

A SURVEY OF THE PRACTICES OF CAMBRIDGE LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

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This paper presents a survey on the practice of the development of English language assessment. Since a certain attainment from international English language assessment tests has become one of the requirements, not only for people who want to enter a foreign college or university but for other educational institutions in non-English speaking countries, it is important for English teachers from those countries to understand how ESL tests are built and how the knowledge of the language is assessed. Cambridge English Language Assessment (CELA) is the main organisation which develops ESL tests and has experience leading back 100 years. Its language tests are used in approximately 130 countries. Nevertheless, there is the question how CELA organises its work on language test development, and how it administers and introduces tests into practice. This paper attempts to give a survey of CELA language assessment practice. The data used in this paper are based on studying the historical background of CELA and its research activity in creating tests. In conclusion, the survey shows the main points English teachers should consider in creating tests, and the result of the survey can be useful for developing national test standards in Kazakhstan as well.

Keywords: CPE, EFL, Cambridge ESOL, CELA

The first Cambridge English examination for non-native speakers was taken by three candidates in 1913. Today, the exams are taken by nearly four million people a year in 130 countries and cover a wide range of needs, from English for young learners to specific qualifications for university entrance and professional use... They have benefited from – and contributed to – research in education, language learning and assessment to ensure that they offer valid, reliable and fair qualifications [2].

Cambridge English Language Assessment (CELA) has a deep history. Its activity is directed towards being professional in creating and providing language tests of all ranges and levels. In the portfolio of CELA, nowadays, there are tests in eight fields such as English for young learners, general English, academic and professional English, Business English, European languages, teaching qualifications for new teachers, teaching qualifications for experienced teachers, and special diploma tests for teachers [10]. Working out various tests by CELA is evidence of systematic work in the purpose of attaining an excellence in developing language tests. This makes a person, who is interested in language tests and language teaching, think how CELA develops its tests, and why its tests have the confidence of users of tests. People who are involved in English language assessment examinations or preparation literatures to those examinations can come across different abbreviated names in this field. To give precise understanding it is worth starting by giving a brief survey about the history of CELA. In the course of this paper, so as not to confuse readers the abbreviation CELA is used to explain examination types and activities prepared by the organization for both past and recent periods. CPE (Cambridge Proficiency

Examination) was introduced by UCLES (the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) in 1913[3]. CPE tests were created by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) department within the UCLES. The name of EFL was a traditional label name. Then EFL was replaced by Cambridge ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages). Peter Falvey, in his paper on the history of Cambridge Language Examinations, says: «This was a traditional form of labelling until relatively recently when the concept of EFL was superseded by the label ESOL. ESOL is a more generic label than EFL as it encompasses not only those candidates for whom English is a foreign language, such as a Mandarin speaker, but also those for whom English might be a second, or other language, like someone from the Commonwealth for whom English is a second language but who also uses English as a third (other) language. This change was reflected in the re-naming of EFL Examinations to Cambridge ESOL in 2002» [1].

From the resource «Research Notes», the regular publication resource for CELA research activities, we can refer to the same statement in respect to the change of the name of the organization: «From October 2002 UCLES EFL will officially become «Cambridge ESOL Examinations». UCLES EFL is adopting the title Cambridge ESOL for all of its activities. The full title of the EFL division of the UCLES group will change to «University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations». The change of identity is recognition of the broader needs and backgrounds of learners and teachers throughout the world, and the many different reasons for which they take the examinations» [4]. The change of the name is connected with the widening of the activities of the organization on

test developments for the countries where English language is a third language. CELA, which is used in the course of this paper, is a current name which replaced Cambridge ESOL due to a centenary anniversary revision of the organisation's activity. «2013 is the 100 year anniversary of Cambridge English exams. Coinciding with this important milestone, we are also changing our name to Cambridge English Language Assessment. We are changing our name to make it easier for people to understand what we do. Over 4 million candidates a year take Cambridge English exams around the world. This enormous growth reflects how English has evolved into a key skill, and how our exams focus on the real-life communications skills candidates» need for success at university, in the workplace and for immigration [11].

