

CAMBRIDGE

EXAMINATIONS, CERTIFICATES & DIPLOMAS

FCE

FIRST CERTIFICATE IN ENGLISH

English as a
Foreign Language



UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE
Local Examinations Syndicate



PREFACE

This handbook is intended principally for teachers and course designers who are, or intend to become, involved in preparing candidates for the Cambridge First Certificate in English examination (FCE). There are separate handbooks for other Cambridge EFL examinations.

The introductory part of the handbook provides a general background to the Cambridge EFL examinations and an overview of the work of UCLES EFL, including a description of current procedures for test design, production and marking. It is hoped that this will be of interest both to those who are familiar with the Cambridge EFL examinations, and to those who are coming to them for the first time.

For further information on any of the Cambridge EFL examinations, please contact:

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Introduction to UCLES

The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) was established as a department of the University of Cambridge in 1858 in order to set a standard of efficiency for schools in England. The Cambridge examinations cover a wide range of academic and vocational subjects and include examinations specially designed for the international market.

Examinations in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) were started at UCLES in 1913, with the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE). The First Certificate in English (FCE) was introduced in 1939. Other EFL examinations and schemes for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) have been added periodically since then, so that UCLES now offers the most comprehensive range of EFL examinations and TEFL schemes with a total annual candidature of over 500,000.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

UCLES EFL has specific responsibility for all the professional and specialist aspects of the EFL examinations and the TEFL schemes. The EFL team is made up of staff with qualifications mainly in the area of applied linguistics and TEFL, and with considerable experience in overseas teaching situations.

The work of UCLES EFL covers four main areas:

- question paper production
- support for the administration of the examinations (particularly the Speaking Tests)
- processing of examinations (marking, etc.)
- user service

The core of the EFL system is the question paper production process. This is described in detail below.

There is a programme of ongoing validation, and specialist staff work on analysis and evaluation in the production and review of examinations. The aim is to ensure that standards are being met and that the examinations develop in order to meet the changing needs of candidates and other test users.

UCLES EFL is responsible for ensuring that various professional requirements are met. This includes, for example, the development and implementation of training and monitoring procedures which are required for carrying out the assessment of spoken and written language by examiners.

UCLES EFL is also responsible for the administration and processing of examinations.

For UCLES EFL, user service concerns professional matters such as the production of information for test users, e.g. specifications, handbooks, sample materials, examination

reports, etc. It is also the responsibility of EFL staff to ensure that obligations to test users are met, and that in this context UCLES EFL examinations fulfil the Code of Practice established by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (see below). This Code of Practice focuses on the responsibilities of both examination providers and examination users and covers four main areas:

- developing examinations
- interpreting examination results
- striving for fairness
- informing examination takers

The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE)

UCLES is a member of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) which was formed in 1990. The members are all providers of language examinations and certificates from countries within the European Union.

The principal objectives of ALTE are as follows:

- to establish a framework of levels of proficiency in order to promote the transnational recognition of certification, especially in Europe;
- to establish common standards for all stages of the language testing process: i.e. for test development, question and materials writing, test administration, marking and grading, reporting of test results, test analysis and reporting of findings;
- to collaborate on joint projects and in the exchange of ideas and know-how.

At the present stage of development of the framework, considerable agreement has been reached on the content definition of all five levels of proficiency. Further empirical research is taking place.

More information about ALTE and copies of ALTE documents can be obtained from the ALTE Secretariat at UCLES.

