

The Revised Pearson Test of English General

Introduction

As part of our ongoing commitment to maintaining the highest standards in English proficiency testing, Pearson Language Tests will be making a series of improvements to the Pearson Test of English General (formerly known as London Tests of English) from the **November 2010** session. For over twenty-five years, PTE General has been offering a reliable, internationally-trusted way of measuring the ability of speakers of other languages to communicate in English. During that time, the tests have grown and developed as customer expectations have changed and views on language testing have progressed.

The revised PTE General represents the next stage in that process of development, which ensures that the tests remain relevant, accurate and challenging for today's language learners. The revisions follow many months of field testing and reflect feedback contributed by teachers, test takers, test centers and critical reviews from language testing experts in the Technical Advisory Group, consisting of Alan Davies, Arthur Hughes, Miriam Jacob and Dina Tsagari.

This document provides an overview of the key changes within the revised Pearson Test of English General and the rationale behind the modifications.

Key revisions

Why revise the Pearson Test of English General (PTE General)

The principal aims of revising the PTE General were:

- to respond to feedback from stakeholders
- to improve validity and reliability
- to achieve a more robust link to the Common European Framework (CEF) (visit http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Portfolio/documents/Framework_EN.pdf)
- to make the test more international

In response to these factors, a number of changes have been made to the test specifications and test production processes.

What has changed

More and shorter tasks

To achieve a more thorough sampling of the language area being tested and to improve fairness and reliability, the number of tasks within the test has been increased and their length reduced to achieve similar overall test length.

Changes to format

The format of the listening part of the test has changed with a greater emphasis on authentic texts. Test takers are asked to listen once to the listening texts, which is a more authentic representation of communication in real life.

The speaking part of the test has also changed with only a single test taker examined at any one time. This helps avoid any impact from one test taker on another's performance.

Greater uniformity of test forms

The specifications have been modified so that each test has the same sequence of questions in order to improve comparability between test forms.

Modification of thematic approach

The principle of linking tasks through common topics has been kept, but instead of each test having only one theme they now have three main themes. Consequently, the test retains a valued feature while reducing the potential for bias against particular test takers.

Item banking

The test items are stored in an item bank, a database in which records are kept of each item's response characteristics as shown in real test administrations. This makes it possible to predict the difficulty level of any test form and so maintain uniformity of measurement from one test form to another.

Linking to the CEF

The new test specifications are matched closely to descriptors in the CEF. In addition, early administrations of the test will contain items which have previously been calibrated in relation to the CEF. Using Item Response Theory (IRT) procedures; mathematical models which relate an individual's test performance to his or her level of ability, we will calibrate the remaining items in the test. Consequently, it will be possible to establish empirically the relationship of test scores to CEF levels.

International content

The new test uses spoken and written sources that have been drawn from a range of standard English varieties, principally British, American and Australian English.

What has not changed

While many aspects of the test have been improved, a number of popular aspects have remained. These include:

- test purpose
- intended test takers
- testing of all four skills
- realistic tasks
- familiar task types
- schedule of sessions
- awarding of grades: fail, pass, merit, distinction

Overview of the revised PTE General

Test purpose

The aim of PTE General is to assess English language proficiency for general, practical purposes. Knowledge of the language, such as the ability to explain grammatical rules, is not tested. Vocabulary knowledge and grammatical accuracy are assessed where they are part of effective communication.

Intended test takers

The test is intended for teenagers and young adults of all nationalities whose first language is not English. The principle categories of potential test takers are:

- secondary school students who are studying English at state school and/or supplementing their English study at state-sponsored or private language classes in their own country
- adults of any age who are learning English, full time or part-time, at a private language school or university in their own country
- teenagers or adults attending English classes, full or part-time, in an English-speaking country
- teenagers or adults who are learning English on self-study programmes outside their own country

Test takers' motives for seeking a qualification in English are likely to be:

- to gain admission to an English language course in secondary, tertiary or further education
 - to gain admission to a course in a subject (academic or vocational) other than English where a qualification in English is a necessary or desirable prerequisite
 - to enhance their general educational profile
 - to qualify for a job which requires knowledge of English
 - to qualify for promotion or career advancement within a current job role
 - to improve future career prospects
 - for personal satisfaction as a mark of progress and achievement
 - to gain an English language qualification as a requirement in the process of obtaining a visa
- PTE General levels 4 and 5 meet the UK Border Agency's requirement for English language tests for Tier 2 UK visa applications. Visit the Home Office UK Border Agency website for further information.

