

EFL EXAMS IN BRITAIN LOOKED AT COMPARATIVELY. WHICH EXAM AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Lois Arthur

It is now a fact of life that one must prove one's ability with a piece of paper – an examination certificate. But which one? In his own country it is not difficult for a student to know which examinations to take, for a teacher to know what to advise or for an employer to know what to demand. But what of examinations promoted by bodies in other countries – the plethora of EFL examinations for example? How can a foreigner hope to know how they relate to one another in terms of level, or what each one means in terms of achievement in English. In this brief review of some of the principal EFL examinations available I hope to solve a few of the mysteries which may confront the foreign student, teacher or employer.

The Principal bodies promoting EFL examinations at present are:

- The Association of Recognised English Language Schools (ARELS)
- The University of Cambridge Examinations Syndicate
- The Royal Society of Arts (RSA)
- The University of Oxford Examinations Delegacy.

Tables I and II provide quick reference for exactly which examinations are available from these bodies, their relationship in terms of level and student achievement and the extent of their recognition. Table III gives a fairly comprehensive breakdown of which skills are tested in each examination and how. The following additional information may also be useful.

The ARELS examinations are perhaps less well known than they deserve to be in certain areas of education abroad. They are quite progressive and unique in their primary objective of assessing students' competence in speaking and understanding English in commonly encountered situations and Table III reflects the thoroughness with which every aspect of the oral/aural use of language is tested. The examinations are to be particularly recommended to students who experience some difficulty in writing English proficiently, but any student wishing to demonstrate his ability to respond readily to conversational stimuli and communicate effectively would be advised to take them. The standards of the examinations are high and more and more centres are offering them which reflects their growing recognition.

The Cambridge Examinations are probably the best known and most widely supported of all EFL examinations, partly because they are well established and partly because of their name which is easily recognised and accepted for quality abroad. The examinations are thorough, particularly in testing written ability, and, in the case of Proficiency and Diploma, the student's ability to read extensively and cope with literary analysis. The style of the examinations is, however, very traditional when compared with the more practical and realistic communicative techniques employed in the Oxford Preliminary Examination and in the new RSA exams at present being piloted, and a pass in the ARELS Certificate would certainly be a better reflection of a student's spontaneous oral ability than a pass in First Certificate. The Proficiency examination is demanding, and a pass indicates the student's all round ability in the language. It is officially regarded as equivalent to 'O' level in Britain.

The availability of optional papers to test special skills (see Table III) is a useful and interesting aspect of First Certificate and Proficiency, especially as performance in these is not taken into account in the award of certificates, but graded separately. The Diploma examination is open only to those with a grade A or B pass in Proficiency and is an extremely demanding test of language which would tax some native speakers. There is, however, no oral component, but a good performance in the ARELS Diploma would reflect similar near native speaker oral competence.

The RSA Examinations have never been as well recognised as the Cambridge Examinations. They have suffered from a too traditional approach to testing and a lack of variety in the ways in which skills are tested. The overall range of ability covered by the three stages is smaller than that covered by the Cambridge and ARELS Examinations, but a student holding Stage III should be readily able to express and discuss his own and others' ideas. All three RSA examinations are currently under review however, and more progressive papers designed to practically test communicative ability are being piloted and look promising.

The Oxford Preliminary Examination has been designed to fill a gap in the market for post-beginner students learning in Britain who wish to prove their ability to 'survive' in English and cope with most everyday situations. The method of testing is interesting, exciting and practical. The examination has great potential and may be developed at other levels. There is no oral component but the ARELS Preliminary examination may be accepted as the oral equivalent.

Finally, students are often bewildered as to which level of examination to enter e.g. First Certificate or Proficiency. While it is always possible to enter examinations at more than one level (the only deterrent being cost) I personally would advise students in doubt to take the lower level examination and give themselves time to build up to the higher level. The examinations are held frequently enough for this, both in Britain and abroad. However, it must be said that Cambridge Proficiency and Diploma and ARELS Diploma are difficult to prepare for without expert guidance and adequate contact with the spoken language.

It is hoped that this review has gone some way towards solving some of the dilemmas facing foreign students, teachers and employers when confronted with the vexed question "Which exam and what does it mean?" I shall always be happy to try and answer any further questions which might arise as a result of this article.

