



Spoken English Proficiency Test for Teachers (SEPTT)

Centre for Academic Literacies & English Communication Skills



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L-Università ta' Malta

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Introduction

The Spoken English Proficiency Test for Teachers (SEPTT) is designed to ensure high levels of spoken English proficiency amongst English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners working in a variety of international contexts.

SEPTT tests candidates' ability to use spoken English for a variety of functions, including conversing, explaining, presenting information, and giving instructions and feedback in a context specific to ELT. SEPTT is divided into three tasks and takes no longer than 15 minutes.

SEPTT assesses candidates on the following five criteria: teacher discourse; coherence and cohesion; pronunciation; vocabulary; and grammar. These criteria form part of an analytic rating scale consisting of four bands, Band 4 being the highest level of proficiency and Band 1 being the lowest.

SEPTT has been developed by the Centre for Academic Literacies & English Communication Skills (CALECS) at the University of Malta. CALECS is responsible for test design, rater recruitment and training, test administration, and research.

English-for-Teaching

SEPTT is based on the notion that people require different proficiencies that are always situated in particular contexts and bounded by a particular social practice (Freeman, 2015). Just as general English proficiency cannot address all the linguistic needs of students in the world beyond the classroom, it cannot fully specify the demands on teachers' use of language inside the classroom when teaching the language.

Hence, an ESP-derived approach to language proficiency is required whereby teacher education focuses on the specific linguistic needs of teachers when enacting their role. According to Freeman et al. (2015), such a 'focused approach converts the problem of language improvement from one of general proficiency to one of specialized contextual language use, which is likely to be more efficient in bringing about practical impacts on teacher classroom efficacy and student learning outcomes' (p. 131). This acts as the foundation for the construct of English-for-Teaching, i.e. the essential language skills needed to prepare and enact a lesson in English (Young et al., 2014). One of the main implications of English-for-Teaching is that teacher language assessment needs to change so that the focus is on classroom-specific language proficiency rather than general language proficiency. This is imperative given that 'Creating assessments that actually look like the work teachers do in the classroom can help build stronger validity arguments' (Freeman et al., 2015, p. 138).

Some of the tasks in SEPTT replicate the classroom tasks and routines that teachers typically engage in. Freeman et al. (2015) inventoried these tasks and routines and grouped them into three functional areas: managing the classroom; understanding and communicating lesson content; and assessing students and giving them feedback. The proficiency construct in SEPTT is framed by the context in which teachers typically use English when teaching the language. Hence, SEPTT is only appropriate for candidates who have completed a pre-

service ELT methodology course. Despite the fact that candidates' knowledge of methodology is the basis on which their spoken English proficiency is tested, the knowledge itself is not assessed in SEPTT.

Assessment Criteria

A candidate's performance on SEPTT is assessed by means of an analytic rating scale made up of five criteria and twenty descriptors corresponding to four bands, Band 4 being the highest level of proficiency and Band 1 being the lowest. The five criteria are: teacher discourse; coherence and cohesion; pronunciation; grammar; and vocabulary. At the end of the test, the examiner determines the band that best describes a candidate's performance with respect to each criterion across all three tasks. The lowest band attained for a specific criterion determines the global band attained in the test.

The table below describes a candidate's performance for each one of the four bands and with respect to each one of the five criteria. Band 3 is considered the cut-off point between operational and pre-operational candidates.

	1	2	3	4
Teacher Discourse	The candidate seems unable to speak at length on teaching-related topics. The candidate rarely varies speech flow for stylistic effect (e.g. to emphasize a point, to highlight an important word or phrase). The candidate demonstrates a limited range of discourse functions appropriate to the context (e.g. formulating questions for different purposes, summarizing, etc.), and might often not adopt an appropriate register and style.	The candidate is willing to speak at length on teaching-related topics but might not be able to do so with relative ease. The candidate might sometimes not vary speech flow for stylistic effect (e.g. to emphasize a point, to highlight an important word or phrase). The candidate demonstrates a limited range of discourse functions appropriate to the context (e.g. formulating questions for different purposes, summarizing, etc.), and might sometimes not adopt an appropriate register and style.	The candidate is able to speak at length and with relative ease on teaching-related topics but may not consistently vary speech flow for stylistic effect (e.g. to emphasize a point, to highlight an important word or phrase). The candidate demonstrates a good range of discourse functions appropriate to the context (e.g. formulating questions for different purposes, summarizing, etc.), and regularly adopts an appropriate register and style.	The candidate is able to speak at length and with a natural, effortless ease on teaching-related topics. The candidate consistently varies speech flow for stylistic effect (e.g. to emphasize a point, to highlight an important word or phrase). The candidate demonstrates an excellent range of discourse functions appropriate to the context (e.g. formulating questions for different purposes, summarizing, etc.), and consistently adopts an appropriate register and style.
Coherence and Cohesion	The candidate seems unable to structure and sequence ideas appropriately. Discourse markers and connectors are limited, and fillers are often distracting. Speech is affected by	The candidate attempts to structure and sequence ideas but this is sometimes done inappropriately. Discourse markers and connectors are limited, and fillers are sometimes	The candidate is able to frequently structure and sequence ideas appropriately. Discourse markers and connectors are used well. Whenever necessary,	The candidate is always able to consistently structure and sequence ideas appropriately. Discourse markers and connectors are used well and spontaneously.