The model of second language proficiency

PTE General is a suite of language proficiency tests that assess language level as practical communicative ability. In other words, test takers are judged according to what they can actually do in the language. In practice this means that they are assessed according to:

- types of language situation they can deal with
- texts, both spoken and written, that they can understand and produce
- language functions they can perform and recognize

Domains

The test covers the personal, public and educational domains as defined in the CEF. Some tasks may touch on the occupational domain, but only in a very generic way that does not assume that the test taker has had any actual work experience. The underlying assumption here is that while all test takers may need to use English in the world of work at some stage in the future, only a minority will have any previous work experience, either in English or in their own language environment.

Constructs

PTE General assesses the four key skills. The emphasis is on communicative skills; that is the ability to use the language for practical purposes rather than having an underlying knowledge of grammar or vocabulary. Tasks are designed to assess the following areas:

Listening	
<p>The ability to understand a range of spoken texts, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - spoken utterances addressed to the listener personally - texts heard as a member of a live audience: theater, lectures and presentations - electronically recorded texts for public consumption: radio, TV and DVD - recorded messages: telephone messages and voicemail 	<p>The range of listening subskills assessed include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rapid listening: listening in order to grasp the main idea of what is said or to gain specific information - listening for detail - recognizing a speaker’s intention or attitude - responding appropriately to spoken utterances

Reading	
<p>The ability to understand a range of written texts including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - texts addressed to the reader personally: letters and emails - texts read for practical information: newspaper reports and educational texts - texts read for entertainment: stories and magazine articles 	<p>The range of reading subskills assessed include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rapid reading: reading in order to grasp the main idea of a text or to gain specific information - reading for detail - recognizing a writer’s intention or attitude

Writing	
<p>The ability to write texts in response to spoken or written stimuli and for transactional purposes (written interaction: letters and emails)</p> <p>The ability to write texts for creative or educational purposes (written production: essays, reports and stories)</p>	

Speaking	
<p>The ability to speak appropriately in social situations; to engage in conversation and discussion; to conduct spoken transactions in an appropriate way (spoken interaction)</p> <p>The ability to give short spoken presentations, explanations, descriptions or narratives (spoken production)</p>	

Levels

PTE General is offered at six levels, A1 to Level 5, which correspond to the six levels of the CEF. For example, a test taker who passes the test at Level 2 can be reasonably predicted to conform to the descriptors for Level B1 within the various scales of the CEF.

Test format

The test consists of two parts: a written component to assess the skills of listening, reading and writing, and a separate oral component to assess speaking. There are nine sections in the written part of the test.

Written test (all levels)	
Sections	Skill
1	Listening
2	Listening and writing
3	Listening
4 - 7	Reading
8 - 9	Writing

The first three sections of the written part of the test assess listening (sections 1-3). The audio extracts for the three listening sections are presented on audio CD and test takers respond to the associated items by checking boxes or writing responses in the test booklet. The audio extracts in sections 1 and 3 are heard once. The listening texts in all of the first three sections of the test are authentic or scripted based on authentic situations. As such, the listening passages contain repetition and clarification of key information. Only important information is tested. Section 2 includes a dictation task which test takers hear twice. Once at normal speed, and once at a slower speed with pauses, so they can write down what they hear.

The listening sections of the test are followed by the reading sections (sections 4-7) which focus on reading for general meaning and specific information.

The reading sections are followed by two writing sections (sections 8-9). Section 8 requires the test taker to produce a written response to the text from the final reading task in Section 7. The second writing task in Section 9) is normally a narrative or other extended piece of writing.

The spoken test consists of three sections at levels A1 and 1. Test takers are required to give a personal introduction in the first section, comment on a picture in the second and engage in a role play in the final section.

Spoken test (A1-1)	
Sections	Skill
1	Speaking: personal introduction
2	Speaking: visual stimulus
3	Speaking: role play

At levels 2 - 5 there are four sections. The additional section requires test takers engage in a discussion about a topic.

Spoken test (2-5)	
Sections	Skill
1	Speaking: personal introduction
2	Speaking: discussion
3	Speaking: visual prompt
4	Speaking: role play

Themes

Each written test form has three main themes which run through the test and act as links between the tasks, hence sections have related topics.

