

# *IELTS vs. Cambridge exams: A review on different exam types*

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## ***Abstract***

*In this article I'm going to talk about the IELTS and the other Cambridge Exams (FCE, CAE, CPE). As we all know IELTS has two kinds of exams and the listening and speaking is the same in both. It has proven to be a real indicator of an individual's ability to communicate effectively in English. This is why the test has gained such popularity for immigration, study and work qualification. IELTS is available in two test formats: Academic or General Training. There are four parts – Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. FCE or the Cambridge First certificate is mostly for upper-intermediate students and since it's a minimum level required by university programs in English speaking countries it became popular. CAE is another type of exam held by Cambridge and it's mostly used for university purposes, and it is a thorough test of all areas of language ability. CPE is the highest-level qualification – proof that you are a highly competent speaker of English. It shows the world that you have mastered English to an exceptional level. It proves you can communicate with the fluency. In this article we are also going to talk about each one of these exam types' similarities and differences the grading points and what we should expect in each one.*

*Keyword: IELTS, Cambridge Exams, FCE, CAE, CPE*

## Research question

In this article as I said earlier I'm going to talk about the different types of exams, their format, content and their grading system so that it would help better to decide which of these are more suitable for which situation and what we need to know about the exams themselves in order to be prepared for the exam to get the best result. Obtaining an internationally recognized English certificate is now an important part on a high profile CV for a good job or to access to top universities. But what differentiates these international language exams? Which one is appropriate for which profile? Which exam is the best? To help you choose and to direct you towards the best option for your situation this article is looking at the differences of the most important internationally recognized English exams and highlights some main features. This article will look specifically at IELTS and the Cambridge Exams. What I hope to get as the answer to the question: "which type of exam is better to take?" is to be able to distinguish the differences and so I can choose a better type of exam.

## Review literature

When I was searching to find the differences among types of exams I came across with several articles and books. (Sluis) Validity of the results is one the main differences. A Cambridge certificate will be valid for the rest of your life, whereas IELTS and TOEFL are just valid for two years. In Cambridge exam there is a chance that you may fail the test therefore you won't be given any diploma whereas with IELTS and TOEFL you always get a diploma with your score. The validity of these tests is important too (a critical review of the IELTS writing test, 2010) different factors interfere with the consistency of the writing test in different degrees. Preparation for the test can be another fact that has been studied an a lot of researches, (Mousavi, 2014) test familiarization is designed to confirm that potential test takers are well knowledgeable in the general skills essential for test taking and to help them gain familiarity with the ways that are necessary to take a particular test. There hasn't been done much about this topic so I couldn't find a lot about other works that had been done.

## Method

In order to get information, what I did was to search on the internet and some books to find the answer to my question, so the type of this article would be descriptive. To do so I visited some original websites for the exam holders to get information on the elements that are important in the exam types such as the content, criteria and the scoring systems, and read some articles related to IELTS. In this article we want to compare these different exam types based on the modules they have because I think that in order to get prepared for the exam you need to know what to study so by reading and knowing different task types you may get ready easier and you can get better result as well. The result that I'm trying to get is to figure the best exam type for different situations and needs based on the

## ***IELTS***

This exam is held by British Council, IDP Education, and Cambridge Assessment English. It consists of two types the general and academic, which based on your purpose and need, you can choose one and get ready for that. The difference between the Academic and General versions is the content, context and purpose of each one. All the other features including time, length of written responses and score are the same. It is the only secure English language test approved for visa customers. In each exam type all four skills are tested, listening, reading writing and the speaking part which can happen either on the same day as the other parts of exam or on another day. You can take the academic version of this test if you want to Study at universities in English speaking countries. Most academic institutions in Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand IELTS accept IELTS as part of their entry requirements. And you can participate in the General version if you want to apply for a residential visa in the UK. (Hashemi, 2018) There is a band score for each part depends on how you answer the question and then you can get the overall score. In IELTS there is no pass and fail you will get the certificate no matter what your score is. The main differences among the general and academic versions are some types of questions; in both the listening is about 30 minutes plus 10 minutes to transfer. Different native (American, British or Australian) accents may be used in the Listening part, and all standard types of English are accepted in responses. In IELTS we have four modules:

### **A) listening**

There are different task types in the listening part such as: (Exam., (2019))

- Multiple choice – assesses detail information of specific points or an overall understanding of the main points. Test takers should choose the correct answer.
- Matching – assesses the listening skill for detail or the test taker’s understanding of information in a given conversation.
- The applicants are expected to match a list of items from the listening audio played to a list of options on the question paper.
- Plan, map, diagram labelling, note, summary, completion – assesses the ability to understand, for example, a description of a place, and to relate this to a visual representation.

### **B) Speaking**

The speaking part which can get about 11 to 14 min. in this part they are going to assess the candidate’s use of spoken English. It consists of three sections: (Exam., (2019))

- Part 1 - the examiner will ask you some general questions about yourself and a range of familiar topics, such as home, family, work, studies and interests. This part lasts between four to five minutes.

- Part 2 – the candidate will be given a Q-card which they should talk about a particular topic. They will have one minute to prepare and they can take notes on a piece of paper before speaking about that specific topic up to two minutes. At the end of this part, the examiner will ask one or two general questions on the same topic.

- Part 3 – The applicant will be asked further questions about the topic in Part 2. These will give you the opportunity to discuss more abstract ideas and issues. This section will last for about four and five minutes.

### C) Reading

It includes three different passages and takes about 60 min, it also tests different skills such as reading for gist, reading for main 10 ideas, reading for details, skimming, understanding the logical argument and recognizing writers' opinions, attitudes and purpose. The reading of IELTS also has two forms based on general or academic exam. (Hashemi, 2018) In Academic each section contains one long text. Texts are authentic and are taken from books, journals, magazines and newspapers. There are three texts and 40 questions. For the general reading there are three sections Section 1 contains two or three short factual texts. Topics are relevant to everyday life in an English-speaking country. Section 2 contains two short factual texts focusing on work-related issues like applying for jobs. Section 3 contains one longer, more complex text on a topic of general interest. (P.Cullen, 2016)

### D) Writing

As I said earlier it has two types based on the type of exam in General in the first task the test takers will be given a situation and required to write a letter inquiring information, or describing that situation. The style of the letter might be personal, semiformal or formal. In the second task the test taker will be asked to write an essay in response to a point of view, argument or problem. In the Academic IELTS the first writing is describing a bar chart or graph, and in the second one the candidates will have to write an opinion essay.it takes about 60 min.

The table below shows all the information we just said in summary:

<b>IELTS Academic</b>	<b>IELTS General Training</b>
IELTS Academic is suitable for an academic, higher learning environment. The test tasks are intended for all test takers in all subjects.	IELTS General is mostly used in a practical daily context. The test tasks reflect both workplace and social situations.

<p><b>Listening</b> (30 minutes, 10 extra minutes to transfer the answers on the answer sheet. There are four recorded monologues and conversations.</p>	<p><b>Listening</b> (30 minutes, 10 extra minutes to transfer the answers on the answer sheet. There are four recorded monologues and conversations</p>
<p><b>Reading</b> (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three long passages with tasks</li> <li>• Texts range from descriptive and factual to discursive and analytical.</li> <li>• Non-verbal materials such as diagraphs, and illustrations</li> <li>• Texts are authentic (taken from books, newspapers &amp; journals)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Reading</b> (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three long passages with tasks</li> <li>• Section 1 contains 2 or 3 short factual texts.</li> <li>• Section 2 includes two short, work-related factual texts.</li> <li>• Section 3 is one long text on a general topic</li> <li>• Texts are authentic (taken from official documents, books and newspapers).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Writing</b> (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing task 1 of at least 150 words, the candidates must summarize, describe, or explain a table, chart, or a diagram.</li> <li>• Short essay task 2 of at least 250 words.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Writing</b> (60 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letter writing task of at least 150 words</li> <li>• Short essay task of at least 250 words</li> </ul>
<p><b>Speaking</b> (11 to 14 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face-to-face interview</li> <li>• Includes short questions, speaking at length about a familiar topic, and a structured discussion.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Speaking</b> (11 to 14 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face-to-face interview</li> <li>• Includes short questions, speaking at length about a familiar topic, and a structured discussion.</li> </ul>

