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978-0-521-73672-5 - Examining FCE and CAE: Key Issues and Recurring Themes in Developing the First Certificate in English and Certificate in Advanced English Exams

Roger Hawkey

Excerpt

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# 1 Background and themes

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## Introduction

*'The charm of history and its enigmatic lesson consist in the fact that, from age to age, nothing changes and yet everything is completely different'*  
Aldous Huxley (1952).

This book, which traces the history of two important international English examinations, the First Certificate in English (FCE) and the Certificate in Advanced English (CAE), would probably not have changed Huxley's view of history. This history takes the reader from the first appearances of the two exams, the FCE, under its previous name 'the Lower Certificate in English' (LCE) in 1939, the CAE in 1991, through to the present, and their latest 2008 versions. At all stages we find recurrent messages about language tests and testing, even as contexts change.

## Contexts

The story is told throughout in its institutional context, which is still, perhaps, worth summarising here in its current structure.

The parent body concerned is the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), a department of Cambridge University. The term 'syndicate' referred originally to the group of 'syndics', that is representatives of the university appointed to oversee the administration of examinations for candidates outside the university. John Roach in his 1971 history *Public Examinations in England 1850–1900* explains how, in the mid-19th century, schools were increasingly requesting help from the universities in running annual exams 'to test qualifications with a view to the selection of the right men (*sic*) for the right place' (Ebrington 1864, cited by Roach 1971:66). Such exams would be held not only at the universities but also 'in the country wherever the local gentry chose to make arrangements for that purpose' (1971:69). Hence the use of the term 'local' in the titles of the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations (UODLE), established in June 1857, and of UCLES, set up in February 1858 and holding its first exams in December that year.

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[More information](#)*Examining FCE and CAE*

*Cambridge Assessment* became the brand name for UCLES in 2005. Cambridge Assessment has three streams. Cambridge ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), the provider of exams and tests for English as an additional language (EAL) users, including both the FCE and CAE exams, is the stream which is the main focus of this book. University of Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) offers international qualifications and assessments across the curriculum. OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and Royal Society of Arts) is an awarding body of UK school, college and work qualifications. The OCR acronym reveals its heritage from the merger of UCLES with UODLE in 1995 and with the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) in 1998.

Since this book appears in the *Studies in Language Testing* (SiLT) series, edited by Michael Milanovic and Cyril J Weir, it shares a focus and an intended readership with previous volumes in the series. The book is the third describing particular Cambridge ESOL Main Suite (General English) exams. Bachman, Davidson, Ryan, and Choi (in SiLT Volume 1, 1995) describe a major study comparing FCE with the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (see further Chapter 3 below). SiLT Volume 15 (Weir and Milanovic Eds 2003) documents the development of and revisions to the Certificate of Proficiency in English examination (CPE). SiLT Volume 16 (Hawkey 2004a) tells the story of exams which were the precursors of the modular Certificates in English Language Skills exam (CELS) and how they shaped the new exam. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has received most attention in the series, through Caroline Clapham on the development of the test, especially the reading module (SiLT Volume 4, 1996), Taylor and Falvey (Eds, Volume 19, 2006) on research into IELTS speaking and writing assessment, Davies (2008) in Volume 23 on the role of IELTS in the assessment of academic English, Hawkey (2006, Volume 24) and Green 2007, Volume 25 on the study of IELTS test impact.

Our target exams in this book, FCE and CAE, belong to what Cambridge ESOL calls its 'Main Suite', that is a set of general English exams covering the four broad language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, and which match levels A2 to C2 (Waystage to Mastery) in the *Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Council of Europe 2001). Table 1.1 reminds us of these levels and the way Cambridge ESOL main suite exams are aligned with them, a feature much discussed later in this book.

