In this opening chapter we try to piece together the development of the CPE in the last century. This is no simple task, as there had been no conscious effort to document its progress at any stage until recently (see Taylor 1979; Spolsky 1995). The account is thus partial and we are at the mercy of what evidence there is and our interpretations of it. However, without such a historical perspective it is not easy to see why the exam is like it is today. By trying to document critical moments in the exam’s history we can try to understand the forces that have shaped it.

CPE 1913–1945

Roach, the founding father of the Cambridge EFL examinations, records how in 1858 the Syndicate began its role as one of the university-based public examining bodies taking responsibility for school-leaving examinations in Britain. Very early on it also developed an overseas extension of its activities arising from the growth of English-medium school systems in South East Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and parts of South America, and by 1898 it had 36 colonial centres and 1,220 colonial candidates (Roach 1971: 145–146).

Roach (1944: 35) details how testing the English of foreigners was not to start until 1913, when the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) was instituted by the Local Examinations Syndicate. The rationale behind its introduction is unclear. All we have is the following extract from the papers of James Roach:

And now at last for the Take-over bid. Why the Syndicate started the examination in 1913, no one knows. It must, I think, have been a break away by Exeter University College from the London examination. Both were based on a course for foreigners, both were heavily academic, with a paper on Phonetics. I think both had the same examiner in this, Professor Daniel Jones. (Roach undated page 4)

The First World War obviously put a stop, and Exeter must have asked for it postwar. It teetered along with 14 or 15 candidates a year, a loss, though
1 A survey of the history of the CPE in the twentieth century

no one was vulgar enough to cost things until I came along and had found my feet. (Roach undated page 5)

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. (See Appendix 1 at the end of the book for a copy of this first CPE paper.) The examination closely matched the contents of Sweet’s (1899) ‘The Practical Study of Languages’ regarded by Howatt (1984) as one of the best ELT methodology books ever written. In all, the candidates spent 12 hours on an extremely demanding test of their abilities in English.

1913 Examination

(i) Written:  
(a) Translation from English into French or German 2 hours  
(b) Translation from French or German into English, and questions on English Grammar 2½ hours  
(c) English Essay 2 hours  
(d) English Literature (The paper on English Language and Literature [Group A, Subject 1] in the Higher Local Examination) 3 hours  
(e) English Phonetics 1½ hours  
(ii) Oral:  
Dictation ½ hour  
Reading aloud and Conversation ½ hour

It is interesting to note that an oral test (reading aloud and conversation), with associated dictation, was present in an international EFL test at such an early stage alongside the grammar and translation-based activities in vogue at the time. Its multidimensionality is testimony to an eclectic approach to language testing that was to survive to this day. The examination remained very much the same throughout the 1920s, with the number of languages for translation increasing in 1926 to include Italian or Spanish. Some slight alterations had also been made to timing by 1926: Reading and conversation is shortened from ½ hour to 20 minutes and English Literature from 3 hours to 2½ hours.

In 1930 a special literature paper was provided for the first time for foreign students. Compared to the 1913 exam the choice of topics had become more general. In 1913, the choice was very anglocentric:

a. The effect of political movements upon nineteenth-century literature in England  
b. English Pre-Raphaelitism  
c. Elizabethan travel and discovery  
d. The Indian Mutiny
The development of local self-government

Matthew Arnold

By 1930, subjects were more general and suitable for the variety of candidates.

1. The topic that is most discussed in your country at the present time
2. Fascism
3. The best month in the year
4. Good companions
5. Any English writer of the twentieth century
6. Does satire ever effect its purpose, or do any good?

In the same year plans were laid by Roach to adapt the examination to the needs of a wider public. The regulations for the year 1932 were published in May 1931 and noticeably the paper on Phonetics had disappeared as a formal test (and so too the earlier questions on English grammar in the translation paper).

A typically thoughtful rationale for this was provided by Roach (1931) in an internal memo:

I suggest that the paper on English Phonetics and the requirement of a knowledge of Phonetics be eliminated from this examination.

(1) Neither the Syndicate in the Higher School Certificate Examination nor the University in the Modern Languages and English Triposes require a knowledge of Phonetics.

(2) Phonetics are no doubt a great aid in learning pronunciation – we can adequately test the results in the oral examination.

(3) Our Certificate is not one of aptitude for teaching English. Were it so, there might be more point in examining on Phonetics. Some countries may require modern language teachers to be proficient in Phonetics, but even so they may not accept our test as sufficient evidence, while at the same time we may be imposing this test on candidates who have no need of it.

(4) With many candidates Phonetics are probably a thing to be ‘got up’ for this examination and to be forgotten thereafter. They may deter some possible candidates from ever entering at all and, to be successful, they almost certainly require a teacher. The rest of the syllabus does not – any ‘mademoiselle’ living au pair in a girls’ school could readily get such guidance as she needs for the literature paper. The elimination of Phonetics should therefore make the syllabus more possible for a wider public – I do not believe that it need lower the standard.

