

# Supporting language learning and mobility: Research-based test revisions

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## 1. Introduction

*Cambridge English: First* and *Cambridge English: Advanced* are English language qualifications for work and study.

A certificate in *Cambridge English: First* (B2-CEFR) is evidence that the holder can work in an English speaking environment, study at an upper intermediate level (foundation and pathway) and live independently in an English-speaking country.

A certificate in *Cambridge English: Advanced* (C1-CEFR) is evidence that the learner can study in English at university level and use English effectively in managerial and professional environments.

In 2015, these exams were revised to ensure they:

- are fit for purpose
- incorporate advances in theory and research
- meet the needs of candidates and other test users

## 2. Revision: method and key questions

**Consultations with test users, ca. 1500 teachers and 180 exam centres**

- 1) What are the main factors influencing decisions to take *First* and *Advanced*?
- 2) What content do test users find important?

**Expert judgment and research**

- 3) Are the current tests appropriate for study and work contexts in terms of construct validity (skills/abilities tested, cognitive processes underlying reading, listening, speaking and writing)?
- 4) What task features are suitable for English language use in study or work environment? (corpus analysis, expert judgment)

**Trialling of the revised tasks and tests**

- 5) Are the statistical properties (e.g. task/test difficulty and discrimination of test items) of new and revised tasks and overall tests appropriate?
- 6) Are the revised *First* and *Advanced* fit for purpose, from the perspective of test users (questionnaire feedback from test takers, teachers and examiners)?

## 3. Example: Cross-text multiple-matching reading task in Cambridge English: Advanced

**Integrating and evaluating information across texts**

A key reading sub-skill for university study and demanding professional contexts

The highest level process in a cognitive processing model of reading comprehension

