# Enhancing Language Learning:
# Designing Tests for Business English Students

Alina Popescu
*„Ovidius" University of Constanta, Faculty of Letters, Romania*
*alinadpopescu@yahoo.com*

## Abstract

*The present paper will focus on test design and development with a particular emphasis on how to devise comprehensive tests for students who attend a course on English for business (BE) purposes, a course which is aimed at enhancing students' grammar, reading, vocabulary, and writing skills at B1 Level. In the introductory section, we are discussing the basic typology of tests as well as their purposes, with particular attention to assessing the skills of BE students. Special consideration will be given to the five phases used when devising a new BE test. Moreover, we will attempt to clarify several aspects concerning test-takers, i.e. BE students. The issues of grading and establishing optimal facility values of test items are also tackled. Some final recommendations on test design conclude our analysis.*

**Key words:** assessment**,** test design, test development cycle, facility values, Business English
**J.E.L. classification:** I 21

## 1. Introduction

Assessment in English Language Teaching fulfills diverse testing purposes as teachers employ various assessment methods to evaluate *student progress* in English language instruction. According to T. McNamara, there are three key assessment categories including proficiency, achievement, and placement tests (2000, pp. 6-7). First, proficiency tests measure the learner's overall language proficiency, focusing on general language skills rather than specific course content. These assessments need to align with the 'can do' statements outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and encompass separate skills and integrated task tests, such as listening comprehension, followed by written production. Typically, educators do not create proficiency tests, however, they play a pivotal role in preparing students for globally recognized assessments like IELTS, TOEFL, and Cambridge Qualifications. Second, achievement tests are customized to specific language courses and aim to evaluate whether students have attained the intended learning outcomes. This type of assessments may be administered at the end of a course or periodically as progress evaluations, often developed by instructors to ensure alignment with their course objectives (Azhar, 2023). Third, placement tests are intended to determine appropriate class placement for new students by evaluating their language proficiency across various levels. So, these tests are essential for matching students with suitable learning environments, and they should be closely linked to the course curriculum, ensuring that students' skills, such as speaking proficiency, are accurately evaluated for effective placement. (Kluitmann, 2008, p. 8)

For professionals interested in doing business in English, obtaining a B1 Business Preliminary certificate demonstrates their ability to engage in discussions on business topics, interpret charts and graphs, compose concise business emails, and participate in brief telephone conversations (see https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/business-preliminary/). Similarly, end-of-year tests that follow a university Business English (BE) course aim to assess students' accuracy and knowledge of key areas of grammar and essential business vocabulary. Some of their purposes are, apart from grading per se, to see to what extent the course has catered for first-year students' needs, if an engaging and supportive learning environment was created, one which should have helped them develop their language skills and gain a deeper understanding of business concepts.

## 2. Literature review

Traditionally, the language test was seen as a tool which amasses proof of "general or specific language abilities from performance on tasks designed to provide a basis for predictions about an individual's use of those abilities in real-world contexts." (McNamara, 2000, p.11). Nowadays, testing is considered to represent more than evidence of knowledge, it is viewed as a valuable resource for understanding best practices in language teaching (Katz, 2021).

As noted by Kluitmann, the level of detail required for classroom tests may differ from large-scale international tests: "the testing of language within a restricted classroom environment, as clearly, (…) has to follow different rules, meet different necessities and is much more likely to employ alternative forms of assessment" (Kluitmann, 2008, p.8)

With their unique focus on assessing students' progress and understanding of specific course content or learning objectives within a limited context, classroom tests hold a distinct place in language assessment. While it is crucial to ensure that these tests are fair, valid, and reliable (Weir, 2005), they may not demand the same level of complexity and rigor as large-scale international tests. The adaptability of classroom tests to the specific needs and goals of the students and the course curriculum allows for a more personalized and effective assessment approach (Coombe, 2012).

Test specifications refer to a detailed set of instructions or guidelines that outline the purpose, level, timing, and specific details about the tasks included in the test. These specifications provide a test development and administration roadmap, ensuring that the test aligns with its intended purpose and accurately assesses the targeted language skills or competencies (Bâcă, 2019, pp. 228-229). Test specifications typically include information such as the overall purpose of the test, the language proficiency level targeted (e.g., CEFR level), the duration of the test, the format and structure of the test (e.g., sections, types of tasks), the number of items or questions in each section, the weighting of items, and any other relevant details necessary for creating and administering the test effectively. Therefore, test developers can ensure test design and implementation consistency, reliability, and validity by following test specifications (Brian, 2008, Jin, 2021, Cohen, 2021).