In his Series Editor's note for the 2003 SiLT volume on the CPE exam, Milanovic suggests that 'in recent years there has been a serious attempt to inform users more effectively about what UCLES does and how it does it'. The intended readership of such volumes includes, Milanovic adds, 'those interested in a historical perspective' (2003:xv). Such a perspective favours the inclusion in the books of examples of actual exam papers, in their

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[More information](#)*Background and themes***Table 1.1 Council of Europe Levels and Cambridge ESOL exams**

Council of Europe Levels		Cambridge ESOL Main Suite Exams	
Basic user	Breakthrough	A1	–
	Waystage	A2	Key English Test (KET)
Independent User	Threshold	B1	Preliminary English Test (PET)
	Vantage	B2	First Certificate in English (FCE)
Proficient User	Effective	C1	Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)
	operational proficiency		
	Mastery	C2	Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)

[See e.g. *Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference for Language: Learning, teaching, assessment (2001) and Taylor (2004)*]

developing versions, as contexts change and as modifications are made. This also ensures a lasting record, which researchers and other interested parties can consult. In this volume, selected LCE, FCE and CAE papers are reproduced as appendices. This book will also attempt to meet the needs of those wanting to know ‘what Cambridge ESOL does and how it does it’ in the cases of the FCE and CAE exams. It should be enlightening for people with an interest in relating the past and present of English language tests for speakers of other languages. The book will attempt to paint a picture of UCLES from when the LCE exam was first administered, on the eve of war (Roach 1944) to 144 students at overseas centres only, through to a time when more than 270,000 people each year in more than 100 countries take the FCE, and more than 80,000 in 60 or so countries, the CAE. Of course, the full story of Cambridge ESOL needs a volume of its own, but a history of two of its most important exams told without their developing corporate context would lack a key dimension.

## Themes

‘By trying to document critical moments in the exam’s history’ writes Weir (2003a:1), ‘we can try to understand the forces that have shaped it’. This book will attempt to identify critical moments in the histories of both the FCE and CAE exams. On the way to fulfilling this aim, major language testing issues must be broached. Key *themes* in the book, the vertical threads linking the horizontal layers on particular watershed exams in the history, will be:

- *the theory and practice of language teaching and testing*
- *test constructs*
- *levels*
- *test development, validation, revision*
- *best practice*

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### *Examining FCE and CAE*

- *stakeholders and partnerships*
- *organisation and management.*

The structure of the book will be mainly chronological though events and views related to our key themes will tend to be grouped within chapters. Throughout the history of the two exams contemporary records are cited and the relevant literature referenced.

### **Author role**

The status and role of the author should be clarified at this stage. I was commissioned by Cambridge ESOL in May 2005, as part of my consultancy contract with them, to write the story of the development of the FCE and CAE exams. I would have access to the Cambridge Assessment Archives and any other relevant information sources I requested; I should make my own plan for the book and attempt to complete the first draft for reader reviews by December 2007. I am not a Cambridge ‘insider’ in the sense of being employed by them as a regular staff member. On the other hand, I have been a consultant to ESOL since 2000. My previous consultancy projects have included exam impact studies (including SiLT 24, Hawkey 2006 above), work for the Cambridge ESOL common scale for writing (Hawkey and Barker 2004) and an earlier exam history (Hawkey 2004a above). Reader reviews (see acknowledgements above) for the present volume included both outsider and insider language testing specialists. The draft of the book was read by people neither working as Cambridge staff nor as consultants, but who are nevertheless familiar with Cambridge ESOL and the two focus exams. It was also read and reviewed by Cambridge ESOL insiders, including the CEO and series editor, and the Director and Assistant Director of Cambridge ESOL Assessment and Operations Group (AOG). The whole book was reviewed by a Cambridge ESOL consultant, until recently a senior member of the Research and Validation Group. The book was also read and reviewed by the SiLT series editor who is not a Cambridge ESOL staff member.

I have worked on no fewer than 30 occasions during the authorship period in the Cambridge Assessment Archives, courtesy of Gillian Cooke, the Group Archivist and her staff. The Archives include in their records historical information on examination administration, executive committees, exam regulations and printed question papers. I was always able to consult the documents I needed. Where the Archives were silent on issues, other sources were tapped, including the files of the Cambridge ESOL AOG and Research and Validation groups. In addition I have interviewed several of the key figures in the histories of the CAE and FCE exams to learn from their memories of formative events and developments. During my work in Cambridge

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[More information](#)*Background and themes*

ESOL offices at home and abroad, I have been able to see and hear what the organisation does and how it does it.

