

# Evaluation of the writing and speaking assessment workshops

OBC, SCE and IDC

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English as the Cornerstone  
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**Introduction:**

A series of workshops were held in the north, center and south of the country on June 23rd, 24th and 25th, 2015. The aim of the workshops was to introduce the assessment criteria used by internationally recognized programs for the skills of writing and speaking, two language skills that, prior to the introduction of the CEFR-Aligned Framework for Teaching English in Higher Education in Israel have not been formally tested in HE English language programs. For many participants, the CEFR was still a new concept, and the Cambridge and the IELTS systems for assessment unfamiliar. The workshops were an opportunity to expose the teachers both to the CEFR, and to these alternative methods of assessment.

Two testing experts from the ECOSTAR consortium, both qualified by Cambridge examiners, came to Israel and travelled the length of the country in order to deliver the hands-on workshops to English teachers from a wide variety of HEIs.

The number of places was limited in order to avoid an unmanageable size of workshop and to ensure an effective practical session where all participants could receive personal attention and direct input. A total of 69 teachers participated in the one-day workshops. Of these, 53 completed the questionnaire giving a 76.8% response rate. The questionnaire, which was distributed to all participants in their workshop pack, used a 5-point scale ranging from ‘extremely satisfied’ to ‘not at all satisfied’ in order to gauge their satisfaction with the lectures and workshop activities. An additional open option asked for general comments and feedback on the event.

