

Greek Results in the Cambridge ESOL CPE Exams: Brief analysis and explanations

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The Revised Proficiency has just been administered. Do you think it will be as popular as the old one?

I think it unlikely that any revisions would seriously affect the popularity of the Cambridge and Michigan Proficiency exams, at least so long as they are treated as a language teaching qualification in Greece. If the recent revisions in the Cambridge Proficiency have any effect, this will probably be on the relative proportion of candidates who choose one exam over the other.

Do you think that the introduction of the CPE Entry Test will screen out weak candidates and eventually raise the CPE pass rate which has been steady in Greece for the last decade (around 30%)?

The entry test is an excellent idea, and I do think it will help increase the pass rate. The question is, will the increase indicate an improvement in teaching, or will it just show that the entry test does a better job in recognising which learners should sit the exam (and in convincing candidates and parents)? Because this is exactly what the results indicate: irrespective of their age, the majority of candidates sit the exam before they are ready.

I would like to remind the readers that the Greek pass average is *less than half* of the worldwide average (around 30% and 65% respectively). The picture becomes grimmer when we look at the percentage of pass candidates who gain A and B grades: Greece has *one-third* of the world average (around 12% and 36% respectively).¹

It is well known that in Greece the majority of candidates entering Cambridge and Michigan exams are much younger than in the rest of the world. Does this affect the low pass rate in our country or other factors - such as preparation and not age - play a more important role in candidates' performance?

As I have already argued in the pages of *ELT News*, age is not a significant factor. If it were, then we would see a marked increase in the pass rate of older candidates (18+), but this doesn't seem to be the case. In fact, "the 14-17 range has on average the same pass rate as the 18+ range. A closer look reveals that the 14-15 range has a higher pass rate than the 16-17 (around 5% higher), whereas the 16-17 range has almost the same pass rate as the 18-19 range".²

Further support for the irrelevance of age comes from the *Cambridge ESOL Handbook*: "Greece and Portugal ... have a younger population than most countries, with almost 60% of candidates between 16 and 20 years of age".³ If age was a determining factor, then the pass rates in the two countries should be similar. They are not. In the December 2001 session, Greece achieved **almost half** the pass rate of Portugal (**32%** and **56%** respectively)!⁴

Why, then, do 2 out of 3 CPE candidates fail? I have identified four reasons contributing to the disappointing results. First, the short time learners spend in CPE preparation classes. Second, the 'gambling approach' to exams. Third, the persistent practice of spending a disproportionate amount of classroom time plodding through past papers. Finally, I think we should seriously consider that there might be a direct link between the low pass rates and the relaxed requirements for gaining a teaching license in Greece.⁵

Cambridge Advanced Certificate (CAE) and Michigan ALCE have started to attract bigger numbers of candidates. Is it because they have both been recognised by the Ministry of Education or because they cover certain candidates' needs e.g. in the work place?

I find it much more likely that recognition is the key factor. The increase in candidates could also have come about because these exams have become better known and/or are better promoted by language schools.

Greece is an exam-oriented country. Are language exams a real need?

Language exams provide employers and educational institutions with information about a candidate's language knowledge and skills, but they also have a 'sell-by date'. For example, a grade C in CPE doesn't say much without reference to *when* the grade was achieved and *what* the holder has done with the language since. Exams give learners and teachers a sense of achievement, but they also give a false impression of 'finality' (hence the popular expression "to finish with English").⁶ On balance, I think language exams are a real need, but should be treated with caution.

Some thoughts and suggestions

We like to pride ourselves of the high proportion of Greeks who can use other languages. Some colleagues have gone so far as to claim that we are somehow superior language learners. As a Greek, I would be very tempted to accept such a flattering proposition. Unfortunately, international language exam results do not tally with this notion, as Greece ranks in the bottom 10% (unless we would rather believe that it is the lesser learners who happen to sit the exams).

We seem, then, to be faced with two main possibilities: either Greeks are not good language learners, or Greek ELT needs to change. The extremely low pass rates cannot be adequately explained by the learners' age and the gambling attitude towards exams. Perhaps we would be wise to re-assess our perception of exam preparation and language teaching/learning.

But this is the long-term solution. In the short term, a course of action that I think can lead to improvement is for Cambridge and Michigan to publicise the pass rates of individual schools for each exam session. Other helpful statistics would be the respective pass rates of candidates registered through schools and the ones registered as individuals (which are presumably those having had private tuition). Making this information publicly available will have three beneficial results. It will enable prospective candidates to make informed choices, it will provide an incentive for those involved in exam preparation and ELT in general, and it will help us draw more accurate conclusions.

¹ Interested readers can examine recent results in the *Cambridge ESOL* website (www.cambridgeesol.org/stats/index.cfm) and draw their own conclusions.

² From my response to the previous survey (*ELT News* 127, September 1999) see www.gabrielatos.com/WhyFail.pdf

³ http://www.cambridgeesol.org/support/downloads/cpe/cpe_hb_intro.pdf (p. 7).

⁴ http://www.cambridgeesol.org/stats/2001/cpe_dec.htm.

⁵ Greek citizens can receive a licence to teach EFL in the private sector on the strength of the Cambridge or Michigan 'Proficiency' language certificate. There are no requirements for further development.

⁶ It is a widespread trend for Greek parents to want their children to get the First Certificate (if not the Certificate of Proficiency) before they start preparing for the extremely competitive university entry examinations (i.e. by the age of 16 or 17).