It is seen from the historical background there are three labelling names of the English language assessment organisation: EFL, Cambridge ESOL and CELA. Examinations offered by CELA are widespread. The first one was called CPE. The examination was based on grammar method. Weir characterises the

tests according to archive copies of CPE (Cambridge Proficiency English) tests as following: «The examination was academic in orientation and initially modelled on the traditional, essay-based, native-speaker language syllabus including an English literature paper, an essay, and also a compulsory phonetics paper with a grammar section, and translation from and into French and German. There was also an oral component with dictation, reading aloud and conversation» [8]. These tests set goals for colonial people who wanted to study in Britain [3]. The primary two-dimensional tests (written and oral) provided by CPE are the core basis of modern differentiated test models. About this Weir states that «Its multidimensionality is testimony to an eclectic approach to language testing that was to survive to this day [8]. «The CPE examination tests were changed in their structure and tasks throughout their development. Here five main formats of examination tests are given. These examination formats are illustrated in the paper by Weir «A survey of the history of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) in the twentieth century» [8]:

Written	(a) Translation from English into French or German	2 hours
	(b) Translation from French or German into English, and questions on English Grammar	2,5 hours
	(c) English Essay	2 hours
	(d) English Literature	3 hours
	(e) English phonetics	1,5 hours
Oral	Dictation	0,5 hour
	Reading aloud and Conversation	0,5 hour

The Test Format 1. 1913 Examination

A survey of the history of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) in the twentieth century» [8], page 2.

Written	English Literature	3 hours
	General Economic and Commercial Knowledge	3 hours
	Translation from English (2 out of 3 passages)	2 hours
	Translation from into English (2 passages)	2 hours
	English Composition	2,5 hours
Oral	Dictation, Reading aloud and Conversation	

The Test Format 2. July, 1938 exam

A survey of the history of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) in the twentieth century» [8], page 6.

Written	(a) English Literature (alternatively a general English paper was offered for overseas centres which were unable to obtain the texts prescribed for the Eng.Lit.paper) or Science Texts or English Life and Institutions or Survey of Industry and Commerce	
	(b) Use of English or Translation from and into English	
	(c) English Language (composition and a passage of English with language questions)	
Oral	Dictation, Reading aloud and Conversation	

The Test Format 3. *1953 paper*

A survey of the history of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) in the twentieth century» [8], page 9.

PAPER 1 Composition	3 hours
PAPER 2 Reading Comprehension	1,15 hour
PAPER 3 Use of English	3 hours
PAPER 4 Listening Comprehension	30 minutes
PAPER 5 Interview	Approx. 12 minutes

Test Format 4. *Content of the 1975 Certificate of Proficiency in English*

A survey of the history of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) in the twentieth century» [8], page 26.

PAPER 1 Reading Comprehension	1 hour
PAPER 2 Composition	2 hours
PAPER 3 Use of English	2 hours
PAPER 4 Listening Comprehension	Approx.30 minutes
PAPER 5 Interview	Approx.20 minutes

Test Format 5. *The 1984 Revision*

A survey of the history of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) in the twentieth century» [8], page 33.