	repetitions, pauses and highly frequent self-correction, and these often interfere with ease of understanding.	distracting. Speech is affected by repetitions, pauses and frequent self-correction, and these sometimes interfere with ease of understanding.	organizational patterns are employed effectively. Speech is sometimes affected by repetitions, pauses and self-correction, but these rarely interfere with ease of understanding.	Whenever necessary, organizational patterns are employed effectively and competently. Speech is rarely affected by repetitions, pauses and self-correction, and these never interfere with ease of understanding.
Pronunciation	The candidate communicates inadequately. Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation frequently interfere with ease of understanding, and/or put strain on the listener.	The candidate communicates inadequately at times. Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation sometimes interfere with ease of understanding, and/or put strain on the listener.	The candidate communicates intelligibly. Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation rarely interfere with ease of understanding.	The candidate communicates effortlessly and intelligibly. Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation never interfere with ease of understanding.
Grammar	The candidate uses a limited range of structures and these might contain errors. Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are not always well controlled. Errors frequently interfere with meaning.	The candidate uses a range of structures, and errors mostly occur when attempting to communicate a complex idea. The candidate's utterances, which may constitute features of spoken grammar (e.g. chunks and clusters, ellipses), are not well controlled. Grammatical structures are quite varied even though dominated by chained clauses, but sentence patterns are not well controlled. Errors sometimes interfere with meaning.	The candidate uses a range of structures but there might be a few inaccuracies. The candidate's utterances, which may constitute features of spoken grammar (e.g. chunks and clusters, ellipses), are quite well controlled and typical of teacher talk. Grammatical structures are quite varied even though dominated by chained clauses, and sentence patterns are consistently well controlled. Structures might contain errors but these do not interfere with meaning.	The candidate uses a range of structures accurately and with ease. The candidate's utterances, which may constitute features of spoken grammar (e.g. chunks and clusters, ellipses), are well controlled and show evidence of fluency typical of teacher talk. Grammatical structures are varied even though dominated by chained clauses, and sentence patterns are consistently well controlled.
Vocabulary	The candidate's vocabulary range and accuracy are often sufficient to communicate on common, concrete, or teaching-related topics, but range is limited and the word choice often inappropriate. The candidate is often unable to paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary.	The candidate's vocabulary range and accuracy are often sufficient to communicate effectively on common, concrete, and teaching-related topics, but range might be limited and the word choice sometimes inappropriate. The candidate can sometimes	The candidate's vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively on common, concrete, and teaching-related topics. The candidate paraphrases consistently and successfully. Vocabulary is sometimes idiomatic. There might be	The candidate's vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively on teaching-related topics. The candidate paraphrases consistently and successfully. Vocabulary is idiomatic, nuanced, and sensitive to register. There are

	Mistakes in word choice frequently affect communication.	paraphrase when lacking vocabulary, but this is not always successful. Mistakes in word choice sometimes affect communication.	minimal inappropriacies in use of lexis, but these do not affect communication.	almost no inappropriacies in use of lexis.
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Rating Procedures

The examiner in SEPTT also acts as an interlocutor. The examiner is responsible for timing every single part of the test, initiating interaction with the candidate, and assessing the candidate's performance. Interaction with the candidate, including the instructions provided to the candidate and all the questions posed to the candidate, is scripted for the purpose of ensuring reliability. Every SEPTT examiner is periodically provided with rigorous training on how to follow test procedures in a consistent manner, and on how to interpret the rating scale for the purpose of reliably assessing candidates' performance. Every single test is recorded and these recordings are used to regularly monitor examiners' rating performance.