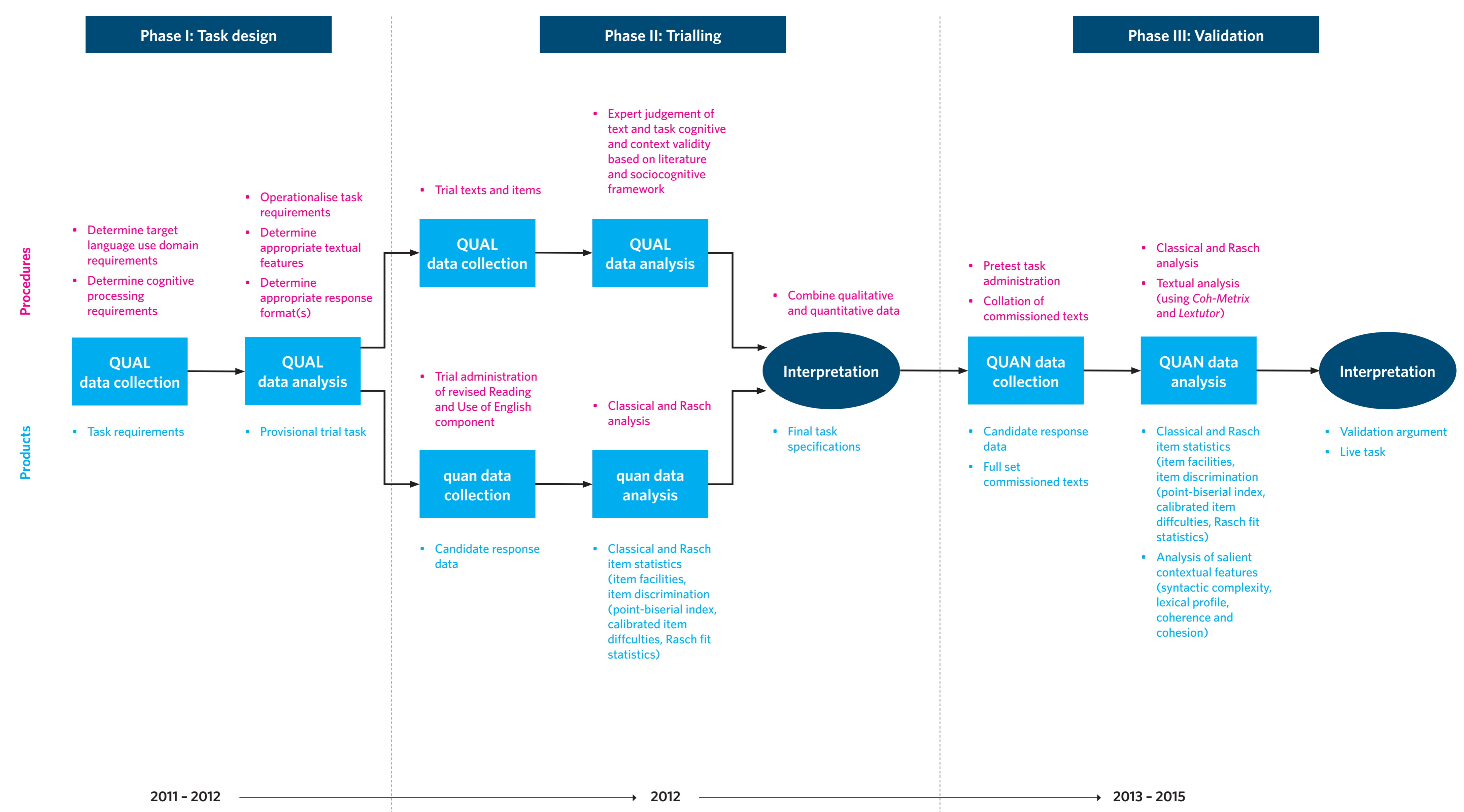
Missing from pre-2015 CAE

**The new cross-text task...**

...requires this sub-skill for successful task completion (expert judgment)

...contains texts similar to undergraduate texts in terms of lexical, syntactic and textual complexity (Coh-Metrix and VocabProfile software)

...performs well in terms of difficulty, facility and discrimination



**Table 1:** A mixed method approach to introducing a cross-text reading task to Cambridge English: Advanced (Elliott and Lim 2016)

## 4. Other key changes

- **Texts** in *Cambridge English: First* include more topics set in the world of work and adult education, while those appropriate for school-aged test takers are found in *Cambridge English: First for Schools*.
- The **topics** and **text features** of *Cambridge English: Advanced* texts are more academic than before, while remaining suitable for work and more general purposes.
- The Listening test in *Cambridge English: Advanced* now includes a task which requires **discourse construction**: synthesising information across a larger chunk of discussion to compare views of two speakers. This sub-skill has its place in the test in view of the CEFR, cognitive processing models and real life needs in study and work contexts.
- **Textual prompts** replaced visual prompts in a *Cambridge English: Advanced* Speaking task to elicit richer and more complex language during a collaborative task in which two test takers speak to each other.
- The **essay task** was made compulsory in *Cambridge English: Advanced* test of Writing which requires knowledge-telling (e.g. summarising) and knowledge transforming (problem-solving, drawing implications) as well as cognitive processes required in university writing (planning, organisation, monitoring what you are writing and revising).

## 5. Conclusions

*First* and *Advanced* were revised to incorporate more realistic task features, and to elicit a broader range of sub-skills relevant for study and work contexts.

This is beneficial because:

- it allows making more valid inferences about a test taker's ability to use language effectively in a real life environment
- it can positively affect teaching and test-takers. The use of authentic tasks in the classroom is not just preparation for a language test, but preparation for real life. Thus, the revised tests can indeed support language learning and mobility.

The approach underpinning the described test revisions is research-based. The triangulation of methods (quantitative and qualitative) and information sources (test users, literature on cognitive processes underlying language use, real-life academic texts, expert judgment) allowed building a thorough picture of what required change and whether the revised tests are fit for purpose.

### References

- 1) Research Notes 62: <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/268809-research-notes-62.pdf>
- 2) Studies in Language Testing series, volumes 26, 29, 30 and 35
- 3) <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/research-and-validation/published-research/sit>