

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. The last bulletin, Bulletin 6, focused on the Reading papers. Bulletin 7 now follows with a detailed description of the Writing papers, along with a rationale for the changes and advice on preparing students for the exams. Future bulletins will focus on the Use of English, Listening and Speaking papers.

Bulletins 1 to 5 contain information on the review and consultation process, and an overview of the full FCE and CAE December 2008 Specifications. They are available at www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/fce and www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/cae

FCE Paper 2 Writing (from December 2008)

The updated FCE Writing paper has two parts:

- Part 1 (Question 1) is a compulsory task.
- Part 2 (Questions 2 – 5) is made up of four tasks from which candidates choose one. Question 5 has one task on each of the two set texts.

Candidates should write between 120 – 150 words for the first task and 120 – 180 words for their chosen Part 2 question. The time allowed is 1 hour 20 minutes and candidates write their answers in a question-paper booklet.

PART 1

In Part 1, candidates are asked to write either an email or a letter, basing their answer on input material of up to 160 words. The input comes from a variety of sources such as letters, emails and advertisements. There may also be additional visual support in the form of photos and timetables, for example. Included in the input will be prompts which provide the basis for the reply.

Candidates must respond to the prompts, each of which will have a clear functional focus. For example, they may be expected to respond positively to an invitation, give or request information, express an opinion, give reasons for doing or not doing an activity, express preference or ask a question. In addition, candidates are expected to show awareness of the target reader and have a clear grasp of the overall scenario and their reason for writing.

PART 2

In Part 2, candidates have a choice of tasks. These tasks may include any of the following task types: an article, an essay, a letter, a report, a review, a story. Questions 2-4 are general questions, based on a range of topics, such as health and fitness, sport, music and so on. Questions 5a and 5b are based on two set texts. There will be one question on each of the set texts. Task types for the set text options are as for Questions 2-4 with the exception of a story.

Each writing task in Part 2 has a context, a purpose for writing and a target reader specified in no more than 70 words. As with Part 1, candidates are expected to show that they are aware of the kind of writing required to accomplish a task, and must be able to demonstrate appropriate use of one or more of the following functions: describing, explaining, expressing an opinion, giving information, narrating.

Set texts

Set texts for the period December 2008 – December 2009 are:

- *Charles Dickens*, *Great Expectations*
- *Gaston Leroux*, *The Phantom of the Opera*

Assessment

Answers are assessed using both a general mark scheme, which is used for all the questions, and a separate task-specific mark scheme for each question. The criteria used to assess the candidates' answers in the general mark scheme include:

- range of structure, vocabulary and expression
- effectiveness of organisation, including paragraphing and linking devices
- accuracy of grammar and spelling
- awareness of the situation and target reader.

The general mark scheme and examples of task-specific mark schemes can be found in the *FCE Specifications and Sample Papers* booklet for examinations from December 2008.

Rationale for the format

The FCE Writing paper continues to be based on realistic tasks with real world applications. For this reason, the nature of the writing tasks is defined as precisely as possible, with each task having the target reader and the purpose of the writing clearly identified. The slightly shorter length of Part 1 reflects the greater need to write more briefly in the modern world, and encourages candidates to organise their writing clearly and consistently for best effect. The introduction of an email task also reflects the fact that email is often the chosen medium of international communication. The compulsory Part 1 task provides a reliable means of assessing candidates on the basis of a standardised task.

The range of task types and topics in Part 2 allows candidates to select a task which is relevant and interesting to them. Introducing reviews as a task type increases the choice for candidates and therefore the chance to write about something which they find motivating. Set texts are still popular with students and teachers, so they are being retained, but reduced in number from five to two because of changing trends in question selection. There will normally be a choice between a classic novel and something more modern (e.g. a thriller or science fiction novel) which reflects current tastes. The set-text option gives candidates the opportunity to focus closely on a preferred option and demonstrate a range of language competencies within the context of their chosen book.

CAE Paper 2 Writing (from December 2008)

The updated CAE Writing paper has two parts:

Part 1 (Question 1) is a compulsory task.

Part 2 (Questions 2 – 5) is made up of four tasks from which candidates choose one.

Question 5 has one task on each of the two set texts.

Candidates should write between 180 – 220 words on Part 1 and 220 – 260 on their chosen Part 2 question. The time allowed is 1 hour 30 minutes and candidates write their answers in a question-paper booklet.

PART 1

In Part 1, candidates are asked to write one of the following: an article, a letter, a proposal or a report. The task includes instructions and input material which candidates are required to consider and use appropriately in their answer.

The input of up to 150 words may come from a variety of sources, for example, extracts from newspapers, letters, advertisements or emails. Visuals such as tables of survey results may be included with the textual input to support or extend a topic.

All the questions in this part have a persuasive focus. For example, candidates may be required to persuade the target reader to take action by recommending something or, less directly, by persuading the reader to accept their point of view or agree with the writer.

PART 2

In Part 2, candidates have a choice of tasks. These tasks may include any of the following task types: an article, a competition entry, a contribution to a longer piece (e.g. to a book), an essay, an information sheet, a letter, a proposal, a report or a review. The letter may include the writing of references, letters of application, and other formal letters; for example, to the editor of a magazine. The set-text task type will consist of an article, an essay, a report or a review. Each task is contextualised by a set of instructions of no more than 80 words.

Candidates will be expected to show that they are sensitive to the style and tone required by a task, and must be prepared to demonstrate appropriate use of two or more of the following functions as specified in the task: describing, evaluating, hypothesising, persuading, expressing opinion, comparing, giving advice, justifying and judging priorities.