The first two Test Formats are close to each other in their task varieties. Slight changes in the second Format are explained as a facilitation of test tasks for the purpose of spreading tests overseas countries as that period coincided with the war time in Europe. «By 1939 the CPE was offered in 30 countries» [8]. Another interesting fact is mentioned by Weir (ibid.) referring to Taylor: «With the outbreak of the WWII entries declined, not picking up again until 1943 when the official figures record 861. The majority of candidates in Britain in this year were members of the Allied Forces». About the decline and increase of test takers during that period Falvey states as follows: In 1923 there were 13 candidates; 15 years later there were 675, of whom 212 sat the CPE overseas. By the end of the Second World War, in 1945, the number of candidates was fewer than in 1928 but overseas candidature had increased to 972. By 1960, there were almost 8,000 candidates, growing steadily until 1980 when there were almost 20,000, a figure which had more than doubled by 2001 to 48,514 [1]. «Replacement of *Literature to General Economic and Commercial Knowledge* was evidence that these tests were taken by students and end-users» [8]. Phonetics was withdrawn from the task list because the knowledge of phonetics was not required by any organizations which required Language Certificates [5]. However, as can be seen from the Test Formats, the time allocated remains without changes. The third Format differs from the previous ones with an introduction of a newly emerged test task *Use of English*. Time allocation was reduced by up to 9 hours as well. *Use of English* was offered

as an alternative to Translation task, i.e. candidates were able to choose one of them. Weir notes: It starts with a reading passage with short answer questions, and then a sentence reformulation task, a task requiring recombining sentences into a more coherent paragraph, a task involving knowledge of how punctuation can change meaning, an editing task, a descriptive writing task and finally a task testing knowledge of affixes [8]. In addition, it is seen from the first three Formats and description of *Use of English* by Weir that test tasks of that period were based on grammar translation and structural approach in linguistics which, it is known, were basic theories in the sphere of language teaching. In the case of the last two Test Formats – Test Format 4 and 5 – it is obvious that language testing approach was totally changed in both task types and allocated time. Relating to the characteristics of tests [8], in his survey paper, divides test development periods into 3 stages corresponding to research work on test characteristics done by other researchers: «...historical survey examined the influence of the Oral – Structural – Situational Approaches to English language teaching that emerged in the United Kingdom between 1921 and 1970. The 1920s saw the birth of «structural linguistics» that was to have a powerful and long-lasting influence on the theory and practice of language teaching for the next 50 years». Weir continues, «Finally, the authors traced the effects of the communicative movement (1971–2012) on Cambridge English examinations. In the 1970s and 1980s we can determine a gradual shift in the United Kingdom away from structural approaches to language

teaching towards approaches that involved using language as a means of communication. This takes us into Stage 3 of the historical survey: Communicative Approaches to Language Teaching and Testing [9].

Falvey [1] makes a similar statement: «The work of N. Chomsky in Linguistics, J.R. Firth in Applied Linguistics, and D. Hymes and M.A.K. Halliday in Sociolinguistics began to focus on language and, in particular, language in use, rather than the study of language as a system». According to the statements done by researchers of the history of English examinations, it becomes clear that the CPE test developments were affected by the theories in linguistics. The other issue, which concerned test developers and researchers who were interested in the history of the test development are issues such as validity, reliability, objectivity, fairness, etc. About test qualities, Spolsky [7] remarks that these test questions are evidence that there is *no place for objective questions*. Here, Weir, supporting the remark by Spolsky, says that «there is no surprise as examinations were focused on literature and translation». As well, this was noted in the research work of Falvey [1]; «... marking should be, first of all, objective, not liable to the whims of individual examiners, and secondly, reliable, in that the results obtained in one test by a candidate should, on the whole, be replicated in a further test with an allowance for further learning, natural development and so on». If, to refer to Saville's work on «*The Process of test development and revision within UCLES EFL*» (Saville, 2003), it is seen that by CELA's discussion result about test usefulness «*four main examination qualities: validity, reliability, impact and practicality must be achieved*». Concerning earlier tests, Falvey [1] also commented that «two other concepts were embraced and became important in creating and developing examinations in English. They are «impact» and «practicality». These concepts consider how practical, useful and ethical an examination is». In pursuing the creation of useful tests, keeping in mind test results, examiners» comments, CELA has made use of a clear approach in developing its language tests. The usefulness of the tests is characterized as a main reason to revise tests continuously. Nowadays tests, developed by the Research and Validation Group of CELA, are worked out in accordance with these approaches. These approaches have developed not only the test quality but examination types are also a result of these approaches. The first examination, as it is seen in the course of this paper, was CPE. FCE (First Certificate Examination) or it is also called as LCE (Low Certificate Examination and KET (Key English Test) or PET (Preliminary English Test) occurred in