## Cambridge exams

Cambridge exams include: FCE (first certificate in English), CAE (certificate of advanced English) and CPE (certificate of professional English). They are all held by Cambridge Assessment English. A Cambridge Exam can be done on a computer or in writing, depending a bit on the exam center. FCE is the most important exam held by Cambridge and it has four sections. The score system is A, B, C, D, E or U. A, B, C means you can pass and the other three shows you fail the test. CAE exam is mostly suitable for people who want to work or study in other countries.

### **FCE** (FCE, 2019)

It is equivalent to B2 in CEFR which shows that learners have the language skills needed for communication in English-speaking countries. FCE has four parts consisting of:

#### Reading and Use of English (1 hour 15 minutes)

The task takers should answer to different types such as: multiple-choice cloze, open cloze, word formation, key word transformations, gapped text and multiple matching

#### Writing (1 hour 20 minutes)

There are two parts, Part 1: one compulsory question, Part 2: one question from a choice of three. They come in different types like: articles, email, essay, report, review

### Listening (about 40 minutes)

There are four types and the recordings can be monologues: answer phone messages, radio broadcasts and features, news, public announcements, stories and anecdotes, lectures and talks; or interacting speakers: conversations, interviews, discussions, radio plays.

### Speaking (about 14 minutes per candidate)

It has four parts: the first part that you have to talk to the examiner is the interview. The second part the candidates will be given some photographs they should talk about them. The third part the candidates should talk to another candidate and the last part will be a discussion.

## **CAE**

It is equal to C1 that is a proof of high-level achievement and it is mostly used for study, work and immigration. (CAE, 2019)

### Reading and Use of English (1 hour 30 minutes)

It consists of 8 different types like multiple-choice cloze, open cloze, word formation, cross-text multiple matching. The texts may be from newspapers and magazines, journals, books (fiction and non-fiction), promotional and informational materials.

### Writing (1 hour 30 minutes)

There are two parts: part 1: one compulsory question Part 2: one question from a choice of three. It can be a range from: essay, letter/email, proposal, report, review.

### Listening (about 40 minutes)

There are three parts including: multiple-choice and sentence completion

### Speaking (about 15 minutes per candidate)

There are four parts exactly the same as the FCE exam.

## **CPE**

It equals to C2 is the highest level. It is mostly used to study post-graduate courses. Depends on the type of exam you will be taking the exam in two days. The first day covers reading, writing and listening. Every module takes one to two hours, depending on your level. The speaking part of the exam usually takes place on another day and takes about 15 minutes, unlike the FCE and CAE the speaking for the CPE has three parts.

See the Appendix on the next page for the summary of the Cambridge exams.

	<b>FCE</b>	<b>CAE</b>	<b>CPE</b>
<i>Reading and use of English</i>	1 hour 15 minutes There are 7 parts	1 hour 20 minutes There are 8 parts from newspapers and magazines, journals, books (fiction and non-fiction), promotional and informational materials.	1 hour 30 minutes and there are 7 parts with different task types
<i>Writing</i>	1 hour 20 minutes You're given an essay title and two ideas clearly linked to the title. About 140–190 words. Article, email/letter, report or review. About 140–190 words.	1 hour 30 minutes You read a text, and then write an essay based on points included in the text. You write a text from a choice of text types – letter/email, proposal, report or review. 220 - 260 words	1 hour 30 minutes Some material to read (two texts, each approximately 100 words). Using the information in this material, you have to write an essay of 240-280 words. A choice of four questions (2–5). For Questions 2–4, you may have to write an article, a letter, a report or a review of 280-320 words.
<i>Listening</i>	About 40 minutes Eight short extracts from monologues or conversations between interacting	About 40 minutes monologues , discussions , interviews	About 40 minutes Four parts such as monologues , interviews
<i>Speaking</i>	Conversation with the examiner, the examiner also gives you two photographs and asks you to talk about them Conversation with the other candidate. Further discussion with the other candidate, guided by questions from the examiner	Conversation between the candidates and the interlocutor. The interlocutor gives you three pictures and asks you to talk about two of them. Conversation with the other candidate. Further discussion with the other candidate based on the topics or issues raised in the task in Part 3.	Conversation between the interlocutor and each candidate. The interlocutor gives you some spoken instructions and one or more pictures to look at. The interlocutor gives you a card with a question and some ideas on it and you have to speak for about 2 minutes on your own.



