

Reviewing FCE and CAE

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UNIVERSITY *of* CAMBRIDGE
ESOL Examinations

General Update

Over the last two years, Cambridge ESOL has carried out a thorough review of the FCE and CAE examinations and will be introducing updated versions of these examinations from December 2008. Following a summary of the updated FCE and CAE specifications in Bulletin 5, Bulletin 6 provides a more detailed description of the Reading papers, along with a rationale for the changes and advice on preparing students for the exams. Future bulletins will focus on the Writing, Use of English, Listening and Speaking papers.

Information on the review and consultation process, and the overview of the full FCE and CAE December 2008 specifications, are in Bulletins 1 to 5, available at:

www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/fce and www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/cae

FCE Paper 1 Reading (from December 2008)

- The updated FCE Reading paper is entirely text-based, the texts making up approximately 2000 words.
- The paper has three parts with 30 questions in total.
- Texts may be taken from any of the following sources: books (fiction and non-fiction); newspapers; magazines; informational materials (e.g. brochures, guide books).
- The time allowed is 1 hour, including the time for candidates to transfer their answers to a machine-markable answer sheet.

PART 1 MULTIPLE CHOICE

Part 1 consists of a text, followed by eight four-option multiple-choice questions which test the understanding of content and text organisation. The text may be taken from, for example, an article or a modern novel. Questions may focus on the main ideas or details in the text and the attitudes or opinions expressed. Candidates may also be asked to deduce the meaning of a word or phrase and to demonstrate understanding of references within the text. Additionally, in the updated paper, questions may focus on the tone of the text or the writer's purpose, as well as the use of exemplification or comparison. These questions may require candidates to infer the meaning from clues in the text, a skill which is an essential part of reading ability.

PART 2 GAPPED TEXT

Part 2 consists of one text from which seven sentences have been removed. Candidates are required to decide from where in the text each sentence has been removed. Each sentence may be used only once, and there is one sentence that candidates do not need to use. The task tests understanding of how texts are structured. Rather than concentrating on individual sentences, candidates need to be able to follow the development of ideas, opinions or events through the text as a whole, using their understanding of text coherence and cohesion devices. This task is particularly effective in helping to distinguish between stronger and weaker candidates at FCE level.

PART 3 MULTIPLE MATCHING

Part 3 consists of one long text or up to six shorter texts, preceded by fifteen questions. Candidates are required to locate the specific information which matches the questions. To do this, candidates need to understand detail, attitude or opinion in the question and locate a section of text where that idea is expressed, discounting ideas in other sections which may appear similar but which do not reflect the whole of the question accurately. Some of the options may be correct for more than one question, and there may be more than one correct answer to some questions. If so, the instructions to candidates will say this.

Rationale for the format

The aim of the updated FCE Reading paper is to test a range of reading skills which are both appropriate to the level and relevant for people who wish to use English for a number of purposes, including further study, work or leisure. The three sections in the paper allow for a variety of text types to be covered.

The introduction of a range of different test focuses in the multiple choice task should help candidates engage more closely with the text and help them to 'read between the lines', which is a useful reading skill at this level. This ensures that the task will continue to distinguish effectively between the stronger and weaker candidates.

The gapped text task assesses candidates' awareness of the importance of a variety of text features, such as concordance of tenses, singular and plural verb forms, pronouns and linking words. Candidates who identify these clues will be able to follow the stages of an argument in a long text successfully. This is a skill which is useful in further study or in the workplace.

Skimming and scanning texts for relevant information are also valuable reading skills. In the multiple matching task, candidates need to use these skills and also choose between a number of possible pieces of information which may look quite similar. To select the correct 'match', candidates have to check the information they have identified in the texts against the question and ensure that the underlying idea in the question is fully expressed by the text.

In conclusion, FCE Paper 1 is carefully designed so that the main task focus moves from detailed comprehension in Part 1, through a focus on text structure in Part 2, to scanning a variety of short texts or sections of a longer text for specific information in Part 3. The change to a fixed number of questions in the different parts of the paper will help teachers prepare their students for the format of the test and train them to allocate their time appropriately.

CAE Paper 1 Reading (from December 2008)

- The updated CAE Reading paper is entirely text-based, the texts amounting to approximately 3000 words.
- The paper has four parts with 34 questions in total.
- Texts may be drawn from any of the following sources: books (fiction and non-fiction); magazines; newspapers; non-specialist articles from journals; publicity and informational materials (e.g. advertisements, guide books, manuals). The updated Reading paper has a broader range of text types than the current version.
- The time allowed is 1 hour and 15 minutes, including the time for candidates to transfer their answers to a machine-markable answer sheet.

PART 1 THEMED TEXTS

Part 1 consists of three short texts from a variety of sources. The texts share a broad common theme. Each text is followed by two four-option multiple-choice questions testing comprehension of text content. Some questions may test understanding of the whole short text, and there may be questions designed to test understanding of text organisation. The thematic link between the texts helps candidates moving from one text to the next and also lends itself to topic-based classroom practice.

PART 2 GAPPED TEXT

Part 2 consists of one long gapped text, as in the existing paper, with the aim of testing comprehension of text structure, cohesion, coherence and global meaning. The text may be drawn from a fiction or non-fiction source (including journalism). The number of questions is fixed at six gaps, with seven paragraph length options. Candidates are required to decide from where in the text each paragraph has been removed. Each paragraph may be used only once, and there is one paragraph that candidates do not need to use.