As a semi-insider I have nevertheless tried to retain a neutral stance on the facts and feelings of this history. Readers and reviewers of the manuscript have tended to focus, naturally enough, on events and issues closest to their own roles or interests in the history. There have been instances where it has been suggested that I have been too critical and cases when I have been considered too uncritical. Sometimes both on the same matter. Actually, I have regarded my role writing this history as to try to find, sort and sift the relevant records, artefacts and, where feasible, participant accounts, then to synthesise them into a coherent, mainly chronological account. Where there has been anything I have been asked not to include for reasons of test security, for example, reference to candidate raw scores, I have tended to acquiesce. Where a theme needs to be *discussed* because it is important to FCE or CAE development, for example English for specific purposes, I would normally describe it in its historical context, including, perhaps, relevant critical views at the time. But since the book is not a thesis nor an academic paper presenting my own research, I do not feel it necessary or appropriate to state my *own* stance on the matter.

**Language learning and teaching theory and practice**

UCLES had started to set exams for UK school leavers in 1858, but its first exam in English for speakers of other languages, then as now called the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE), was first administered in 1913. According to Jack Roach, Assistant Secretary to the Syndicate from 1925 to 1945, (not to be confused with *John* Roach, the historian, mentioned above) the CPE was ‘intended chiefly for students who sought proof of their practical knowledge of the language with a view to teaching it in foreign schools’ (Roach 1945:34).

‘The [CPE] examination’, says Weir (2003a:2), ‘was academic in orientation initially modelled on the traditional, essay-based, native speaker language syllabus’. Spolsky (in Bachman et al 1995:2) would seem to agree when he suggests that the CPE in its earliest form ‘assumed the traditional language syllabus for native speakers of English, employing the essay as the principal testing method’. Table 1.2 overleaf shows the contents of the 1913 CPE exam.

The influences, theoretical and practical, behind the configuration of the early CPE exam, would appear to be the *grammar-translation* method. Grammar-translation, also called the classical method, was the ruling paradigm for those who wished to learn ‘foreign’ languages such as Latin and Greek. Its focus was on the study of grammatical rules, memorising vocabulary, writing exercises and translating texts to and from the target language.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Examining FCE and CAE***Table 1.2 Contents of 1913 CPE exam****CPE exam 1913**

- Translation into French *or* translation into German (2 hours)
- Translation into English and English Grammar (2½ hours)
- Part I Translation:
  - translation into English from French (“for candidates taking French”) *or*
  - translation into English from German (“for candidates taking German”)
- Part II Grammar (for all candidates)
  - English Essay (2 hours)
  - English Literature (3 hours)
  - English Phonetics (1½ hours)
  - Oral exam:
    - Dictation ½ hour
    - Reading aloud and Conversation ½ hour

Howatt (1984:131) explains that the grammar-translation method was originally an attempt to adapt the scholastic study of foreign languages for a reading knowledge of their culture and history ‘to the circumstances and requirements’ of school students.

This tendency is confirmed by the CPE exam in 1938, just one year before the arrival of the LCE/ FCE (see Table 1.3 on page 7). The phonetics paper had been dropped in 1932, a paper on Economic and Commercial Knowledge was included as an alternative to the literature component (an early example of English for specific purposes (ESP), see below) and translation papers were offered in nine more languages as well as French and German, with still others possible on request. The translation papers, it will be noted from the exam summary in Table 1.3 no longer included the English Grammar section of 1913, which had been, in tune with the exam as a whole, somewhat rule and convention based. Consider, for example, the 1913 grammar items: *Give the past tense and past participle of each of the following verbs, dividing them into strong and weak; add explanations: tell, wake, buy, eat, lay, lie.* In his 1983 reminiscences, Jack Roach expresses the view that it had not yet been realised that English was, for foreign candidates, a ‘modern language’. Many British students then and much later even, learning ‘modern’ languages such as French or German at UK schools or colleges, might have noted a similar lack of realisation. A typical ‘modern’ language course at a British grammar school in the 1950s and 1960s would be using a coursebook with a unit format beginning with a ‘prose’ in the target language, to be read aloud in class, with some grammar and vocabulary explanation as you went along and some comprehension questions (in English) to follow. Then a section on a particular grammatical point, a tense, perhaps, or the paradigm of a particular irregular verb, would be followed by un-contextualised phrase or sentence level exercises, often requiring translation (e.g. Translate into French: *The boy ran yesterday or: of the*

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[More information](#)*Background and themes***Table 1.3 Contents of the 1938 CPE exam****CPE exam 1938**

- a) English Literature or Economic and Commercial Knowledge (3 hours)
- b) Translation from English (2 hours)
- c) Translation into English (2 hours)
- d) English Composition (2½ hours)
- e) Dictation, Reading aloud and Conversation

*green vegetables*). The unit might end with a prose for translation from English into the target language, or, later in the curriculum, a short composition in the target language.