the course of test development and, particularly, in this case the reason why these examinations took place, was tied to creating tests for a wider audience. On the other hand, to increase the number of test takers was also of great interest. These tests aimed to define the general language level of test takers. Falvey comments about the examination types as follows: A lower examination in English proficiency, the First Certificate in English (FCE) was created on the eve of the Second World War. It was originally named the Lower Certificate in English [1]. As well as commenting on the structure of the test he says (ibid.): «The First Certificate contains five papers with a similar format to the CPE. The use of the title «First Certificate» did not rule out the development of lower forms of an English proficiency test, as new names for lower-level examinations, such as Preliminary English Test 1980 (PET) and Key English Test 1994 (KET), were created and are now in common use». Relating to the reason why these types of examinations took place, Falvey comments in his work as follows (ibid.) «Newer ESOL examinations grew even more rapidly in those years. This is not because the CPE was less attractive to candidates and their teachers, but because it is a difficult examination. It sets a high standard of proficiency, one that is not appropriate for everyone's needs».

There are three other big batches where CELA examinations can be clustered according to their intended audience. In the second half of the last century, demand for the certificate in relation to the university degree programmes lead CELA to work on creating tests for academic purposes. Falvey [1] «To test and find appropriate level of English for university degree programmes a suite of examinations were developed during 1966 and 1980». This fact is cited by O'Sullivan [3] as follows: «By the early 1980, test developers in the UK began to explore the possibility of creating tests of language for specific purposes and developed with ELTS (the English Language Testing Service), which soon became IELTS (International English Language Testing Service). The renaming of ELTS to IELTS was caused by the reason that CELA develops this test in collaboration with the British Council and with the International Development Program of Australian Universities and Colleges [1]. Increase in the sphere of business collaboration is also reflected by its influence on developing new tests which define appropriate language level for the commercial field. BEC (Business English Certificates) and BULATS (Business language Testing Service) were introduced in 1993 and 1998 respectively. In respect of the occurrence of these tests Falvey remarks: Worldwide demands for Business English tests

emerged in response to the growth of Business English Programmes throughout the world as English became the lingua franca for millions of people working in Business and commercial fields, and Human Resource managers, English teachers and course participants realised that neither general English course books nor tests from Cambridge's main suite were appropriate [1].

To the group of these tests it is appropriate to cluster ILEC (International Legal English Certificate), which was introduced not long ago in 2005. The purpose of this examination is to define the appropriate language level of lawyers. This examination is considered to be an internationally collaborated test. CELA works out these tests in collaboration with Translegal-Europe's leading firm of lawyer-linguists [1]. Finally, there is another group of examinations which is directed toward testing language teachers' qualifications. CELTA (the Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) and DELTA (the Diploma in English Language Teaching) are the examinations which meet the needs of test takers who want to teach the English language. CELTA is an initial Certificate while DELTA is a substantial diploma which allows those who seek promotion in their teaching career [1]. To this group the test of TKT (Teacher Knowledge Test) can be included as well. The purpose of this type of test is to test the teaching knowledge of English Language teachers [1].

CELA, as can be seen from the resources, is the main organisation working on language examinations and certificates. In this paper only the case of English language tests are considered. Starting its activity a hundred years ago, CELA has worked out its test structures and contents according to the principle

of usefulness. Validity, reliability, impact and practicality have enabled CELA tests to be further developed, and also facilitates CELA tests to be embedded both within and outside of the UK. Test tasks are worked out in the context of a communicative oriented approach. These factors allow CELA to create various tests that are able to test appropriate language levels for both academic and non-academic purposes.

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