(Roach 1931)

An internal paper headed ‘Certificate of Proficiency in English July 1934’ (UCLES 1934) records the details of the new syllabus:
1 A survey of the history of the CPE in the twentieth century

1934
Oral: Dictation, Reading and Conversation.
Written: (a) Translation from English to French or German or Italian or Swedish: 2 hours.
(b) Translation from French or German or Italian or Swedish into English: 2 hours.
(c) English Essay: 2 hours.
(d) English Literature: 3 hours.

Paper (d), English Literature, will contain
(i) Questions on prepared books. Questions will be set on all the books prescribed but candidates will only be expected to choose three books for study and to answer the questions dealing with those three. The questions will be so framed as to give candidates an opportunity of showing whether they can understand and interpret representative works of English Literature.
(ii) A question on an unprepared English passage which candidates will be asked to explain in such a way as to show that they have a proper appreciation both of the meaning and of the form of the passage.

A number of other events of importance for the future of CPE took place in the 1930s. 1935 was notable for the announcement that the official approval of the Board of Education (the Ministry of Education of His Majesty’s government) had been given to the examination. Roach was later to comment (1977: 2):

...We came fairly near to a ‘national’ certificate in 1935, year of birth also of the British Council, when I persuaded the Board of Education to grant its approval to the Certificate of Proficiency. The Board had no Seal, so the Royal Mint designed one for the certificate. The Seal has now gone, but the official approval continues... The Proficiency carries equivalence in the University of Cambridge, and doubtless many other places, ‘as part of the examination requirements for matriculation’. We may therefore think of the Cambridge First Certificate as O-level and the proficiency as A-Level, each being issued in three Grades ...

In 1937 the first mention of co-operation with the British Council appears, which had undertaken to give information concerning the examination to cultural societies and to official representatives of other countries; the start of a mutually beneficial collaboration which has lasted until this day.

By the outbreak of the Second World War CPE had Ministry of Education approval and recognition for matriculation purposes at British universities. This and its use in British Council teaching operations overseas led in 1941 to a formal collaboration between the Council and the Syndicate on the organisation of the Cambridge EFL examinations (UCLES 1982: 1). For some years there had been collaboration with the British Council, particularly with regard to overseas arrangements, and thus in 1941 this association was
formalised by the establishment of a Joint Committee which was formed to
deal with the increased amount of detailed administrative matters. This
included representatives of English language teaching in its various spheres,
e.g. further education centres, recognised private schools of English,
university departments, British Council specialists with overseas experience,
and whenever possible direct overseas representation (UCLES 1973: 4).

In one of the very first references to the concept of washback validity,
Roach questioned how far examinations act as a stimulus and a focal point for
both teachers and taught, and thereby promote the expansion of the studies that
they are designed to test. He concluded that this was a matter that does not
lend itself to exact research. The examinations were only part of a process. He
added that it is certain that in the revival and expansion of systematic English
studies which is revealed by these statistics, the activity of the British Council
looms very large. Alike at home and abroad, the Council constantly sought
new channels of services, responded to new requests, and carried teaching and
assistance wherever they were needed (Roach 1934: 36).

One can also detect in the internal documentation available for the 1930s
the recognition that a reasonable volume of entries was necessary for such
examinations to survive (this imperative of course remains with exam boards
to this day). For a number of years CPE had only led a modest existence. It
was held only at one centre, in London, and as late as 1931 the total number
of candidates was only 15.

Spolsky (1995: 63–64) commented:

The examination remaining so small, there may well have been
discussions, Roach recollected, of closing it, but instead, full
responsibility was handed to Roach, who prophesied that he would spread
the examination round the world in ten years.

In 1932 new centres were created in England and also on the continent of
Europe. An internal paper (UCLES 1933) draws attention to ‘the increase in
numbers and the institution of a December examination’. 1936 saw the
inclusion of a syllabus in Economic and Commercial Knowledge as an
alternative to Literature, presumably intended to increase candidature by
offering exams perceived as appropriate by students and end-users. In 1937
there is the first mention of arrangements at German universities, and that the
examination was held three times, in March, July and December. As a result
of these developments, the number of candidates who completed the
examination for the full certificate rose (see Appendix 1.1).

Roach (1944: 35) notes that the year 1937 also brought a decision by the
University of Cambridge to accept the Certificate of Proficiency as ‘the
equivalent of the standard in English required of all students, British or
foreign, before entrance to the University’; Oxford gave similar recognition in
the following year.
I A survey of the history of the CPE in the twentieth century

By 1938 translation papers were being regularly set in a number of languages (see Appendix 1.3) and papers in other languages were available on request. Choices (two out of three) were given in July 1938 in the ‘From English’ translation paper, whereas there was no choice given in 1923. A history alternative could be offered in lieu of literature, as an approach to the study of English Life and Institutions, a paper which was introduced under that title in the following year. The examination was held five times in the year.

