

*Continuity and Innovation:
Revising the Cambridge
Proficiency in English
Examination 1913–2002*

People write the history of experiments on those born blind, on wolf-children, or those under hypnosis. But who will write the more general, more fluid, but also more determinant history of the 'examination' – its rituals, its methods, its characters and their roles, its play of questions and answers, its systems of marking and classification? For in this slender technique are to be found a whole domain of knowledge, a whole type of power.

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish*.



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1 A survey of the history of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) in the twentieth century

Cyril J. Weir

In this opening chapter we try to piece together the development of the CPE in the last century. This is no simple task, as there had been no conscious effort to document its progress at any stage until recently (see Taylor 1979; Spolsky 1995). The account is thus partial and we are at the mercy of what evidence there is and our interpretations of it. However, without such a historical perspective it is not easy to see why the exam is like it is today. By trying to document critical moments in the exam's history we can try to understand the forces that have shaped it.

CPE 1913–1945

Roach, the founding father of the Cambridge EFL examinations, records how in 1858 the Syndicate began its role as one of the university-based public examining bodies taking responsibility for school-leaving examinations in Britain. Very early on it also developed an overseas extension of its activities arising from the growth of English-medium school systems in South East Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and parts of South America, and by 1898 it had 36 colonial centres and 1,220 colonial candidates (Roach 1971: 145–146).

Roach (1944: 35) details how testing the English of foreigners was not to start until 1913, when the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) was instituted by the Local Examinations Syndicate. The rationale behind its introduction is unclear. All we have is the following extract from the papers of James Roach:

And now at last for the Take-over bid. Why the Syndicate started the examination in 1913, no one knows. It must, I think, have been a break away by Exeter University College from the London examination. Both were based on a course for foreigners, both were heavily academic, with a paper on Phonetics. I think both had the same examiner in this, Professor Daniel Jones. (Roach undated page 4)

The First World War obviously put a stop, and Exeter must have asked for it postwar. It teetered along with 14 or 15 candidates a year, a loss, though

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no one was vulgar enough to cost things until I came along and had found my feet. (Roach undated page 5)

The examination was academic in orientation and initially modelled on the traditional, essay-based, native-speaker language syllabus including an English literature paper, an essay, and also a compulsory phonetics paper with a grammar section, and translation from and into French and German. There was also an oral component with dictation, reading aloud and conversation. (See Appendix 1 at the end of the book for a copy of this first CPE paper.) The examination closely matched the contents of Sweet's (1899) 'The Practical Study of Languages' regarded by Howatt (1984) as one of the best ELT methodology books ever written. In all, the candidates spent 12 hours on an extremely demanding test of their abilities in English.

1913 Examination

- (i) Written:
- (a) Translation from English into French or German 2 hours
 - (b) Translation from French or German into English, and questions on English Grammar 2½ hours
 - (c) English Essay 2 hours
 - (d) English Literature (The paper on English Language and Literature [Group A, Subject 1] in the Higher Local Examination) 3 hours
 - (e) English Phonetics 1½ hours
- (ii) Oral:
- Dictation ½ hour
 - Reading aloud and Conversation ½ hour
-

It is interesting to note that an oral test (reading aloud and conversation), with associated dictation, was present in an international EFL test at such an early stage alongside the grammar and translation-based activities in vogue at the time. Its multidimensionality is testimony to an eclectic approach to language testing that was to survive to this day. The examination remained very much the same throughout the 1920s, with the number of languages for translation increasing in 1926 to include Italian or Spanish. Some slight alterations had also been made to timing by 1926: Reading and conversation is shortened from ½ hour to 20 minutes and English Literature from 3 hours to 2½ hours.

In 1930 a special literature paper was provided for the first time for foreign students. Compared to the 1913 exam the choice of topics had become more general. In 1913, the choice was very anglocentric:

- a. The effect of political movements upon nineteenth-century literature in England
- b. English Pre-Raphaelitism
- c. Elizabethan travel and discovery
- d. The Indian Mutiny

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e. The development of local self-government

f. Matthew Arnold

By 1930, subjects were more general and suitable for the variety of candidates.

1 The topic that is most discussed in your country at the present time

2 Fascism

3 The best month in the year

4 Good companions

5 Any English writer of the twentieth century

6 Does satire ever effect its purpose, or do any good?

In the same year plans were laid by Roach to adapt the examination to the needs of a wider public. The regulations for the year 1932 were published in May 1931 and noticeably the paper on Phonetics had disappeared as a formal test (and so too the earlier questions on English grammar in the translation paper).

A typically thoughtful rationale for this was provided by Roach (1931) in an internal memo:

I suggest that the paper on English Phonetics and the requirement of a knowledge of Phonetics be eliminated from this examination.

