

Preface

This handbook is for anyone who is preparing candidates for the Cambridge ESOL First Certificate in English examination (FCE).

The introduction gives an overview of FCE and its place within Cambridge ESOL. This is followed by a focus on each paper and includes content, advice on preparation and example papers.

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OVERVIEW OF FCE GLOSSARY

Introduction to Cambridge ESOL

■ University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations

University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL) is a part of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), which has provided examinations in English for speakers of other languages since 1913. Cambridge ESOL offers an extensive range of examinations, certificates and diplomas for learners and teachers of English. In 2002 over 1.2 million people took these examinations at centres in over 130 countries.

Cambridge ESOL examinations can be taken by anyone whose first language is not English. They are suitable for learners of all nationalities, whatever their first language and cultural background, and there are examinations suitable for learners of almost any age. The range of Cambridge ESOL examinations includes specialist examinations in Business English and English for Academic Purposes, as well as tests for young learners and a suite of certificates and diplomas for language teachers.

The examinations cover all four language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking. They include a range of tasks which assess candidates' ability to use English, so that in preparing for the examinations, candidates develop the skills they need to make practical use of the language in a variety of contexts. Above all, what the Cambridge ESOL examinations assess is the ability to communicate effectively in English.

Cambridge ESOL is committed to providing examinations of the highest possible quality. This commitment is underpinned by an extensive programme of research and evaluation, and by continuous monitoring of the marking and grading of all Cambridge ESOL examinations. Of particular importance is the rigorous set of procedures which are used in the production and pretesting of question papers.

■ The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE)

Cambridge ESOL 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 Europe.

The principal objectives of ALTE are as follows:

- to promote the transnational recognition of certification, especially in Europe
- to establish common standards for all stages of the language testing process, i.e. 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.

Cambridge ESOL examinations fulfil the Code of Practice established by ALTE. 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.

For more information on ALTE please visit www.ALTE.org

■ Official accreditation in the UK

FCE has been accredited by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), the statutory regulatory authority for external qualifications in England, and its counterparts in Wales and Northern Ireland at Level 1 in the National Qualifications Framework, under the title 'Cambridge ESOL Level 1 Certificate in English (ESOL)'.

■ Key features of Cambridge ESOL examinations

Cambridge ESOL undertakes:

- to assess language skills at a range of levels, each of them having a clearly defined relevance to the needs of language learners
- to assess skills which are directly relevant to the range of uses for which learners will need the language they have learned, and which cover the four language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – as well as knowledge of language structure and use
- to provide accurate and consistent assessment of each language skill at the appropriate level
- to relate the examinations to the teaching curriculum in such a way that they encourage positive learning experiences, and to seek to achieve a positive impact wherever possible
- to endeavour to be fair to all candidates, whatever their national, ethnic and linguistic background, gender or disability.

Cambridge ESOL examinations are designed around four essential qualities: validity, reliability, impact and practicality. Validity is normally taken to be the extent to which a test can be shown to produce scores which are an accurate reflection of the candidate's true level of language skills. Reliability concerns the extent to which test results are stable, consistent and accurate, and therefore the extent to which they can be depended on for making decisions about the candidate. Impact concerns the effects, beneficial or otherwise, which an examination has on the candidates and other users, whether these are educational, social, economic or political, or various combinations of these. Practicality can be defined as the extent to which an examination is practicable in terms of the resources needed to produce and administer it. All these factors underpin the development and production of Cambridge ESOL examinations.

Introduction to FCE

■ The level of FCE

FCE is at Level B2 of the Common European Framework, and a description of this level is given below in terms of:

- what material learners can handle
- what learners can be expected to be able to do.

The type of material an FCE candidate can deal with

At this level, a learner should 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.

What an FCE candidate can do

Examinations at Level B2 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.

The ALTE ‘Can Do’ Project

The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) has developed a framework which covers six levels of language proficiency aligned to the Council of Europe Common European Framework. Research carried out by ALTE has shown what language learners can typically do at each level.

The table below gives some examples at FCE level of typical general ability plus ability in each of the skill areas and in a range of contexts.

