

Comparison of the Cambridge Exams main suite, IELTS and TOEFL

This guide is intended to help teachers and consultants advise students on which exam to take by making a side-by-side comparison. Before getting into the complexities of the different methods of testing and the different levels measurable by each exam, the administrative differences will be compared. The guide will conclude with some recommendations.

Organizational and Administrative Differences

One very obvious difference between the exams is their structure: the time required to take the exam, the order the sections are done, the time required to receive the results and the number of times per year the exam is administered in the area. Furthermore, there are differences in the skills tested: all of the exams have sections dedicated to reading, listening, writing and speaking while the Cambridge suite also includes a specific grammar and vocabulary section which is known as the use of English. The IELTS and TOEFL test these areas implicitly in the other sections of their exams. The TOEFL also has approximately 30 minutes of experimental material under consideration for future exams which is mixed in with either the reading or listening section.

FCE	CAE	CPE	IELTS	TOEFL
Total time: 4 hrs.	Total time: 5 hrs.	Total time: 6 hrs.	Total time: 3 hrs.	Total time: 3.5 hrs.
Reading: 60 min.	Reading: 75 min.	Reading: 90 min.	Listening: 40 min.	Reading: 60 min.
Writing: 80 min.	Writing: 90 min.	Writing: 120 min.	Reading: 60 min.	Listening: 60 min.
Use of Eng.: 45 min.	Use of Eng.: 60 min.	Use of Eng.: 90 min.	Writing: 60 min.	Speaking: 20 min.
Listening: 40 min.	Listening: 40 min.	Listening: 40 min.	Speaking: 16 min.	Writing: 50 min.
Speaking: 15 min.	Speaking: 15 min.	Speaking: 18 min.		Extra: 30 min.
Results: 8 weeks	Results: 8 weeks	Results: 8 weeks	Results: 2 weeks	Results: 3 weeks
Per year: 3	Per year: 3	Per year: 3	Per year: > 40*	Per year: > 20

*the IELTS is administered almost every week in Morges, with approximately 4 exams per year in Geneva starting in 2010

IELTS and TOEFL are shorter than the Cambridge exams and they have the additional advantage of being completed in one day; the exams in the Cambridge suite require students to come on separate days for the written test and the oral test, usually about one or two weeks apart. In addition to the quicker assessment and delivery of results, the IELTS and TOEFL are administered much more frequently than the Cambridge main suite, and the British Council and Educational Testing Service can arrange for private sessions if the demand is large enough.

Test levels compared using Common European Framework of Reference

The CEFR is a method of measuring users' proficiency in a language expressed in "can-do" statements. A basic version from the British Council can be found in appendix 1. It has become the standard means of describing a user's language ability and so it is a useful method of comparing the exams. The Cambridge

main suite maps exactly onto the different levels whereas the IELTS and TOEFL provide a range of scores so the same exam can accurately determine the levels of two very different students. There are some discrepancies in the correspondence of the IELTS and TOEFL scores depending on the source, so I have compiled information from the British Council and Educational Testing Service (see appendix 2) into this table.

CEFR	B2	C1	C2
Cambridge exam	FCE	CAE	CPE
IELTS band (max: 9)	5.5-6.0	6.5-7.0	7.5 and higher
TOEFL score (max:120)	35-78	79-101	102 and higher

In a very rough and unscientific description, a B2 student has successfully learned the English taught in books, a C1 student has started to notice and understand how native speakers bend and break the “rules” of grammar, and a C2 student has achieved a relative mastery of the illogical and idiomatic native-level language. If the students knew what a radio programme was about, a B2 student could find specific information while a C1 student would be able to tell you what the opinions of the speakers were. A C2 student would be able to begin listening in the middle of the programme and tell you what it was about based on what they heard. He or she would also be able to say whether the speakers were being sincere or sarcastic and they would notice most of the jokes.

Who needs to be at these levels? The B2 level is considered adequate for most undergraduate courses, but C1 is sometimes required. For graduate school, C1 has been the standard for some time. Professionally, requirements also vary from B2 to C1. C2 is extremely difficult to achieve, especially without having lived in an English-speaking country. Only the most prestigious universities demand this level for incoming students and it would only be necessary in a select few fields such as translation, diplomacy, negotiation or international law.