In our opinion, testing is not to be viewed as a phase which is separated from the process of learning. When analyzing instruction, Katz also sees assessment as its intrinsic part, one that supports the process of learning:

"For teachers, such an approach to assessment provides a window onto classroom learning processes so as to be able to measure and track students' language appropriacy of instruction in meeting students' learning needs. For students, such assessment supports reflection on learning, identifies areas of strengths and weaknesses, and nurtures skills that can lead to life-long learning." (Katz, 2021, p.66). The same scholar concludes that assessment has two roles: first, it influences learning and, second, it plays a vital role in the dynamics of the language classroom. As a result, a special focus should be placed, on students' feedback and on teachers' awareness of the need to adapt assessment to their learners' needs. As the two aspects are closely linked, Katz suggests that teachers need to translate students' suggestions into "learning environments keyed to learner needs". (Katz, 2021, p. 72).

A BE course is characterized by an amalgamation of field-specific vocabulary and general content and by an orientation of the course toward achievement. As such, it needs a solid foundation in test development, meaning that insights and guidance on creating effective assessments for language learners are much needed:

"In language for specific purposes testing, the task of the test designer is to mirror as accurately as possible the language, tasks, and contexts of the target language situation in order to accurately predict workplace language performance." (Moder & Halleck, 2021, p.81)

## 3. Research methodology

Generally speaking, the test development cycle consists of five phases. In the planning phase, the assessor determines the reasons for needing a new test, its purpose, type, test takers, and other users. Next, the design phase involves creating test specifications, detailing tasks, listening and reading features, and sample test materials. During the development phase, sample test materials are tested,

and feedback is gathered. If changes are needed, the process may return to planning and design. The following step is the operational phase which involves creating and administering the complete test to real candidates. Then, in the monitoring phase, the teacher evaluates the test performance, and the evidence gathered is used to make decisions on future test changes. Lastly, all materials are then revised and updated accordingly.

As far as a course in Business Communication and Correspondence is concerned, we suggest the following stages necessary to devise new tests:

1. In the planning phase, the following important aspects need to be considered:
- The need for new tests arises from the specific requirements of English for communication in business courses. What these tests aim to assess is the language proficiency of students within a business communication context.
- The purpose of the tests is to evaluate students' ability to effectively communicate in English within a business setting, including skills such as writing emails, reports, memos, reading, and listening.
- The tests will be designed as a comprehensive assessment that includes, preferably, listening, speaking, reading, and writing components, tailored to business professionals' communication needs.
- The test takers will be students enrolled in the English for Communication in business course, aiming to enhance their language skills for professional purposes.
- Other test users may include teachers who will use the results to tailor their instruction to meet students' needs effectively, as well as potential employers who may consider the test results when evaluating candidates' language proficiency for business communication roles.

2. According to the design phase, we have to take into account:
- Not only the test specifications that will outline the test tasks' format, content, and objectives, including specific listening and reading text features relevant to business communication, but also
- The sample test materials that will be developed to align with the test specifications, providing a preview of the types of tasks and topics that will be included in the assessment.

3. During the development phase, there are two steps:
- First, the sample test materials will be trialed with a group of students to gather feedback on the tasks' clarity, relevance, and difficulty level.
- Second, the feedback collected from the trial will be used to make any necessary adjustments to the test design, potentially leading to revisions in the planning and design phases to ensure the test effectively meets its intended objectives.

4. In the operational phase, we are supposed to:
- Finalize a complete test version, one that is based on the feedback received and administered to real candidates enrolled in the BE course, and
- Use the test results to evaluate students' language proficiency in business communication and provide valuable insights for both teachers and students to enhance learning outcomes in the course.

5. In the Business English course context, the last stage, the monitoring one, involves reviewing the test performance. The feedback and evidence gathered during this phase are crucial for determining any necessary adjustments to the test in the future. Additionally, all course materials should be thoroughly revised and updated based on the insights gained from this last phase.

Regarding the students, some crucial aspects that should be clarified are:

What is the class profile? In the example provided below, the class consists of adult learners ranging from 19 to 50 years old, pursuing higher education and, possibly, already engaged in professional settings. Students may come from diverse professional backgrounds, such as business, marketing, finance, or administration, with varying levels of experience and exposure to English in a business context.

What are a) expected topic knowledge and b) background knowledge? In our case, students are likely to possess a fundamental understanding of business concepts and terminology and they may be familiar with common business practices, communication styles, and etiquette. Besides, background knowledge in areas such as sales, marketing, finance, and management may vary among

students.

