

WEEKLY ENGLISH PRACTICE

CAMBRIDGE ENGLISH EXAMS: TO SIT OR NOT TO SIT?

When it comes to learning English, expert opinion varies on the benefits of focusing on a qualification. Coach John **ponders** the question.



English learners in the Spanish State admit to a serious problem with the English language. Only 19% of them consider their level to be “very good”, according to statistics from Eurostat. So who **makes up** this 19%? Those who study simply to improve their fluency, or those who choose courses that will prepare them for official exams such as those **run** by Cambridge English, part of the University of Cambridge.

There is no conclusive evidence to show students learn better with one approach or another. Some argue it is more effective to focus on the short or medium-term challenge of Cambridge's First Certificate, Advanced Certificate and Proficiency since, apart from anything else, they offer practice in the four fundamental skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking.

On the other hand, some language experts argue that focusing solely on passing exams limits

teachers' creativity and freedom, reducing learning to something purely mechanical.

Exam classes don't take into account students' personal interests or strengths and weaknesses and the four skills are given an equal amount of attention.

Some English teachers (including this one) complain about the mechanical aspects of exam-focused language learning.

There were also criticisms, including the price of the exams, which **ranges** from €50 for the Young Learner's exam to €217 for Proficiency. State-school teachers say Cambridge English is an imposition and little more than a **money-spinner**.

Exams do have their supporters. In a survey English teachers in the state sector said that preparing for exams had enabled them to dedicate more time to oral skills and also to change their assessment criteria.

In oral exams, contrary to popular belief, examiners no longer penalise grammatical mistakes as long as a student is able to communicate effectively. Other aspects teachers appreciated included the quality of the materials provided by Cambridge English, among them the range of voices and accents when it came to listening.

Adapted from an article in El Pais

by **ECP coach**



John Hird

Word list

sit: (v) to take an exam

ponder: (v) to consider something deeply, thoughtfully, and thoroughly: [no object] She pondered for a while, then came to a decision. He pondered his next move.

make up: (v) to form something, constitute.

run: (v) to manage or conduct, eg a business or course.

range: (v) the extent to which, or the limits between which, something can change or vary eg prices.

money-spinner: (n) something that earns a lot of money

keep track: (v) to have information about what is happening or where somebody/something is.

CAMBRIDGE EXAM LINKS

Euskadi: [Matricúlate](#)
Cambridge [Exam Guide](#)

Let's chat about that!

1. Summarise the text
2. What percentage of students consider their English level to be 'very good'?
3. How would you categorise your level?
4. Have you passed any official English exams? Which ones? Would you like to sit an English exam?
5. What do English teachers in the state sector think of Cambridge exams?
6. Are exams really just a money-spinner?
7. *Look at page 2.* Do you think the European Language Portfolio is a viable alternative to 'official' exams?

EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO

What are the alternatives to taking an English exam?

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is a project of the Council of Europe.

The portfolio helps you **keep track** of your progress as you learn foreign languages.

The ELP has three parts:

I. **A LANGUAGE PASSPORT** that will guide you while learning languages. In this part of the ELP, you write down what you can do with the foreign languages you are studying:

- What you understand when you listen to someone speaking the language
- What you can read in the language
- What you can say in the language
- What you can write in the language

II. **A LANGUAGE BIOGRAPHY** is where you describe your progress in learning a foreign language. This section of the ELP will help you assess your language knowledge and skills. You

will do this yourself. The Language Biography is where you will write down the reasons why you want to learn foreign languages, where, when, and how you have communicated with foreigners, and new things you have learned about other countries and cultures.

III. **A DOSSIER ("MY TREASURE BOX")** is where you collect your best work. Here are some things you can put in your treasure box:

- Homework assignments
- Examples of your written works in English
- Poems
- Essays
- Letters
- Film and TV series reviews
- Language certificates and diplomas
- Exchanges you have had with your coach about the Weekly English Practice
- Voice notes and recordings

What is the [European Language Portfolio](#)?

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