Part 1: Interview: The Teacher (2-3 minutes)

Description

Part 1 consists of an introductory interview in which the examiner asks questions about the candidate's interests, plans, and training in relation to ELT. Questions may also focus on the candidate's views about teachers, teaching and learning.

The task takes the form of a two-way exchange initiated by the examiner where the candidate is expected to respond to a set of questions. The questions posed by the examiner may focus on past, present or future situations.

The task is aimed at assessing candidates' ability to provide information about familiar topics related to ELT, as well as details about their interests with respect to this profession.

Procedure

1. The examiner greets the candidate, introduces him/herself, and confirms the candidate's identity.
2. The examiner explains the procedure to be followed for this part of the test.
3. The examiner then asks a set of questions within the time available.
4. If the candidate answers a particular question at length, the examiner intervenes politely and proceeds to the next question.
5. If the candidate answers a question too briefly or is unable to move beyond brief responses, the examiner moves on to the next question or to Part 2 of the test.

Part 2: Long Turn: The Lesson (6-7 minutes)

Description

A three-minute presentation expressed as a long turn by the candidate based on a prompt focusing on some aspect of an English language lesson, such as managing the classroom, communicating content, or setting up an activity. Before entering the test room, the candidate is provided with ten minutes in which to examine the prompt. Prior to the presentation, the candidate is provided with three minutes for preparation.

This task focuses on extended, structured speaking using a prompt that clearly outlines what the candidate is meant to do in a particular scenario. Besides a detailed rubric, the prompt might also include printed or visual components that would aid the candidate in the delivery of the presentation.

This task assesses the candidate's fluency and accuracy in presenting, defining, developing and exploring information related to the prompt. The prompt will not focus on personal experience and will be worded in such a way as to ensure that the candidate can move from a general to a more specific development of information. However, the candidate may include personal experience (e.g. references to training and learning) as one of the various factors within the presentation.

The presentation needs to include a description and explanation of what the candidate would do and why.

When delivering the presentation, the candidate might need to: introduce the presentation by indicating how each part of the prompt will be discussed; define and focus on each part of the prompt; exemplify each part of the prompt; conclude the presentation by summarizing, referring to future situations, identifying main areas of concern, suggesting the course of action required, or indicating personal experiences and views.

Procedure

1. Before entering the test room for Parts 1 and 2, the candidate is provided with a copy of the prompt and allowed ten minutes to examine it. The candidate is not to bring into the test room any kind of written or printed material.
2. The examiner explains to the candidate the procedure to be followed in this part of the test.
3. The examiner provides the candidate with a pencil and a sheet of paper to make notes. The candidate is given three minutes to prepare the presentation. Any notes made by the candidate must not be taken out of the examination room.
4. As soon as the three-minute preparation time has elapsed, the examiner invites the candidate to begin the presentation. The candidate may begin earlier if s/he wishes.

5. The candidate is not allowed to go beyond the three-minute limit. Once the candidate has talked for three minutes, the examiner politely stops him/her and asks a rounding-off question before proceeding to Part 3.
6. If the examiner notes that the candidate is unable to maintain discourse for the required three minutes, the examiner probes further by asking the candidate to say more about one particular aspect of the prompt. If the candidate is still unable to proceed, then the examiner asks a rounding-off question before proceeding to Part 3.

Part 3: Conversation: Instructions and Response (4-5 minutes)

Description

A conversation between the examiner and candidate based on a given scenario related to the prompt in Part 2. The candidate is provided with a rubric and one minute in which to examine it. Then the candidate is asked a number of questions.

This task focuses on the candidate's ability to respond to a particular lesson scenario or provide instructions to learners. The candidate might be asked to describe how s/he would address a specific situation or what kind of instructions they would provide to learners. The candidate is expected to use concrete examples when answering. By means of a set of questions, the candidate may be required to speculate, evaluate, compare and contrast, explore possibilities, extend situations and experiences, and suggest alternative perspectives.

Procedure

1. The examiner explains to the candidate the procedure to be followed in this part of the test.
2. The examiner presents the candidate with a rubric and provides him/her with one minute in which to examine it. The candidate may make notes, but these must not be taken out of the examination room
3. As soon as the one minute has elapsed, the examiner asks the candidate a set of questions within the remaining time available.
4. If the candidate answers a particular question at length, the examiner intervenes politely and proceeds to the next question.
5. If the candidate answers a question too briefly or is unable to move beyond brief responses, the examiner moves on to the next question or brings the test to an end.
6. At the end of the test, the examiner collects the rubric, the prompt used in Part 2, and the paper and pencil.

