The Password Skills Plus Test Specification

Introduction

English Language Testing Ltd (ELT) design, develop, sell and deliver world class on-line testing services under the "Password" brand. Password launched in 2008 and now supports hundreds of education institutions (Password partners) with high quality online English language and maths testing. Tests are run in over 120 countries around the world.

Password tests occupy a unique position in the online testing market, offering Password partner institutions a unique combination of high quality and easily accessible testing, operated under their own control and brand. Password partner institutions can run Password tests whenever and wherever required and have exclusive access to test results for tests run by themselves, making the tests a valuable recruitment tool.

Password tests are flexibly built from a series of test modules including English language knowledge, reading, writing, listening, speaking and maths.

The Password Skills test, comprised of reading, writing, listening and speaking test modules, fulfils all Home Office requirements for admission to undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the UK and is widely used by UK universities for recruitment and admission purposes. The test was developed following widespread consultation with the UK University sector and since its launch in 2014, has helped many universities with the recruitment and admission of international students.

Password Skills has been formally aligned to the CEFR[1] (A2 to C1) and was specifically designed to assess academic English. The test takes three hours and five minutes in total and all four test modules are delivered online.

Test results are available within three to five working days and test takers receive certificates showing Password scores and CEFR levels.

Building on this success, and due to demand from Password partner institutions, ELT have now launched the Password Skills Plus test. Password Skills Plus tests are sold directly to students from ELT's website and students benefit from the convenience of being able to take the test in their own home. The test is run under secure conditions with online invigilation being undertaken by ELT's partner Examity, a world-leading online proctoring service. Test takers are sent a printable pdf certificate as a record of their achievement, and institutions accepting the test for admissions can verify test results by using ELT's secure online validation service. This service is free of charge and is accessed by login codes distributed by ELT.

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[1] The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a Council of Europe project to describe foreign language proficiency, teaching and assessment in a standard manner

The Password Skills Plus Test

Password Skills Plus uses the same test modules as the Password Skills test but for security reasons has different question sets, downloaded from our large databank of questions each time a test is run.

Test Format

Reading	**75 minutes** This test module consists of five tasks which increase in difficulty as the module progresses. Whilst the tasks are designed to assess academic English, they require no prior knowledge of specific subject matter.
Writing	**30 minutes** This test module offers test takers a choice of two "open ended" questions, one of which they choose as the subject of an essay. Test takers are instructed to write 200 words or more.
Listening	**60 minutes** This test module consists of five sections with one or more tasks in each section which increase in difficulty as the test module progresses. Most of the recordings are short lectures or snippets of lectures and, as with the reading test modules, no prior knowledge of specific subject matter is required.
Speaking	**20 minutes** This test module consists of five tasks which are displayed on screen. The responses expected increase in length and complexity as the test module progresses. Responses are captured by a microphone.

Academic Management

The Password Skills Plus test, like all Password English tests is academically designed and managed by CRELLA based at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK. Founded by Professor Cyril Weir OBE and now directed by Professor Tony Green, CRELLA are a research group of world leading experts in testing and assessment, and have worked on many English tests for the major English language testing boards and also for various government organisations.

In the recent 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF), the official UK government assessment of university research, 72% of the research CRELLA submitted was assessed as 4* (world leading, the highest category), placing CRELLA above Cambridge, Oxford and UCL for research conducted in the field of English and English Language.

The Password Skills Plus test is formally aligned to the CEFR. The test was designed to match closely the CEFR descriptors for language competence between levels A2 to C1. The process began with initial test design, drafting of specifications, production of sample items and tasks, reviews, trialling and modifications prior to test production.

Members of the expert team at CRELLA developed the various parts of the skills tests, combining their expert knowledge of the CEFR with their understanding of the latest research into the areas of reading, listening, writing and speaking assessment.

CRELLA worked closely on the design with ELT to ensure that the test specifications met the practical demands of management and delivery as well as essential demands for reliability and validity.

Wider consultation was undertaken with stakeholders regarding initial designs and tasks as well as initial trialling of questions and test modification to ensure test functioning.

