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Candidates' perceptions about the Cambridge English examination

Percepciones de los candidatos sobre el examen de Cambridge English

Anthony Darwin Espinal Bailon

anthony.espinalbailon@upse.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8054-2906>
Universidad Estatal Península de Santa
Elena
La libertad – Santa Elena – Ecuador

María Antonieta Morales Jaramillo

mmorales@upse.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4230-2985>
Universidad Estatal Península de Santa
Elena
La libertad – Santa Elena – Ecuador

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Maria Antonieta Morales Jaramillo

mmorales@upse.edu.ec
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4230-2985>
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Abstract

English proficiency has become a fundamental requirement in academic and professional contexts, which has increased the demand for international certifications such as the Cambridge English Examinations. However, these are often perceived as demanding due to their structure, time constraints, and emotional load. This study aimed to analyze candidates' perceptions of the Cambridge English Examination, focusing on perceived difficulty, emotional experiences, preparation processes, and the usefulness of the certification for academic and professional purposes. The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through one-to-one interviews with five adult candidates and a focus group with three adolescent candidates who had taken the A2 Key, B1 Preliminary, or B2 First examinations. In addition, an open-ended questionnaire guided participants' reflection. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The findings indicate that candidates perceive the Cambridge English Examination as challenging yet fair and relevant. Listening comprehension and time management emerged as the main difficulties, while anxiety, nervousness, and stress were the most frequent emotional responses. Despite these challenges, participants recognized the certification as valuable for academic progression and professional development. The study highlights the importance of effective preparation, emotional support, and equitable access to international language certifications.


Keywords: Cambridge English examination, candidates' perceptions, test anxiety, language assessment

Resumen

El dominio del inglés se ha convertido en un requisito fundamental en el ámbito académico y profesional, lo que ha incrementado la demanda de certificaciones internacionales como los Exámenes de Cambridge English. Sin embargo, estos exámenes suelen percibirse como exigentes debido a su estructura, limitaciones de tiempo y carga emocional. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo analizar las percepciones de los candidatos sobre el Examen de Cambridge English, centrándose en la dificultad percibida, las experiencias emocionales, los procesos de preparación y la utilidad de la certificación para fines académicos y profesionales. El estudio adoptó un enfoque fenomenológico cualitativo. Los

datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas individuales con cinco candidatos adultos y un grupo focal con tres candidatos adolescentes que habían presentado los exámenes A2 Key, B1 Preliminary o B2 First. Además, un cuestionario abierto guió la reflexión de los participantes. Los datos se analizaron mediante análisis temático para identificar patrones y temas recurrentes. Los hallazgos indican que los candidatos perciben el Examen de Cambridge English como un desafío, pero justo y relevante. La comprensión auditiva y la gestión del tiempo surgieron como las principales dificultades, mientras que la ansiedad, el nerviosismo y la sensación de calle fueron las respuestas emocionales más frecuentes. A pesar de estos desafíos, los participantes reconocieron el valor de la certificación para su progreso académico y desarrollo profesional. El estudio destaca la importancia de una preparación eficaz, el apoyo emocional y el acceso equitativo a las certificaciones internacionales de idiomas.

Palabras clave: examen de Cambridge English, percepciones de los candidatos, ansiedad ante los exámenes, evaluación lingüística

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INTRODUCTION

As English functions as a global lingua franca, both native and non-native speakers increasingly rely on it as the primary means of communication in business, education, and professional contexts. The English language is widely used across numerous fields, including science, engineering, technology, trade, commerce, academic research, tourism, the internet, banking, business, advertising, the film industry, transportation, and pharmacy, among others (Rao, 2019). Given its extensive global use, demonstrating proficiency in English has become essential. One of the most common ways to validate language competence is through international certifications, such as Cambridge English Examinations (Hernández, 2022), which are among the most widely recognized assessments of English proficiency worldwide.

Cambridge English offers a range of standardized international examinations that are aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Some assessments evaluate performance across multiple proficiency levels, while others focus on a specific proficiency level, such as Cambridge English: Preliminary at B1 and Cambridge English: First at B2 (Docherty & Corkill, 2015). Consequently, Cambridge English examinations have become a key mechanism for formally validating learners' English proficiency in academic and professional contexts worldwide.

The CEFR establishes six proficiency levels A1 and A2 (basic users), B1 and B2 (independent users), and C1 and C2 (proficient users) which provide a transparent and coherent framework for describing language ability (Little, 2020). These levels are not only used to assess linguistic performance but also to guide learning, teaching, and self-assessment processes, promoting learner autonomy and continuous language development. In alignment with this framework, Cambridge English Examinations ensure consistency and comparability in the assessment of language proficiency across different levels.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) published by the Council of Europe in 2001, overall language proficiency results from a complex interaction between general competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and learning ability) and communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic). As highlighted in the CEFR Companion Volume (North, 2020), these competences are activated through communicative language activities such as reception, production, interaction, and mediation, enabling effective language use in real-life contexts.

From this perspective, the CEFR framework helps explain why Cambridge English examinations are often perceived as demanding. Candidates are required to demonstrate an integrated command of multiple competencies rather than isolated grammatical knowledge. The assessment of receptive, productive, and interactive skills places candidates in communicative situations that closely resemble real-world language use, which may increase both cognitive and emotional demands during the examination process.

Despite the widespread use of Cambridge English Examinations, limited research has explored candidates' perceptions of these assessments, particularly in a Latin American context such as Ecuador. Most existing studies have focused on test structure, validity, reliability, or large-scale outcomes, leaving aside candidates' lived experiences, emotional responses, and contextual challenges during preparation and test performance. Understanding candidates' perceptions is especially relevant, as emotional factors such as anxiety, stress, and time pressure can directly influence performance in high-stakes language examinations.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze candidates' perceptions of the Cambridge English Examination, with particular attention to perceived difficulty, emotional experiences, preparation processes, and

perceived usefulness of the certification for academic and professional purposes. By examining these perceptions, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how candidates experience international English assessments and how these experiences may shape motivation, confidence, and performance.

METHODOLOGY

According to Eatough & Tomkins (2022), qualitative research offers a broad set of tools to explore and understand emotions. Since emotional experiences are complex, this methodology helps researchers focus on how people feel, express, and interpret their emotions within everyday situations. Based on this, they explain that their discussion highlights only a selection of the methods commonly applied to examine emotional aspects of human life. Whereas quantitative research focuses on numerical data and statistical patterns, qualitative research explores the deeper layers of people's experiences and viewpoints, allowing researchers to understand the context and subtle details that numerical data often cannot capture (Lim, 2024).

Due to this, this study to gather rich and meaningful data, two qualitative techniques were used: one-on-one interviews with adults' candidates and focus group with teenage learners who had already taken a Cambridge English exam. In the case of the adolescent participants, the focus group was conducted only after obtaining informed consent from their parents or legal guardians, ensuring ethical compliance when involving minors in the study. It has been argued by Taherdoost (2022), interview represent an effective method for gathering qualitative information because they create direct communication between the researcher and the participant, allowing the researcher to explore and interpret the participant's opinions and related to a particular topic whether the conversation occurs in person, by phone, or through an online platform. While Walle's research (2015) as cited in Sanz (2025), stated that a focus group is a qualitative research technique that brings together a selected group of individuals to discuss and explore specific topics or research question in depth.

Sofaer (1999) as cited in Karkouti (2023), explained that phenomenological research seeks to make sense of complex issues by examining and interpreting individuals' lived experiences. In line with this, the present study follows a phenomenological perspective, which that it seeks to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences by examining their detailed descriptions and subjective interpretations.

Additionally, a questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to guide participants' reflections. By combining these tools, the study achieves a broader understanding of candidates across different ages and proficiency levels.

Lastly, the data collected will be examined using thematic analysis, which helps identify common ideas and patterns in participants' responses. This approach allows the study to clearly understand how learners experience the Cambridge English Examination and factors that influence their confidence, motivation, and performance.

Type of research

Williams (2021), explains that recent applications of phenomenology in qualitative research focus on understanding how individuals experience events and how they interpret the situations they encounter. In line with this perspective, Oluka (2015) also describes phenomenology as a qualitative approach that examines people's lived experiences to uncover the meanings they attach to a particular context. Together, these views support the use of a phenomenological design in this study, as it allows for a deeper exploration of how candidates interpret and make sense of their experience with Cambridge English examination, particularly how they interpret its difficulty, structure, and emotional impact.

Through participant's personal accounts, the research aims to explore shared elements that shape their confidence and overall performance.

Participants

A target population is the full group of people connected to the purpose of a study, whereas a sample is a selected subset representing key characteristic of that population (Shukla, 2020).

For this study, the entire population and sample were composed of eight English language learners who had taken a Cambridge English examination (A2 Key, B1 Preliminary, or B2 First). This complete group included three adolescent candidates, who participated in a focus group, and five adult participants, who engaged in one-to-one interviews. Because every individual had direct experiences with structure, skills assessed, and emotional demands of Cambridge test, they contributed highly relevant and informed perspectives. Additionally, for the adolescent participants, parental or legal guardian consent was obtained, ensuring full ethical compliance in the inclusion of minors.

Data collection techniques

Focus group

Krueger (2014), as cited in Akyildiz & Ahmed (2021), noted that a focus group requires a moderator to guide the session. This person is responsible for opening the discussion and encouraging participants to share their views confidently. Besides, another key role of the moderator is to ensure that the group feels comfortable and supported so they can participate effectively in the conversation.

In this study, the focus group was carried out with three teenage learners who had taken a Cambridge examination. The session was conducted through Zoom platform and guided the researcher, who ensured that the participants felt comfortable, respected, and confident to express their ideas. During the discussion, the students shared their perception, the students shared their perceptions of the exam's difficulty, the types of tasks they experienced before, during, and after the test. This group interaction allowed to observe how the participants built on each other's comments revealing common experiences and concerns related to Cambridge assessments.

One-on-one Interview

Guest et al. (2020) highlight that one of the widely used qualitative techniques is the one-on-one interview, which is designed to gather detailed and personal insights directly from an individual participant. These interviews allow the researcher to explore a person's experiences, perspectives, and thoughts related to a particular issue or topic.

Similarly, this study included individual interview with five adult candidates who had already completed a Cambridge English exam. Each conversation was held separately via zoom, which enabled to examine participants' personal view on the exam such as how challenging they found it, how they understood its structure, how they prepared, and the emotions they experienced throughout the process.

Instruments

Questionnaire

As mentioned, Mazhar et al. (2021), a questionnaire consists of questions designed to collect information from a group of participants. It is an effective tool or gathering data from a large population and is especially useful when respondents are dispersed geographically, making direct interaction difficult.

In this research, the questionnaire served as the main instrument for gathering participants' reflections about the Cambridge English Examination. For one-on-one interviews, a set of twelve open-ended questions was prepared, while the focus group received the open-ended questions. These items were designed to explore candidates' view on the exam's structure, level of difficulty, preparation, emotional responses, economic factors, and overall experience with Cambridge

Type of question

Open-ended questions

A study by Rouder et al. (2021), fundamental characteristic of open-ended questions is that they permit participants to express their thoughts in their own words, rather than choosing from predetermined response categories. This flexibility enables respondents to provide richer, more detailed information that may reveal personal perspectives, emotions may offer general perspectives, emotions, or experiences that structured options, or experiences that structured options could overlook.

Building on this, in this research, open-ended questions were included in both the one-on-one interview guide (12 questions) and the focus group questionnaire (10 questions). These items encouraged Cambridge exam candidates to describe, in detail, their perceptions of the test, the challenges they faced, and the emotions they experienced throughout their preparation and exam process.

Thematic Analysis

According to Jnanathapaswi (2021), qualitative data analysis requires both interpretation and systematic examination, often occurring with data collection as researchers work to uncover meaning with participants' responses. Within this process, thematic analysis is used to identify recurring patterns and themes that directly contribute to answering the research questions. Consequently, thematic analysis is one of the most widely used approaches for examining qualitative data, as it provides a structured yet flexible framework for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across datasets (Ahmed et al, 2025)

In line with this perspective, thematic analysis was used to organize and code the participants' reflections about Cambridge English Examination. Through this process, recurring themes such as perceived difficulty, emotional reactions, preparation challenges, and overall exam relevance were identified.

Ethical considerations

The protection of human participants through the proper application of ethical principles is essential in any research. In qualitative studies, ethical considerations become even more significant due to the depth and sensitivity involved in the research process (Mohd, 2018).

Additionally, as outlined by Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023), when qualitative research includes participants, it is essential to ensure their protection so they feel comfortable giving sincere responses during data collection. Safeguarding participants is a key requirement in any primary qualitative study that uses interviews.

Based in these ethical principles, this study adhered to the fundamental standards of qualitative research. Participation was voluntary, and each candidate received clear information about the purpose of the study before providing informed consent. The participants had taken Cambridge English Examinations at different levels (A2 Key, B1 Preliminary, and B2 First). To maintain confidentiality, the eight candidates were identified using alphabetical labels (Candidate A, Candidate B, and so on), and all collected data were anonymized and used solely for academic purposes. Besides, parental or legal

guardian consent was obtained for three adolescent participants involved in the focus group, while five adult individuals participated in one-to-one interviews and provided their own informed consent.

Moreover, focus group and one-to-one interviews were conducted respectfully in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines, ensuring, confidentiality, integrity, and respect throughout the research process.

DEVELOPMENT

There is a wide range of official certifications that recognize English language proficiency, with those offered by Cambridge among the most renowned. These examinations are (Use of English, Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking, where the Use of English section specifically assesses candidates' overall command of English grammar and vocabulary (Cambridge English, 2022) as cited in (Hernández, 2022).

In recent years, one of the most relevant priorities have been acquiring proficiency in a language other than one's mother tongue, with English being English is a global language facilitates communication across various fields such as business, science, education, and technology, Therefore, obtaining an International English certification from Cambridge has become essential to demonstrate one's level of the English proficiency (Novoa, 2023).

As Roger Hawkey (2013) mentioned in his book, Cambridge English Exams, the first Cambridge examination for non-native speakers was taken by three candidates in 1913. Today, nearly four million people across 130 countries take these exams annually. Likewise, over the years, Cambridge English exams have continually evolved to respond to the shifting demands of candidates, students, professors, universities, academies, center preparations, and schools.

This research explores candidates' perceptions of the Cambridge English Examination. Lindsay and Normand (1977), as cited in Amperio Sánchez (2023), explained that perceptions are the process of interpreting and organizing sensory information to create meaning. Likewise, perception is the process by which individuals register and evaluate information detected from the internal or external environment, consciously or unconsciously (Burn, 2010). In this regard, candidates' perception plays a relevant role in how they interpret the demands, fairness, stress, anxiety, and challenges by the Cambridge English Examinations at the A2 Key, B1 Preliminary, and First B2 levels, as well as the benefits they perceive from taking the exam and getting an international certification.

On the other hand, examinations are central to strengthening educational quality because they promote accountability and support effective teaching and learning (Alqahtani, 2021). In this landscape, Cambridge English exams have become widely used as standardized measures of English proficiency, providing a consistent way to evaluate candidates' language skills in an international academic environment.

Moreover, learners tend to be highly motivated when preparing for the Cambridge English: Young Learner exams. This increased motivation positively influences students' attitudes and behaviors in the classroom, even though a few learners may occasionally become anxious. Overall, professors view the exams' motivational impact as beneficial for most students (Breeze & Roothoof, 2014).

However, Breeze & Roothoof, (2014) also point out several challenges associated with the implementation of the Cambridge English. One major concern is the economic factor: some families are unable or unwilling to cover exam fees, which becomes especially problematic in schools with students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This financial barrier is particularly noticeable in the state sector, where access to the exams can be limited because they are not free. Another issue concerns the emotional response of some children, who may become nervous when facing the exam,

even though this reaction is often viewed as a natural reaction to achieve satisfactory results, which raises concerns about the potential discouragement they may experience.

Consequently, building on these findings, it becomes clear that both motivational benefits and the challenges associated with these examinations form part of the broader educational context. While the tests can encourage greater engagement with English learning, factors such as exam fees or students' emotional reactions may influence their participation or shape the way they experience the process.

Furthermore, considering these aspects, candidates' perceptions are influenced not only by the exam itself but also by the experiences they have during preparation. Elements such as the support they receive and the level of familiarity they develop with the exam format can affect how difficult or manageable they perceive the test to be. Considering these aspects contributes to promoting more equitable practices and providing more effective support for learners.

Finally, the concepts of validity and reliability are essential in the field of language assessment, as they ensure that English proficiency tests reflect students' abilities. Hence, validity refers to how well a test measures the skills it is intended to assess, while reliability focuses on the consistency of results across different administrations and different versions of the exam. Widely recognized proficiency tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, and Cambridge English work to uphold these principles through standardized formats and careful test development (Khan, Imran, & Javed, 2025).

Cambridge English Examination

To understand candidates' perceptions also requires considering the structural design of the Cambridge English examination. A2 Key, B1 Preliminary, and B2 First follow a specific format that assesses language skills in progressively complex ways.

These structural features play a direct role in shaping how candidates evaluate the exam's difficulty, demands, and fairness. Therefore, a brief description of each exam format is essential to contextualize their perceptions within the broader assessment framework.

A2 Key

According to Liu (2025), Cambridge A2 for Schools represents a fundamental English qualification designed for young learners. He points out that it built the necessary confidence to advance toward higher-level exams, such as B1 Preliminary, B2 First Certificate English, or C1 CAE. Therefore, candidates who achieve the level A2 of the CERF can communicate effectively in simple, everyday scenarios.

Lui (2025) also highlighted that the KEY exam is designed with a strong focus on authenticity and communication aiming to evaluate how well candidates can use English in real-word scenarios. Thus, test-takers are expected to apply their language knowledge to communicate effectively, which is both a key requirement and the core goal of the exam

According to the Cambridge Assessment English website (<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/>), the A2 Key is made up of three main components:

Table 1

Structure of the Cambridge A2 Key Examination

Reading and Writing tasks
Time: 60 minutes

This section is divided into seven parts, totaling 32 questions. It assesses candidates' ability to make out short reading and basic written materials, such as notices, brochures, and emails, as well as their skill in producing simple sentences and short paragraphs.
Listening
Time: 30 minutes
This section requires candidates to hear different types of spoken texts, including announcements and short conversations, and they answer questions to show their understanding of specific details and the general meaning of the recordings. The listening test consists of five parts with a total of 25 questions, and the audio is delivered at a moderate pace appropriate for the exam's basic level.
Speaking
Time: 9-10 minutes
In this part of the exam, candidates listen to different spoken materials such as short conversations and announcements, and respond to questions that assess their comprehension of both specific details and the general meaning. The section consists of five parts with a total of 25 questions.

Note: Adapted from A2 Key Handbook for Teachers (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024)

In this table, it can be observed that the A2 Key exam is organized into clearly defined sections that target essential language skills. Each component such as Reading, writing, listening, and speaking includes specific tasks, time limits, and question formats that collectively illustrate the exam's focus on assessing candidates' ability to manage simple, everyday communicative scenarios.

B1 PET

Rodríguez and Neida (2020) explain that the Preliminary English Test B1 (PET) is a Cambridge English qualification at the B1 level of the CEFR, designed to assess candidates' ability to use English in everyday situations, express simple opinions and feelings, and write short messages about familiar topics. Likewise, PET is taken by both students and adults who need an official certificate and is the step before the B2 First. This exam is offered in paper-based and computer-based formats, making it accessible for different learner preferences.

Based on information from the Cambridge Assessment English website, there are four parts in a B1 examination.

Table 2

Structure of the Cambridge B1 Preliminary Examination

Reading and Use of English
Time: 1 hour 15 minutes
This section contains six parts with 32 questions. It assesses candidates' ability to understand main ideas, details, opinions, and attitudes from short texts, brochures, notices, emails, and longer passages. Tasks include multiple-choice, matching, gapped text, and cloze exercises.
Writing
Time: 1 hour 20 minutes
The section consists of two tasks. In part 1, candidates must reply to an email. In Part 2, they choose between writing an article or a story. The test evaluates clarity, organization, and appropriate use of B1-level language.
Listening
Time: 40 minutes
This section includes four parts with 25 questions. Candidates listen to announcements, conversations, and spoken texts about everyday situations, demonstrating understanding of both general meaning and specific details.
Speaking
Time: 10-12 minutes per pair/ 15-17 in groups of three

Candidates participate in a face-to-face interview with an examiner and another candidate. There are four parts: assessing interaction, responding to questions, expressing opinions, and describing photos.

Note: Adapted from B1 Preliminary Handbook for Teachers (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024)

The table showed that the B1 Preliminary exam was organized into four clearly defined sections that assessed candidates' ability to use English in everyday situations. Each component included specific task and time limits that required learners to demonstrate intermediate-level skills, such as understanding longer texts, producing structured writing, listening for details, and participating in spoken interactions. Overall, the structure reflected the exam's aim of evaluating communicative competence at the B1 level.

B2 First

A study by Vladana (2022) explains that B2 First is often selected by candidates, drawing on data cited from Cambridge English Language Assessment (2019). According to this source, Cambridge Assessment English, part of the University of Cambridge, is recognized as a global leader in providing English language qualifications, with more than four million candidates taking their exams annually. This makes B2 First one of the most widely chosen examinations in the portfolio.

Vladana also highlights that in many countries where English is not the native language, it has been incorporated into national curricula as a mandatory foreign language, and learners are frequently required to demonstrate their proficiency through different testing forms. Likewise, each year, large numbers of students prepare for English language examinations, some required, such as school-leaving exams, and others taken voluntarily in order to obtain an internationally recognized certification of their English level.

Homayounfar et al. (2023) state that Cambridge English examinations include the FCE (First Certificate in English), CAE (Certificate in Advanced English), and CPE (Certificate of Proficiency in English), all administered by Cambridge Assessment English. These exams can be taken either on a computer or on paper, depending on the exam center. The author highlights the B2 FCE as one of the most relevant exams, while CAE is particularly suitable for individuals aiming to work or pursue academic opportunities abroad. According to the 2025 FCE handbook, the FCE corresponds to the B2 level of the CEFR, demonstrating that candidates possess the language skills required for communication in English-speaking contexts. FCE has four parts that consist of:

Table 3

Structure of the Cambridge B2 First Examination

Reading and Use of English
Time: 1 hour 15 minutes
This section has seven parts with a total of 52 questions. It evaluates candidates' ability to understand different types of written texts, as well as their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary through tasks like multiple-choice cloze, open cloze, word formation, and key word transformations.
Writing
Time: 1 hour 20 minutes
This section consists of two tasks. In Part 1, candidates must write an essay. In Part 2, they choose one task from three options, which may include an article, review, email/letter, or report. The paper assesses the ability to communicate clearly, organize ideas, and use appropriate language.
Listening

Time: 40 minutes
This section contains four parts with 30 questions. Candidates listen to a range of spoken materials such as interviews, discussions, talks, and monologues. They must show understanding of both general ideas and specific details, including opinions, attitudes, and implied meaning.
Speaking
Time: 14 minutes per pair of candidates
In this face-to-face test, candidates take part in a conversation with an examiner and another candidate. The test includes four parts and assesses the ability to communicate clearly, express and justify opinions, take turns, and interact effectively in different speaking tasks.

Note: Adapted from B2 First certificate in English for Teachers (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2025)

In this table, it can be observed that the B2 First exam was organized into four structured sections, each with specific tasks and time limits that assessed different language skills. The structure demonstrated how candidates were required to understand written and spoken texts, produce organized writing, and participate in spoken interaction across a variety of communicative situations.

Candidate's perceptions about the English test

In terms of perceptions, Mahreda (2017, as cited in Masykuri & Basuki, 2022), identifies two types of perceptions.

Positive perception refers to interpreting information, whether known or unknown, in a favorable way, leading individuals to accept and support what they perceive, while negative perception involves viewing information as unsuitable or unfavorable, which results in rejecting or opposing the perceived object or situation.

Consequently, North (1990), as cited in Rozzi et al. (2014), argues that Cambridge English examinations used to assess language proficiency offer a clearer and more objective understanding of students' and teachers' performance because they measure progress using international standards. Schools that create their own exam may fail to notice weaknesses in their testing methods, as these tests can unintentionally reflect what teachers believe their students are capable of achieving. In essence, candidates' perceptions of the English test become especially relevant. When students take internationally standardized exams such as those from Cambridge, they often view them as more reliable and fairer compared to internal school tests.

Test anxiety

As stated by Mashayekh & Hashemi (2011) that exam anxiety is a psychological condition in which an individual feels significant distress before, during, or after an exam or any evaluative situation, to the point that this anxiety reduces performance or disrupts normal learning processes. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2022) argue that test-related anxiety is a widespread issue that affects the academic performance of many students around the world each year. Periods of exams and assessments tend to be highly pressured moments when stress levels usually peak; instead, a moderate amount of stress can actually serve as a motivator for learners. Excessive stress often has the opposite effect and may hinder their performance.

Based on this, international English assessments can generate pressure due to exam structure, time, and content. Considering these elements from a general perspective allows for a broader understanding of how the examination environment can shape attitudes toward language evaluation, highlighting the importance of adequate preparation, clarity of instructions, support from parents and teachers, and familiarity with the exam's format.

Stress

Stress refers to a state of mental pressure or worry that appears when someone faces difficult circumstances. It is a normal human reaction that helps us deal with challenges or threats in our daily lives. All people experience stressful moments, but the way each person manages these feelings plays a major role in their overall well-being. Similarly, exam-related stress is the nervous, uneasy feeling that rises during testing situations. A small amount of stress can motivate you to try harder, but it becomes an issue when it affects your performance and prevents you from reaching your academic goals (Fathima, Farin, & R. Lavanya, 2025). With regards to the Cambridge exam, candidates may still experience notable stress, as the importance they place on obtaining an international certificate can heighten pressure and make the exam feel more demanding.

The research by Heissel et al. (2020) indicated that high-stakes standardized assessments such as students' course placement, graduation eligibility, and admission to college. These exams also lead to consequences for schools. Additionally, such testing systems often face strong opposition, mainly because many believe they create significant stress for students.

Nervous

Nervousness can be described as an uncomfortable emotional state characterized by feeling such apprehension, distress, embarrassments, surprise, and fear. It refers to a subjective experience of tension and worry that is linked to the activation of the autonomic nervous system (Putri et al. 2022, as cited in Amiruddin. et al 2023).

Amiruddin et al. (2023) also highlighted that students who experience nervousness tend to develop feelings of fear, worry, discomfort, and intense anxiety. This emotional state is especially evident in second language learning contexts, where learners feel pressure and concern when using English, leading them to perceive speaking English as an unsafe or threatening situation when their language acquisition is insufficient.

Based on these findings, nervousness increases when students feel unprepared or lack sufficient language acquisition, negatively affecting their confidence and performance. Therefore, candidates tend to become nervous when facing high-stakes assessments such as the Cambridge English Examination.

Economic situation

Education is widely viewed as an essential element that shapes a person's social and economic success, since it opens the door to greater opportunities and enhances overall quality of life (OECD, 2020, as cited in Munir et al. 2023). In fact, children from low socioeconomic status families tend to achieve lower academic outcomes than children from middle-class families (Poon, 2020). Considering this, the Cambridge examinations may also become less accessible for students from low-income backgrounds, since both the test fee and the preparation courses require financial resources that not all families can afford. Besides, Broer et al. (2019) found that children from more affluent backgrounds often benefit from families' resources, which help them access educational qualifications more easily. Therefore, candidates who lack economic resources may face disadvantages, as limited financial resources can restrict their access to both exam preparation and the itself, potentially affecting their performance and opportunities for certification.

Time management

Time exams remain a widely used method in education to assess a student's knowledge, skills, and competencies in a particular subject (Helen & Purcell, 2019). Additionally, Davies (1986) and Zeidner (1998), as cited in Tarchinski et al. (2022) indicated that time constraints of exams can increase anxiety

level among students. Consequently, regarding an international English proficiency exam, the timed nature of the test can heighten candidates' stress, especially for those who struggle with managing time under pressure. Besides, when creating an exam, two key factors need to be taken into account: 1) the types of questions used, and 2) the duration of the exam (Ragab et al. 2023). Although exam timings are aligned with established formats, many students still face challenges in effectively managing the allotted time.

Research Question

Which are candidates' perceptions of the Cambridge English Examination regarding preparation, confidence, performance, and usefulness for their academic or professional future?

General Objective

- To analyze candidates' perceptions about the Cambridge English Examination and how these perceptions influence their motivation, confidence, and performance during preparation and testing process.

Specific Objectives

- To identify which parts of the Cambridge English exam candidates, perceive as the most difficult.
- To explore candidates' opinions about the usefulness and relevance of the exam for real-life communication and academic or professional opportunities.
- To understand the challenges, they face during preparation and test performance to improve support strategies.

RESULTS

The results are present separately according to the data collection technique used (focus group and individual interviews), in order to respect the nature of each lived experience. This approach strengthened the phenomenological analysis of the study, as it focused on the meanings that candidates' attributes to their experience with the Cambridge English Examination.

Focus Group Results (Adolescents)

The focus group consisted of three adolescent students who had taken a Cambridge English Examination. Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of five main themes related to participants' motivation, emotional experience, perceived difficulties, benefits, and preparation strategies.

Table 4

Themes identified from in the Focus Group with Adolescent Candidates

Themes	Category	Description of Findings
Motivation to take the exam	Academic and family influence	Participants reported that their motivation to take the Cambridge exam stemmed from the desire to improve their English level, along with encouragement from teachers and support from family members
Emotional experience	Nervousness and relief	All participants expressed feelings of nervousness before and during the exam, followed by a sense of relief, pride, and satisfaction after completing it.

Exam difficulties	Accent comprehension and exam skills challenges	Listening was identifying as the challenging component due to the British accent and audio speed, while writing difficulties were mainly related to grammar and structure
Perceived benefits of Cambridge Certification	Academic and professional opportunities	Participants perceived the Cambridge English certification as beneficial for their academic and professional future, particularly in terms of university recognition and expanded opportunities at national and international levels.
Preparation strategies	Continuous practice and guidance	Regular practice, teacher support, reading activities, listening to music in English, and guided writing task were reported as effective preparation.

Source: own elaboration.

One-to-one Interview Results (Adults)

The one-to-one interviews were also examined through thematic analysis, allowing for a deeper exploration of individual experiences and more personal reflections. The analysis revealed seven main categories related to motivation, emotional experience, difficulties, benefits, economic factors, and preparation strategies.

Table 5

Themes Identified in the one-to-one Interview with Adult Candidates

Themes	Category	Description of Findings
Motivation to take the exam	Professional and academic development	Adult participants reported taking the Cambridge exam mainly to improve career prospects, pursue academic goals, and access international opportunities.
Emotional experience	Anxiety and pressure	Participants described experiencing, anxiety, primarily related to the importance of the exam and the pressure to perform well.
Exam difficulties	Time management and accent comprehension challenges	The most frequently reported difficulties were time pressure during the exam and challenges in understanding British accents in the listening section.
Perceived benefits Cambridge Certification	International recognition and employability	Participants viewed the Cambridge certification as a highly valuable credential that enhances employability and is internationally recognized.
Economic Factors	Financial effort and accessibility	While some participants were able to afford the exam, they acknowledged that preparation and exam fees may limit access for other candidates.
Preparation strategies	Practice and self-discipline	Effective preparation strategies included constant practice, exposure to English in real-life contexts, and disciplined self-study.

Source: own elaboration.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to analyze candidates' perceptions of the Cambridge English Examination and how these perceptions influence their motivation, confidence, performance, and

preparation process. The findings reveal a clear alignment between participants' lived experiences and the theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature, particularly regarding motivation, emotional responses, perceived difficulty, economic factors, and the usefulness of the certification for future academic and professional opportunities.

Both adolescent and adult participants reported strong motivation to take the Cambridge English Examination, which closely reflects previous findings in the literature. Adolescents highlighted academic goals and encouragement from teachers and family members as key motivators, while adults emphasized professional development, employability, and international recognition. These results are consistent with Breeze and Roothoof (2014), who identified increased learner motivation as a positive outcome of Cambridge exam preparation, as well as with Novoa (2023), who emphasizes the growing importance of English certification in a globalized academic and professional context.

Furthermore, participants across both groups perceived the Cambridge certification as a valuable credential that enhances academic progression and career opportunities. This perception supports North's (1990, as cited in Rozzi et al. 2014) argument that internationally standardized exams are viewed as more reliable and meaningful than internal assessments. The findings suggest that candidates associate Cambridge exams with fairness, credibility, and long-term benefits.

Regarding emotional experience, participants reported nervousness, anxiety, and pressure before and during the exam, followed by relief after completion. These findings align with Mashayekh and Hashemi (2011) and Thomas et al. (2022), who identify test anxiety as a common response in high-stakes assessments. At the same time, the results support Fathima et al. (2025), as moderate stress was perceived as motivating, although excessive pressure negatively affected performance, as noted by Heissel et al. (2020).

Regarding perceived difficulty, the results show that listening comprehension and time management were the main challenges. These perceptions are directly related to the structure of the A2 Key, B1 Preliminary, and B2 First exams, which are characterized by strict time limits and the use of authentic accents. This aligns with Davies (1986) and Zeidner (1998), as cited in Tarchinski et al. (2022), who indicate that time constraints increase anxiety, as well as with Liu (2025), who highlights the communicative and authentic focus of Cambridge exams.

In terms of preparation, participants emphasized continuous practice, teacher support, self-discipline, and exposure to English in real-life contexts as effective strategies. This finding supports Alqahtani (2021), who argues that familiarity with exam format enhances confidence and performance. Moreover, candidates acknowledged that exams accurately assessed their language abilities, reinforcing the principles of validity and reliability discussed by Khan et al. (2025).

On the other hand, economic factors were identified as potential barriers, particularly for candidates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This finding is consistent with Breeze and Roothoof (2014), Broer et al. (2019), and the OECD (2020, as cited in Munir et al. 2023), who emphasize the role of economic conditions in access to international certifications.

Overall, Cambridge English examinations are perceived as demanding yet fair assessments with strong academic and professional value. Nevertheless, emotional, structural, and economic factors shape candidates' experiences, highlighting the need for effective preparation and more equitable access to these certifications.

Implications

From a theoretical implication, the findings contribute to the literature on language assessment by reinforcing the role of candidates' perceptions, emotional responses, and contextual factors in shaping

experiences in high-stakes standardized examinations such as Cambridge assessments, while practical implications suggest that the preparation courses should place stronger emphasis on listening practice with varied accents, explicit time-management strategies, and emotional support to help reduce anxiety. Besides, professors and institutions may also benefit from integrating exam simulations to increase candidates' familiarity with the test format and enhance confidence. From a broader perspective, the results highlight the need for policies that improve access to international certifications, particularly for candidates from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study was related to coordinating meetings with candidates who had already taken a Cambridge English Examination for the individual interviews and the focus group. As participants had different academic and work commitments, the sessions were scheduled according to their availability, which required a flexible approach to the data collection process. Despite this, participants were provided with sufficient time and support to respond thoughtfully and objectively, allowing the study to gather relevant information about their perceptions of the Cambridge English Examination.

Recommendations for future research

In light of the findings of the present study, several lines of research related to candidates' perceptions of Cambridge English Examinations can be identified. In this regard, future studies are encouraged to explore the beliefs and perceptions of teachers and exam preparation instructors regarding the teaching and preparation processes for international certifications, particularly across different educational contexts and preparation programs. Additionally, it is relevant to continue investigating candidates' attitudes, emotions, and perceptions toward the different components of the exam, as the existing literature on these experiences remains limited. These types of research would contribute to a broader understanding of how the preparation context influences candidates' experiences and performance in high-stakes examinations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined candidates' perceptions of the Cambridge English Examination and how these perceptions influence their motivation, confidence, performance, and preparation process. The findings indicate that, although candidates perceive Cambridge exams as demanding, they also regard them as fair, reliable, and highly valuable for their academic and professional development. Motivation, teacher support, familiarity with the exam format, and effective preparation strategies play a key role in shaping candidates' experiences.

In addition, emotional factors such as anxiety, stress, and nervousness, along with structural aspects like time management and listening comprehension, significantly affect performance during the examination. Economic barriers were also identified as factors that may limit equitable access to international certifications. Overall, the results highlight the importance of strengthening preparation processes, providing adequate emotional support, and promoting policies that improve access to internationally recognized English certifications, reinforcing the relevance of this study in understanding candidates' experiences with high-stakes assessments.

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