

The following questions were further to the seminars held by Susan Gilbert and Elayne Wehrlin on 8.11.08 and 15.11.08

1. Is FCE 5 a CAE 3? *Yes, in that the descriptors overlap to a certain extent, HOWEVER the tasks are calibrated differently. CAE tasks are more difficult (more abstract and more words have to be produced in less time. The definition of 'range and variety' is more demanding at CAE level.*
2. What format should the 'contribution to a longer piece' (CAE) take? *In Elayne's opinion no introduction or conclusion is necessary. We have passed the question on to Cambridge and we hope for an official statement shortly.*
3. Why are lists of necessary grammar structures and vocabulary topics not to be found in FCE/CAE handbooks? *We are awaiting a reply from Cambridge ESOL*
4. Do examiners actually count the words? *Yes, they count 3 lines, multiply the word average by the number of lines, and then add on 3 lines before drawing a felt pen line across the page. The whole script is counted to inclusion of ideas, but the English is only evaluated down to the felt pen line.*
5. What exactly is the difference between the informal letter and email in FCE Part 1 Writing? *None, except the name. Look at the worked examples of E mails in the new FCE handbook and you will see what Elayne means.*
6. Why does Cambridge not provide a more comprehensive sampling of student writing that is assessed at various levels? Without clear 'benchmarking' it is difficult to ascertain your expectations. *Cambridge considers that the elaborate versions of the General Marking Scale (in the handbooks), the Examiners' Reports (online) and the worked examples in the handbooks give sufficient indications of the level.*
7. Although I've read the grading guidelines in the handbook I'm quite nervous about assigning a grade. I'd like to see the actual process – an example. *(Elayne) I'm afraid that the General Marking Scale (in the handbooks), the Examiners' Reports (online) and the worked examples in the handbooks constitute the only material that Cambridge releases to help you – plus our seminar of course!!*
8. Students often want to know if their composition would 'pass'. For me it's a grey and fuzzy area. Any concrete tips? *(Elayne) Not really, because the concept of any given script 'passing' is not exactly how Cambridge operates. Yes, of course, each script is graded (General Mark Scheme, Specific Task Scheme), but 2.3 (failing, if you like) is only 1 point below 3.1, there are 2 scripts, and Writing is only part of the exam. The only help I can offer is study of the General Mark Schemes in the handbooks, reading the examiners' reports (online) and studying the worked examples given at the seminar and in the handbook.*
9. CAE Writing Part 1 I'm confused as to whether the students must address each one of the 'disputed items' in a letter of complaint, for example. All, or pick a few of them? *(Elayne) All!! This is fundamental to task achievement. They will be heavily penalised if one or more is omitted or 'inadequately addressed' – to use Cambridge parlance. The number of points to be covered, the number of words asked for and the time available are 3 of the parameters that calibrate an answer at CAE (C1) level.*
10. Why are Cambridge bands in 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 (etc)? Why no 3.5, 3.6, 3.7 etc? *(Elayne) Because Cambridge in its infinite wisdom decided to base its writing evaluation on 15 points. Why not base it on 50 points? I don't know, and Cambridge isn't saying!*

11. CAE Writing paper. Is it possible that an informal letter would be necessary for part 1 or could it only turn up on part 2? *(Elayne) I THINK it can only turn up on part 2, but I have forwarded the question to Cambridge for a definitive answer.*
12. CAE long turn – can students point to pictures or should they say, for example “the picture in the top left-hand corner...” A: *(Susan Gilbert) whichever they feel comfortable with.*
13. Do you recommend that students practice in class with their speaking test partner? A: *(Susan Gilbert) No, they should practice speaking with as many different people as possible. It isn't necessarily an advantage to be with someone they know very well, sometimes they don't have much to say to each other. They should always speak English with their partner while waiting to go into the test room. This is very useful warm-up.*
14. Part 4 of speaking tests: are the questions collaborative or individual? *(Susan Gilbert) A: the examiner asks questions to each candidate, but sometimes asks a Q to both (ie without nominating a candidate), and they can both discuss it. Sometimes the examiner will pass a question on to the partner candidate, by saying “and you?” or just a gesture.*
15. If one candidate speaks a lot more than the other in part 3, does the examiner ask more questions in part 4 to the partner who spoke less, to adjust the balance? A: *(Susan Gilbert) Yes, but candidates must also take the opportunity given them to speak, to develop their answers, not just rely on more questions coming.*
16. Is it necessary to translate the names of places (eg St Gallen)? And German words like Berufsmatura? A: *(Susan Gilbert) Place names don't need to be translated, but candidates should explain other words in English.*
17. Can examiners rephrase questions? Isn't it done to help? A: *(Susan Gilbert) No, they can't rephrase, but they can repeat the questions. At the lower levels (eg KET) they have backup questions (in simpler English) which they can use when candidates don't understand. The reason it isn't permitted to rephrase the question is that examiners may actually make the task more difficult by their choice of phrase, and in the interests of fairness – the test has to be the same for all candidates.*
18. How important is posture and non-verbal behaviour? A: *(Susan Gilbert) Examiners are trained not to be influenced by factors such as these, but candidates will probably feel more ready for the test if they dress carefully, perhaps? Although examiners would certainly not make a candidate down for poor posture, posture affects pronunciation.*
19. Is it true that examiners do not ask for a clear “result” or decision at the end of part 3 A: *(Susan Gilbert) yes, they just thank the candidates, take back the materials and move on to part 4.*
20. If a student takes too long in part 3, does the examiner stop them, and if so, how? A: *(Susan Gilbert) yes, the examiner would indicate with gesture that both candidates should participate, and then if necessary intervene.*
21. If I have questions about the exams during the year, who should I contact? A: *(Susan Gilbert) The Cambridge exams manager, Karen Kerley or a member of the office staff info@cambridge-esol-sg.ch.*
22. In CAE speaking, can students be too relaxed, using “yeah”, not finishing sentences? A: *(Susan Gilbert) candidates should be relaxed, but not to the extent that they don't really try. Although Examiners try to create a non-intimidating atmosphere, in the end it's a test.*

23. FCE/CAE speaking. As the task asks students to compare the pictures then answer a question, is it a good idea to start with some description of the pictures?
A: (Susan Gilbert) Yes, this is a good start. See an example script of a part 2 in the booklet "top tips for FCE"

24. Replies from Cambridge ESOL. Thank you for your enquiries.

An overview of all Cambridge ESOL exams (including information on exam level and content), sample papers for each examination, and a chart mapping Cambridge ESOL examinations to CEFR levels can be found on the Cambridge ESOL website:

* Information on exams -
<<http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/index.html>>
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* Sample papers -
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A more detailed comparison between IELTS score and the CEFR can be found here -
http://www.ielts.org/teachers_and_researchers/common_european_framework.aspx
<http://www.ielts.org/teachers_and_researchers/common_european_framework.aspx>

Information about universities and companies which recognise or have used Cambridge ESOL examinations can also be found on the Cambridge ESOL website: <http://www.cambridgeesol.org/recognition/search.php>
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Where the universities are in English-speaking countries inclusion on the database normally indicates that these exams are accepted for admissions purposes. However in other countries the institution may also recognise Cambridge ESOL examinations by incorporating it into a course, awarding credits or exemptions to candidates who have passed an exam, or make successful completion of the exam a requirement for graduation.

Please let me know if anything is unclear, or if you have any further enquiries.

Kind regards,

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