Relating the Occupational English Test (OET) to the CEFR

Independent review of the OET assessment materials in Dentistry, Nursing, Medicine and Pharmacy has found the four tests well designed to assess occupational English at levels B2-C2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This review also considered test scoring through analysis of student samples at key thresholds from two tests (Nursing and Medicine), concluding that the following test scores can be considered broadly comparable to the CEFR[1]:

CONTEXT AND SCOPE

The OET, offered by Cambridge Boxhill Language Assessment (CBLA), is available in 12 professions: Dentistry, Dietetics, Medicine, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Optometry, Pharmacy, Physiotherapy, Podiatry, Radiography, Speech Pathology and Veterinary Science.

To support wider understanding of the OET for the purposes of further study, professional registration or employment in the healthcare sector, UK NARIC conducted an independent benchmarking study of the OET in Medicine, Nursing, Dentistry and Pharmacy to the CEFR.

TEST FORMAT

These tests are designed to assess individuals' English language proficiency in listening, reading, speaking and writing within a professional medical context. The overall test structure is the same across all four professions. For listening and reading, all candidates sit the same test, whilst for speaking and writing, there are separate papers designed to assess candidates' ability to use English effectively for their chosen profession.

In the case of listening, candidates sit a 40-minute paper in which they complete notes (gap fill) and answer multiple choice questions on a series of audio texts derived from a medical context. Candidates are expected to demonstrate their comprehension of complex and/or technical information, as well as their ability to infer meaning. Audio texts are played only once and reflect authentic features through use of pace, emphasis, digressions and accents and, as such, are well selected to reflect real life communication within a healthcare setting.

For reading, candidates sit a one-hour exam designed to test their understanding of materials related to the healthcare sector such as guidelines, memos, patient/practitioner interactions or research into medical conditions. Texts range in length from 100-150 to 680-820 words and include both specialist language and a broad range of grammatical structures and functions relevant to an occupationally-focussed test.

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[1] It should be noted that this review has compared the language skills assessed through the OET to the CEFR scales of proficiency and does not seek to provide a wider judgement on the suitability of the test for the professions, noting that medical language would fall outside of UK NARIC's area of expertise.

The 45-minute writing test contains a single task, specific to the candidate's profession, designed to assess the candidates' ability to read, analyse and communicate medical information in writing using high level, profession-specific terminology. Candidates are provided with patient notes and are expected to select relevant information to be incorporated into a professional letter in their field of expertise. Letter types can take the form of a referral letter, letter of transfer, letter of discharge or a letter to advise or inform a non-professional. The length of the task is expected to fall between 180-200 words. The samples reviewed by UK NARIC ranged from B1-C2, with those at the highest scores in the OET able to demonstrate exceptional accuracy and key subskills associated with CEFR C2.

The speaking test is 20 minutes in duration and includes a general introduction (unmarked) and two roleplays relevant to the candidate's profession, thereby also providing an integrated assessment of speaking and listening skills. The scenarios are well designed to reflect real-life situations a healthcare professional may deal with in their day-to-day work. The roleplay tasks reviewed by UK NARIC required candidates to use a range of high-level functions and skills in English that may be needed to operate within a context of spontaneous interaction on a technical or complex topic.

SCORING

Candidates receive a separate score from 0 to 500 for each skill (listening, reading, writing and speaking). Prior to September 2018 each was scored according to an A-E scale. The table below shows the correlation between the letter and numerical scoring systems.

OET results to August 2018	OET score from September 2018
A	450-500
B	350-440
C+	300-340
C	200-290
D	100-190
E	0-90

CONCLUSIONS

Overall the OETs in these four professions were found to provide an appropriate test of occupational English, with sufficient documentation and mechanisms in place to enable conclusions to be drawn on the comparable CEFR levels of the sub-tests in speaking, reading, listening and writing. As shown in the CEFR table on the first page, the tests can be used to identify occupational English language competence at CEFR levels B2, C1 and C2. The global descriptors for these levels can be seen in the table below, whilst more information on the CEFR can be found on the Council of Europe website.

CEFR level	Global descriptor
C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

The study employed UK NARIC's established methodology for benchmarking language tests, informed by the Council of Europe 2009 Manual[2] and involved review of assessments, mark schemes, a sample of marked candidate scripts, and audio files from the speaking exams.

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[2] Council of Europe (2009). *Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) – A Manual.*