Test Design

Password Reading

The design of Password Reading was led by Professor Tony Green at CRELLA. The test employs texts designed to reflect the demands of the A2 to the C1 level based on both CEFR descriptors and Green's work (2012) in identifying the distinctive features of texts at each level in terms of their grammatical, lexical and discoursal features.

The content of the texts is intended to reflect a trajectory leading from relatively general texts to more argumentative text types encountered in academic study. The tasks at the lower levels of the test focus on local processing of words and explicitly stated propositions. The higher levels require test takers to connect ideas at the paragraph level and to form a conceptualisation of the meaning of a text as a whole.

Password Writing

The Password Writing task is a short expository essay on a generally accessible topic, chosen from a choice of two topics presented. The task reflects the kind of writing commonly required in English for Academic Purposes programmes and on tests of academic language skills. The responses are scored on four rating criteria:

- Arguments and evidence
- Organization
- Grammar/ vocabulary range
- Grammar/ vocabulary control

There is a clear correspondence between the Password Writing task and the CEFR activity and illustrative scale for Reports and Essays.

Password Listening

Password Listening design was led by Dr John Field at CRELLA and aims to measure students' listening proficiency in terms of different levels of cognitive processing, such as extraction of

factual information centring on word-level cues (A2) to following a line of argument (C1).

The listening test draws upon CEFR descriptors and expands to include a range of listening processes that students need to master for an academic context, such as those outlined in research carried out by the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment, University of Bedfordshire, into the nature of academic language use (Weir et al 2009) and cognitive models proposed by Field for the speaking (2012) and listening (2013) constructs.

<u>Password Speaking</u>

Password Speaking was designed by Professor Lynda Taylor at CRELLA. It was developed to reflect the demands of CEFR descriptors of the A2 through the C1 level (based on the empirical work of Weir 1983, Brown, Iwashita and McNamara 2005, Green 2012, Nakatsuhara and Inoue 2013 and Nakatsuhara 2014.)

Test Delivery

Password Skills tests are securely accessed (to run a test) by using unique logins and passwords to log in over the Internet to the Password (test software) platform, often simply referred to as the "Password Platform". The Password Platform is hosted in a highly secure and redundant data centre in the UK.

All that is required in terms of equipment is a standard PC and an Internet connection.

Upon logging in, questions are randomly drawn for each test from a large question bank.

Examity's Online Proctoring Service – The Plus

Following the start of the COVID pandemic in early 2020, ELT needed to find ways for their partner institutions to run tests without face-to-face invigilation. ELT devised their own solutions for institutions able to invigilate themselves over Zoom, Teams and similar software, and also started working with several online proctoring companies. By early 2022 ELT had concluded that the best service was offered by Examity and so selected Examity to partner with them to invigilate Password Skills Plus tests online.

Founded in 2013, Examity is the market leader for scalable proctoring with exam access 24 hours each day, 365 days per year offering test-taker support anywhere in the world. With over 2 million proctored exams in 2021 and more than 1,200 invigilators, Examity offers the lowest candidate to proctor ratio for the education and certification sectors. As well as ELT, Examity partners with GMAC, the Goethe Institut and the British Council.

For Password Skills Plus Examity use human proctors backed up by AI monitoring (which flags potential violations of security rules) to check and record test takers identity and then invigilate the entire test; all test sessions are recorded. The proctors' report and the video recordings are reviewed by ELT's staff together with analysis of test results to determine whether tests can be judged to have been taken correctly. Tests that pass this review process have their results uploaded into ELT's online validation service.