- (1) Neither the Syndicate in the Higher School Certificate Examination nor the University in the Modern Languages and English Triposes require a knowledge of Phonetics.
- (2) Phonetics are no doubt a great aid in learning pronunciation – we can adequately test the results in the oral examination.
- (3) Our Certificate is not one of aptitude for teaching English. Were it so, there might be more point in examining on Phonetics. Some countries may require modern language teachers to be proficient in Phonetics, but even so they may not accept our test as sufficient evidence, while at the same time we may be imposing this test on candidates who have no need of it.
- (4) With many candidates Phonetics are probably a thing to be ‘got up’ for this examination and to be forgotten thereafter. They may deter some possible candidates from ever entering at all and, to be successful, they almost certainly require a teacher. The rest of the syllabus does not – any ‘mademoiselle’ living au pair in a girls’ school could readily get such guidance as she needs for the literature paper. The elimination of Phonetics should therefore make the syllabus more possible for a wider public – I do not believe that it need lower the standard.

(Roach 1931)

An internal paper headed ‘Certificate of Proficiency in English July 1934’ (UCLES 1934) records the details of the new syllabus:

1934

Oral: Dictation, Reading and Conversation.

- Written: (a) Translation from English to French or German or Italian or Swedish: 2 hours.
(b) Translation from French or German or Italian or Swedish into English: 2 hours.
(c) English Essay: 2 hours.
(d) English Literature: 3 hours.

Paper (d), English Literature, will contain

- (i) Questions on prepared books. Questions will be set on all the books prescribed but candidates will only be expected to choose three books for study and to answer the questions dealing with those three. The questions will be so framed as to give candidates an opportunity of showing whether they can understand and interpret representative works of English Literature.
- (ii) A question on an unprepared English passage which candidates will be asked to explain in such a way as to show that they have a proper appreciation both of the meaning and of the form of the passage.
-

A number of other events of importance for the future of CPE took place in the 1930s. 1935 was notable for the announcement that the official approval of the Board of Education (the Ministry of Education of His Majesty's government) had been given to the examination. Roach was later to comment (1977: 2):

...We came fairly near to a 'national' certificate in 1935, year of birth also of the British Council, when I persuaded the Board of Education to grant its approval to the Certificate of Proficiency. The Board had no Seal, so the Royal Mint designed one for the certificate. The Seal has now gone, but the official approval continues... The Proficiency carries equivalence in the University of Cambridge, and doubtless many other places, 'as part of the examination requirements for matriculation'. We may therefore think of the Cambridge First Certificate as O-level and the proficiency as A-Level, each being issued in three Grades ...

In 1937 the first mention of co-operation with the British Council appears, which had undertaken to give information concerning the examination to cultural societies and to official representatives of other countries; the start of a mutually beneficial collaboration which has lasted until this day.

By the outbreak of the Second World War CPE had Ministry of Education approval and recognition for matriculation purposes at British universities. This and its use in British Council teaching operations overseas led in 1941 to a formal collaboration between the Council and the Syndicate on the organisation of the Cambridge EFL examinations (UCLES 1982: 1). For some years there had been collaboration with the British Council, particularly with regard to overseas arrangements, and thus in 1941 this association was

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formalised by the establishment of a Joint Committee which was formed to deal with the increased amount of detailed administrative matters. This included representatives of English language teaching in its various spheres, e.g. further education centres, recognised private schools of English, university departments, British Council specialists with overseas experience, and whenever possible direct overseas representation (UCLES 1973: 4).

In one of the very first references to the concept of washback validity, Roach questioned how far examinations act as a stimulus and a focal point for both teachers and taught, and thereby promote the expansion of the studies that they are designed to test. He concluded that this was a matter that does not lend itself to exact research. The examinations were only part of a process. He added that it is certain that in the revival and expansion of systematic English studies which is revealed by these statistics, the activity of the British Council looms very large. Alike at home and abroad, the Council constantly sought new channels of services, responded to new requests, and carried teaching and assistance wherever they were needed (Roach 1934: 36).

One can also detect in the internal documentation available for the 1930s the recognition that a reasonable volume of entries was necessary for such examinations to survive (this imperative of course remains with exam boards to this day). For a number of years CPE had only led a modest existence. It was held only at one centre, in London, and as late as 1931 the total number of candidates was only 15.

Spolsky (1995: 63–64) commented:

The examination remaining so small, there may well have been discussions, Roach recollected, of closing it, but instead, full responsibility was handed to Roach, who prophesied that he would spread the examination round the world in ten years.

In 1932 new centres were created in England and also on the continent of Europe. An internal paper (UCLES 1933) draws attention to ‘the increase in numbers and the institution of a December examination’. 1936 saw the inclusion of a syllabus in *Economic and Commercial Knowledge* as an alternative to *Literature*, presumably intended to increase candidature by offering exams perceived as appropriate by students and end-users. In 1937 there is the first mention of arrangements at German universities, and that the examination was held three times, in March, July and December. As a result of these developments, the number of candidates who completed the examination for the full certificate rose (see Appendix 1.1).

Roach (1944: 35) notes that the year 1937 also brought a decision by the University of Cambridge to accept the Certificate of Proficiency as ‘the equivalent of the standard in English required of all students, British or foreign, before entrance to the University’; Oxford gave similar recognition in the following year.

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By 1938 translation papers were being regularly set in a number of languages (see Appendix 1.3) and papers in other languages were available on request. Choices (two out of three) were given in July 1938 in the 'From English' translation paper, whereas there was no choice given in 1923. A history alternative could be offered in lieu of literature, as an approach to the study of *English Life and Institutions*, a paper which was introduced under that title in the following year. The examination was held five times in the year.

