

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH QUALIFICATIONS: CHALLENGES AND APPROACHES

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Rezumat. *Articolul de față are drept scop prezentarea structurii examenului Cambridge de nivelul B2, cel mai des solicitat astăzi de către elevii și studenții din țara noastră. Autoarea prezintă părțile examenului, oferă sfaturi și indică cele mai des întâlnite probleme care apar în procesul susținerii acestuia. De asemenea, autoarea vine și cu sugestii pentru evitarea comiterii erorilor și greșelilor comune.*

Abstract. *The purpose of this article is to present the structure of the Cambridge B2 First level exam, most often requested today by pupils and students in our country. The author presents the parts of the exam, offers advice and indicates the most common problems that occur in the process of taking it. The author also comes up with suggestions to avoid making common mistakes and errors.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *structuri gramaticale, vocabular, părți de vorbire funcționale, parafrază, indicii.*

Keywords: *grammatical structures, vocabulary, functional parts of speech, paraphrasing, cues.*

Increasingly, more and more students in our country become interested in taking one of Cambridge English Qualifications, in particular the exams that allow them to be exempted from national exams or to continue their studies abroad. In this regard, the growing demand, in turn, has led to the organization of preparation course at various language centers, schools and universities. Although there are specially trained teachers offering their services at such centers, the teaching staff at schools and institutions of higher education strongly feel the necessity to come to terms with these qualifications, study their structure and requirements.

The most popular Cambridge examination that is demanded locally is B2 First as it is the one that can help school leavers to get the best mark at the national exam without taking it. Cambridge English First examination has four papers or simply called parts. Each part consists of a number of particular tasks. The first paper is called *Reading and Use of English*. It takes 1 hour 15 minutes and consists of 7 tasks or parts. Part 1 is a multiple choice gap-fill. Students have to choose from words A, B, C or D to fill in each gap in a text. This part mainly tests the appropriate use of collocations, fixed expressions, phrasal verbs, connectors, close synonyms. Students have to pay attention to the environment of the gap – prepositions, parts of collocation. They have to look at sentences BEFORE and AFTER the gap, eliminate wrong answers, giving themselves clear arguments why they don't fit. At the end, they have to reread the whole sentence with the final choice to check if it makes sense. Part 1 mainly tests vocabulary, but students may also need to understand grammatical connections between words, or the text as a whole. In order to prepare for this task, it is good that students should keep a record of words that often go together (they are called *collocations*, e.g. *drive a car, make noise*). Part 2 of *Reading and Use of English* mainly tests grammar structures. In Part 2 there is a text

with eight gaps. There are no sets of words from which to choose. Part 2 mainly tests ‘grammar words’ or functional parts of speech like articles (e.g. *the, a*), auxiliary verbs (e.g. *do, has*), pronouns (e.g. *they, whose*), prepositions (e.g. *at, in, from*), linking expressions (e.g. *despite*) and verb forms (e.g. *would do*), as well as words in phrasal verbs (e.g. *put on*) and fixed phrases (e.g. *in spite of the fact that*). Students must only use one word in each gap and the spelling of the inserted words must be correct. They always have to fill in the gap in Part 2. The gap can never be left blank in the sentence. As well as that, answers are never hyphenated words such as *long-term*. Some gaps may have more than one possible answer, but students must only write one they consider the most appropriate. If they cannot answer a particular question, they should go on to the next ones and then come back to it later after they have completed the rest of the text. Students should pay attention to the environment of the gap, i.e. what is before and after the gap as there can be clear clues about what word to fill in. Students also have to predict what part of speech is needed for each gap. Also, it is important to remember that contracted forms like *she’s* or *wouldn’t* as they count as two words. Part 3 is also a text containing eight gaps. This time, each gap corresponds to a word. The stems of the missing words are given beside the text and must be changed to form the missing word. This part mainly tests the word formation section of vocabulary. Students first need to predict what part of speech is needed and then to identify the prefixes, suffixes or inner flexions they need to use in order to transform the given word into the needed one. They may, for example, need to form adverbs by adding *-ly* to adjectives, make nouns plural by adding *-s* or *-es*, change verb/adjective forms by adding *-ed* or *-ing*, or form comparative/ superlative forms by adding *-er* or *-est*. They may also have to make spelling changes (e.g. *wide* to *width*). Spelling is crucial in this part as only correctly spelled words get the only point given for every correct answer. One of the difficulties students face is the use of negative forms of words in particular contexts. Thus, it is not only a part based on their technical skills of word formation, but also on understanding the idea of the text on the whole. In order to help students get ready for this part, they ought to keep a record of words with affixes that they see while they are reading in English. When they learn a word, it is advisable to use a good dictionary to find out which affixes they can add and how these change the meaning. They should note them down, with example sentences. Part 4 consists of six separate questions, each with a lead-in sentence and a gapped second sentence to be completed in two to five words, one of which is given as a ‘key word’. Part 4 tests grammar *and* vocabulary by asking students to use different structures and words to express the same idea. They have to write their answer in two, three, four or five words the most. This includes the word in capitals, which they have to use and mustn’t change (it is called the *key word*). They lose marks if they ignore any of the given instructions. The answer is conventionally divided into two parts. Each correct answer offers them two marks, with one mark for each part of the answer. So Part 4 has more possible marks than Parts 1, 2 or 3. For some questions, more than one answer is possible,

but students must only write one answer. Students also have to check that the spelling is correct otherwise they will lose marks for spelling mistakes [1].

Part 5 is a text followed by six multiple-choice questions. Texts in Part 5 are 550–650 words each. Questions may test their ability to understand overall meaning, main ideas or details, as well as attitudes or opinions. They may need to use clues to understand things that aren't actually said. The first line can be a question or an unfinished statement. Questions follow the order of information in the text. Questions may ask them to work out the meaning of words or phrases using the context, or to focus on reference words like *it* and *this*. Questions could be about the use of examples or comparison, the writer's purpose, or the tone, (e.g. *critical*) of the text. Students don't need to understand every word of the text to be able to answer the questions. So the advice will be not to spend too much time on expressions they don't know. One important aspect is that students ought to choose their answer according to what the text says, not what they think the correct answer should be from their general knowledge, or their own opinions. One more difficulty students face could be the temptation they have when they see the same words in options as in the text itself. This is usually a kind of "trap" as every correct answer is a paraphrase from what is said in the text.

Part 6 is a text from which six sentences have been removed and placed in a jumbled order after the text. A seventh sentence, which does not need to be used, is also included. They must use each sentence only once. Part 6 tests students' understanding of the overall structure of the text, and the development of ideas, opinions and events. The instructions tell them what kind of text it is and what it is about. The text has a title, and often some background information below it. It is important that students are taught some basic concepts as *reference words* as these are extremely important in identifying the correct sentence to be included.

The final part of *Reading and Use of English* paper is a text, or several short texts preceded by ten multiple-matching questions. In Part 7 there may be one long text divided into sections or a number of shorter texts. There are 10 questions which they match with the sections or short texts (A, B, C, etc.), according to the question at the top, e.g. *Which person ...*. Part 7 basically tests their ability to spot some particular information in the given texts. They need to understand detail, attitudes and opinions in the questions, and identify the part(s) of the text which express the same idea. The instructions tell them what kind of text it is and what it is about. It always has a title. The information they need may not be in the same order as the questions. There may be evidence for a particular answer in more than one sentence or part of a sentence. The main difficulty this part poses to students is that different texts or parts of the text may contain similar ideas or use some words or phrases from the questions, but they have to read carefully to decide which say exactly the same thing as the questions, but in different words. They will need to use the same option for more than one question, e.g. four answers might all be *A*. there is no clear number of answers for each text. All in all, in the

Reading and Use of English candidates have to show the ability to apply their knowledge of the language system by completing the first four tasks. They are also expected to demonstrate understanding of specific information, text organisation features, tone and text structure [2].

The second paper in the B2 First exam is Writing. It lasts 1 hour 20 minutes and candidates have to do 2 parts. Part 1 is a mandatory one and it is always an essay presented through a rubric and short notes. There is a question or statement to discuss and students are also given some notes to guide their writing. They ought to write between 140 and 190 words and allow about 40 minutes for this task, including time to plan their text and for proofreading. Essays must be well organised into distinct paragraphs, with good linking expressions. As in most cases the reader of the essay is a teacher, students have to use fairly formal register of language. They should write full sentences with correct grammar and punctuation, using a good range of language and spell the words accurately. The problem that often occurs when writing essays is that students cannot possibly see both sides of the same issue. For that they need to think of points they disagree with, imagine what someone who disagrees might say and note them down giving reasons and examples. When writing for *and* against, they should list their points in two columns so that they can balance the essay.

In Part 2 students can choose one of questions out of 3 possible options. The tasks are situationally based and presented through a rubric and possibly a short input text. The task types are: an article, a letter or email, a review, a report. Candidates are expected to be able to write using different degrees of formality and different functions: advising, comparing, describing, explaining, expressing opinions, justifying, persuading, recommending and suggesting. The possible marks for Part 1 and Part 2 are the same. In all tasks they are explicitly told who they are writing to and why. Thus, the register of the text should be clear from the start. All the conventions of the texts should be fully respected [3].

The third paper is Listening and it lasts about 40 minutes. Students both hear and see the instructions for each task, and they hear each of the four parts twice. Students hear pauses announced so that they could use this time for looking at the task and the questions carefully. At the end of the test they have five minutes to transfer the answers onto the answer sheet (if it's a paper-based exam). Part 1 is a series of eight short unrelated extracts from monologues or exchanges between interacting speakers. There is one three-option multiple-choice question per extract. The questions include the information about a situation followed by a direct question. All the options are somehow reflected in the recording and students must be able to distinguish the correct answer by identifying the idea, not the same words used the options. The correct answer is always a paraphrase. Part 2 is a short talk or lecture on a topic, with a sentence completion task which has ten items. Students do not have to change the words they have to fill in. The difficulty of these words does not exceed B2 level. There will always be another word or even several words the students could mistake for the correct answer.

These are usually called “distractors”. Part 3 consists of five short related monologues, with five multiple matching questions. Before they answer a question, it is advisable they wait until they have heard everything the speaker has to say. Students have to listen for ideas, not just individual words that are similar to those in the given options. Part 4 is an interview or conversation, with seven multiple choice questions. For every question they hear a ‘cue’ – words that express a similar idea to the question – that tells them the answer is in that part of the recording. The options use phrases or sentences that rephrase, summarise or report the ideas in the text. Students are expected to be able to show understanding of attitude, detail, function, genre, gist, main idea, opinion, place, purpose, situation, specific information, relationship, topic, agreement, etc.

The last paper in the Cambridge English exam is the Speaking part. It last about 14 minutes for a pair of candidates. There are two examiners, but one of them does not take part in the conversation. Part 1 is a conversation between the examiner (the ‘interlocutor’) and each candidate. One aim of this part is to make the candidates feel comfortable, settle down by asking them personal questions about themselves, their hobbies and interests. In Part 2 students have to speak twice: once to speak about a set of photographs and answer a question (for one minute) and the second time to answer a question about their partner’s photographs. The difficulty here is that candidates lack the ability to speculate about the pictures and simply describe them. Also, it is important to use some specific vocabulary when referring to the pictures. Part 3 is a discussion question with five written prompts. Candidates have to talk to each other in a natural way, negotiating, agreeing and disagreeing politely. The main difficulty occurs when candidates transform this part into two distinct monologues and forget about creating a natural dialogue between them. Part 4 is a discussion on topics related to Part 3 thematically.

Conclusion. Having prepared a great number of students for Cambridge English Qualifications, I have to say that students need to get ready for these exams more thoroughly, conscientiously as these require a lot of effort, knowledge and attention. It would be advisable for school teachers and university lecturers to use the specially designed preparation materials for Cambridge qualifications during their lessons or lectures as the former would definitely add more variety, structure, and even freshness to the teaching process and would certainly motivate our students to conquer higher “peaks” of learning.

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