Security measures include the following:

- Random selection of online invigilators
- Identity document checks by online invigilators
- Monitoring throughout the test by online invigilators
- Video recordings of each testing session with AI flagged potential security violations flagged, which are reviewed by ELT's own staff
- Stringent checking of test profile and results before tests are uploaded into ELT's online validation service

A Comparison Of Password Skills And Password Skills Plus

	Password Skills	Password Skills Plus
Test modules	Reading, writing, listening, speaking	Reading, writing, listening, speaking
Scoring	CEFR (broken down into Password score levels)	CEFR (broken down into Password score levels)
Academic design and management	CRELLA	CRELLA
Cost	£40.00	£95.00
Results availability	Three to five working days	Three to five working days
Test purchased by	Institution (from ELT by phone or email)	Student (from ELT's website)
Results uploaded to	Institution's private results area	General validation service
Certificate branded by	Institution and Password	Password only
Invigilated by	Institution (online, in person, or by third party proctoring service)	Examity, in partnership with ELT
Administered by	Institution	ELT

Scoring And Results

Password Skills Plus band scores are reported and linked with levels on the CEFR. All four modules use the same scoring system reporting a score for each skill and an overall score.

"Password 7.0 and above" indicates that the score is AT LEAST Password 7.0, but may be higher. "Pre-Password" indicates that the score is below Password 3.0.

Percentage scores are also available and these can be used to see how close a test taker is to a particular score boundary.

Password	CEFR
Password 7.0 and above	C1
Password 6.5	B2
Password 6.0	
Password 5.5	
Password 5.0	B1
Password 4.5	
Password 4.0	
Password 3.5	A2
Password 3.0	
Pre-Password	

Test results are available to students within three working days of tests being taken and are accessed by education institutions wishing to verify results from ELT's online validation service.

Test Item Production

Items for the test are written by a suitably qualified team of item writers with a postgraduate qualification such as English as a foreign language or related field (e.g. Cambridge DELTA), and with experience as a teacher of English for Academic Purposes. All item writers are trained in writing items and follow detailed item specifications.

The process of item writing is as follows:

All items are reviewed by the team at CRELLA and then revised, accepted or rejected for the next stage. After an item is approved, it then goes for "piloting" or pre-testing. This is an essential part of ongoing test maintenance for consistent performance and quality. When there is sufficient data for confident analysis of their proper functioning and the difficulty level is correct they are then added to the operationalised test bank of live items (or rejected).

Alignment To The CEFR

The CEFR was designed to bring together the best of a wide range of schemes for describing language learning levels and is widely recognised as an important framework of reference for language proficiency. It is used widely across Europe and Australia, and increasingly the world.

In the development and production of the Password tests, the CEFR is very much at the forefront, and every effort has been made to ensure the tests align meaningfully to CEFR levels and descriptors.

All sections of the test were produced with the CEFR descriptors in mind, and these descriptors are referenced by item writers and markers. CEFR panels with independent

language experts have also been conducted for all skills within the test. There was also analysis of the initial items of the test to review and enhance item quality and levels. These procedures are outlined in the Council of Europe document "*Relating examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference: A Manual*". In terms of the Password test, they were undertaken in the following ways.

Test Design

CRELLA designed the Password Skills test using the CEFR as a reference in design and also by identifying areas of overlap between the Password and the CEFR and making judgements from this overlap on which levels on Password may correspond with the CEFR. The aim of this was to establish a clear overview of the relationship between Password and the CEFR.

Alignment Panels

The tests also underwent a procedure of linking to the CEFR via a panel of experts. Panels were all made up of experienced and well qualified English language educators within the higher education sector with more than 10 years' experience in English language teaching. This involved familiarisation (or re-familiarisation) training, followed by training in assessing performance in relation to the CEFR levels, followed by rating Password performance or items in relation to CEFR levels.

Statistical Analysis

Password questions have all been through thorough statistical analysis. Initial questions, which themselves underwent both statistical analysis and alignment, are used as anchors. These questions and their alignment to the CEFR plus correlation to existing test-takers' levels meant that they could be used as good anchors of level i.e. have a very high confidence of their difficulty level which can be used to compare with and link to further items.

Pricing

Password Skills Plus tests can be purchased by students directly from ELT's website for £95.00 (plus VAT if applicable, i.e. if bought in the UK unless exempt). Batches of tests can also be purchased at a discount by institutions wishing to use the tests as a recruitment tool.

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