Buckingham Journal of Education 2025 Vol 6 No 1 pp 15–36, DOI: 10.5750/tbje.v6i1.2697

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LITERATURE PAPER IN THE CAMBRIDGE PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH EXAMINATION (CPE) 1913–2002: HAVE THEY THROWN THE BABY OUT WITH THE BATH WATER?

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the historical development of the literature paper in the Cambridge Proficiency examination (CPE) from its beginning in 1913 to its discontinuation in 2002. The research draws inspiration from research notes published in 2013 and 2002 (Weir, 2002, 2013) as well as from personal communication with the Archives team at *Cambridge Assessment*. Based on an understanding of writing educational history from a moral and pedagogical perspective (Williams, 2005), the study provides a critical account of how and why the literary paper of the CPE was discontinued in 2002. The subsequent analysis of examination types is informed by past literature papers from the Cambridge Lower Certificate in English (CLCE, 1972) and the 1975 paper from the CPE. It shows that both the CLCE and CPE examination questions, despite criticism that they did not assess candidates' language ability (Carter and Long, 1990), enabled candidates to situate themselves critically in relation to academic secondary sources, a main characteristic of academic writing (Wolf, 2024). Finally, the article looks at the pedagogical implications of using tried and tested as well as recent language-based tests of comprehension (see Bauer et al., 2022) in the context of literature testing. It is found that language-based tests encourage and reliably test readers' interpretive skills through focusing on their understanding of the wider meaning of literary texts.

Keywords: Literature testing, history, pedagogy, comprehension, language ability, proficiency

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INTRODUCTION

WHY STUDY THE HISTORY OF AN EXAMINATION PAPER?

The old chestnut that ignorance of our past condemns us to repeating it in the present applies to educational history as much as to any other kind. But this leads to the further question of how we are to broach the history of an examination.

In a book called 'Why Study the Past,' Rowan Williams (2005) makes a number of observations which will serve well here as a starting point for how we approach educational history in the context of language assessment. What, Williams (2005, 1) asks, is good history?

His answer is that good history is one which both recognises that the past is a foreign country and that, nonetheless, it is our past. There is a tension here, which often remains unresolved, between those who see the past as a strange land for which one has to make excuses, and those who will not have any moral relativism of this sort and judge the past by contemporary standards. In this respect, Williams (2005, 11) refers to a great historical quarrel of the nineteenth century between Lord Acton, a Roman Catholic, and Mandell Creighton, an Anglican theologian. The former accused Creighton of being too lenient in his judgements of the Renaissance popes. Creighton was adamant that the 'strangeness of a fifteenth century mind' had to be considered in any interpretation, while Acton's point was that this led to moral relativism, 'a betrayal of the moral purpose of writing history' (William, 2005, 11).

What this example shows, amongst other things, is that tensions will inevitably arise as soon as one realises that there is a moral dimension to the writing of history. But the point to consider at this stage is that the risk of treating the past as if it were the 21st century is as great as that of treating it as a foreign land.

Histories of language teaching (see Richards and Rodgers, 1986 and Larsen-Freeman, 1986) often reflect these notions, i.e. that past teaching methods, and by extension the assessment of students, are judged at once according to the strangeness of past minds and by contemporary educational values. The limitations of such 'procession of methods' views of the past have been criticised by many (Hunter and Smith, 2012, 432; Howatt and Smith, 2014, 76) for disregarding tradition and the historical importance of some methods.

As a result, teaching and testing approaches are presented as being unconnected to one another so that any reader of a history of language learning would be forgiven for thinking that there is no continuity in the way languages are taught and assessed and that certain paradigm shifts took place which served to divorce the past from an infinitely superior present.

The proponents of these 'potted histories' (Hunter and Smith, 2012, 432) have tended to represent the process of teaching languages as going in

disconnected leaps and bounds from crude pre-theoretical beginnings (the past) to the enlightened and scientific days of communicative language teaching (the present). Viewed this way, the history of language teaching has led inevitably to discontinuities being constructed as the norm by educational institutions and examination boards motivated by fashions and political sleight of hand.