Sample Test Materials

Pre-test Procedure

Before entering the test room, the candidate is provided with the prompt to be used in Part 2 and ten minutes in which to examine it.

Test Session Information

At the beginning of the test, the examiner turns on the audio recorder and reads out the following:

This is a Spoken English Proficiency Test for Teachers conducted on [date] at [place]. The candidate is [candidate's name and number], and the examiner is [examiner's name and number].

This part of the test is not timed.

Part 1: Interview: The Teacher (2-3 minutes)

The examiner turns on the timer and tells the candidate:

Good morning/afternoon/evening.

My name is... [The examiner gives their name.]

Can you tell me your full name, please? [The candidate gives their name.]

Thank you.

Can you show me your identification, please? [The candidate shows their identification to the examiner.]

Thank you.

In this part of the test, I am going to ask you some questions about yourself and your interest in English Language Teaching. Please remember to answer questions as fully as possible.

The examiner proceeds to ask all the questions in a set.

Set A

1. *Why are you interested in becoming a teacher?*
2. *What aspects of your teacher training course did you find particularly interesting? Why?*
3. *Do you plan to use technology in your lessons? Why/why not?*

Set B

1. *In your opinion, what qualities make a good language teacher? Which of these qualities do you possess?*
2. *Would you rather teach a monolingual group of students or a group coming from all around the world? Why?*
3. *How will you seek to engage your learners once you start teaching?*

Set C

1. *Could you describe a teacher that you consider to have been inspiring for you?*
2. *Were there any aspects of your teacher training course that you found challenging? Why/why not?*
3. *How do you plan to keep developing as a professional once you start teaching?*

[If the candidate answers a question too briefly or is unable to move beyond brief responses, the examiner should move on to the next question or to the next part of the test.]

After the candidate has answered all the questions in the set, the examiner says:

Thank you. Now we shall proceed to Part 2 of the test.

Part 2: Long Turn: The Lesson (6-7 minutes)

The examiner tells the candidate:

In this part of the test, you are to speak for about three minutes using the prompt you were given before the beginning of the test. Before you start your presentation, you have three minutes to prepare what you are going to say. Here's a pencil and paper to make notes. [The examiner provides the candidate with a pencil and a sheet of blank paper.] You may refer to these notes during your presentation.

Prompt

You are going to be teaching a class of 12 learners of different nationalities. Their language level is B1 (Intermediate). The lesson's focus is on the function of 'making recommendations'. Describe what you would do as part of this lesson. You might wish to consider the following points:

- how you might use the material below
- whether you would adapt the activities or add any other activities
- how you would set up the lesson's activities
- what the learning outcomes of the lesson's activities are



Warm up

1 Work in pairs. Look at the pictures and compare and contrast them. Who are the people and what do you think they are talking about?


Useful phrases

- I think he/she is ...
- He/She/They could be ...
- Perhaps they ...
- In both pictures ...
- In the first picture ... but in the second ...

2 When you visit a new place, what are the advantages and disadvantages of ...

- staying in a hotel?
- staying in somebody's home?

Listening

1  1.10–1.11 Listen to the conversations. What do the people in the pictures want to know?

2 Listen again. Tick the three things each speaker recommends.

Conversation 1

- a walk to the harbour
- a good restaurant
- a trip to the caves
- an organised tour

Conversation 2

- a concert
- pubs with live music
- the symphony orchestra
- the students' union

Language focus

1 Look at these sentences from the conversations. Underline the phrases that the speakers use to recommend something.

- 1 If you don't want to go far, I'd suggest walking down to the harbour.
- 2 Oh yes, you shouldn't miss the caves.
- 3 I can really recommend the organised tour.
- 4 Well, what about a concert?
- 5 There are lots of good pubs with live music.
- 6 Or you could try the student union in Chambers Street.

2 Listen to the conversations again. How do the visitors reply to the recommendations? Tick the phrases they use.

Conversation 1

- 1 a That sounds good.
- b That's good.
- 2 a I think we'll do that tomorrow.
- b I don't think we'll do that tomorrow.

Conversation 2

- 3 a That isn't a good idea.
- b That's a good idea but ...
- 4 a That's great.
- b That sounds great.

Speaking

Work in pairs. Choose **one** of the tasks below.

A You have a teenage exchange student staying with you. Give him/her some tips about what to do in your area. Use the new expressions you have learnt.

B A business visitor wants to know about places to visit in your town or somewhere you know well. Make recommendations. Use the new expressions you have learnt.

