

EFL Exams in Britain Looked at Comparatively

by Lois Arthur

Which Exam and What does it mean?

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 in Britain 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. 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 the fact that more and more centres are offering them 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 recognized and accepted for quality abroad. The examinations are thorough, particularly in testing written ability, and, in the case of

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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

TABLE I — EFL EXAMS AVAILABLE

<u>NAME OF EXAMINING BODY</u>	<u>NUMBER OF COMPULSORY PAPERS</u>	<u>DATES EXAMS ARE SET</u>
	<i>Preliminary</i> : Oral component only	<i>Preliminary</i> : March, July, October
ARELS	<i>Certificate</i> : Oral component only	<i>Certificate</i> : February, May, August, November
	<i>Diploma</i> : Oral component only	<i>Diploma</i> : June (November)
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE EXAMINATIONS SYNDICATE	<i>Preliminary</i> : Not yet generally available, in pilot form only at present <i>First Certificate</i> : 5 papers—Oral; Listening; Reading; Composition; Use of English. <i>Proficiency</i> : 5 papers—Oral; Listening; Reading; Composition; Use of English. <i>Diploma</i> : Choice of 4 out of 5 papers.	First Certificate } Proficiency } June and December Diploma }
ROYAL SOCIETY OF ARTS	RSA I } 3 papers RSA II } at each level RSA III } Oral, written and reading	RSA I } RSA II } March, May, July RSA III } and November
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD EXAMINATIONS SYNDICATE	Preliminary only at present: 2 papers Reading and Writing.	<i>Preliminary</i> : March only

awarding 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 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 com-

PLACES EXAMS MAY BE TAKEN

Approved centres (schools with language laboratories) in UK and abroad. List available from: The Director, ARELS Examination Trust, 48 Russell Square, London

Approved centres in UK and abroad. List available from: The Secretary (Exams in English), Syndicate Buildings, 17 Harvey Road, Cambridge.

Approved centres in UK and abroad. List available from: Assistant Secretary, Royal Society of Arts Examinations Board, Murray Road, Orpington, Kent.

Approved centres in UK plus 2 or 3 abroad. List available from: The Secretary, Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, Ewert Place, Summer-town, Oxford.

municative 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.

STATUS AND RECOGNITION

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

Proficiency is given 'O' level equivalence by the Cambridge Exams Syndicate. First Certificate 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.

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.

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.

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

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ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

A small number of positions are available for experienced ESL/EFL teachers at Chinese educational institutions. For direct employment by the Chinese government, write to:

The Employment and Accommodation Office
 Foreign Experts Bureau
 State Council

Beijing
 People's Republic of China

Those teachers interested in applying for the small number of Fullbright grants in China, should write to:

The Council for the International Exchange of Scholars
 11 Dupont Circle
 Washington, DC 20036

EFL Exams in Britain

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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 vexing question, "Which exam and what does it mean?"

Ed. Note: The author has expressed her willingness to answer any further questions that might arise as a result of this article.

TABLE II – COMPARATIVE LEVELS OF EFL EXAMINATIONS

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

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TABLE III – SKILLS TESTED/EXAMINATION COMPONENTS

EXAM	SKILLS TESTED																
	ORAL	TESTED THROUGH									LISTENING	TESTED THROUGH				READING	Vocabulary Items
		Dialogue Reading	Prepared Talk	Social Situations	Narrative	Structural Accuracy	Persuasive clear speaking	Pronunciation	Summary	Use of Register		Passage and Multiple Choice	Passage and Open-ended Questions	Aural Discrimination	Dialogue/Discussion Participation		
OXFORD PRELIM.	NO										NO				YES	✓	
ARELS ORAL PRELIM.	YES			✓		✓		✓		✓	YES	✓			NO		
ARELS ORAL CERT.	YES	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	YES	✓	✓	✓	NO		
ARELS ORAL DIPLOMA	YES	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	YES	✓	✓	✓	NO		
F.C.E.	YES	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	YES	✓			YES	✓	
C.P.E.	YES	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	YES	✓			YES	✓	
CAMBRIDGE DIPLOMA	NO										NO				YES		
RSA I	YES				✓	✓		✓		✓	YES		✓		YES	✓	
RSA II	YES				✓	✓		✓		✓	YES		✓		YES	✓	
RSA III	YES	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	YES		✓		YES	✓	

S TESTED																SPECIAL SKILLS						
TESTED THROUGH						TESTED THROUGH										PAPERS IN						
Vocabulary Items	Passage and Multiple Choice	Open-ended Questions	Practical Application of Information	Literature	Summary	WRITING	Narrative Composition	Decriptive 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
✓			✓			SEY	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓					OZ				
						OZ												OZ				
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✓	✓	✓			✓	SEY	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				SEY	✓			✓
		✓		✓		SEY			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	OZ				
✓		✓				SEY	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓					OZ				
✓		✓			✓	SEY	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				OZ				
✓		✓			✓	SEY	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				OZ				