My intention in this article is first to provide an analysis of how and why the Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE) examination was irreversibly altered in 1975 by making the literature task optional. I then consider the characteristics of examination question types in the 'Cambridge Lower Certificate in English' (1972) and the 'Cambridge Proficiency (1975)' to show how candidates' understanding of language was assessed, despite criticisms that the questions only tested the memorisation of plot lines. Finally, I try to demonstrate that other forms of literature assessment do reliably test students' understanding of language and culture and should be made use of in a future Cambridge Proficiency examination.

THE DOWNGRADING AND THE EVENTUAL DISCONTINUATION OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE CPE

This brief analysis of the Cambridge Proficiency in English literature paper examination from 1913 to 1975 draws largely on the 'Studies in Language Testing (SiLT) volumes 'Measured Constructs' (Weir, 2013; Weir, 2002).

The Cambridge University Language examination had modest beginnings: what was then known as the 'Certificate of Proficiency' in English (CPE), now the 'C2 Proficiency', was administered to three students in one London centre in 1913 (Weir, 2013: 2). The written examination, then, included a three-hour long literature paper, the longest of all the written tests (see Table 1 below).

1913 CPE EXAMINATION

Table 1. Taken from Weir, (2013, 2)

(a) Translation from English into French or German (2 hours)
(b) Translation from French or German into English, and questions on English grammar (2 ½ hours)
(c) English Essay (2 hours)
(d) English Literature (The paper on English Language and Literature e [Group A, Subject 1] in the Higher Local Examination) (3 hours)
(e) English Phonetics (1 ½ hours)

Weir (2002, 2) notes that a special literature paper was later produced specially for foreign students with a 'less anglocentric choice' of subjects than in the 1913 examination, e.g. Matthew Arnold, Elizabethan travel and

discovery. Notwithstanding the fact that such topics can hardly be said to be multicultural, it is not clear why Weir (2002, 2) feels the need to criticise the original 1913 examination on that basis. The students were, after all, taking an examination which tested their knowledge of British culture and language and could reasonably expect an anglocentric focus. From the early days of the CPE then, it would seem that the English literature section was viewed with a certain amount of suspicion and was perceived as possibly disadvantaging foreign language students. We will see how this reluctance to include an English literature section in the CPE not only manifests itself at every stage in the development of the CPE examination, but eventually culminates in the demise of the section altogether.

The first step towards making English literature redundant was to offer an alternative to it as early as 1938, that is, an approach to the study of economic and commercial knowledge. (see Table 2 below):

CPE LITERATURE IN 1938

Table 2. Taken and adapted from Weir, (2002, 3)

(i) Written: a. English Literature (3 hours)
(ii) General Economic and Commercial Knowledge (3 hours)

By 1953, the English literature examination lasted for three hours and candidates were offered a general literature paper if they were unable to obtain prescribed texts. Alternatives to literature which were introduced in order to 'maximise candidate numbers' and to respond to the 'varying curriculum content of diverse educational systems' (Weir, 2002, 2) now included more alternatives, i.e. science texts, English life and institutions and a survey of industry (see Table 3. below):

CPE LITERATURE IN 1953

Table 3. Taken and adapted from Weir (2002, 3)

(i) English Literature (3 hours) alternatively a General English Literature Paper was offered for Overseas Centres which were unable to obtain the texts prescribed for the Eng Lit paper.
(ii) or Science Texts
(iii) or English Life and Institutions or Survey of Industry and Commerce

The 1960's saw a renewed emphasis on the separation between language and literature (Weir, 2002, 3) with literature being one of three options (see Table 3 below).

CPE IN LITERATURE (1966)

Table 4. Taken and adapted from Weir, (2002, 3)

Candidates must offer: (a) English Language and two other papers chosen from (b), (c), or (d). No candidate may offer more than one of the alternatives in (b). a. English Language (composition and a passage or passages of English with language questions. The choice of subjects set for composition will include some for candidates who are specially interested in commerce.) (3 hours) b. Either English Literature (3 hours) or Science Texts or British Life and Institutions or Survey of Industry and Commerce c. Use of English (3 hours) d. Translation from and into English (3 hours)

The '1975 revision' (Weir, 2002, 4) listed five papers. Notable for its absence is the literature paper of the CPE examination.