So, it was a literary, grammar-translation model of language teaching which held sway when, on 21 June 1939, the new UCLES examination, the Lower Certificate in English (LCE), appeared (to be renamed the First Certificate in English (FCE) in 1975). As we trace forward the history of this exam and later the CAE, the changing models of language learning they both represent will be a recurring theme. We may expect to encounter the influences, in addition to the grammar-translation method, of the direct and audio-lingual methods of the 1950s and 1960s. We shall see how language testing changed with the continuing ascendancy of communicative approaches to language teaching (e.g. Brumfit and Johnson 1979) and testing (e.g. Morrow 1979), which gathered momentum from the latish 1970s. We shall consider the part played in exams like the FCE and the CAE by many aspects of theoretical and applied linguistics, communication needs analysis and syllabus specification; as well, of course, by testing and measurement research and its application.

## Constructs and specifications

The LCE was introduced to meet increasing demand for an exam at a lower proficiency level than the CPE. This demand was growing partly because of the number of new centres opening worldwide for CPE candidates, which were also bringing to the attention of learners at lower proficiency levels the opportunity to take Cambridge EFL exams (Weir and Milanovic 2003:6–7). Roach (1944:37) also notes the influence of the Second World War as revealing the need for more than one level of English language exams. This brought a ‘growing keenness of Service authorities to promote the study of English among Allied forces on British soil’. In addition there were ‘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’ (1944:37). In such circumstances, the need was growing for certification at more than the current single level provided by the CPE. CPE,



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[More information](#)*Examining FCE and CAE*

with its relatively small candidature of 750 candidates in 1939, had, in 1937, been recognised by Cambridge University as ‘the equivalent of the standard of English required of all students, British or foreign, before entrance to the University’. Note the rather bold but vague statement of exam equivalence here. In fact, the question of the way high-stakes exams are defined, in terms of the levels they represent, the needs they are meeting, the *constructs* they are testing and how these are manifested in test tasks or items, is a further recurrent theme of this book.

The concept of *construct* is taken to refer to the *traits, skills or abilities that we set out to test*. Hughes (2003:26) suggests that we ‘create language tests to measure such essentially theoretical *constructs* as “reading ability”, “fluency in speaking”, “and control of grammar”’. Saville (2003:66) adds that these ‘constructs need to be embedded in a conceptual framework which specifies the meaning of the construct, distinguishes it from other constructs and indicates measures of how the construct should relate to other variables’. It is one of the interesting then-*versus*-now differences traced in this book that language test constructs tended to be less explicitly and comprehensively stated in the past than they are now. This is partly, as we shall see, because there used to be altogether less in the way of exam support materials (specifications, handbooks, sample papers) than exist nowadays.

Thus, in 1938, with the increasingly varied candidate proficiency levels involved, ‘Roach proposed the introduction of a new Lower Certificate of English’ (Spolsky 1995a or b:3). Note here from the late 1930s the direct influence on key exam development events of an individual such as Roach. We shall see the growth in the size and complexity of UCLES EFL management systems over the years, from small beginnings and more individualistic management.

Like the CPE, the LCE was intended as an exam to certify the level of proficiency of those taking it. The first LCE exam was outlined, or specified, in the December 1938 *Regulations*. These described the following LCE content:

**Table 1.4 Contents of the 1939 LCE exam****Lower Certificate in English 1939**

Subjects:

Oral: Dictation, Reading, Conversation.

Written: (a) Prescribed texts: 2 hours.

(b) English Composition and Language: 2 hours.

No translation from and to English.

The full *Regulations* did, however, *note*:

- that the examination would be held ‘only at centres outside Great Britain’



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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Background and themes*

- that the set books ‘are based on one form or another of simplified English . . . intended to provide reading matter of a suitable standard of difficulty and to form the basis of the relatively limited vocabulary which, it is recognised, is all that can be expected at this stage’
- that ‘the object of the question paper will not be to test literary appreciation but to give candidates the opportunity of expressing themselves easily and correctly when handling a familiar subject-matter’
- that the writing tasks in Paper (b) ‘will provide a choice of subjects for a free composition, such as a letter or an essay on a given subject’
- that Paper (b) would also ‘include various tests in the correct use of simple English’.