July 1938 exam
Oral: Dictation, Reading and Conversation.
Written:
   English Literature (3 hours)
   General Economic and Commercial Knowledge (3 hours)
   Translation from English (2 hours) – 2 out of 3 passages
   Translation into English (2 hours) – 2 passages
   English Composition (2½ hours)

The ‘English Essay’ is by 1938 called the ‘English Composition’. In the 1932 exam paper candidates had to write one essay, choosing a subject out of 6 choices. In the 1938 ‘English Composition’ paper there is an additional task: read a passage of 525 words and write a summary not exceeding 185 words.

Summary of changes by 1938 (changed from 1913)
- ‘English Phonetics’ paper is omitted.
- ‘Translation’ papers no longer include grammar questions.
- ‘English Literature’ paper became the first paper.
- An alternative paper to ‘English Literature’, ‘General Economic and Commercial Knowledge’, was introduced. (And ‘English Life and Institutions’ was added as another alternative in 1939.)
- ‘English Essay’ is renamed ‘English Composition’, and a new summary writing task is added. A longer time is allocated; changed from 2 hours to 2½ hours.

Centres were now being set up much further afield, not only in Europe but in North Africa, West Africa, the Middle East and China. By 1939 the CPE was offered in 30 countries. In consequence the papers set for translation reflected this widening interest (see Appendix 1.3). The proficiency examination thus developed steadily, with about 750 candidates each year by 1939 when a preparatory examination, the Lower Certificate in English, was introduced in response to a demand for an examination at a more elementary level. This quickly established itself as a recognised examination with its own status and currency and a much larger entry than Proficiency, reflecting the relative number of students at these different levels.
With the outbreak of the Second World War entries declined, not picking up again until 1943 when the official figures record 861. The majority of the candidates in Britain in this year were members of the Allied Forces, including Polish servicemen and Italian prisoners-of-war who made the most of an enforced stay in Britain (Cartledge 1971 in Taylor 1979: 8).

According to Roach:

Another important factor was the growing keenness of Service authorities to promote the study of English among Allied forces on British soil. Education officers and Liaison officers increasingly used the examinations, not merely as a test of progress made, but as an encouragement to regular study under conditions that were often difficult. For pupils of an Army Staff College or an RAF Initial Training Wing, tuition in English might have to be fitted into a crowded time-table. … Nor must one forget the allied civilians and friendly aliens who were learning English while working in war factories, as teachers and nurses, in commerce, or in the offices of Allied governments in London. Nor, finally those British improving their English while in prisoner-of-war or internment camps in Germany. One candidate, for lack of books, was prepared for the paper English Life and Institutes, chiefly from the ‘combined memories’ of several other members of the camp. … (Roach 1944: 37)

With the ending of the war thoughts turned to changes in the examination and we detail below the post-war changes that led up to the current revision period.

**Major syllabus changes 1945–75**

A new syllabus for CPE was introduced by UCLES in 1945. Language still only had a small part to play in the examination, with literature and translation of equivalent value.

A broad range of pathways through the examination was also possible, e.g. the alternative options to English literature. This was in all likelihood a response to the varying curriculum content of diverse educational systems in existing and former colonies as well as an attempt to maximise candidate numbers. The wide range of options in all three of the written papers, though addressing content validity demands, had obvious shortcomings in terms of parallel forms reliability, a point which will be taken up below.

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**CPE Syllabus 1945**

Oral:

Dictation, Reading and Conversation

Other tests, e.g. the written reproduction of a story read aloud by the examiner, could be added at the discretion of the Syndicate.
1 A survey of the history of the CPE in the twentieth century

Written:
(a) English Literature
   or English Life and Institutions
   or Survey of Industry and Commerce
   or English Language with Literature (for cases where no access to set books)
   (and from 1946 English Science Texts) (3 hours each)
(b) Translation from and into English (3 hours)
   Candidates not using the language of the country in which they are examined should consult the Local Secretary well in advance.
(c) English Language (composition and a passage of English with language questions) (3 hours)
   English Language with a Commercial Bias (1947)

Paper (a), English Literature, will contain
(i) Questions on prepared texts, of which candidates will choose three.
(ii) An unprepared English passage to be explained in such a way as to show proper appreciation of its meaning and form. As an alternative, candidates may answer one question from a choice dealing with English life and character.
Choice of texts for 1945: Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*; *The Centuries’ Poetry, Pope to Keats* (Penguin); Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Dent, King’s Treasuries, 1s. 2d., or other editions); Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Dent, 1s. 9d., or (UCLES 1944: 1) other editions); T.E. Lawrence, *Selections from Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (Methuen, 2s.); *Biography of To-day* (Longmans, Heritage of Literature, 1s. 8d.); Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; *Anthology of Modern Verse* (Methuen, 2s. 9d.); *Prose of our Time* (ed. Ratcliff, Nelson, 1s. 6d.).