EFL EXAMS AVAILABLE

Table 1

NAME OF EXAMINING BODY	NUMBER OF COMPULSORY PAPERS	DATES EXAMS ARE SET	PLACES EXAMS MAY BE TAKEN	STATUS AND RECOGNITION
ARELS	<p>Preliminary: Oral component only Certificate: Oral component only Diploma: Oral component only</p>	<p>Preliminary: March, July, October Certificate : February, May, August, November Diploma : June (November)</p>	<p>Approved centres (schools with language laboratories) in UK and abroad. List available from: The Director, ARELS Examination Trust, 48 Russell Square, London</p>	<p>Varies in UK and abroad. 35 out of 90 ARELS schools in UK support it, with moves to increase this. Some British Council centres support well, others do not at all. The exam deserves more recognition</p>
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE EXAMINATIONS SYNDICATE	<p>Preliminary: Not yet generally available in pilot form only at present First Certificate: 5 papers – Oral; Listening; Reading; Composition; Use of English. Proficiency: 5 papers – Oral; Listening; Reading; Composition; Use of English. Diploma: Choice of 4 out of 5 papers.</p>	<p>First Certificate)) Proficiency) June and December) Diploma)</p>	<p>Approved centres in UK and abroad. List available from: The Secretary (Exams in English), Syndicate Buildings, 17 Harvey Road, Cambridge.</p>	<p>Proficiency is given 'O' level equivalence by the Cambridge Exams Syndicate. First Cert. has no equivalence. Proficiency is often accepted for University entrance abroad, for teaching purposes in some countries, and for interpreters' schools. Diploma may be accepted for University entrance in Britain.</p>
ROYAL SOCIETY OF ARTS	<p>RSA I) 3 papers RSA II) at each level RSA III) Oral, written and reading</p>	<p>RSA I) March, May, July RSA II) and November RSA III)</p>	<p>Approved centres in UK and abroad. List available from: Assistant Secretary, Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board, Murray Road, Orpington, Kent.</p>	<p>Considered by many to be second best to the Cambridge Exams. In need of improvement, which is at present being undertaken. New exams being piloted look very promising. Particularly intended for learners studying in UK.</p>
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD EXAMINATIONS SYNDICATE	<p>Preliminary only at present: 2 papers Reading and Writing.</p>	<p>Preliminary: March only</p>	<p>Approved centres in UK plus 2 or 3 abroad. List available from: The Secretary, Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, Ewert Place, Summertown, Oxford.</p>	<p>A relatively new exam designed to test "survival" English of students learning in Britain. It is extremely practical. It is still in its infancy but is an exciting step forward in exam style and has great potential.</p>

Table II Comparative Levels of EFL Examinations

Near Native speaker competence	CAMBRIDGE DIPLOMA	ARELS DIPLOMA	OXFORD PRELIMINARY
Fluent in speaking and writing	CPE	ARELS CERTIFICATE	ARELS PRELIMINARY
Communicates reasonably well	RSA III	FCE	
	RSA II		
Survival English	RSA I		
Post Beginners level			

Table III

Skills Tested/Examination Components

EXAM	SKILLS TESTED												SPECIAL SKILLS												
	TESTED THROUGH						TESTED THROUGH			TESTED THROUGH			PAPERS IN												
OXFORD PRELIM.	ORAL																								
	Dialogue Reading																								
	Prepared Talk																								
	Social Situations																								
	Narrative																								
	Structural Accuracy																								
	Persuasive clear speaking																								
	Pronunciation																								
	Summary																								
	Use of Register																								
	LISTENING																								
	Passage and Multiple Choice																								
Passage and open-ended Questions																									
Aural Discrimination																									
Dialogue/Discussion Participation																									
READING																									
Vocabulary Items																									
Passage and Multiple Choice																									
Open-ended Questions																									
Practical Application of Information																									
Literature																									
Summary																									
WRITING																									
Narrative Composition																									
Description Composition																									
Reflective Composition																									
Argument Presentation																									
Letter/note Writing																									
Use of Register																									
Structural Accuracy																									
Open-ended Questions																									
Free expression of ideas																									
Critical Appreciation																									
Knowledge of British Life and Institutions																									
OPTIONS																									
Translation																									
Business English																									
English for Science																									
Literature																									
ARELS ORAL PRELIM	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
ARELS ORAL CERT.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
ARELS ORAL DIPLOMA	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
F. C. E.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
C. P. E.	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
CAMBRIDGE DIPLOMA	N																								
RSA I	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
RSA II	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		
RSA III	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		