## Discussion

### Differences

In the previous section we mentioned general information about each exam types, now here we are going to look deeply in each one to see if they have any differences. The Cambridge exams are mostly for finding jobs but the IELTS is for the immigration purposes. Another difference is that there is no expiry date for any of the Cambridge exams whereas the IELTS exam expires in 2 years. There are different exams for each level in Cambridge such as: KET, PET, FCE, CAE, and CPE. But there is only one test for all levels in IELTS. There is no use of English in IELTS. The time allocated for each exam is different for example in FCE exam we may have 75 min for the reading and use of English but in CAE for this part we have 90 min and in the CPE exam these parts are separated like for the reading you have 90 min and for the use of English you have 90 min. The total time for FCE is 3 hours and 29 minutes, the CAE is 3 hours and 55 minutes and the CPE is 3 hours 56 minutes long, but the IELTS is shorter and it takes 2 hours and 45 minutes. For the speaking test as we said IELTS has three parts but FCE and CAE has four parts including: for the first part, a short conversation. In the second part some photos are shown and candidates are asked to talk about them. In the third part you have to have a conversation with the other candidate and decide on something. And the last part you have further discussion and questions related to part three. In the Cambridge exams for the speaking part we have a partner and the interactive communication is important but in the IELTS there is no partner and you have to answer the questions on your own. The scoring system for Cambridge exams are A, B, C, D, D, E and U. But for the IELTS there is a band score and based on how many questions you answered you will get a score. Another difference that these exam types have is the score and the CEF levels: the exam that is equivalent for A2 is one of the Cambridge exams KET, and other exams like PTE general level 1 and TOEIC (Test Of English for International Communication). After that there is B1 which for IELTS is 4-4.5, PET for the Cambridge exam, PTE general level 2. The students who take part in FCE can be in B2 as well as IELTS 5-6.5 and PTE level 3. CAE students are in C1 along with IELTS 7-8 and PTE level 4. And C2 which is the advanced part will be for the CPE takers and IELTS 8.5-9 and PTE level 5.

### Similarities

Both types of exams are testing the students' English language skills. Both of them are also well-known and internationally recognized. And they are both held by Cambridge. IELTS, FCE and CAE they have four parts in their exams but CPE has five parts, as I said use of English has a separate section. The writing in FCE takes about 80 min. there are two parts for it, the first one writing an essay based on prompts and the second one writing one from a choice of four questions: article, essay, story, report or review. For the CAE writing the first part they give you some material to read and then write an essay for that. The second one looks like the FCE exam. For both IELTS and Cambridge writing and speaking exams there are the same criteria that you will be assessed based on. For the writing: Task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy. And for the

speaking: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, Pronunciation. The FCE, CAE and CPE all have 4 papers in the first paper there are two sections: reading and use of English. The second paper is writing, the third paper is the listening and the last paper is speaking.