What is the expected language level? As already stated, the anticipated language level is B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. As such, students should be capable of understanding and using everyday expressions related to work, social interactions, and business situations, although with limited fluency and accuracy.

What are the language strengths and weaknesses? On the one hand, students' strengths include some basic vocabulary related to business topics, the ability to understand simple business texts, and express basic opinions and ideas. On the other hand, weaknesses may include limited fluency and accuracy in more complex language structures, challenges understanding nuanced business language, and difficulty expressing detailed thoughts and opinions.

What are the test specifications? The test we suggest aims to assess students' proficiency in using English language skills in a business context and evaluate their ability to comprehend and communicate effectively in various business situations. This test that will be provided as an example will include sections on grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing.

What skills and language elements will be tested? As shown below, the test will assess grammar through verb tenses, reading comprehension through understanding business-related texts, vocabulary through application of business-related terms, and writing through composing a professional email requesting information.

How much time will be available for the test? The total duration of our test is approximately 60-75 minutes, with each section allocated specific time limits.

How many sections will there be in the test? Our test comprises sections on grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing, each designed to evaluate different language skills relevant to business communication.

What is the length of each section? While the grammar section includes 10 questions to be completed in 15 minutes, the reading comprehension section includes 5 questions to be completed in 15 minutes. Additionally, the vocabulary section includes 8 gaps to be filled in 13 minutes, and the writing section requires completing one task in 15-20 minutes.

What is the number of questions in each section? As seen in the previous paragraph, each section of the test includes a specific number of questions: grammar (10 questions), reading comprehension (5 questions), vocabulary (8 gaps), and writing (1 task).

How will the final score be calculated? Weighting of questions will be discussed in a subsequent section.

There are some other considerations that need to be taken into account. For example, it is essential to ensure that the test tasks are relevant to real-world business scenarios and include various question types to assess different language skills. Besides, clear instructions for each task should be provided to avoid confusion, and authentic business materials should be incorporated to make the test content engaging and meaningful for students.

Test Title: Business English Test
Level: B1

Task 1: Grammar (VERB TENSES)
Choose the correct verb tense in each sentence that best fits the business context.
1. The team _____ (work) on a new project this week.
a) will work                                    c) has worked
b) is working                                   d) worked
2. Our sales department _____ (meet) with prospective clients tomorrow.
a) will meet                                    c) has met
b) is meeting                                   d) met
3. The company _____ (launch) a new advertising campaign next month.
a) will launch                                  c) has launched
b) is launching                                 d) launched
4. The CEO _____ (attend) a conference in Paris next week.
a) will attend                                  c) has attended
b) is attending                                 d) attended
5. Our marketing team _____ (develop) a new branding strategy for the product yet.
a) will not develop                             b) is not developing

c) has not developed                                    d) did not develop
6. The finance department _____ (analyze) the company's financial reports last week.
a) will analyze                                         c) has analyzed
b) is analyzing                                         d) analyzed
7. The IT team _____ (upgrade) the company's software systems next month.
a) will upgrade                                         c) has upgraded
b) is upgrading                                         d) upgraded
8. Our HR department _____ (conduct) interviews for new employees for three days.
a) will be conducting                                   c) has been conducting
b) is conducting                                        d) was conducting
9. The production team _____ (manufacture) a new product line for the upcoming season.
a) manufactures                                         c) had manufactured
b) is manufacturing                                     d) manufactured
10. We were informed that our company _____ (expand) into new markets the previous year.
a) will expand                                          c) has expanded
b) is expanding                                         d) had expanded

Key:
1. b) is working                                        6.  d) analyzed
2. a) will meet                                         7. a) will upgrade
3. b) is launching                                      8. c) has been conducting
4. b) is attending                                      9. b) is manufacturing
5. c) has not developed                                 10. d) had expanded

Task 2: Reading Comprehension
Read the following text about business strategies and check if the true or false statements that follow are true or false.