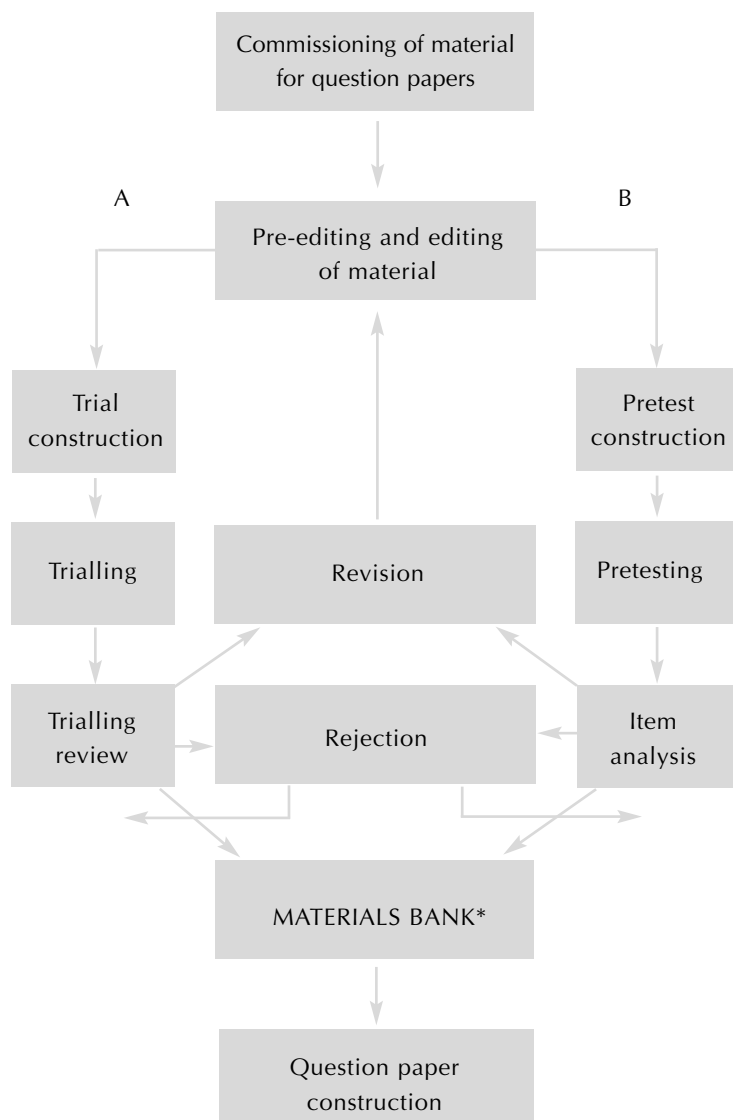
The Production of EFL Question Papers

The production process for question papers for EFL examinations and TEFL schemes begins with the commissioning of material and ends with the printing of question papers.

For the majority of EFL question papers there are five main stages in the production process:

- commissioning
- editing
- pretesting
- analysis and banking of material
- question paper construction

This process can be represented in the diagram below:



*electronic bank for pretested materials

The Production Cycle for Pretested Question Papers

UCLES employs a team of Item Writers to produce examination material, and throughout the writing and editing process strict guidelines are followed in order to ensure that the materials conform to the test specifications. Topics or contexts of language use which might introduce a bias against any group of candidates of a particular background (i.e. on the basis of sex, ethnic origin, etc.) are avoided.

After selection and editing, the items are compiled into pretest papers. Pretesting plays a central role as it allows for questions and materials with known measurement characteristics to be banked so that new versions of question papers can be produced as and when required. The pretesting process helps to ensure that all versions conform to the test requirements in terms of content and level of difficulty.

Each pretest paper contains anchor items or is supplied to candidates with an additional anchor test. The anchor items are carefully chosen on the basis of their known measurement characteristics and their inclusion means that all new items can be linked to a common scale of difficulty.

Pretest papers are despatched to a wide variety of EFL schools and colleges, which have offered to administer the pretests to candidates of a suitable level. After the completed pretests are returned to the Pretesting Section of UCLES EFL, a score for each student is provided to the centre within two weeks of receiving the completed scripts. The items are marked and analysed, and those which are found to be suitable are banked.

Material for the productive components of the examinations is trialled with candidates to assess its suitability for inclusion in the Materials Bank.

The UCLES Main Suite: A Five-Level System

UCLES has developed a series of examinations with similar characteristics, spanning five levels. Within the series of five levels, the First Certificate in English is at Cambridge Level Three.

FCE is the most widely taken Cambridge EFL examination and the annual candidature is in excess of 250,000.

Cambridge Level Five
Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)

Cambridge Level Four
Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)

Cambridge Level Three
First Certificate in English (FCE)

Cambridge Level Two
Preliminary English Test (PET)

Cambridge Level One
Key English Test (KET)

BACKGROUND TO FCE

FCE was originally offered in 1939 as the Lower Certificate of Proficiency. Regular updating has allowed the examination to keep pace with changes in language teaching and testing. In 1974, the Lower Certificate was renamed the First Certificate in English. A number of important changes were made in 1984, including the introduction of a taped listening test. In 1991, a review of the examination content and administration was begun in order to take into consideration recent developments in teaching and testing. The result of this review is the revised FCE, introduced in December 1996.

