

# Testing the world's English

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Cambridge English. Credit: Cambridge ESOL 2011

Language testing affects the lives of millions of people every year. The Cambridge English qualifications, produced by the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations and taken by more than 3.3 million people worldwide annually, are a passport to countless opportunities. A successful test result could open the door to jobs, further education and even countries.

But Cambridge ESOL is much more than exams. Behind these gold standard tests is an organisation (part of the University department Cambridge Assessment) that is deeply committed to research into [language](#) teaching and learning. Cambridge ESOL's team of specialists not only deliver tests that are fair, accurate and valid but their work is also contributing to global educational reforms. And with the biggest ever study of the language proficiency of European school children now under way, their research promises to shine new light on the way

language is taught across Europe.

## **Fit for purpose**

For almost 100 years, ever since the first Certificate of Proficiency in English test rolled off the presses in 1913, Cambridge has been associated with English language testing. Now with a portfolio of over 20 different exams, Cambridge ESOL prides itself on being able to provide the right assessment for the right person. ‘Cambridge English’, a branding developed by Cambridge ESOL and Cambridge University Press, is synonymous with good practice in English language learning, teaching and assessment.

“Language assessment has evolved to keep pace with the way in which English is being used around the world,” said Cambridge ESOL’s Chief Executive, Dr. Mike Milanovic. “But this process has accelerated over the past 20 years with the growing recognition by governments that English is a basic skill essential for the future employability of their citizens. English is now a core part of school curricula, no longer regarded as a foreign language.”

With this comes a great responsibility for assessment providers to develop reliable tests that meet the needs of teachers and learners, and are relevant to evolving educational curricula. This is where research becomes especially important.

Cambridge ESOL’s 40-strong team is the largest dedicated research capability of any provider of English language assessment. Each year, its researchers interrogate hundreds of millions of pieces of information relating to the tests taken by over 3 million candidates. It’s a vast, complex exercise that combines data from pre-tests and tests, candidates’ demographics and information on the impact that tests have on life-changing decisions such as immigration, education and employment.

Only then can a picture emerge of how fit for purpose the exams are and how they can be continually improved.

## **Global impact**

Cambridge ESOL's research also looks beyond its exams to global curricula development and educational reforms. English Profile, for instance, is a ground-breaking programme it leads with Cambridge University Press that is shaping the future of English language learning, teaching and assessment worldwide. The aim of the network of global specialists, which includes researchers at Cambridge's Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, is to develop a definitive description of English – its grammar, vocabulary and functional language – and to relate this to the language that learners can be expected to demonstrate at each level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Meanwhile, results from the largest and most comprehensive survey ever to assess how well European pupils know other languages are being finalised ready for reporting to the European Commission (EC) in early 2012. SurveyLang, which is being conducted by a consortium led by Cambridge ESOL, is measuring the language competence of 50,000 pupils aged 16–18 years across 15 countries in Europe for two out of five European languages.

Once the survey is completed, policy makers will have access for the first time to evidence on a European scale that links foreign language competence and insights into good practice in language learning. Not only will the information be useful to the EC for understanding the nature of foreign [language learning](#) in schools, but it will also help individual governments make important policy decisions around the way language is taught in their own country.

“What we’re striving for through these and other research projects,” added Dr. Milanovic, “is to make sure that what we do really does have a positive impact on the learning, teaching and assessment of English in the real world.”

Provided by University of Cambridge

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