

Greek Results in the FCE and CPE Exams: Explanations and Solutions

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This article is based on my response to a survey carried out by *ELT News*, which invited teacher educators in Greece to offer their views on the reasons behind the extremely low rate of success of Greek candidates taking the FCE and CPE examinations of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES; now Cambridge ESOL). The response was originally published in *ELT News* 127, September 1999. In the original version, I responded separately to the four questions asked by the editor;¹ in this version (April 2002), I have re-organised and expanded my discussion.

BACKGROUND

The FCE and CPE exams of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) are extremely popular in Greece. Nevertheless, the success rate in Greece is by far one of the lowest in the world: just under 50% for FCE and around 30% for CPE. In this article I identify three main reasons for this unfortunate situation: popular myths about the exams, misguided approaches to exam preparation, and syndromes ailing ELT in Greece. I also propose short- and long-term solutions to the problem.

EXPLANATIONS

Three popular myths

A large number of teachers, learners and parents in Greece seem to be influenced by three very popular ELT myths. The uncritical acceptance of these myths and their use to explain away the extremely low pass rate in both FCE and CPE are among the main reasons why little has changed in the way language examinations are approached in Greece.

Myth 1. Greek candidates are too young when they take the exams.

It is of course true that Greek candidates sit for the exams at a younger age than in other countries. On the other hand, this does not seem to be a reason for the low pass rate. My examination of the breakdown of the results according to age shows that in the FCE the 14-15 range has a much higher pass rate (more than 10% higher) than the 16-19 range, and a slightly higher pass rate (3-4%) than the 20-plus one.

Similarly, age is not a factor in the CPE. 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.

¹ Why do Greek candidates underperform in the FCE? Why do Greek candidates underperform in the CPE? Why do re-sits fail? What can be done to improve the situation?

Myth 2. Greek candidates take the FCE too soon.

The UCLES booklet on the FCE (1995: 5) states that "information from centres indicates that the examination is often taken after approximately 500-600 hours of study of English." Now, the usual short route to FCE in Greece is one Junior class and five so-called 'regular' classes of one academic year each (termed A, B, C, D and FCE), which corresponds to 750 hours of study. There is also a large number of candidates who follow the long route; that is, they do an additional Junior and/or 'regular' class (totaling 850-1000 hours of study).

It seems then that Greek candidates sit for the FCE exam after a much longer period of preparation than candidates from other countries.

Myth 3. Learners are ready for the CPE one or two years after passing the FCE.

Preparation time does seem to be a contributing factor to the CPE results. On average, Greek candidates take the CPE exam 1-2 years after they have succeeded in the FCE (250 hours on average). There are even cases of learners sitting for the CPE 1-2 years after they had failed the FCE! The main reason is that learners and/or their parents are anxious to 'finish with English' (as they put it) before the learners start their two-year preparation for the extremely competitive Greek university entry examinations.

On the other hand, it appears that Greek candidates are indeed encouraged to take this exam much too soon. Keeping in mind that UCLES has introduced the CAE specifically to bridge the gap between FCE and CPE, it seems that the average Greek CPE candidate doesn't have enough preparation to reach the appropriate level. In other words, most Greek learners sit for the CPE when they should be sitting for the CAE.

Popular approaches to exam preparation in Greece

My experience in running exam preparation courses and seminars for teachers points towards the existence of two main approaches to exam preparation in Greece, which I term teaching 'through' and 'for' the exam.

Teaching through the exam

Tests are used as the only teaching materials. Learners are asked to prepare (part of) a test at home; in class the teacher checks the answers and provides the correct ones. Correct answers are counted and an average score is calculated. The teacher or the students themselves keep a record of the scores in order to check 'development'. Tests or papers already dealt with may be set in class after a period of time so that the teacher can check whether the students have 'learned' the items 'practised' in previous lessons. The underlying principle seems to be that students should 'cover' as many materials as possible in order to increase the chance of 'knowing' the items in the exam.

