

Testing young learners with CYLE: The new kids on the block

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The Cambridge Young Learners of English (CYLE) tests are a English proficiency instrument produced by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES). They are a three-level series of tests targeted at English learners between the ages of 7 and 12. They are intended to serve as a bridge to the UCLES Main Suite examinations (i.e., KET and PET). The tests were first administered in 1997 in Cambridge, and have been introduced in 46 countries around the world. CYLE came to Japan in June 2000. Currently, CYLE tests are available only in the Tokyo area, but plans are being made to expand to other regions of Japan.

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While one purpose of the test is to measure overall English proficiency, the CYLE tests also aim to give a positive impression of English testing to young learners in order to encourage and motivate them to continue their learning. To this end, the test items use large colorful illustrations and emphasize communicative discourse and vocabulary.

CYLE tests are currently administered at the request of individual public and private schools (including language schools) who have a minimum of 10 examinees. The schools reserve a test date at least six weeks in advance, and certified speaking test examiners and administrators are dispatched to conduct the tests onsite. In the future, the Japan CYLE test center plans to establish regular testing dates throughout the year at designated examination centers so that individuals can take the test (as they do for the other Cambridge tests).

Test Overview

The CYCLE tests have three levels, known as Starters, Movers, and Flyers. The Starters test was originally targeted for 7 yr. old children who have studied English for about 100 hours; the Movers test was designed for 8-11 yr. old children who have studied for 175 hours; and the Flyers test was made for 9-12 yr. old children with 250 hours of English study (UCLES, 1998:6). The actual age ranges of candidates in Japan at each level is much wider. For example, Starters is administered more often to 13- and 14-year-olds (first and second year junior high school students) than to 7-year-olds.

For each level there are three separate tests: listening, reading/writing, and speaking. None of the levels requires much writing: Starters need only write single word answers, Movers write 1-3 words at most, and Flyers write single words or short phrases. Since this is not, for the most part, a multiple choice test, candidates must be able to produce language and write it.

Listening Test Sections

The listening segments of each test contain 20-25 questions, covering 4-5 different question types, and taking 20-25 minutes to complete. Task types include matching written words or pictures of objects to a larger illustration by drawing a line, matching a picture with a word (to identify the picture or to make an association with the picture), choosing one picture from a group of three by ticking a box,

writing words to complete a chart or form (gap filling). The final section of each level requires examinees to listen to a dialogue, then color and draw according to what they hear.

Reading/Writing Test Sections

Reading and writing tests contain 25 items for Starters, 40 items for Movers, and 50 items for Flyers. They are 20-40 minutes long and cover 5 - 7 different tasks. In the Starters level test, examinees are asked to do the following: (i) identify whether sentences describing pictures are true or false; (ii) unscramble letters to make a word to correspond to the accompanying illustration; (iii) write single words in blanks to complete sentences (picture prompts for the missing words are given); and (iv) write one-word answers to questions about the accompanying illustrations. Movers and Flyers tests follow a similar format at more advanced levels, with longer, more complex sentences and more varied vocabulary. They also ask examinees to read short paragraphs (with illustrations) and write word or phrase answers (both with and without prompts) to comprehension questions.

Speaking Test Sections

The purpose of the speaking test is to identify examinees' interactive listening ability, pronunciation, and ability to produce words and phrases by evaluating how they fulfill a variety of tasks: asking and answering questions about a picture, telling a story based on a set of illustrations, explaining the differences between two or more pictures, and answering questions about themselves.

Depending on the level, the speaking tests contain 2-4 tasks and take 5-9 minutes. At the Starters level, examinees point to identify objects, place picture cards according to directions, say the names of objects, say colors and numbers, and answer simple questions about themselves (i.e., "How old are you?"). Examiners work from scripts called "interlocutor frames," which give the exact language that should be used, as well as the exact prompts that should be given to help examinees. The examiner test packet contains six different tests for each level which are meant to be used in rotation.

Effort is made to create a non-threatening test experience for examinees. To that end, in addition to the examiner, there is an "usher" who escorts each examinee into the test room and introduces him/her to the examiner. Where possible, Cambridge encourages the examinee's teacher to play the role of the usher so there is someone familiar to the examinee present for the introduction.

During the test, the examiner is required to give positive feedback to the examinee, i.e., "good," "great," "fine," "OK, " and to prompt the examinee when it is clear they are having trouble answering. If the examinee cannot answer, then the examiner should give them the answer to provide a sense of closure to the task. Thus, the examiner is also a supportive participant in the test, not simply an administrator.

Test Scoring

A strong motivational feature of this test is that there is no pass or fail. All examinees receive a certificate to award their efforts and abilities. For each of the three sections of the test, they receive up to five stickers (in the shape of Cambridge shields) which reflect their numerical scores. Thus, even the lowest scoring examinees receive one sticker per test for each test section. One obvious weakness in this score reporting system, at least thus far in the test's short history, is that there is no indication of what these shield scores mean, and therefore the scores cannot be translated into descriptions of what the examinee is and is not able to do.

Examiners

Examiners for the speaking tests are trained in a one-day workshop which is free to participants. It includes a lecture, a practice session, and a certification test (by watching and evaluating a videotaped session). Certified examiners are qualified to work at any CYLE test site worldwide. The current remuneration in Japan is 600 yen per examinee. Candidates need not be native English speakers, but they must hold a higher degree and must be working as an English teacher.

Discussion

There are many excellent aspects of the CYLE, among them the user-friendliness and visual appeal of the materials (every item includes an illustration), and the supportive, motivating atmosphere created by the speaking test. These are the main factors which make this English test a positive experience rather than a traumatic one.

The test also has some problems which have yet to be solved. Four issues in particular merit further attention:

1. Since the age limits of the test have been upwardly stretched in Japan, some of the questions and tasks are less appropriate for older examinees. For example, the final part of a Flyers speaking test contains the question "Who do you play with?" This question is too childish for use in cases where Flyers is administered to 17-year-olds and needs to be changed. If many items are in fact inappropriate for older examinees, then the materials should be restricted for use to the ages for which they were made. Clear age-limits need to be imposed.

2. One storytelling item (a series of four pictures) which appears in the Movers and Flyers speaking tests is too difficult for most examinees to complete without substantial support from the examiner. This item needs to be re-evaluated for the Japan market and possibly for other countries as well.

3. During tests conducted in March 2001 in Japan, it appeared that examinees were not familiar with test procedure. This needs to be corrected. Examinees should be briefed on what will happen in the test, especially in the speaking section. Responsibility should be taken by UCLES to give more detailed information to teachers (such as sample test questions and overviews of the test formats), who should then pass it on to the students who intend to sit for the exams.

4. Interviews are conducted by one examiner with one examinee at a time. The examiner training materials state that interviews are normally audio taped - not for the purpose of a second rating, but in order to monitor and review the examiner's work from time to time. However, this procedure has not been implemented in tests conducted in Japan and should be in order to maintain testing standards.

In November 2000, the Japanese Ministry of Education (*Monbusho*) gave official approval of the CYLE tests. With this authorization, the CYLE tests can compete with tests like STEP-Eiken. Approximately 1,200 learners in Japan have taken CYLE since 2000. Because user volume is still low, examination fees are quite high, ranging from ¥5,250 for a Starters test to ¥6,300 for a Flyers test.

Teachers of young learners who are interested in communicative teaching and motivational testing are heartily encouraged to have a close look at this test. For further information and sample materials, contact:

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References and Further Reading

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HTML: http://www.jalt.org/test/mac_4.htm / **PDF:** <http://www.jalt.org/test/PDF/MacGregor4.pdf>