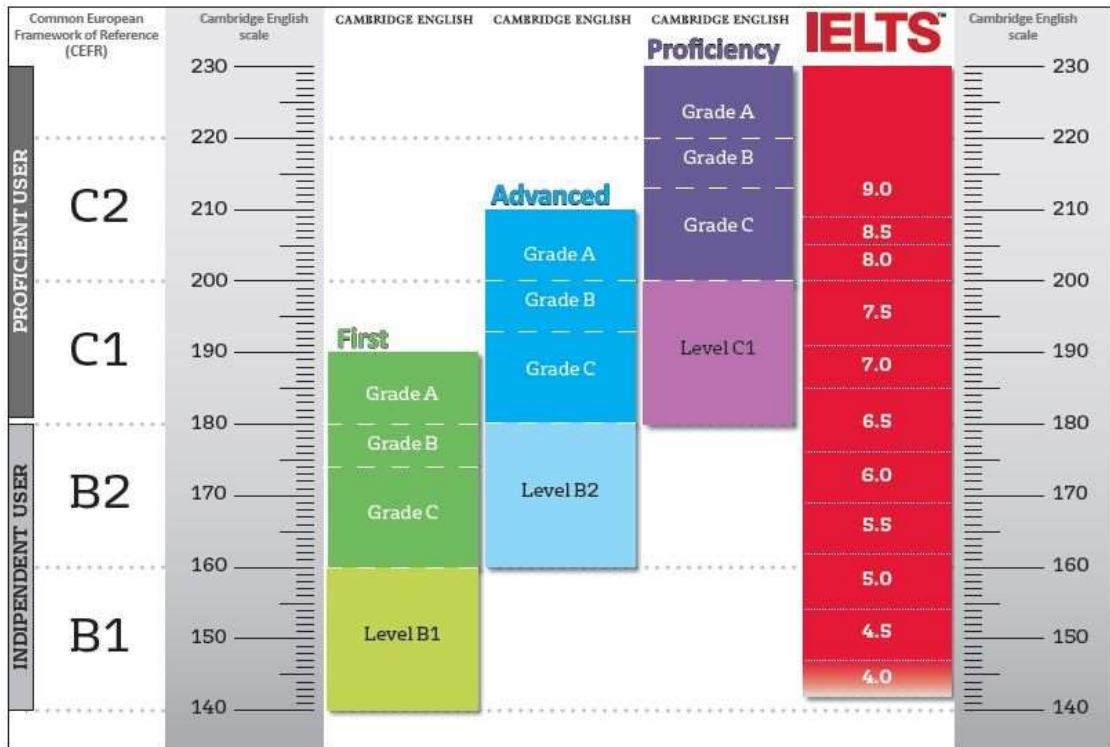
## Appendix

	<b>Cambridge</b>	<b>IELTS</b>
For admission universities	UK (higher levels)	UK (most), Australia and Canada (some)
For immigration?	UK: only CAE exam	UK, Canada and Australia
For professional certification?	Yes	Yes
For people looking for a job?	Yes	No
As a study tool?	No	No
Price exam	€ 130 -220	€ 175 - 260
Exam locations	Authorised test center	Authorised test center
Validity results	unlimited	2 years
Level framework	CEFR	IELTS score
Exams	KET (A2) PET (B1) FCE (B2) CAE (C1) CPE (C2) BULATS (Business)	IELTS Academic IELTS General Training

## Conclusion

Based on everything that we said in Cambridge exams there is fail and pass but in IELTS you will get a score but you need to improve your skills to get better scores and therefore better universities or jobs. All these exam types work on all the four skills that we have but in different format do different number of questions. (Janna Fox, 2007) They concluded that if face validity is important ELTS will be suitable but for the general forms IELTS would be the best option, and IELTS claims a general and vibrant capacity to reveal control over interactions in language use rather than a structural knowledge of the language. Based on the studies that I had I think that IELTS can be a better option for me since it is more well-known in Iran and there are more classes for preparing students for IELTS. But the Cambridge exams are still new in Iran and not everyone knows about the preparation and exam type. Another reason why I chose IELTS over the Cambridge exams is that all the universities abroad accept the IELTS but for the Cambridge you need to search and see if the university you want to apply to accept that kind of exam or not. I also think that IELTS can be more exact since you will be given a score and you can see which parts you can work more to get a better score, but in the Cambridge exams each section take some percentage of the entire exam. So I will choose the IELTS exam when I want to apply for another country or university.

# Appendix



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