‘Can Do’ summary

| Typical abilities | Listening and Speaking | Reading and Writing |
|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Overall general ability | CAN follow a talk on a familiar topic. CAN keep up a conversation on a fairly wide range of topics. | CAN scan texts for relevant information. CAN make notes while someone is talking or write a letter including non-standard requests. |
| Social & Tourist | CAN ask for clarification and further explanation, and is likely to understand the answer. CAN keep up a conversation on a fairly wide range of topics. | CAN read the media for information quickly and with good understanding. CAN express opinions and give reasons. |
| Work | CAN ask for factual information and understand the answer. CAN express her/his own opinion, and present arguments to a limited extent. | CAN understand the general meaning of non-routine letters and understand most of the content. CAN write a simple report of a factual nature and begin to evaluate, advise, etc. |
| Study | CAN answer predictable or factual questions. CAN check that all instructions are understood. | CAN make simple notes that are of reasonable use for essay or revision purposes, capturing most important points. CAN present arguments, using a limited range of expression (vocabulary, grammatical structures). |

■ Varieties of English

Candidates' responses to tasks in the Cambridge ESOL 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 centres, British Council offices, Cambridge ESOL and from www.CambridgeESOL.org

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

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 200. 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.
- *Gender*
About 60% 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.

- *Reasons for taking FCE*
Candidates' reasons for wanting an English language qualification are roughly distributed as follows:
 - to gain employment (51%)
 - for further study (32%)
 - out of personal interest (17%).

■ FCE administration

FCE is held each year in March, June and December in about 700 centres worldwide. Candidates must enter through a recognised centre.

■ 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 percentage of marks needed to achieve each grade may vary from session to session depending on the precise difficulty of the individual papers which make up the particular examination. The approximate ranges of percentages for each grade at FCE are typically as follows:

| Passing Grades | | Failing Grades | |
|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| Grade A | 80% and above | Grade D | 55% to 59% |
| Grade B | 75% to 79% | Grade E | 54% and below |
| Grade C | 60% to 74% | | |

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.

■ 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 statements of results slips.

■ Special circumstances

Special circumstances covers three main areas: special arrangements, special consideration and malpractice.

- **Special arrangements:**
These are available for candidates with a permanent or long-term disability, such as a visual or hearing difficulty, or a temporary difficulty such as a broken hand, or ear infection affecting a candidate's ability to hear clearly. They may include extra time, separate accommodation or equipment, Braille transcription, etc. Consult the Cambridge ESOL Local Secretary in your area for more details as soon as possible.
- **Special consideration:**
Cambridge ESOL 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:**
Cambridge ESOL 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.

FCE support

■ Course materials

A number of coursebooks and practice materials are available from publishers. A list of UK publishers which produce material related to the examinations is available from Cambridge ESOL Information and is on the Cambridge ESOL 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.

N.B. Cambridge ESOL does not undertake to advise on textbooks or courses of study.

■ Past papers and examination reports

Cambridge ESOL produces past examination papers, which can be used for practice, and examination reports, which provide a general view of how candidates performed overall and on each paper and offer guidance on the preparation of candidates. Details of how you can order past papers and examination reports, and a downloadable order form, are available from

www.CambridgeESOL.org/support/pubs/index.cfm

The sample question papers included in this handbook have been produced to reflect the format of the examination.

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.

■ On-line support

Cambridge ESOL provides an on-line resource for teachers, designed to help them understand the examinations better and to prepare candidates more effectively.

The Teaching Resources website can be found at www.CambridgeESOL.org/teach

In some countries, a dedicated Cambridge ESOL website is available. These websites can be found at [www.CambridgeESOL.\(initials for country\)](http://www.CambridgeESOL.(initials for country)), e.g. www.CambridgeESOL.gr (Greece) www.CambridgeESOL.ch (Switzerland)

■ Seminars for teachers

Cambridge ESOL offers a wide range of seminars designed for teachers concerned with the 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 examinations. Contact Cambridge ESOL Information for further details.

■ 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 Cambridge ESOL Local Secretary in your area, or from the address on the back cover of this handbook. In some areas this information can also be obtained from the British Council.