CPE IN 1975

Table 5. Taken from Weir, (2002, 4)

PAPER 1: Composition (3 hours) PAPER 2: Reading Comprehension (11/4 hours) PAPER 3: Use of English (3 hours) PAPER 4: Listening Comprehension (30 minutes) PAPER 5: Interview (Approx. 12 minutes)

As Weir (2002, 4) makes no reference in his article to the literature paper, we are left wondering what happened to it. Later in 2013, the same author (Weir, 2013), in a summary of Weir and Milanovic's (2003) research, inserts a table (see Appendix 1 below) intended to offer a set of specific key events which influenced language testing at Cambridge over the period 1913–2012. As in the earlier 2002 article, the event which led to the eventual discontinuation of the literature paper, a key event in the history of the Cambridge Proficiency, is not mentioned anywhere in the table (see Appendix 1).

This omission about the disappearance of the literature paper in 1975 seemed to point to a lack of transparency, especially as I knew the paper was offered in 1975, having sat for it myself. That the paper was not referred to after the 1975 revision, even though it had been offered then, was a source of confusion.

As a result of a freedom of information request I submitted to *Cambridge Assessment* in November 2024, it then became apparent that the literature paper continued to be offered as an optional additional paper, and was available until June 2002, when it was last assessed: 'The Regulations for 2002 confirm the last administration of the Optional Additional Papers and the revised format for the CPE for December 2002 onwards. The Regulations also detail

how performance in the Optional Additional Papers related to the CPE examination' (*Cambridge Assessment*, 2024, personal communication).

At the time of writing, it is still not clear why the decision to stop administering the paper was taken in 2002, - I am still in the process of finding out more information from *Cambridge Assessment* about this, i.e. how many candidates took the literature paper post 1975, what kinds of papers were administered in the period between 1975–2002 -, but what seems obvious from events surrounding the administration of the literature paper is that it was downgraded to an option in 1975 with the view to discontinue it in 2002.

Indeed, if we look closely at Weir's (2013) table, (see Appendix 1), we find that significant events both preceded and followed the 1975 decision to make the literature paper optional: in 1966, a revision was introduced which allowed candidates to sit a language-only pathway at CPE. In 1975 as the literature examination is about to be made optional, we see the introduction of a 'Reading and Listening paper'.

To take a historical perspective to this, it can justifiably be claimed that the literature examination was flanked on either side by key events which both anticipated and followed its being made optional, leading to its eventual discontinuation in 2002.

The omission of this key event in the research reports related to the history of CPE amounts to a denial that this ever happened. The author, Weir (2013), makes implicit references as to the causes of the downgrading of the literature examination in CPE. He acknowledges, for example, that, following World War Two (1939–45), the traditional teaching of English as a way of accessing classical literature was being supplanted by political forces which wanted to make English a world language. To this end, English literature was to succumb to the need of making English an international means of communication rather than an object of scholarly study. Shifts in the Cambridge English examinations in the latter part of the 20th century when the literature paper of the Cambridge proficiency was made optional bear witness to this change in attitude (Weir, 2013, 5).

By the 1970's, the author concludes, (Weir, 2013), the early 'scholarly' view of language had disappeared which paved the way for an approach which focused on how language was used, 'gone was the prominence given to a knowledge of phonetics, translation, English literature, and grammatical usage to be largely replaced by papers on listening and reading skills in their own right'.

But it is clear that this shift away from scholarly concerns did not happen in a vacuum. Weir (2013, 6) attributes the 'downgrading of the importance of literature and cultural knowledge as a language ability construct' to globalisation, the growth of English as an international language and the introduction of the language-only route for CPE examination candidates. Another possible reason for the demise of literature is our membership of the European Economic community; Weir (2013, 5) observes that this led to a perceived need to define learners' progression and goals more explicitly, though he does not clarify how this need for definition excluded the assessment of literature.