The range and nature of the themes used are chosen so that the subject matter of any test falls within the sphere of knowledge, experience and interests of literate teenagers and young adults

who are attending or have attended secondary education. They may include topics from popular culture, sports and hobbies, family life, education, science and technology, arts and entertainment.

Text types

Texts used for assessment of listening and reading comprehension resemble, as far as possible, the texts which test takers are likely to encounter in real life. Where these are addressed directly to the reader or listener (as is the case with letters or telephone messages) these display the features of authentic communication, as far as is consistent with the aims of assessment at the respective language level. Other texts are extracted from authentic documents or, at the lower levels, realistic imitations or adaptations of these.

Item types

In order to compensate for any *method effect* (the inherent bias which an item type, e.g. multiple-choice items, may display in favor of a particular category of test taker) the test uses a variety of item types.

The written component

The item types used in the written component include:

Multiple choice	- standard text-based, three-option multiple choice - graphical multiple choice (the test taker chooses which of three pictures best corresponds to a recorded stimulus) - gapfill multiple choice (the test taker chooses which of three options, words or phrases, best completes a gap in a short text)
Gapfill	- completing a gapped text using information from a spoken or written stimulus
Short answer	- answering an open-ended question according to information in a spoken or written stimulus
Dictation	- transcribing an audio text

The item types above are used to assess both listening and reading. They are always associated with a spoken (listening) or written (reading) text, referred to here as the *stimulus*. The relationship between stimulus and items may be one-to-one or one-to-many. That is, an item type may consist of a short text with only one associated item, or of a longer text with up to seven items.

The item types used in the written component include:

Guided writing	- completing a skeleton text (used only at Level A1)
Constructed responses	- open-ended writing in response to instructions
Dictation	- transcribing an audio text

The oral component

The oral component of the test consists of a structured face-to-face interaction between a single test taker and an interlocutor. During the spoken test, the examiner explains the tasks, asks questions and generally interacts with the test taker. The examiner also makes the assessment of the test taker and assigns scores, or this may be done by a second examiner who observes but does not interact with the test taker. The interaction comprises three stages (A1 and Level 1) or four stages (Levels 2 to 5) designed to elicit a varied sample of language performance.

Long turn 1	The test taker gives personal information in response to questions and/or talks uninterrupted on a topic related to themselves or their experience.
Discussion	The test taker and the interlocutor conduct a conversation involving exchange of opinion, agreeing and disagreeing. This phase is omitted at the lowest two levels, A1 and Level 1.
Long turn 2	The test taker talks uninterrupted in response to a visual prompt.
Social situations	The test taker and the interlocutor role play a situation based on a role card.

Like the written test, some sections are thematically linked. The sections are designed so that in the earlier part of the test (the first three sections at levels 2 to 5, the first two at A1 and Level 1) test takers speak from their own experience, knowledge or opinion. In the remainder of the test, test takers speak on the basis of given content (pictures, instructions or role cards).

The speaking test is recorded and scored in-country or centrally by trained assessors.

Test length

The time allowed for the written component varies from one hour 15 minutes at the lowest level to two hours 55 minutes at the highest.

The timing for the spoken test varies from five minutes at the lowest levels to eight minutes at the highest.

Procedures for scoring

Items for assessing receptive skills are scored dichotomously; in other words, each answer will either be correct or incorrect with no half marks.

Performance in writing and speaking will be evaluated by means of analytical scales derived from scales within the Common European Framework.

Reporting of results

Scores for each of the four skills are given equal weighting.

For each test form a calculation is made, based on the difficulty values of the constituent items, of appropriate cut scores for the grades of Pass Merit and Distinction. In relation to the test taker, these can be interpreted as follows:

Pass	- meets the required standards for the respective CEF level
Merit	- exceeds these standards and is mid-way to achieving the standards of the next highest level
Distinction	- consistently exceeds the standards for the level and is close to achieving the standards for the next highest level

Grades are determined on the basis of total scores according to a fully compensatory model. In other words, a test taker does not have to reach a threshold score in any one part or skill in order to pass or to achieve a given grade.

All test takers receive a performance report showing their score profile for all four skills.

Contacts

For further information about revisions to PTE General;

Use our [online form](#)

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