The candidate is given three minutes in which to prepare their presentation. At the end of the three minutes, the examiner tells the candidate:

All right? Can you please start your presentation?

Once the candidate has talked for three minutes, the examiner should politely stop him/her by saying *Thank you* and ask one rounding-off question from the following:

- *In what way will your lesson help to teach learners how to make recommendations?*
- *Why have you chosen to use these activities as part of your lesson?*

[If the examiner notes that the candidate is unable to maintain discourse for the required three minutes, the examiner should probe further by asking the candidate to say more about one particular aspect of the prompt. If the candidate is still unable to proceed, then the examiner should ask a rounding-off question.]

After the candidate has answered the rounding-off question, the examiner says:

Thank you. Now we shall proceed to Part 3 of the test.

Part 3: Conversation: Instructions and Response (4-5 minutes)

The examiner tells the candidate:

In this part of the test, you are going to be given a rubric related to the prompt used in Part 2 of the test. You have one minute in which to examine the rubric. Then I shall be asking you some questions. Here is the rubric. [The examiner provides the candidate with the rubric.]

Rubric

Imagine you are delivering a lesson on the function of 'making recommendations'. Give the class instructions on how to complete the Speaking activity in the material from Part 2 of the test. Use the actual language you would use in class.

After one minute has elapsed, the examiner proceeds to ask all the questions in the set.

1. *What are your instructions?*
2. *How would you check whether the learners have understood your instructions?*
3. *Let's imagine that some of the learners are not using the new expressions they were taught by means of the previous activities in the lesson. What would you do?*
4. *One of the learners in a particular pair is doing most of the talking. How would you deal with this situation and what would you tell the learner?*

[If the candidate answers a question too briefly or is unable to move beyond brief responses, the examiner should move on to the next question.]

After the candidate has answered all the questions in the set, the examiner says:

Thank you. May I have the rubric, prompt, and paper and pencil back, please? This is the end of the test.

The examiner collects the rubric, prompt, and paper and pencil. The timer is then turned off. The audio recorder is turned off only once the candidate has left the room.

FAQs

1. What happens if a candidate provides an irrelevant answer to a particular question in Parts 1 and 3?

If this occurs in at least two separate instances in the test, the candidate will be marked down for Coherence and Cohesion. The candidate will only be marked down if their answers are irrelevant to the questions asked not due to irrelevance with respect to methodology.

2. What happens if a candidate's presentation in Part 2 contains irrelevant information?

If the examiner determines that the irrelevant information substantially detracts from the focus of the prompt, the candidate will be marked down for Coherence and Cohesion. The candidate will only be marked down if their presentation is irrelevant to the focus of the prompt not due to irrelevance with respect to methodology.

3. What happens if a candidate's answer to a question in Parts 1 and 3 pre-empts the next question?

The examiner will skip the question or move on to the following part of the test or bring the test to an end, as appropriate.

4. What happens if a candidate fails to understand a particular question in Parts 1 and 3 of the test?

The examiner will skip the question or move on to the following part of the test or bring the test to an end, as appropriate. The examiner will not paraphrase a question or define the meaning of a word that a candidate finds difficult to understand. However, the candidate may ask the examiner to repeat a question.

5. What happens if a candidate indicates that s/he wants to start the long turn before the end of the three-minute preparation time in Part 2?

The examiner will ask the candidate, Are you sure you're ready? If the candidate replies in the affirmative, the examiner will invite him/her to start the presentation.

6. What happens if a candidate indicates that s/he wants to start answering questions before the end of the one-minute preparation time in Part 3?

The examiner will ask the candidate, Are you sure you're ready? If the candidate replies in the affirmative, the examiner will start asking questions.

7. What happens if a candidate pauses during the long turn in Part 2?

If the candidate pauses for at least five seconds, the examiner will probe further about a particular aspect of the prompt by asking one of the following questions:

- *Can you tell me more about this/...?*
- *Would you like to add anything to this/...?*

*The probing question can only be used **once** during the entire duration of the long turn.*

8. How many rounding-off questions are asked after the long turn in Part 2?

The examiner asks one of two rounding-off questions, choosing the one that is most appropriate to what the candidate would have said in the presentation.

9. How is a candidate's performance assessed in the test?

The examiner uses an analytic rating scale made up of five criteria and twenty descriptors corresponding to four bands. At the end of the test, the examiner determines the band that best describes a candidate's performance with respect to each criterion across all three tasks. The lowest band attained for a specific criterion determines the overall band attained in the test.

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