**Results:**

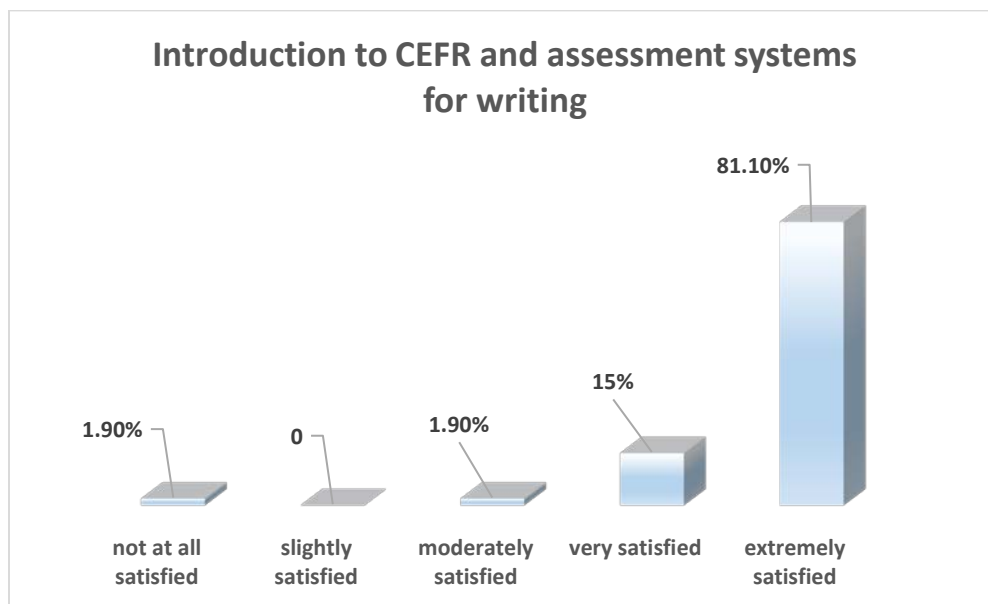


Figure 1: Introduction to the CEFR and to assessment systems for writing

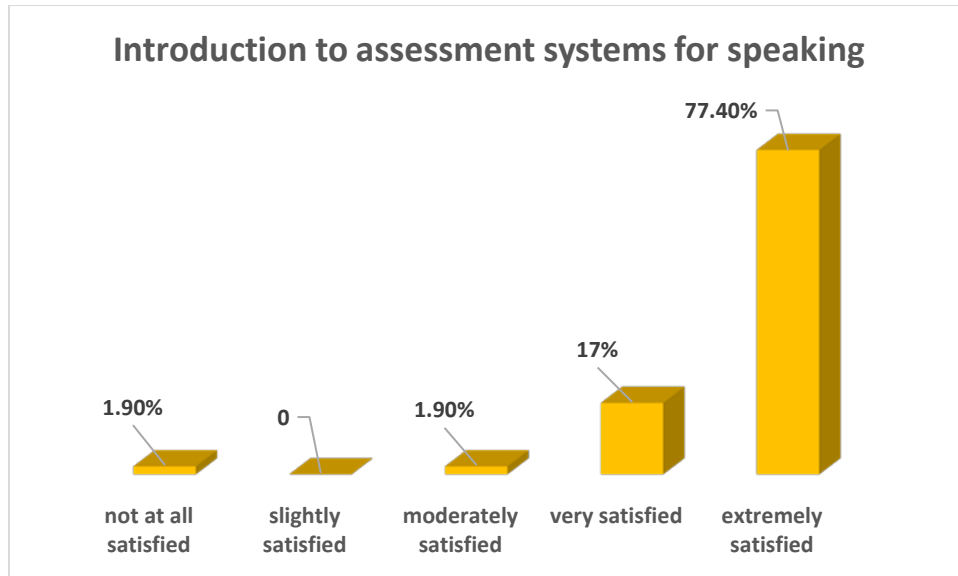


Figure 2: Introduction to assessment systems for speaking

The first two lectures introduced the participants to the concept of the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning (CEFR) and to the IELTS and Cambridge Mainsuite methods for assessing speaking and writing. The responses show that the majority were extremely or very satisfied with the introductory presentations.

For the hands-on sessions, the participants were divided into two groups who alternated between the two lecturers to experience the two assessment criteria according to two different levels: the A2-B2 levels correspond approximately to the basic, advanced 1 and advanced 2 English levels respectively in Israel. The writing skills were addressed in the morning and the speaking skills after the lunch break. Satisfaction levels with the hands-on workshops can be seen below in figures 3-6.

Writing assessment:

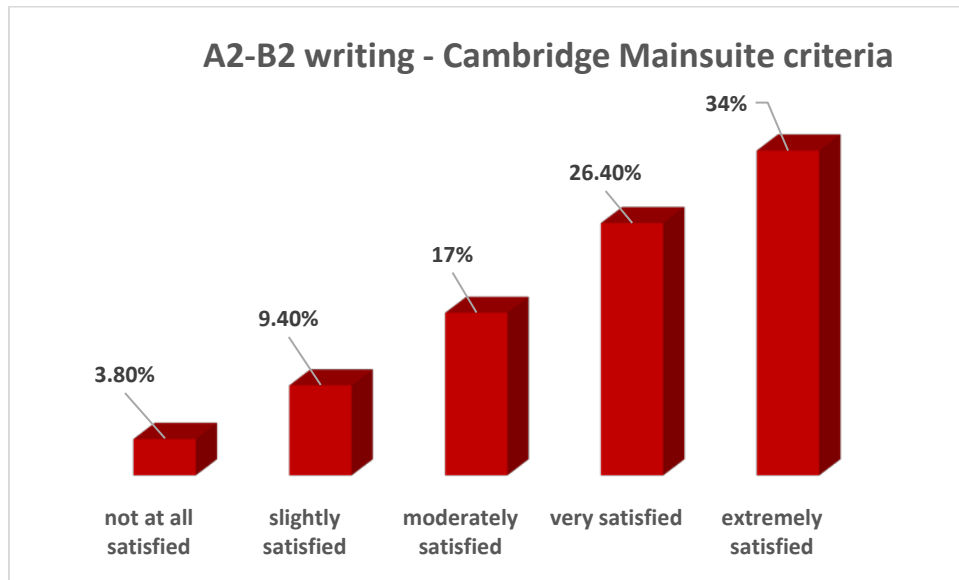


Figure 3: A2-B2 writing assessment with Cambridge Mainsuite criteria

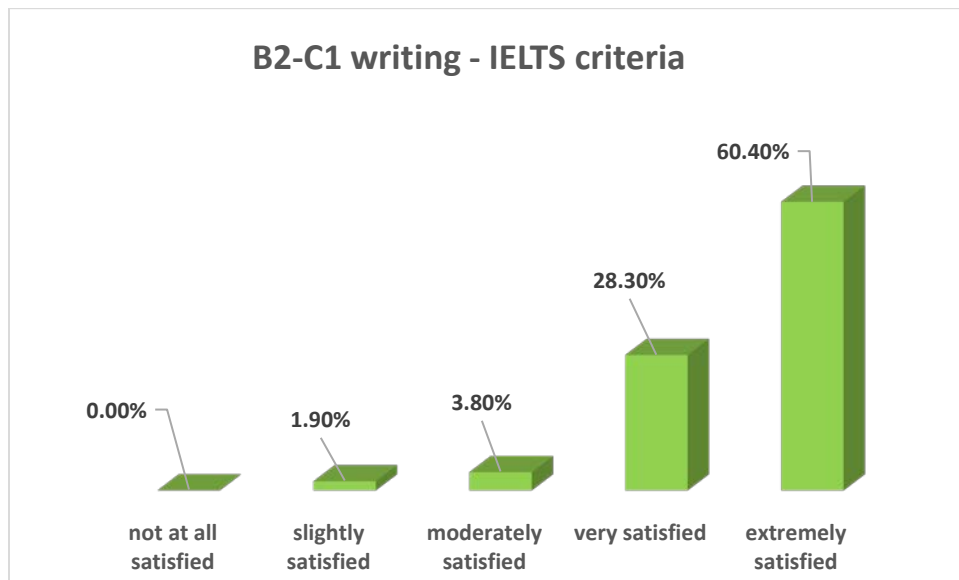


Figure 5: B2-C1 writing assessment with IELTS criteria

Speaking assessment:

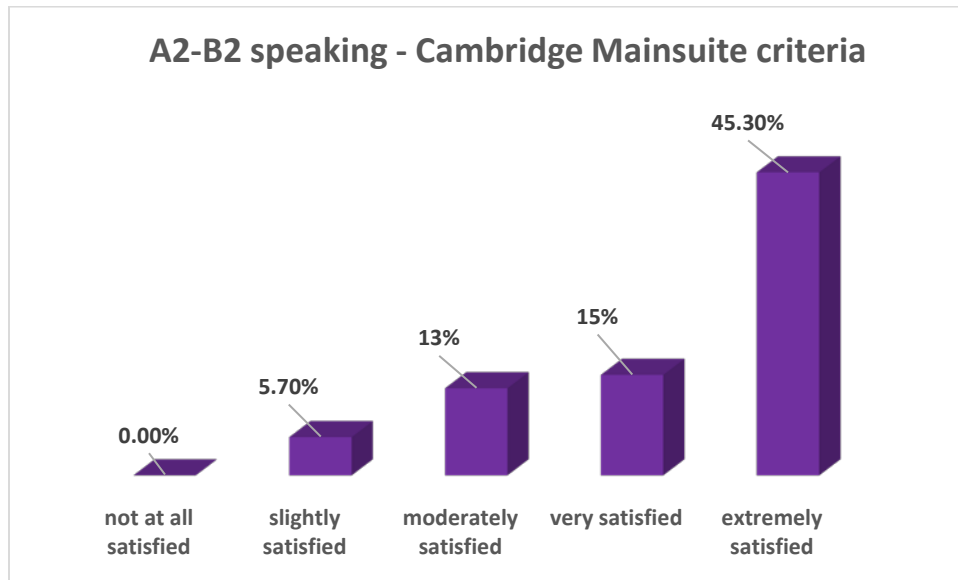


Figure 4: A2-B2 speaking assessment with Cambridge Mainsuite criteria

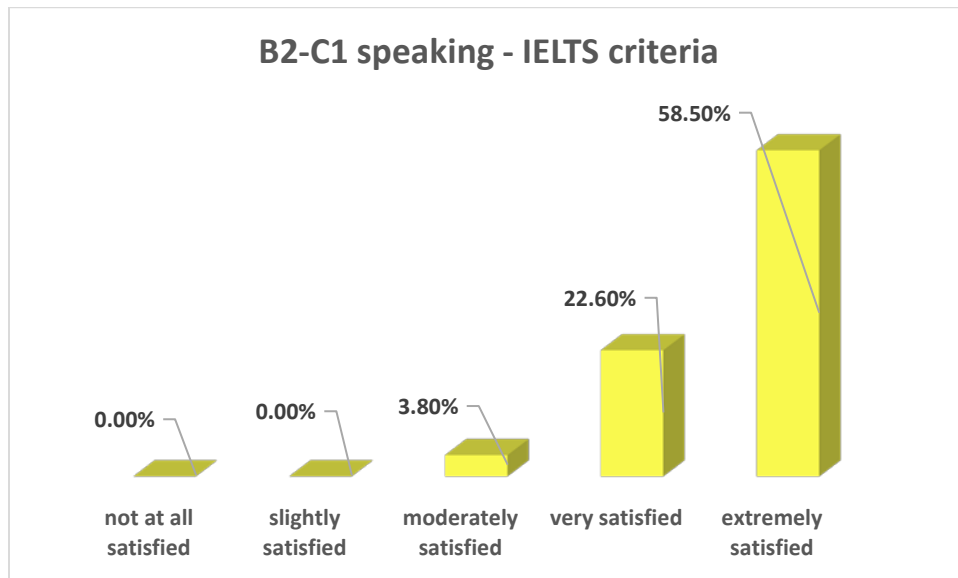


Figure 6: B2-C1 speaking assessment with IELTS criteria

Overall, satisfaction rates are high and reflect the enthusiasm with which the event was received. The formal assessment of writing and speaking in higher education in Israel is relatively new and not part of the final assessment criteria of the English courses in many institutions. The workshops served as an introduction and will need to be complemented with additional and ongoing workshops throughout the country in order for mutually-recognizable assessment criteria aligned with the new framework to be established.