The offering of the first LCE exam ‘only at centres outside Great Britain’ seems odd, especially given the year. According to Jack Roach (1983:6), it was because the British Council (established in 1935) opposed the introduction of the LCE that ‘I seem to have given way then to the extent of not introducing the examination at home [UK] centres’ (1983:6). It appears likely that the British Council’s objections stemmed from a perception that an English exam at a level below that of the CPE might suggest an acceptance of lower target standards in the language. Hence Roach’s restriction of LCE to overseas centres, until 1943, by which time the Syndicate and the British Council were in agreement on the need and the growing demand for the LCE to be offered at UK centres as well as overseas. Closer investigation of this key issue appears in Chapter 2 below.

The regulation for the 1939 LCE exam that ‘there will be no translation from and to English’ does not indicate, as one might have thought, a departure from the grammar-translation model. In fact, from 1943 onwards, the LCE included translation papers. In 1944, for example, LCE translation tests for 18 languages were being offered, although, as the *Regulations* for 1943 specify, ‘the translation paper is an alternative for the Prescribed Texts paper’. The new LCE exam shared a rather literary ethos with its senior partner exam, the CPE. The object of the prescribed texts paper, notice, though not to ‘test literary appreciation’, was ‘to give candidates the opportunity of expressing themselves easily and correctly’, which it was assumed would be facilitated by literary ‘subject-matter’. While the English Composition and Language Paper provided various tasks of writing, its Section C tested both reading comprehension and further language items.

**Working relationships**

The relationships between UCLES, in particular the Cambridge ESOL stream, and key partners is another recurring theme in our book, labelled above in the more current terms ‘*stakeholders and partnerships*’.

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[More information](#)*Examining FCE and CAE*

The British Council's involvement with the development of English language through its overseas teaching operations made it a natural partner, from near its beginning (in 1935) and its appointment of its first overseas representatives in 1938. Weir (2003:4) notes the first UCLES reference to the British Council as in 1937, when the Council 'had undertaken to give information concerning the (CPE) examination to cultural societies and representatives of other countries'. On 29 March 1941, the Joint Committee of the British Council and the Syndicate was established with three members from each organisation, to recommend on exam syllabus, subject to the understanding that the Syndicate had ultimate responsibility for the appointment of examiners, examination marking, the assessment of standards, and issuing certificates. The Joint Committee would approve the establishment of exam centres and encourage Syndicate co-operation with British Council institutes. The deliberations and decisions of the Committee (1941–1993) and its executive committees will regularly inform the story told in the early chapters of this book. During that period, the UCLES EFL committees, Joint, and especially its Executive and Research and Development committees, were more than reporting and approval *fora*. For an extended period, lasting to the beginning of the 1990s, they were also an essential part of the exam development and management system. Their minutes and accompanying papers were consequently often more detailed than might be expected, and, as we shall see quite frequently below, did not shy away from controversial issues. The author enjoyed free access to the committee papers as provided by Cambridge Assessment Archives (see above).

By 1943, LCE candidature had risen to 846 (now including home as well as overseas candidates). Roach's 1944 *Survey* wonders 'how far examinations of this kind may act as a stimulus and a focusing point for both teachers and taught, and thereby promote the expansion of the studies which they are designed to test' (1944:37). The British Council is seen as 'bulking very large' in such activities: 'Alike at home and abroad, the Council constantly sought new channels of service, responded to new requests, carried teaching and assistance wherever they were needed' (1944:37). More on the UCLES : British Council relationship as this history of the FCE and the CAE unfolds. But notice here the early reference to what we should now call the *washback* relationship (e.g. Green 2003:1) between language tests and teaching in preparation for them. This has always, it seems, been a concern with UCLES EFL exams (see Weir 2003:23).

The stakeholders involved in exams such as the FCE and CAE and their roles with regard to test impact as part of the *consequential validity* of tests, will be a theme as the book progresses. The stakeholder constituency (Taylor 1999) of an examinations board such as UCLES also includes its network of key exam professionals, for example: item writers ('setters' in earlier archives), Chairs of papers, Subject Officers and Subject Co-ordinators,