Two separate translation papers (total 4 hours: 2 hours for ‘into English’ translation and another 2 hours for ‘from English’ translation) had been combined into one ‘Translation’ paper with 3 hours to complete all translations. Candidates were now required to work on 3 passages: ‘from English’ translation on one compulsory passage and another one of their choice, and one ‘into English’ translation which carried half of the total mark.

In 1945, the ‘English Composition (2 1/2 hours in 1938) paper was changed to an ‘English Language’ paper (c) (3 hours), which had basically the same content as the 1938 paper but with some additional language questions. For candidates who were unable to access set texts owing to wartime conditions there was an alternative to ‘English Literature’ called the ‘English Language with Literature’ paper.

The ‘English Language with Literature’ paper contained a compulsory first question and thereafter candidates could choose any four out of an eclectic range of thirteen questions that quite clearly made different demands and were hardly comparable. These included:
1 A survey of the history of the CPE in the twentieth century

- a letter or composition on a suggestion from the passage in Question 1
- a paraphrase of the full meaning of a passage of blank verse from Shakespeare
- a description of a man on the basis of a description of his house
- the correction and explanation of errors in five ungrammatical sentences
- the recommendation of two books of English literature a friend would enjoy and one which would present problems to nationals of your country and the reasons for your choice
- an essay on romantic novels in English
- an essay on Shakespeare’s view of tragedy or comedy
- a consideration of Wordsworth’s view of the aim of poetry in relation to English poetry familiar to you
- an essay on what is characteristically English about English literature, or about English people always acting on principle, or what English cookery reveals about the English character, or about the English taking their pleasures sadly.

Summary of changes in 1945

- More alternative papers were available for ‘English Literature’.
- Allocated 3 hours for both ‘into’ and ‘from English’ translation as one paper.
- ‘English Language’ paper replaced ‘English Composition’.

Further significant changes had taken place by 1953. It became possible to take a ‘Use of English’ paper as an alternative to ‘Translation’. This new paper has remained albeit with changed formats, until this day. It starts with a reading passage with short answer questions, 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. The long history of the ‘Use of English’ paper in this form partially explains why the current equivalent is apparently so diverse.

1953 paper
Oral: Dictation, Reading and Conversation
Written:
(a) English Literature (3 hours)
(alternatively a General English Literature 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 (3 hours)
or Translation from and into English
(c) English Language (composition and a passage of English with language questions) (3 hours)
Objectivity, reliability and fairness in this period

Spolsky (1995: 206) concludes:

It is clear from the kind of questions set that the objective question had no place in the thinking of Cambridge examiners … Examinations like these were invitations to the candidates to display their linguistic prowess in a variety of formally proscribed situations.

As two of the main focuses of the examination at that time were literature and translation, this was perhaps not too surprising. Despite the relief from marking it would offer, few overloaded academics in Britain would be in favour of objective formats for these papers given the obvious threat to validity this would pose.

Despite his concern with the lack of parallelism of the optional tasks referred to above, Spolsky does highlight one of the enduring characteristics of the UCLES examinations (ibid. 206):

The examiner was then expected to apply educated and moderated judgement in order to arrive at a fair and equitable decision on the standard that had been achieved. While we have no detailed account of the concern taken within the system to assure that this moderation worked in written examinations, we can see from his work on the oral examination the kind of care that Roach considered must be taken to make these judgements as fair as humanly possible.

He quotes extensively from Roach (1945) to illustrate how UCLES attempted to ensure fairness to candidates:

… Oral examiners received copies of Roach’s (1945) study, revised mark sheets and instructions, and a heading for their reports. They were invited to describe (1) the general conditions of the examination (Was it better to give the reading first? Was it possible to prevent communication between candidates? What was the average time? Would more time be an advantage?); (2) the reading test (Did two separate reading tests help? What did the examiner listen for in each? How would the examiner define the degree of proficiency expected at the different levels? Were any of the early candidates retested?); (3) the conversation (What degree of fluency and range of vocabulary was expected at each level? Were questions based on the reading passage?Were all candidates asked the same questions? What was the balance between questions requiring short answers and those encouraging free conversation? Did specific questions test specific vocabulary, the use of tenses, the knowledge of numerals, days of the week, and English names of counties? What do you suggest as a syllabus to define the range of the conversation test?); (4) the standards for the test as a whole (Would examiners prefer that standards be suggested or fixed? Should the standards be the sum of the various parts of the test? Should a candidate pass after failing one section of the test?); and (5) the dictation (Manner and speech of reading? What is it designed to test? What should
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