The Level of FCE

As well as being at Cambridge Level Three, FCE also falls within Level Three of the ALTE framework, and a brief description of this level is given below. This description is not a specification for the examination content but refers to language activities in real-world, non-examination contexts.

ALTE Level Three: An Independent User

ALTE Level Three, which goes under the label 'Independent User', corresponds to what is often referred to as an intermediate stage of proficiency. Learners at this level are expected to be able to handle the main structures of the language with some confidence, demonstrate knowledge of a wide range of vocabulary and use appropriate communicative strategies in a variety of social situations. Their understanding of spoken language and written texts should go beyond being able to pick out items of factual information, and they should be able to distinguish between main and subsidiary points and between the gist of a text and specific detail. They should be able to produce written texts of various types, showing the ability to develop an argument as well as describe or recount events.

Examinations at ALTE Level Three are frequently used as proof that the learner can do office work or take a course of study in the medium of the language being learned. Learners at this level can be assumed to have sufficient ability to operate effectively in English in many clerical, secretarial and managerial posts.

Varieties of English

Candidates' responses to tasks in the Cambridge EFL examinations are acceptable in varieties of English which would enable candidates to function in the widest range of international contexts. Candidates are expected to use a particular variety with some degree of consistency in areas such as spelling, and not for example switch from using a British spelling of a word to an American spelling of the same word in the same written response to a given task.

Recognition

FCE has widespread recognition in commerce and industry, e.g. for public contact or secretarial work in banking, airlines, catering, etc. Many universities and other educational institutions recognise FCE for English language entrance requirements. More information about recognition is available from British Council Offices and from UCLES.

FCE Candidature

Information is collected about the FCE candidates at each session, when candidates fill in a Candidate Information Sheet. The candidates for FCE come from a wide range of backgrounds and take the examination for a number of different reasons. The following points summarise the characteristics of the current FCE candidature.

Nationality – FCE is taken by candidates throughout the world in about 100 countries, although the total number of nationalities represented in the candidature is over 150. The majority of these candidates enter for FCE in European and South American countries. Many candidates also take the examination in the UK.

Age – Most candidates (about 75%) are under 25, with the average age being about 23. In some countries the average age is lower (e.g. in Greece it is about 16).

Gender – About 65% of candidates are female.

Employment – Most candidates are students, although there are considerable differences in the proportion of students in different countries.

Exam Preparation – A large proportion of candidates (about 80%) undertake a preparatory course before taking the examination; most of these courses last between eight and twenty-four weeks.

Reasons for taking FCE – Candidates' reasons for wanting an English language qualification are roughly distributed as follows:

- to gain employment (37%)
- for further study (30%)
- out of personal interest (33%)

FCE CONTENT: AN OVERVIEW

The examination consists of five papers:

Reading	1 hour 15 minutes
Writing	1 hour 30 minutes
Use of English	1 hour 15 minutes
Listening	40 minutes (approximately)
Speaking	14 minutes (approximately)

Reading

Candidates are expected to be able to read semi-authentic texts of various kinds (informative and general interest) and to show understanding of gist, detail and text structure, and deduce meaning.

The paper contains four parts and 35 questions. Each part contains a text and corresponding comprehension task. One part may contain two or more shorter related texts.

Writing

Candidates are expected to be able to write non-specialised text types such as letters, articles, reports and compositions for a given purpose and target reader, covering a range of topics. One of the optional tasks in Part 2 is based on the reading of one of five set books.

Candidates are required to carry out two tasks; a compulsory one in Part 1 and one from a choice of four in Part 2. The word length of each answer is 120–180 words.

Use of English

Candidates are expected to demonstrate their knowledge and control of the language system by completing a number of tasks, some of which are based on specially written texts.

The paper contains five parts and 65 questions, which take the form of multiple-choice cloze, open cloze, key word transformations, error correction and word-formation task types.