In the past year, the company has focused on enhancing its existing product line rather than planning to launch a new product next month. The CEO, known for his forward-thinking approach, strongly advocates for innovation within the organization, emphasizing the importance of staying ahead in the market. Despite facing challenges, the company's profits have remained stable, showcasing resilience and strategic financial management. The marketing team, recognized for its creativity and strategic vision, plays a crucial role in developing innovative campaigns to engage customers and drive brand growth. With a strategic plan in place, the company is determined to expand its market share by 10% this year, leveraging market insights and customer feedback to drive sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

(Text adapted with Chat GPT3, 2023)

Key

1. The company plans to launch a new product next month.
1. The company plans to launch a new product next month. F

2. The CEO believes in the importance of innovation.
2. The CEO believes in the importance of innovation. T

3. The company's profits have decreased in the past year.
3. The company's profits have decreased in the past year. F

4. The marketing team is responsible for developing new campaigns.
4. The marketing team is responsible for developing new campaigns. T

5. The company aims to increase its market share by 10% this year.
5. The company aims to increase its market share by 10% this year. T

Task 3: Business Vocabulary on Selling
Fill in the gaps in the text about selling with the correct words from the list below.
*knowledge, negotiation, needs, customers, strong, professionally, strong, partnerships*
In the world of sales, it is crucial to understand the __1__ of your customers. By building __2__ relationships and gaining their trust, you can create long-term __3__. It is also important to have a good __4__ of the product or service you are selling and be able to __5__ its benefits effectively. Additionally, having strong __6__ skills and being able to handle objections __7__ will help you close deals successfully. Remember, the key to successful selling is providing value to your __8__."

(Text adapted with Chat GPT3, 2023)

Key
1. needs
2. strong
3. partnerships
4. knowledge

5. communicate
6. negotiation
7. professionally
8. customers

•     Task 4: Email Writing

Write a semi-formal email to a business partner requesting information about a new project. Include relevant details and use appropriate business language.

Suggested key points:

- Introduction and greeting: Start with a polite greeting to the business partner.
- Purpose: State the purpose of the email, which is to request information about a new project discussed in a recent meeting.
- Specific request: Ask for detailed information regarding the project scope, timelines, and key deliverables.
- Collaboration: Express the importance of understanding the project details for effective collaboration.
- Assistance offering: Offer assistance if there are any specific requirements or resources needed from you.
- Closing: Close your email with a polite thank you and a sign-off.

Sample answer:

Subject: Request for Information on New Project

Dear [Business partner's name],

I am writing to request information regarding the new project we discussed during our recent meeting. As we move forward, we need to have a clear understanding of the project scale, timelines, and key deliverables. If possible, I need you to send me some detailed information on these aspects.

Second, if there are any specific requirements or resources needed from our part, please let me know so we can ensure the efficient execution of our project.

Keep in touch.

Best regards,

[Your name]

## 4. Findings

Grading a test can be problematic and time-consuming. Therefore, it is important to allocate the marks according to the complexity and importance of each task, when assessing the students' English language proficiency in a business context. For the test suggested in the previous section, the marks will be awarded as follows:

1. Grammar (Task 1): 3 marks
2. Reading Comprehension (Task 2): 2 marks
3. Vocabulary (Task 3): 2 marks
4. Writing (Task 4): 3 marks

In what follows we are going to account for this mark allotment. First, grammar is fundamental to effective communication in English, especially in business settings. This task assesses the students' understanding and application of verb tenses, which is crucial for conveying accurate information in various business situations. Second, reading comprehension is considered to be essential for understanding business-related texts, such as reports, emails, and articles. Task 2 evaluates the students' ability to understand and interpret information presented in a business context, which is vital for making informed decisions and communicating effectively with their future colleagues and clients. Third, we think that vocabulary is key to expressing ideas and concepts clearly and accurately in BE. As noted, this task assesses the students' knowledge and comprehension of business-related vocabulary, which is necessary for their effective communication in the workplace. Last, it is agreed that writing skills are crucial for communicating professionally in business environments, particularly through emails, reports, and presentations. This final task evaluates the students' ability to compose a clear, concise, and appropriately formatted email requesting information about a new project, demonstrating their proficiency in written communication.

By allocating the marks in this way, we aim to ensure that each task receives an appropriate weighting based on its significance in assessing our students' English language proficiency in a BE course. The present approach reflects the importance of grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing skills in effective business communication, while also providing a balanced assessment of the students' overall language abilities.

In the concluding paragraph of the current section, we are going to discuss the issue of facility values, more precisely what the optimal value of test items are. To determine the difficulty level of a question, we can calculate the percentage of students who answered it correctly. Step number one is divide the number of students who answered correctly by the total number of students who took the test. A score of 0.0 means that no students managed to answer the question correctly, thus making it extremely difficult. Conversely, a score of 1.0 means that all students answered the question correctly, indicating it posed no difficulty. The majority of students is assumed to answer questions correctly in an achievement test which assesses course knowledge. A good value would be if, for example, 21 out of 30 students could answer a question correctly since the calculation would be $21/30 = 0.7$. However, in an end-of-year test determining grades, questions that are too easy or difficult are ineffective. The recommended percentages for this type of tests are within the range of 0.25 to 0.75. Scores below 0.25 may be regarded too difficult, while scores above 0.75 may be seen as too easy. Taking into account these optimal values, teachers will be able to calculate facility values in all their tests (Martyn, 2024).