PART 3 MULTIPLE CHOICE

Part 3 consists of one long text, drawn from a variety of sources which include fiction. There are seven four-option multiple-choice questions which test detailed understanding, including opinions and attitudes expressed – the ability to distinguish between, for example, apparently similar viewpoints, outcomes or reasons. Candidates should be able to deduce meaning from context and interpret the text for inference and style. They should also be able to understand text organisation features such as exemplification, comparison and reference, including lexical reference. This part of the paper is similar to the current Paper 1, but it has seven fixed questions rather than the five to seven which are in the current paper.

PART 4 MULTIPLE MATCHING

Part 4 consists of one or two sets of questions followed by a single page of text: the text may be continuous, or divided into sections, or consist of a group of short texts. This part will be similar to the current Part 1 of the paper, but with a fixed number of questions (15), rather than a variable number. Candidates are required to match the questions with the relevant information from the text. Some of the options may be correct for more than one question and there may be more than one correct answer to some questions. If so, the instructions to candidates will say this.

Rationale for the format

The aim of this paper is to offer candidates as much variety as possible in terms of the texts they encounter and the opportunity for them to demonstrate flexibility in the reading strategies they use. Texts will continue to be drawn from a range of sources seen in every day life, especially from newspapers and general interest magazines.

Fiction has been introduced as a source in order to broaden the range of text types and to expand the testing focus. The type of fiction to be used in this paper is found in magazines, modern novels and similar sources. Fiction can be used as a source in any of the four tasks, but it is more likely to be used in Parts 1 and 3, the multiple-choice tasks. Fiction is also used in FCE Paper 1 and CPE Paper 1. This range should encourage a greater flexibility in teaching strategies and activities during classroom preparation.

After consultation, it was decided to include one multiple-matching task in the updated paper, so one of the multiple-matching tasks has been replaced with three short texts in order to make a new Part 1 task. Feedback on this decision has been very positive and candidates will be exposed to a greater variety of text types. These will include extracts from brochures, advertisements and other ephemera, as well as fiction. The three texts will be loosely linked thematically and this theme may include abstract ideas such as Happiness or Youth or more specific ones such as Animals or Architecture.

On both the short and long multiple-choice texts there will now be a greater variety of testing focus. For example, text organisational features such as exemplification, comparison and reference are now being formally included as testing focuses and candidates are also being asked to interpret the text for inference, attitude and style.

The number of questions in the gapped text has been reduced from seven to six and the text length reduced slightly. The gapped text is widely recognised as a good test of reading and it gives the paper a different testing focus. It tests the understanding of how texts are structured and assesses the ability to predict text development.

The number of questions in the paper has been reduced from an average of 42 to a fixed number of 34. This gives candidates in each administration a similar exam experience and makes preparation more straight forward. Results of trialling have indicated that candidates take longer on average to answer multiple-choice and gapped-text questions than multiple-matching questions. As a result of this, and owing to the fact that the overall word count is not significantly reduced, the timing of the paper remains the same: 1 hour, 15 minutes.

Preparing for the Reading papers

The principal requirement for success in the FCE and CAE Reading papers is exposure to, and engagement with, a substantial and varied range of written English. All candidates should be encouraged to read extensively as well as intensively both in and out of the classroom. Their reading should include articles from newspapers and magazines on a variety of topics, such as travel, sport, leisure interests or interviews with people who are involved in a variety of fields. By varying the topic of the texts that they read, students will be exposed to a range of lexical fields which will help to widen their vocabulary and enable them to read more easily. Students should also be encouraged to read fiction for pleasure – short stories and novels (abridged if necessary). For students who are less keen on engaging with books, the internet is a useful resource to encourage reading. Homework assignments might include finding texts on individual topics of interest and either writing a review or giving a report to the class.

As with FCE, the sources for texts in the updated CAE Reading paper are contemporary. The updated CAE will now include some fiction, as mentioned above. Such sources as marketing materials and correspondence may be used in Part 1.

In choosing course books and setting work for both FCE and CAE exam preparation, teachers may find that the most useful types of reading exercises are those which:

- practise deducing the meaning of unknown words from context
- familiarise students with a wide range of sources, registers, topics and lexical fields
- focus on understanding the overall function and message of texts or sections of texts
- involve analysing the global organisation of the text and seeing how this affects meaning
- require students to explore the way parts of the text are related, e.g. sequence of events, cause/effect, premise/conclusion
- demonstrate that it is possible to understand the significant points of a text, even though some words may be unfamiliar
- practise selecting and interpreting specific information from a text
- focus on recognising and evaluating attitude and opinion
- enhance students' abilities to infer underlying meaning
- raise students' awareness of paraphrase at word and phrase level
- give practice in improving the speed at which students are able to read a long text

Here are some suggestions for activities which may be used in the classroom:

- students draw lines from reference words to the nouns/phrases they refer back to
- students practise underlining the key idea in a paragraph or text
- students check all the multiple-choice options against the text and justify their choice
- students collect synonyms for important words in a text
- students complete jigsaw reading tasks in order to focus on text structure
- linking words are removed from a text and students are asked to replace them
- competing in teams, students practise skimming and scanning skills against the clock
- as a homework assignment, students are asked to find texts and write questions for a multiple matching task

www.CambridgeESOL.org

University of Cambridge
ESOL Examinations
1 Hills Road
Cambridge
CB1 2EU
United Kingdom

Tel. +44 1223 553355
Fax. +44 1223 460278
email ESOL@CambridgeESOL.org