July 1938 exam

Oral: Dictation, Reading and Conversation.

Written:

English Literature (3 hours)

General Economic and Commercial Knowledge (3 hours)

Translation from English (2 hours) – 2 out of 3 passages

Translation into English (2 hours) – 2 passages

English Composition (2½ hours)

The 'English Essay' is by 1938 called the 'English Composition'. In the 1932 exam paper candidates had to write one essay, choosing a subject out of 6 choices. In the 1938 'English Composition' paper there is an additional task: read a passage of 525 words and write a summary not exceeding 185 words.

Summary of changes by 1938 (changed from 1913)

- 'English Phonetics' paper is omitted.
- 'Translation' papers no longer include grammar questions.
- 'English Literature' paper became the first paper.
- An alternative paper to 'English Literature', 'General Economic and Commercial Knowledge', was introduced. (And 'English Life and Institutions' was added as another alternative in 1939.)
- 'English Essay' is renamed 'English Composition', and a new summary writing task is added. A longer time is allocated; changed from 2 hours to 2½ hours.

Centres were now being set up much further afield, not only in Europe but in North Africa, West Africa, the Middle East and China. By 1939 the CPE was offered in 30 countries. In consequence the papers set for translation reflected this widening interest (see Appendix 1.3). The proficiency examination thus developed steadily, with about 750 candidates each year by 1939 when a preparatory examination, the Lower Certificate in English, was introduced in response to a demand for an examination at a more elementary level. This quickly established itself as a recognised examination with its own status and currency and a much larger entry than Proficiency, reflecting the relative number of students at these different levels.

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With the outbreak of the Second World War entries declined, not picking up again until 1943 when the official figures record 861. The majority of the candidates in Britain in this year were members of the Allied Forces, including Polish servicemen and Italian prisoners-of-war who made the most of an enforced stay in Britain (Cartledge 1971 in Taylor 1979: 8).

According to Roach:

Another important factor was the growing keenness of Service authorities to promote the study of English among Allied forces on British soil. Education officers and Liaison officers increasingly used the examinations, not merely as a test of progress made, but as an encouragement to regular study under conditions that were often difficult. For pupils of an Army Staff College or an RAF Initial Training Wing, tuition in English might have to be fitted into a crowded time-table. ... Nor must one forget the allied civilians and friendly aliens who were learning English while working in war factories, as teachers and nurses, in commerce, or in the offices of Allied governments in London. Nor, finally those British improving their English while in prisoner-of-war or internment camps in Germany. One candidate, for lack of books, was prepared for the paper English Life and Institutes, chiefly from the 'combined memories' of several other members of the camp. ... (Roach 1944: 37)

With the ending of the war thoughts turned to changes in the examination and we detail below the post-war changes that led up to the current revision period.

Major syllabus changes 1945–75

A new syllabus for CPE was introduced by UCLES in 1945. Language still only had a small part to play in the examination, with literature and translation of equivalent value.

A broad range of pathways through the examination was also possible, e.g. the alternative options to English literature. This was in all likelihood a response to the varying curriculum content of diverse educational systems in existing and former colonies as well as an attempt to maximise candidate numbers. The wide range of options in all three of the written papers, though addressing content validity demands, had obvious shortcomings in terms of parallel forms reliability, a point which will be taken up below.

CPE Syllabus 1945

Oral:

Dictation, Reading and Conversation

Other tests, e.g. the written reproduction of a story read aloud by the examiner, could be added at the discretion of the Syndicate.

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Written:

- (a) English Literature
or English Life and Institutions
or Survey of Industry and Commerce
or English Language with Literature (for cases where no access to set books)
(and from 1946 English Science Texts) (3 hours each)
- (b) Translation from and into English (3 hours)
Candidates not using the language of the country in which they are examined should consult the Local Secretary well in advance.
- (c) English Language (composition and a passage of English with language questions) (3 hours)
English Language with a Commercial Bias (1947)

Paper (a), English Literature, will contain

- (i) Questions on prepared texts, of which candidates will choose three.
- (ii) An unprepared English passage to be explained in such a way as to show proper appreciation of its meaning and form. As an alternative, candidates may answer one question from a choice dealing with English life and character.

Choice of texts for 1945: Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*; *The Centuries' Poetry*, *Pope to Keats* (Penguin); Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dent, King's Treasuries, 1s. 2d., or other editions); Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Dent, 1s. 9d., or (UCLES 1944: 1) other editions); T.E. Lawrence, *Selections from Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Methuen, 2s.); *Biography of To-day* (Longmans, Heritage of Literature, 1s. 8d.); Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Anthology of Modern Verse* (Methuen, 2s. 9d.); *Prose of our Time* (ed. Ratcliff, Nelson, 1s. 6d.).

Two separate translation papers (total 4 hours: 2 hours for 'into English' translation and another 2 hours for 'from English' translation) had been combined into one 'Translation' paper with 3 hours to complete all translations. Candidates were now required to work on 3 passages: 'from English' translation on one compulsory passage and another one of their choice, and one 'into English' translation which carried half of the total mark.

In 1945, the 'English Composition (2½ hours in 1938) paper was changed to an 'English Language' paper (c) (3 hours), which had basically the same content as the 1938 paper but with some additional language questions. For candidates who were unable to access set texts owing to wartime conditions there was an alternative to 'English Literature' called the 'English Language with Literature' paper.

The 'English Language with Literature' paper contained a compulsory first question and thereafter candidates could choose any four out of an eclectic range of thirteen questions that quite clearly made different demands and were hardly comparable. These included:

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- a letter or composition on a suggestion from the passage in Question 1
- a paraphrase of the full meaning of a passage of blank verse from Shakespeare
- a description of a man on the basis of a description of his house
- the correction and explanation of errors in five ungrammatical sentences
- the recommendation of two books of English literature a friend would enjoy and one which would present problems to nationals of your country and the reasons for your choice
- an essay on romantic novels in English
- an essay on Shakespeare's view of tragedy or comedy
- a consideration of Wordsworth's view of the aim of poetry in relation to English poetry familiar to you
- an essay on what is characteristically English about English literature, or about English people always acting on principle, or what English cookery reveals about the English character, or about the English taking their pleasures sadly.

Summary of changes in 1945

- More alternative papers were available for 'English Literature'.
- Allocated 3 hours for both 'into' and 'from English' translation as one paper.
- 'English Language' paper replaced 'English Composition'.

Further significant changes had taken place by 1953. It became possible to take a 'Use of English' paper as an alternative to 'Translation'. This new paper has remained albeit with changed formats, until this day. It starts with a reading passage with short answer questions, then a sentence reformulation task, a task requiring recombining sentences into a more coherent paragraph, a task involving knowledge of how punctuation can change meaning, an editing task, a descriptive writing task and finally a task testing knowledge of affixes. The long history of the 'Use of English' paper in this form partially explains why the current equivalent is apparently so diverse.

1953 paper

Oral: Dictation, Reading and Conversation

Written:

- (a) English Literature (3 hours)
(alternatively a General English Literature Paper was offered for overseas centres which were unable to obtain the texts prescribed for the Eng Lit paper)
or Science Texts
or English Life and Institutions
or Survey of Industry and Commerce
 - (b) Use of English (3 hours)
or Translation from and into English
 - (c) English Language (composition and a passage of English with language questions) (3 hours)
-

Objectivity, reliability and fairness in this period

Spolsky (1995: 206) concludes:

It is clear from the kind of questions set that the objective question had no place in the thinking of Cambridge examiners ... Examinations like these were invitations to the candidates to display their linguistic prowess in a variety of formally proscribed situations.

As two of the main focuses of the examination at that time were literature and translation, this was perhaps not too surprising. Despite the relief from marking it would offer, few overloaded academics in Britain would be in favour of objective formats for these papers given the obvious threat to validity this would pose.

Despite his concern with the lack of parallelism of the optional tasks referred to above, Spolsky does highlight one of the enduring characteristics of the UCLES examinations (ibid. 206):

The examiner was then expected to apply educated and moderated judgement in order to arrive at a fair and equitable decision on the standard that had been achieved. While we have no detailed account of the concern taken within the system to assure that this moderation worked in written examinations, we can see from his work on the oral examination the kind of care that Roach considered must be taken to make these judgements as fair as humanly possible.

He quotes extensively from Roach (1945) to illustrate how UCLES attempted to ensure fairness to candidates:

... Oral examiners received copies of Roach's (1945) study, revised mark sheets and instructions, and a heading for their reports. They were invited to describe (1) the general conditions of the examination (Was it better to give the reading first? Was it possible to prevent communication between candidates? What was the average time? Would more time be an advantage?); (2) the reading test (Did two separate reading tests help? What did the examiner listen for in each? How would the examiner define the degree of proficiency expected at the different levels? Were any of the early candidates retested?); (3) the conversation (What degree of fluency and range of vocabulary was expected at each level? Were questions based on the reading passage? Were all candidates asked the same questions? What was the balance between questions requiring short answers and those encouraging free conversation? Did specific questions test specific vocabulary, the use of tenses, the knowledge of numerals, days of the week, and English names of counties? What do you suggest as a syllabus to define the range of the conversation test?); (4) the standards for the test as a whole (Would examiners prefer that standards be suggested or fixed? Should the standards be the sum of the various parts of the test? Should a candidate pass after failing one section of the test?); and (5) the dictation (Manner and speech of reading? What is it designed to test? What should

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be the principles of marking?). Examiners were also invited to comment on Roach's report, to report on any experimental testing, and testing of joint examining, to make general suggestions for improvement, and to suggest 'semi-oral' tests. It is evident from this that Roach was planning to continue his ground-breaking research, and that Cambridge test suffered from his resignation. (Spolsky 1995: 206–207)

An UCLES report for 1944 also shows the commitment to ensuring the examinations were as fair as possible:

We found time to make a preliminary survey of certain problems, to conduct some interesting experiments, and to prepare a first report. This has had an immediate influence in causing certain modifications of the oral tests to be held in 1945, and we hope that it will stimulate discussion wherever the examinations are taken. The chief experiments in joint examining took place at the Polish Initial Training Wing, R.A.F., and at the Polytechnic, Regent Street, London. (UCLES 1944b)

Spolsky (1995: 208) feels that the problem of parallel forms continued and perhaps deepened in the 1950s as more choice became available:

The 1955 examination had a compulsory three-hour Use of English paper in the afternoon. Question 1 was a reading passage followed by a number of comprehension questions. Other questions (candidates were to answer all but one) involved rewriting sentences and paragraphs, showing the effect of punctuation changes, correcting errors in a passage (and saying why they were wrong), describing objects, and showing knowledge of prefixes. Before this, in the morning, candidates could choose among a number of papers: English Language (a passage for summarizing and a formal essay – the topics included: 'The ordinary man' and 'The customer is always right'); and English Literature (a wide choice of questions); Survey of Industry and Commerce ('Describe a suitable method of insuring a valuable cargo of radio and television sets to be sent from London to New York'); English Life and Institutions ('What are the principal outdoor recreations of the English schoolgirl? How do they compare with those in your own country?'); and English Science Texts (summarizing a passage, paraphrasing another, and writing an essay on a topic such as 'Give an account of poisons produced by animals'). For the Oral Examination, there were six possible reading passages.

Spolsky voices the concerns he has with this choice:

With this number of options available, the chance of achieving anything like minimal psychometric equivalence, let alone internal or inter-rater consistency, was obviously nil.

However, he does point out that:

With regular moderation and constant meetings of examiners, however, some degree of fairness would be possible. (Spolsky 1995: 208)

From the outset the concern of UCLES had been with the validity and

usefulness of what was being tested, and in particular the fairness of the results. This quest for fairness can again be observed in the Joint Committee 1956:

Syllabus for the examinations of 1959, Certificate of Proficiency, English literature paper.

It was noted that at recent examinations, a growing proportion of candidates appeared to have entered for this paper without adequate preparation. It was considered that this tendency would be checked by the earlier date for entry to be set in 1958, and that it would not be necessary to specify in the Regulations the period of preparation which might be desirable. The examiners would be asked to report the names of those centres which present a notable proportion of insufficiently prepared candidates at the June 1956 examination. (**Joint Committee 1956**)

And again in 1961:

It was considered that the best method of clarifying uncertainty about standards to be required in the oral examinations in Cyprus would be for specimen tape recordings from the island, with marks awarded by the Local examiners, to be sent to the Syndicate for assessment. (**Joint Committee 1961**)

Spolsky adds another example of this:

At its first meeting in November 1957, a new Executive Committee had its role explained. The committee learnt that more guidance was needed for the oral examiners, who should try not to be influenced by the intelligence of the candidates, or as questions requiring factual knowledge or literary judgement. (**Spolsky 1995: 210–211**)

Its concern for fairness and avoidance of bias continued:

It was noted that the list for Lower Certificate did not include any 19th Century novels. Attention was also drawn to the need to have in mind that female candidates form the majority of the entry. (**Joint Committee 1967**)

In keeping with its central tenet of fairness, attempts were also made to discourage candidates from taking the test who might be seen in advance as going to fail:

Survey of the examinations of 1966

The continuing very high failure rate in some overseas areas entering large numbers of candidates was noted. The committee decided to recommend that British Council officers in charge of arrangements for entry should use their authority as Local Secretaries to limit the number of candidates entered for the examination to those for whom accommodation is readily available, and to discourage the large-scale entry of unsuitable candidates by fixing a maximum number of candidates for the centre as a whole and for individual schools. (**Joint Committee 1967**)

As part of a broad concern with the overriding importance of test reliability

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Spolsky makes frequent reference to UCLES' lack of concern with objective formats as well as with the proliferation of different forms. However, Spolsky's frequent criticism of the lack of interest in objective methods in this early period does not fit easily with some of the discussion, for example, at this 1951 meeting:

'Objective' method of examining reading. Mr. Butlin undertook to inform the Committee of the results of experiments to be made in 'objective' methods of testing. (**Joint Committee 1951**)

There is also ample evidence of the development of sound examination practice in these early years, also critical for establishing test reliability (see Chapter 2 for a full account of current Syndicate practice). Piloting of tests appears at an early stage:

Mr. Burton reported that questions from the specimen 'Use of English' paper had been worked by a small number of students in Portugal and London, and were also being worked by a group of students in Paris. The results of the first two sets appeared to be satisfactory...., but it seemed that a larger choice of questions should be given.

Ensuring appropriate time allowance to maximise performance was another concern:

After consideration of criticisms of the time allowance for the Certificate of Proficiency English Language paper, it was agreed that candidates be instructed not to spend more than 1½ hours on the passage for precis and the subsidiary questions on it. Supervisors would be instructed to modify the rubric of the June 1952 paper accordingly. (**Joint Committee 1952**)

Spolsky, however, remains concerned by the more subjective elements in the exams favoured by UCLES:

A year later, in its June 1959 meeting, the Joint Committee had an opportunity to consider new developments in testing techniques, and I cite in full the item from the minutes:

'The possibility of using 'objective' tests was briefly discussed, and it was agreed that this should be borne in mind in future. The possibility might well be a limited one, however, since examining bodies using such tests in English language use a test in composition of the type set by the Syndicate, and some of the Syndicate's questions (e.g. on the meaning of words and phrases) resemble 'objective' questions to some extent.'

The comment is an interesting one, showing that the committee members had very little appreciation of the problems that objective testing (with 'objective' still in inverted commas) was intended to deal with. They clearly lacked the sophistication that had been developed across the Atlantic in members of the College Entrance Examination Board by their professional staff since the 1930s, and were deaf to any advice offered by British applied linguists. The 'objective' question issue came back to the Joint Committee at its June 1960 meeting ... The Committee remained quite unimpressed. (**Spolsky 1995: 211**)

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There is obviously a marked difference here in British and American traditions. In these early days UCLES felt it essential to base CPE on the needs of the teachers and their students and on best classroom practice. In addition it probably felt the need to satisfy the various felt needs of its client base by providing a variety of attractive options for papers that would best match their developing performance abilities. Satisfying ESP needs (e.g. English for science or social science prospective or past students) is seen as normal today when we have a proliferation of ELT examinations around the world intended to act for a widely diverse candidature. Important texts and mainstream approaches in EFL support such developments (Clapham 1996, Douglas 2000). Research has clearly indicated the beneficial effects of reading and writing in an area of your own specialism. Testing for best is not a new idea.

However, the conflicting demands of a broad choice of options and parallel test reliability are undeniable; they reflect the sometimes diverse pulls of reliability and validity. The cardinal guiding principle for UCLES was validity, followed closely by utility. This does not mean they did not seek to achieve reliability, but reliability was not the overriding determinant of what went into the examination.

The approach was to aim for validity and work on reliability, rather than through the single-minded pursuit of objectivity seriously curtail what CPE would be able to measure. A valid test that might not present perfect psychometric qualities was preferred to an objective test which, though always reliable, might not measure that much of value, e.g. not test speaking or writing. We will return to these issues of principle at the end of this chapter.

The abiding focus on validity

CPE was always concerned with the validity of what it wanted to test, and this included recognition of both the background and future needs of its candidature. By 1946 UCLES was diversifying into ESP:

Future arrangements. ... Arrangements are contemplated for the provision in 1946 of complete alternative papers, including English Language and translation passages, for candidates of a commercial bent. These papers will go some way to recognize their particular interest, but will not be merely tests of 'commercial English'. A further proficiency paper, alternative to Literature, will be provided in 1946. It will offer a choice of texts of a scientific rather than a literary character. During 1945 the Language-with-Literature alternative which has of recent years been provided for Service candidates will be available at centres in liberated Europe. It will contain general questions on literature of a kind to suit those who have access to standard English works, and it may help to meet the textbook difficulty. ... (UCLES ... survey for 1944 ... Feb. 1945: 4)

Partially as a result of these developments, the immediate post-war period was marked by considerable growth in the number of candidates and in the number of centres overseas and in the United Kingdom. (UCLES 1973: 3).

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A further example of the attempt to make the examination relevant to a use-based approach to the teaching and learning of English (see discussion by Roach on phonetics above) is noted in the minutes of the annual joint meeting of the British Council and UCLES in 1950. The minutes also show how at this early stage UCLES was committed to validation procedures such as checking difficulty against previously passing candidates. Again this demonstrates the commitment to fairness to candidates which we noted above.

C.P.E. Use of English paper. A specimen paper was discussed. The Secretary was instructed to modify the paper on the lines suggested during the discussion, and to send a copy of the modified draft to the British Council Representatives for comment. It was agreed that a question requiring the use of formal grammatical terminology be deleted from the draft and that such questions be not set in the examination. As it was felt that some of the other questions in the specimen paper were too difficult, the Chairman and Mr. Butlin undertook to have the paper, with the exception of question 6, worked by students in Portugal who had already passed the Proficiency examination and the Secretary said that he would make similar arrangements for the paper to be worked in England. (**Joint Committee 1951**)

At the Joint Conference, 20 July 1951, the continuing commitment to making available papers as relevant as possible to the lives of the candidates taking them can again be observed:

English Life and Institutions syllabus. The proposal to include local government in the syllabus for the Proficiency Life and Institutions paper was approved. (**Joint Committee 1951**)

This can obviously be viewed negatively as a lack of concern with parallelism of forms, or positively as an attempt to enhance the validity of what is being measured. We will return to this paradox below.

Utility

CPE continued to be recognised as a useful instrument for determining entrance into British Universities:

The Committee noted that, in the case of foreign students who have fulfilled the matriculation requirements of Universities in their own countries, the University of London accepts the Certificate of Proficiency in English (but only a Grade I or Grade II certificate) for exemption from the University's entrance examination in English. (**Joint Committee 1952**)

The Committee were informed that candidates for admission to the University of Leeds whose native language is not English must provide evidence of their knowledge of English, and that this condition could be satisfied by a pass in the C.P.E. dictation and Oral tests, Use of English Paper and English Language Paper. It was agreed that bona fide applicants for entrance to the University under these conditions should be allowed to

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take these papers without entering for the full certificate. (**Joint Committee 1954**)

An interest in having the examination recognised for matriculation purposes was to continue throughout its history. This early interest in consequential validity, or impact as it is now called, is another hallmark of the examination:

Recognition of the Certificate of Proficiency by the Professional Bodies.

Replies to the inquiry made of professional bodies in the United Kingdom were reported. It was noted that a high proportion of these either already accepted the Certificate of Proficiency as an equivalent of a G.C.E. Ordinary level pass in English language for various purposes or were considering giving recognition.

It was decided that the Central Council for admissions should be consulted regarding the recognition of the Certificate of Proficiency by Universities in addition to those of Cambridge and London. (**Joint Committee 1967**)

By 1979 Taylor was able to report:

In Britain, 'the CPE is recognized by nearly all British universities as the equivalent of GCE Ordinary level English, or the Use of English test, or special tests of English for foreigners at this level (JMB, TOEFL, etc.) for purposes of matriculation, and of admission subject to individual faculty requirements. The optional additional papers are recognized as further 'approved subjects'. Recognition at an equivalent level is given by many professional associations in Britain for purposes of registration, admission to courses etc.' (Cambridge, March 1977). (**Taylor 1979: 14**)

And CPE was also considered important for other educational purposes as early as the 1950s:

Recognition of the C.P.E. The Committee were informed that 'de facto' recognition as a qualification for teaching English is given by the Greek Ministry of Education to the Diploma of English Studies, the Certificate of Proficiency in English and the Lower Certificate in English. In view of the impending review of University entrance requirements it was agreed to defer until 1954 any general enquiry about recognition which may be given to the Certificate of Proficiency in English by Universities in the United Kingdom. (**Joint Committee 1953**)

Taylor was later to summarise this aspect of the use of CPE:

Despite its concern with a general type proficiency in the English language, the examination has always had close connections with teachers' needs and with higher education. 'The title of the middle-grade certificate includes the word "Proficiency" because when it was first instituted in 1913 its purpose was to assess the proficiency in English of foreign students wishing to read for the Tripos in English and, more

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generally, of foreign teachers of English wanting to take a course in Britain leading to a recognized British qualification' (Lott 1978). In three of the countries with the highest numbers of entries, the possession of the certificate is recognized as a language qualification for teachers of English: Greece – 'Cambridge qualifications are popular and of high prestige in Greece and the Certificate of Proficiency is an officially recognized qualification for appointment to teaching posts in Institutes' (ELT Profile 1974); Brazil – 'Cambridge CPE holders may obtain temporary licences to teach English in State schools provided they have completed a one-year pedagogical course at a Faculty of Philosophy' (ELT Profile 1976). The examination is used in a similar way in Italy (ELT Profile 1975). At the Ecole d'Interpretes in the Faculté de Lettres, University of Geneva, the standard requirement for entry is the possession of a CPE plus six months' residence in the United Kingdom (Cartledge 1971). **(Taylor 1979: 13–14)**

Though the exam was never developed specifically to cater for teacher certification, it has provided a useful benchmark across the world for defining what is a minimally acceptable performance level for teachers. Constant reference is still made in countries across the world to UCLES levels that must be reached for someone to be deemed qualified to teach the language. This is a valuable impact function of the exam, as research suggests that one of the most important variables in the effectiveness of the non-native EFL teacher is his/her language proficiency.

Developments in the 1960s: the move towards a language-based examination

There had been discussion of the possibility of providing a language alternative to literature as early as 1942, as the minutes for the Joint Committee meeting of that year record (Joint Committee 1942). However this was seen largely as an emergency measure for those centres which could not lay their hands on the set books:

it did not necessarily point to the establishment of an all language course, exclusive of Literature in normal times.

In the early 1960s we see the beginnings of a critical shift in the Cambridge language testing tradition, namely that language might be divorced from testing literary or cultural knowledge in the CPE:

The Committee discussed recent developments in the field of English teaching and their relevance to the Syndicate's examinations. It was felt that the policy at present followed in the Certificate of Proficiency examination, whereby candidates are expected to have some familiarity with English background and culture, should not be altered, but that enquiry should be made about the extent of the demand for a more purely linguistic type of examination. Mr. Cartledge was asked to obtain information from Tehran about proposals which have been made there,

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and it was agreed that the Secretary, in consultation with the British Council, should send out an exploratory circular to Local Education Authorities in this country. (**Joint Committee 1962**)

Historically, the only way languages had been deemed worthy of degree status at British Universities was by heavily loading such programmes with literature and culture courses, i.e. 'academic subject' components. It is apparently still possible in some British Universities to take a language degree without ever being examined in one's proficiency in the use of the language. The decision to contemplate a language-only route for CPE was thus groundbreaking and reflected a developing interest in the use of English among the language teaching profession.

UCLES never took decisions in isolation from its constituency. Proposals for change by UCLES were always made after close consultation with its centres: a practice that has continued to this day (see Chapters 3–7).

Certificate of Proficiency examination.

It was reported that a questionnaire (a copy of which is attached to these Minutes) had been sent to 103 Local Secretaries and centres organized by Local Education Authorities in Great Britain, and that replies had been received as follows: 49 centres had replied, and of these 32 were in favour of the suggested changes, 11 saw no objection to them, and 6 were on the whole opposed to the changes on the ground that they would have difficulty in preparing students for the Translation paper which would no longer be alternative to the Use of English paper.

It was felt that this was a serious objection and that it would have to be kept in mind.

It was agreed that no further action should be taken until all the replies had been received and fully considered. It was further agreed that the main oversea centres should also be consulted, and that the replies should be brought to the next meeting of the Executive Committee in November 1963. (**Joint Committee 1963**)

It is thus possible in this period to date the start of a gradual but critical change of the examination to one of language as against language, literature and culture. Taylor (1979: 9) notes that:

... in 1953 a Use of English paper was introduced as an alternative to the compulsory translation test for candidates in whose languages there were difficulties in arranging an examination. As a straight alternative to Translation its popularity was to grow steadily until 1966, when a change in the form of the examination made it possible to take, with the compulsory English language paper, both Use of English and Translation, instead of one of these in conjunction with the Literature paper or one of its alternatives.

As a result of widespread consultation, a new syllabus was proposed which reflected a shift towards a language-based examination.

Change in the Regulations for the Certificate of Proficiency examination.

After considering detailed recommendations made by the Executive Committee, it was agreed that the Regulations for the 1966 examination should require a candidate to take a compulsory English Language paper and two of the following:

- i. English Literature (or one of the alternatives);
- ii. Use of English;
- iii. Translation from and into English.

The committee further agreed that the mark allocation for the Use of English and Translation papers be increased to 100 marks each, and that the aggregate marks required for the various grades of certificate be adjusted in such a way as to maintain the overall standard of the examination.

- (a) Change proposed by the Executive Committee in the form of the C.P.E. *English Language* and *Use of English* papers for 1966 were also approved. It was agreed that the setters of the Use of English paper be asked to bear in mind that the paper must require evidence of wide reading on the candidate's part, and that questions of a 'phonetic' type must not be set. (**Joint Committee 1964**)

Thus a 'brave new' form of the examination was introduced in 1966:

The development of a semi-objective paper at Proficiency level, systematically testing usage and vocabulary, made it possible from 1966 to take Proficiency, by appropriate choice of alternative papers, as a purely language examination. ... (**UCLES 1982: 1**)

1966

Oral: Dictation, Reading and Conversation

Written: Candidates must offer (a) English Language and two other papers chosen from (b), (c), or (d). No candidate may offer more than one of the alternatives in (b).

- (a) English Language (composition and a passage or passages of English with language questions. The choice of subjects set for composition will include some for candidates who are specially interested in commerce) (3 hours)
 - (b) Either English Literature (3 hours)
Or Science Texts
Or British Life and Institutions
Or Survey of Industry and Commerce
 - (c) Use of English (3 hours)
 - (d) Translation from and into English (3 hours)
-

As in 1953, candidates still had to take two other papers in addition to the compulsory 'English Language' paper. However, unlike 1953, candidates

could choose both 'Use of English' and 'Translation from and into English' as two additional papers, which means they did not have to take anything from (b) 'English Literature' or its alternatives. In 1953 and 1966, candidates spent a total of 9 hours on the 3 written tests, plus the time for the oral test.

Rather interestingly, the 'English Life and Institutions' paper was renamed as 'British Life and Institutions' by 1966 – again perhaps indicative of a continued shift away from an avowedly English imperial view of the world.

The 1966 'British Life and Institutions' paper and 'Survey of Industry and Commerce' paper both included a reading passage with questions which tested reading comprehension. Neither of these papers in 1955 included a reading passage; they simply tested the productive knowledge of the subjects by requiring them to explain, compare, distinguish, and describe things. Again this may be taken as part of the shift towards measuring language rather than subject competence.

In section (b) of the Use of English paper, 3-option multiple-choice items are introduced.

Summary of changes in 1966

- 'English Language' paper (a) became the only compulsory paper.
- All alternative papers to 'English Literature' also contained a reading comprehension component.
- Candidates could now do a language-based examination which did not involve literature.
- Objective formats made an appearance.

The popularity of this revision was soon evident:

Following the increasing popularity of the Use of English paper in the Proficiency examination, a similar paper was introduced in 1970, under the title of Structure and Usage, for the Lower Certificate. (UCLES 1973: 4)

An increased concern with research and objective testing

The interest in research which had been so impressive under Roach in the 1940s began to take hold again in the 1960s with his re-entry into the UCLES fold:

Research into method of testing.

It was noted that the Syndicate had set up a Research Committee and that work on methods of oral testing had already been undertaken by Mr. Roach. After discussion of possible forms of oral testing, the Committee expressed the hope that Mr. Roach would report on his progress at the next meeting. (Joint Committee 1965)

Mr. Roach reported on the work of the Syndicate's committee for research into methods of testing. It was noted that the introduction of an alternative syllabus in G. C. E. Ordinary Level French has given an opportunity to explore new forms of oral examination, involving the use of prepared topics and questions. The Sub-Committee appointed to consider the form of the Lower Certificate examination would be considering new methods of testing. (Joint Committee 1966)