## 5. Conclusions

When creating tests, it is advisable to:

1. Ensure that test tasks align with students' real-life language needs;

2. Design test tasks that prompt students to think and communicate as they would in business-like situations;

3. Create test scenarios that mirror the working conditions in which students will engage in communication;

4. Evaluate whether the test results will provide valuable insights into students' language proficiency and usage abilities in their area of expertise.

Some additional components that could be included in the test to make the assessment more comprehensive and relevant to the student's needs in a business English context are listening comprehension section(s), where students can listen to recordings of business-related conversations, presentations, or interviews. As follow-up activities, students could answer questions or complete tasks based on the content of the recordings, such as summarizing key points, identifying main ideas, or answering comprehension questions. Another option is incorporating a role-play or speaking component which helps students engage in simulated business scenarios, such as negotiating a deal, participating in a meeting, or giving a presentation. Also, this task would assess students' ability to communicate effectively in spoken English, demonstrating skills such as fluency, clarity, and appropriate use of language in real-world business situations. If time allows, the writing section can be expanded to include additional types of business writing tasks, such as drafting a proposal, composing a formal report, or creating marketing materials. Such tasks would enable students to demonstrate their ability to produce various types of business documents, applying appropriate language and formatting conventions.

What we have offered are just a few suggestions among many other tasks that would assess students' ability to think critically, analyze information, and make informed decisions, which are essential skills in the business world.

To conclude, by incorporating these additional components into the test, the assessment would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of students' language proficiency and readiness for success in real-world business environments. It would also help students develop a broader range of skills and competencies relevant to their professional goals, fostering their growth and success in an increasingly globalized and interconnected business world.

**6. References**

- Azhar, A., 2023. *15 Types of Assessment in Lifelong Learning*. [online] Available at: <https://curiousdesire.com/types-of-assessment-in-lifelong-learning> [Accessed 22 March 2024].
- Bâcă E., 2019. Effective Error Correction and Language Improvement in Business Communication Teaching. *"Ovidius" University Annals, Economic Sciences Series* Volume XIX, Issue 2/2019, pp. 227-230. [online] Available at: <http://stec.univovidius.ro/html/anale/RO/ovidius-university-annals-economic-sciences-series-volume-xix-issue-2/> [Accessed 02 March 2024].
- Brian K. L., 2008. *Testcraft: A Teacher`s Guide to Writing and Using Language Test Specifications*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Jin Y., 2021. Test Specifications. In Fulcher, G. and Harding, L., eds., 2021. *The Routledge Handbook of Language Testing* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge, pp. 271-288, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003220756.
- Cohen, A. D., 2021. Test-taking strategies and task design. In Fulcher, G. and Harding, L., eds., 202). *The Routledge Handbook of Language Testing* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge, pp. 372-396, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003220756.
- Coombe C., 2012. *The Cambridge Guide to Second Language Assessment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katz, A., 2021. Linking Assessment with Instructional Aims and Learning. In Fulcher, G. and Harding, L., eds. 2021. *The Routledge Handbook of Language Testing* (2nd ed.). Routledge, pp.66-73, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003220756.
- Kluitmann, S., 2008. Testing English as a Foreign Language. Two EFL-Tests used in Germany. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis (ELT), University of Albert- Ludwigs. [online] Available at: <https://www.sprachenmarkt.de/fileadmin/sprachenmarkt/wissen_images/Wissenschaftliche_Arbeit_Sebastian_Kluitmann_TOEIC-KMK.pdf> [Accessed 22 March 2024].
- Martyn, T., 2024. *Item Analysis for Language Tests*. Academic English Co. [online] Available at: <https://www.academicenglishco.com/teacher-resources-item-analysis-for-language-tests/> [Accessed 15 May 2024].
- McNamara, T., 2000. *Language Testing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moder, C. L. and Halleck, G. B., 2021. Designing language tests for specific purposes. In Fulcher, G. and Harding, L. (Eds.). (2021). *The Routledge Handbook of Language Testing* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge, pp. 81-95, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003220756.
- OpenAI, 2023. ChatGPT3 (Feb 10 version) [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com/chat>.
- Weir, C. J., 2005. *Language Testing and Validation. An Evidence-Based Approach*, Palgrave Macmillan, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230514577.