Teaching for the exam

Teaching is geared entirely towards the exam. Every effort is made so that texts are as close as possible to

the ones used in the exam in terms of length, type, style and level of difficulty. Learners are asked to perform only the task-types present in the exam. On the whole, the materials used simulate exam materials. Special exam-prep coursebooks are used, and usually a lot of exam-type supplementary books. The underlying principle, again, seems to be quantitative; the more they become familiar with exam-type texts and exercises the better their chances of success.

Syndromes ailing ELT in Greece

The two approaches to exam preparation are associated with a number of general attitudes and practices regarding ELT content and methodology in Greece, which in my view are responsible for the low pass rates in FCE and CPE. These syndromes can also explain why learners appear to be de-motivated and unwilling to participate.

The grammar syndrome

A disproportionate amount of time is devoted to grammar. My analysis of exam papers shows that very little grammar is examined directly in the FCE. What is more, the grammar needed to gain a 'pass' in the FCE is that of an intermediate level class ('D' in the Greek ELT school system).

The vocabulary list syndrome

Vocabulary teaching consists mainly of the teaching of single word items, with 'meaning' being the only information given (quite often in the form of Greek 'equivalents'). Very little attention is given to the vocabulary actually examined directly in the FCE: collocations and fixed expressions.

The last minute syndrome

Very little principled skills work has usually been done before intermediate level (D and/or E classes). Reading and listening texts are used only/mainly for grammar and vocabulary work, whereas writing and speaking are seen mainly as vehicles for grammar and vocabulary practice. Then, one or two years before learners sit the FCE they are somehow thrown in at the deep end. They are asked to read or listen to longer and more complex texts and perform novel tasks such as reading/listening selectively, inferring information/attitude, understanding text organisation, and disregarding or inferring the meaning of unknown lexis.

The coursebook-as-Bible syndrome

Teachers just plough through the coursebook, regardless of the materials' possible limitations and omissions, or the actual needs of learners. Learners don't usually deal with topics or do tasks which are within their interests and needs; instead, they do a succession of loosely related or even unrelated exercises.

The testing syndrome

Learners are examined rather than taught. Exercises and tasks are seen as a means for the teacher merely to check what learners have learned, rather than being

exploited to raise awareness and provide support and guidance for the learners' development. This is compounded by the overuse of practice tests and past papers.

The correct answer syndrome

Learners are not really involved in the process of learning. The 'rationale' seems to be that listening to the correct answers automatically results in increased knowledge and skills. For example, after a reading task it is common for teachers to just check the answers without guiding learners to investigate helpful clues and successful strategies.

The compartmentalisation syndrome

Learners do 'vocabulary' or 'listening' or 'speaking' lessons as if those elements of language knowledge and use were unrelated. There seems to be little integration of the different aspects of understanding and using the language.

Why do re-sits fail?

There are two reasons for this. First, the same methodology is used, with the *testing syndrome* being the major influence, as the favoured approach seems to be ploughing through more practice tests and past papers. Second, learners are not given help in the specific areas they need to develop. As a result, time is often wasted working on areas in which learners are strong enough.

SOLUTIONS

As a short-term solution, the approach I have been using is one that not only results in higher pass rates, but also helps learners use English effectively in real-life situations. I term this approach *teaching around the exam*.

Teaching has two goals. The primary goal is language awareness and development for use in real life. That is, the majority of lessons aim at developing language awareness and use, language skills, and learner autonomy. A wide variety of text-types is used and tasks are selected according to text-type, purpose and audience rather than only for the sake of practising particular sub-skills or exercise types. Exam preparation comes as a supplement. In exam-prep slots during the year and/or more intensively during the last two months, the students are helped to familiarise themselves with the exam format and are supported in tackling the exercises effectively, identifying pitfalls and managing their time efficiently.

The underlying rationale is that learners should first be helped to develop their language awareness and use at the level of the exam, and then familiarise themselves with the exam so as to be able to 'perform' to the best of their abilities.

Of course, the long term solution is the principled selection of materials and methodology aiming towards the development of language awareness and use in all areas, as well as learner autonomy, from the very beginning of language learning.