Qualitative feedback:

Participants were asked to provide additional feedback on the workshops. Comments related to the general organization of the event, the quality of the lecturers and opinions about the topic.

The most common comments were of satisfaction with the event:

- ✚ “Fascinating!”
- ✚ “Very worthwhile!”
- ✚ “Wonderful and informative.”
- ✚ “It was great! I enjoyed myself to the full.”
- ✚ “Excellent!”
- ✚ “Outstanding.”
- ✚ “Very informative.”
- ✚ “I learnt a lot.”
- ✚ “Well-organized, helpful professionally.”
- ✚ “Very practical and most enjoyable.”
- ✚ “It was a VERY good and informative workshop.”

Fuller responses also attested to the usefulness of the event:

- ✚ “Very well-structured, gave us excellent guidelines for tasks we have not yet had to assess.”
- ✚ “Raised very relevant issues and gave us very practical ways of addressing these issues, thank you.”
- ✚ “Excellent and comprehensive for the very limited time they had. Thank you!”
- ✚ “I enjoyed listening to different foreigners' speaking problems.”
- ✚ “Excellent training. Though I wish we knew if we would be using it nationally. I certainly will be using it in my specific courses.”
- ✚ “It was an intriguing day, raising many important issues. I also feel that as much as we want to have equal assessment rubrics, it is very challenging.”
- ✚ “Extremely satisfied with the day. However, I felt that the Cambridge system is far better suited for high schools.”
- ✚ “Gave us a broad basis of awareness of issues in assessment such as subjectivity.”
- ✚ “All in all, very interesting. If Israel adapts to this, then it will be a challenge after we have been teaching differently up until now, fluency over accuracy.”

Not all comments were completely positive:

Regarding the content of the workshops:

- ✚ “I'm not convinced that the skills of assessing at this variety of levels are relevant. We've got more of a problem being able to differentiate within the mid-range skills in speaking and writing.”
- ✚ “Assessment of reading skills was missing.” (The event was widely publicized as assessment for speaking and writing.)
- ✚ “Should have had more participants.” (Participation was voluntary and the number of spaces was limited, but hopefully at future events there will be more people.)
- ✚ “Don't show the people who speak - distracting and it affects the assessment!”
- ✚ “Speaking assessment of lower levels is less relevant for us and especially in a non-academic setting.”
- ✚ “I understand this is just an introduction, but would have expected some explanation of WHY student X is a 3.5 rather than a 3.”

Feedback on the lecturers:

There were positive and negative comments made about the two lecturers' very different styles of delivery:

- ✚ “Nice day and a lot to learn from the two lecturers. Thank you for the event and for the lunch.”
- ✚ “The difference in evaluating the two lecturers' emphases that what's important is how you deliver a message and not what you actually deliver.”
- ✚ “Both gave great insight into how to grade written and oral presentations.”
- ✚ “I feel brevity may have been lacking a bit. Thank you.”

Specific comments relating to the lecturers included the following:

Lecturer 1:

- ✚ “... a FANTASTIC lecturer.”
- ✚ “... enthusiasm and delivery of such a dry subject was greatly appreciated. Thank you, it was very helpful.”



Lecturer 2:

- ✚ “You don't need to read it all - too long and drawn out.”
- ✚ “... never introduced yourself and merely read out the information.”
- ✚ “... didn't add information beyond what was written on the slide.”
- ✚ “... main read from the slides which quickly became boring and easy to tune out. Would have preferred a summary of slides.”

Several technical issues were raised. Regarding the handouts that were provided for the participants:

- ✚ “An index was missing from the booklet.”
- ✚ “Put clear page numbers in the booklet and refer to /use them - takes too long to get to the right pages.”

A technical issue which caused some dissatisfaction was the sound quality for some of the speaking elements: “Sound wasn't brilliant.” This is an important point to consider for future events using pre-recorded material.

In summary, the feedback from the participants shows that overall, satisfaction levels were high and that the event was important and relevant. The few negative comments raise some issues for consideration in the arrangements for future such events.

Rapporteur - Sonia Munteanu, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca.