

Expert guidance on the new Proficiency Exam

The new format for the Cambridge English Proficiency due to be introduced in March 2013 should not present any unforeseen problems for the teacher or student. Existing task types have either been modified slightly or changed to bring them in line with the FCE and/or the CAE examinations (eg the Reading and Listening multiple-matching tasks). Some task types (eg the Use of English gapped sentences) have gone altogether and others which might seem to be new (eg Writing Part 1) are largely building on skills the students would already have been practising for the old exam format, ie summarising. Finally, the exam is shorter overall which will make it more accessible for the students.

However, the fact remains that the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) is a high level examination and requires certain skills and fairly intensive preparation. To teachers preparing students for the new exam therefore, I would suggest the following guidelines:

- **Reading and Use of English.** This is a combined paper with 7 parts to be completed in 1 ½ hours. Exam time will need to be used correctly and constructively. Students should therefore be trained in exam strategies and skills that will enable them to approach the tasks in the most effective way. *Expert Proficiency* contains a bank of important strategies and exam skills that will help the students to make the most of their exam time. Use of English tasks at this level focus on the ability to understand and manipulate ‘chunks’ of language so emphasis should be put on getting the students to learn items of vocabulary within a contextualised phrase or collocation. A programme of reading outside the classroom should be encouraged together with the use of a suitable English-English dictionary, such as the *Longman Exams Dictionary*. Through the Vocabulary Development and Language Development sections in *Expert Proficiency*, students will be presented with a wide range of collocational and idiomatic phrases. They will also be able to use the bank of further phrases and expressions at the back of the coursebook as a resource.
- **Writing.** The writing task types in Part 2 of this paper will be familiar to the students (article, letter, report, review, essay). *Expert Proficiency* devotes two Writing sections to each of these task types, with extra support and model answers at the back of the coursebook. The writing task in Part 1 draws on students’ existing knowledge and skills in relation to effective use of summarising. Together with that, students are asked to evaluate the opinions expressed in the two short texts that are given here, adding their own opinions. In other words, teachers should focus on training their students to express ideas in their own words and to use sophisticated language at the level to encapsulate their own ideas on the subject under discussion. *Expert Proficiency* devotes ten Writing sections (in 5 modules) to the development of advanced summarising and evaluation skills.
- **Listening.** Students at this level need to be familiar with idiomatic language as used by native speakers and to be able to grasp and understand a sophisticated level of language use. Students should therefore be encouraged to take as much responsibility as possible for their progress in this area, by watching films in English, listening to the radio in English or by watching discussion programmes on the Internet: there is no shortage of material available! *Expert Proficiency* provides skills-based exam training in this area together with an extra focus on idiomatic language arising from the exam tasks.

- **Speaking.** Fluency in speaking is made up of several components: 1 exposure over time to the use of native speaker-type language, 2 a grasp of essential vocabulary so that ideas can be expressed successfully and clearly, and 3, a familiarity with the grammatical structure of the language so that utterances can be organised in a grammatically accurate way to ensure mutual comprehension. It would be a good idea for teachers to organise classroom debates on topics related to those that normally occur in the examination. This will give students both practice in expressing their ideas and the opportunity to increase their fluency. The Speaking sections in *Expert Proficiency* focus not only on exam practice (although that is a significant element of each section) but also on the provision of topic-related ideas and vocabulary, together with input in the form of native speaker dialogues.

I hope that the above advice will prove useful during the forthcoming academic year and I wish all teachers every success in the preparation of their students!

Megan Roderick, Autumn 2012

About the author



Megan Roderick first taught EFL in the UK and has since spent 25 years teaching and writing in Greece, where her wide experience of teaching students of all ages and abilities – both at her own language school and elsewhere – has informed her writing of English Language materials. She is a qualified secondary school teacher with an MEd in TEFL.

Megan is the co-author (together with Carol Nuttall and Nick Kenny) of the brand new Pearson course *Expert Proficiency*. Her previous publications include secondary grammar courses, Michigan ECCE and ECPE Exam Practice books, Primary materials (*Our Discovery Island*) and Exams courses (*Cosmic B1*, *Activate B1+*). Her particular interests are the use of grammar as a vehicle for meaning, the process of conveying humour through the manipulation of language, and bringing the language alive through dialogue and story.