Set texts

Set texts for the period December 2008 – December 2009 are:

- *Kingsley Amis*, Lucky Jim
- *John Grisham*, The Pelican Brief

Assessment

Answers are assessed using a general mark scheme, which is used for all the questions, and a separate task-specific mark scheme for each question. The criteria used to assess the candidates' answers in the general mark scheme include:

- range of structure, vocabulary and expression
- an ability to organise content
- an ability to write effectively and accurately, addressing all aspects of the task
- use of register and format appropriate to the purpose and audience.

The draft general mark scheme and examples of task-specific mark schemes can be found in the *CAE Specifications and Sample Papers* booklet for examinations from December 2008.

Rationale for the format

The updated CAE Writing paper reflects writing trends in the modern world such as the need to write briefly and clearly for best effect. Research conclusions from trialling on Part 1 reveal *'that the impact of reduced input and output length in Part 1 CAE Writing tests is a very positive development in that the reduction afforded greater clarity to both candidates and examiners'* (Shaw, S, 2006). Furthermore, the change in length of input for Part 1 reduces the processing load and brings this part more in line with the other Cambridge ESOL Upper Main Suite exams. In Part 2, a longer response is allowed for so that candidates can develop their own ideas for the task set. A reduction in the overall timing of the Writing paper corresponds to the reduction in input and output in Part 1 and allows for the appropriate level of challenge to be maintained.

The range of task types available has been updated. Essays are included as a new task type as they appear on both FCE and CPE and are also a realistic task type for writing about set texts. In Part 1, task types are now restricted to those which allow a wide range of topic areas and can accommodate an element of persuasion. Overall, the task types themselves have been rationalised in order to be more straightforward and relevant to the candidature. Memos are being removed as these are work specific and therefore not accessible for all candidates.

A compulsory Part 1 is being maintained as it is a reliable means of assessing all candidates on the basis of a standardised task. A choice in Part 2 is also being kept to allow candidates to demonstrate a range of language competencies on a topic with which they are familiar and can engage.

Information gathered regarding the current CAE candidature shows that a large proportion of candidates are students aged between 16 and 19. In view of this, the work-based question (Question 5) has been removed. Work will now be a possible topic area for questions 2 – 4 in Part 2 but this will be a task that is accessible to all candidates. Set texts have been introduced in response to the general shift in candidature. This will also aid progression from FCE to CPE. In addition, it is hoped that the inclusion of a set text will encourage candidates to read extensively in English.

Preparing for the Writing papers

When candidates come to answer a question in the FCE and CAE Writing papers, they need to ensure that they read the question carefully so that they are clear about who they are writing to (the target reader) and what they hope to achieve (the purpose) before beginning to plan their work.

In the FCE Part 1 tasks, candidates should be aware that there are always prompts or points to address in each task, and that responding to these points should form the basis of their answer. They should also realise that, if they want to perform well, they need to expand on one or two of these points and not simply write the bare minimum. In CAE Part 1 tasks there is always more than one language function to fulfil in the task. Candidates should have practice in locating the relevant information, and dealing with the functions as this is key to completing the task satisfactorily.

With regard to Part 2 tasks, for both FCE and CAE it is important that candidates familiarise themselves with the different task types that appear on the paper, and are confident that they know the differences between them. Since not all task types appear on every paper, it is important for candidates to have experience of writing all the different types. In addition, they should be aware that certain functions (describing, narrating, explaining, giving opinions) will be needed for many of the task types. As with Part 1 tasks, candidates need to be familiar with the structures and vocabulary relevant to the required functions and know how to express levels of formality.

Allowing time to check and correct answers is an important skill for candidates to develop, so that their answers communicate coherently and accurately. Familiarity with what the examiner is looking for (e.g. organisation and cohesion; register) is another aspect of preparation as it focuses attention on what is expected. It is also important for candidates to develop an awareness of how much time they have for each answer and how many words they should write.

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

- Students highlight the functions they are expected to fulfil in tasks, then write down language which expresses these functions, e.g. *I suggest ...* for recommendation, conditionals for hypothesis, etc.
- Students read Part 1 tasks, identify the target reader and highlight the key points to be included in planning.
- Students highlight which points in the Part 1 input will support the points they make in their answer. Ask them to develop points where relevant to give them practice in extending their responses.
- Students make a plan of an answer in class. Remind them that organisation involves deciding how much of their answer to devote to each function required so that their response is appropriately balanced.
- Students note the vocabulary and structures needed for each Part 2 choice on a past paper to help them decide which one can best demonstrate their language skills and knowledge.
- Students identify the different features that mark the various formats or genres, e.g. a title of an article, headings for a report or proposal, giving an early reason for writing in a letter.
- Students note the various points they might make in response to a Part 2 answer and then note down reasons or examples to support their points. This will give them practice in justifying their views.
- Students practise editing their answers by selecting synonyms to replace words or forms they have used repetitively. This will help them to see how their responses can show more variety and range.
- Students practise writing an answer in short sentences before using linking words to join them together. They can discuss which linking words work well in different situations, and get to know how to use them.
- Students can occasionally complete timed tasks in class to remind them of the length and time allowed.
- Students preparing for the set-text question can be asked to discuss the characters and events.
- Students prepare short presentations or written tasks which require them to give their supported opinions on a set text, not just describe the plot.

References

Shaw, S (2006) *Examinations Modification Project: establishing the impact of reduced input and output length in Part 1 CAE scripts*, ESOL: UCLES validation report

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