Which exam to take? (This teacher recommends the IELTS)

The most obvious answer is: the exam the student is required to take. However, many schools are now accepting more than one exam and so the student must choose. I strongly believe the IELTS is the exam which tests the user's English in the most natural and intuitive way, and so allows them to receive the mark which best represents their ability. While the TOEFL and the Cambridge suite are well-researched, well-supported, well-known and widely recognised, they all have certain procedural peculiarities which (in my opinion) can hinder a student's score.

I find the format of the TOEFL speaking exam to be very unnerving to the student. First of all, they record all of their answers on a computer rather than having a conversation with an examiner. In a very tightly scheduled 20 minutes, (which the candidate has no control of, they must respond to beeps in the recording which tell them when to start and stop speaking) they must read and listen to several pieces of information, write notes and then summarise them in one-minute answers. Overall, I feel it is an extremely stressful way to take a speaking test.

Another problem I have with the TOEFL is the listening test. The questions are only given to the student after they hear the recording, which can be as long as six minutes, so the student is expected to take notes while they listen and remember the entire lecture or conversation. I do agree that note-taking is an important

skill to test in potential university students although in a university course the student will be interested in and familiar with the subject material and lectures will be supplemented with reading material and a class syllabus. In the TOEFL exam, the material can be from any field of study from marketing to biology to anthropology to engineering. Again, it's very stressful to try and follow a lecture you have no background in.

Finally, the score that most schools seem to require, 100 points out of 120, demands almost total perfection from the student on the day. Writing and speaking are impossible to do perfectly, even on a student's (or a native speaker's) best day and without time limits. So in order to achieve 100 points, a student can really answer no more than two or three questions incorrectly in each of the listening and reading sections because they will certainly drop some points in the speaking and writing sections. An overall average score of 83% is required (100/120) as opposed to a 72% average on the IELTS (6.5/9) or a 60% on the CAE. Considering the stressful conditions of the listening and speaking tests, this level of accuracy is quite challenging. And as you can see in the table on page 2, 100 points is closer to the CPE than the CAE which shows it is a very formidable task indeed.

Overall, I find the Cambridge suite to be very balanced but my one point of criticism is the Use of English section. This is the part of the exam where a student is specifically tested on their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. This is not, in itself, a bad thing. But in normal interactions, the user is in control of the structures and expressions they use and is able to use any number of methods to communicate effectively. While it is unarguably desirable for a student to have a broad vocabulary and a wide range of grammar structures, 50 arbitrary questions on an exam seems to be an imprecise way of measuring this.

The Cambridge speaking exam is better than the TOEFL, but the requirements during the exam are not always clear to students and so this is one area where exam preparation is essential. Students are often distracted by the fact that another student is taking the exam at the same time. There are two parts of the exam where interaction between the students is the focus and if they are not aware of this it is possible to lose marks. Therefore it is relatively difficult, without special training, to receive a good score on the Cambridge speaking tests.

The speaking test is one of the main reasons I recommend the IELTS. It is face-to-face, one-to-one, and done on the same day as the exam. This is a familiar format and so provides very few distractions from the tasks which are being tested. I also appreciate the format of the listening test, where the student knows the questions in advance and must answer while they listen to the recording which is only played once. The questions on the reading test are varied but display a consistent logic in their design which encourages skimming, scanning and reading for detail. The exam is offered around twice a month and the results are available quickly which is particularly convenient when applying for colleges. One perceived mark against the IELTS is that the results are only valid for two years as opposed to the Cambridge exams which are "valid for life." The British Council's reasoning is that people take the IELTS in order to study or live abroad, so after two years their level should naturally be considerably higher.

Again, the most important parties in the process of choosing an exam are the student and the institution requiring it. As I said before, all of these exams are well-researched, well-supported, well-known and widely recognised (with the IELTS improving its worldwide recognition thanks to the Ivy League of universities in the United States accepting IELTS scores starting in 2010). But when an institution accepts more than one exam, I hope this guide will help choose the one that suits the student best.

These levels describe a learner's general English language proficiency. You can find more detailed information about the CEF from www.alte.org

Proficient	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
User	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
User	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
User	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

From British Council

Corresponding CEF Level	IELTS approximate band score
C2	7.5+
C1	6.5/7.0
B2	5.0/5.5/6.0
B1	3.5/4.0/4.5
A2	3.0

from ETS

TOTAL SCORES	
TOEFL	IELTS
35	5.0
46	5.5
60	6.0
79	6.5
94	7.0
102	7.5
110	8.0
115	8.5