Listening

Candidates are provided with short extracts and longer monologues, announcements, extracts from radio programmes, news, features, etc., at an intermediate level. They are expected to show understanding of detail and gist, and to deduce meaning.

The paper contains four parts and 30 questions. Each part contains a recorded text or texts and corresponding comprehension tasks.

Speaking

The standard test format is two candidates and two examiners. Candidates must be able to respond to questions and interact in conversational English. Prompt materials are used by the examiner to stimulate and guide the interaction.

The paper contains four parts, including short exchanges with the examiner and with the other candidate, and a 'long turn' of about one minute.

GRADING AND RESULTS

The five FCE papers total 200 marks, after weighting. Each paper is weighted to 40 marks.

A candidate's overall FCE grade is based on the total score gained by the candidate in all five papers. It is not necessary to achieve a satisfactory level in all five papers in order to pass the examination.

The overall grade boundaries (A, B, C, D and E) are set according to the following information:

- statistics on the candidature;
- statistics on the overall candidate performance;
- statistics on individual items, for those parts of the examination for which this is appropriate (Papers 1, 3 and 4);
- advice, based on the performance of candidates, and recommendations of examiners where this is relevant (Papers 2 and 5);
- comparison with statistics from previous years' examination performance and candidature.

Results are reported as three passing grades (A, B and C) and two failing grades (D and E). The minimum successful performance which a candidate typically requires in order to achieve a Grade C corresponds to about 60% of the total marks. Statements of results are sent out to all candidates and include a graphical display of the candidate's performance in each paper. These are shown against the scale Exceptional – Good – Borderline – Weak and indicate the candidate's relative performance in each paper.

Special Circumstances

Special Circumstances covers three main areas: Special Arrangements, Special Consideration and Malpractice.

Special Arrangements: These are available for disabled candidates. These may include extra time, separate accommodation or equipment, Braille transcription, etc. Consult the UCLES Local Secretary in your area for more details.

Special Consideration: UCLES EFL will give Special Consideration to candidates affected by adverse circumstances immediately before or during an examination. Special Consideration can be given where an application is sent through the centre and is made within ten working days of the examination date. Examples of acceptable reasons for giving Special Consideration are in cases of illness or other unexpected events.

Malpractice: The Malpractice Committee will consider cases where candidates are suspected of copying/collusion, or breaking the examination regulations in some other way. Results may be withheld because further investigation is needed or because of infringement of regulations. Centres are notified if a candidate's results have been investigated.

Notification of Results

Statements of results are issued through centres approximately two months after the examination has been taken.

Certificates are issued about six weeks after the issue of statements of results. Enquiries about results may be made through Local Secretaries, within a month of the issue of results slips.

FCE ADMINISTRATION

FCE is held each year in March, June and December in about 1,900 centres worldwide. Candidates must enter through a recognised centre.

Further Information

Copies of the Regulations and details of entry procedure, current fees and further information about this and other Cambridge examinations can be obtained from the Local Secretary for UCLES examinations in your area, or from the address on page 1. In some areas this information can also be obtained from the British Council.

FCE SUPPORT

Course Materials

A number of coursebooks and practice materials are available from publishers. A comprehensive list of those published by UK publishers is available from UCLES and is on the UCLES website. FCE requires an all-round language ability and this should be borne in mind when selecting course materials. Most coursebooks will need to be supplemented; care should be taken to ensure that coursebooks and practice materials selected accurately reflect the content and format of the examination.

NB UCLES does not undertake to advise on textbooks or courses of study.

Past Papers and Examination Reports

Past examination papers, which can be used for practice, are available from Local Secretaries and from the Publications Department at UCLES. The sample question papers included in this Handbook (in reduced format) are taken from previous FCE examinations. Examination Reports are also available from Local Secretaries or from the UCLES website. However, candidates are strongly advised not to concentrate unduly on working through practice tests and examinations as this will not by itself make them more proficient in the different skills.

Seminars for Teachers

UCLES offers a wide range of seminars designed for teachers concerned with the EFL examinations; some are also suitable as introductions for administrators, school directors, etc. Some seminars are intended to provide information and support for teachers who are familiar with the examinations, and others can be used to introduce teachers to established examinations and also to new or revised UCLES examinations. Contact EFL Information for further details.