a title for the article.
A. Teenage boy causes car crash
B. Teenager sleeps through car crash
C. Roadworks reason for accidents
D. Collapsing wall injures teenagers

02 The car's passengers
A. had to have medical attention.
B. slept through the accident.
C. had been on their way to a party.
D. were not hurt in the accident.

03 Jin's room was
A. being renovated.
B. below his parents' room.
C. not damaged.
D. full of smoke.

Next

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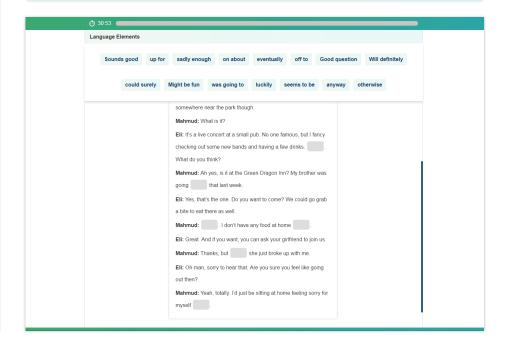
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3 Language Elements

The Language Elements section of Part 2 focuses on sentence-level grammar and on the relationship between ideas in sentences, corresponding to these CEFR skills:

- general linguistic range
- vocabulary range
- vocabulary control
- grammatical accuracy
- sociolinguistic appropriateness conversation
- understanding interactions between native speakers

For instance, the items on the right test candidates' abilities to use the following C1 structures:

- wide range of phrasal verbs + object pronoun + particle
- wide range of adverbs (degree adverbs as well as stance adverbs)
- determiners in hyperbole
- modification of gradable adjectives with adverbs of degree

Test result

The candidate is finally placed in a CEFR level, A1-C2. There is also an unclassified category, U, which indicates that the candidate has not attempted enough questions for their level to be assessed. There is an additional A0 level that is given for the lowest scores — and is more accurately described as "not at the A1 level".

As a single CEFR level covers a wide band of linguistic competence, we have added a numeric score — the Relative Numeric (RN) — which is useful as a relative indicator within a CEFR level result. The goal for this score is to help an institution differentiate students in a situation where a large number of test-takers are placed in the same CEFR level.

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