I shall argue below that this shift away from scholarly concerns, especially with regards to literature, has reduced the learning of language to utilitarian and political objectives, has taken the heart out of English language testing, and has homogenised its values to the extent that what *Cambridge Assessment* now offers is not as culturally distinctive as it could be. The CPE particular disregard for British culture and its native speakers is reflected in the speaking assessment scales developed in the 1980s with the downgrading of the native speaker concept as the top of the scale. Such disregard verges, absurdity given the high esteem in which British culture is held by foreign language students of English (see Wolf, 2024).

AN ANALYSIS OF EXAMINATION QUESTION TYPES IN THE CAMBRIDGE LOWER CERTIFICATE IN ENGLISH (1972) AND THE CAMBRIDGE PROFICIENCY (1975): WERE THEY QUITE SO IRREDEEMABLE?

In a paper which intended to examine the characteristics of rubrics in EFL literature examinations, Carter and Long (1990) offered an analysis of examination question types, some of which they argued against on the basis that they did not assess candidates' language skills. I shall here provide a similar, though less negative analysis of question types, based on two Cambridge examination papers, *The Cambridge Lower Certificate in English (1972)* and the *Cambridge Proficiency (1975)*[1]. Carter and Long (1990) identify three examination test types.

EXAMINATION QUESTION TYPE 1

The first type of examination rubric is referred to as 'paraphrase and context' in which candidates are asked to re-write a given literary text into contemporary English. They can also be asked questions about the context in which the extract is set, given that the extract given is often central to the rest of the novel. Such questions can be found in the 1972 paper of the 'Lower Certificate in English' on Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*:

1. How were the group about to spend their day when Colonel Brandon received his letter, and what preparations had they so far made?
2. Explain what we learn later about the true relationship between Colonel Brandon and Mrs Williams, and why Brandon had to depart so suddenly to see her?
3. How did Willoughby and Marianne spend the rest of the day following Brandon's departure?

(Cambridge Lower Certificate in English, 1972)

[1] I must acknowledge that as a learner of English, I myself took these two examinations a teenager and that my views may be coloured by a hint of nostalgia for the past.

The main criticism against this type of assessment is that candidates are required to retrieve information about the text, which 'advantages students with good memories' (Carter and Long, 1990). Whilst this is clearly the case, a good memory is required in a variety of learning contexts where knowledge needs to be learnt: it would not be unusual for students of Chemistry to be asked to retrieve information about the periodic table, and even a discursive discipline such as Philosophy requires students to remember definitions when they talk about the distinction between, say, analytic and synthetic propositions. It seems futile to decry the merits of that essential characteristic of learning, i.e. memory, when a lack of it would be considered dangerous in matters of life and death, e.g. medicine and aviation.

The other criticism levelled at this approach is that candidates may answer such questions competently whilst having read the text in their first language. There are ways to obviate such problems, i.e. choosing less frequently translated literary texts. Students should also be made aware that offering what are essentially back-translations can land them in serious difficulties since translations are not the equivalents of source texts. I still remember the amused reaction of examiners at a University entrance interview many years ago when a student claimed she had read Keats' *'The Ode to a Greek Urn'.

Now let me consider the positive characteristics of type 1 examination questions; it is first of all their flexibility. They can be used with candidates at the lower levels of language proficiency (see examples, 1, 2, 3), but can also be upgraded to include questions about the historical and the literary context, for example:

4. What does the *Ode to a Nightingale* reveal of Keats' character, preoccupations and moods'?

(Certificate of Proficiency in English, 1975)

The fact that such a question can be answered by students who have carried out extensive research about Keats in their first language seems largely irrelevant here. Indeed, many eminent experts in the literature of England have published interesting and widely read monographs on English literature in French (Laffay, 1968; Legouis and Cazamian, 1924). More pointedly, Long and Carter (1990) argue that the candidates' language skills are not assessed. But to this kind of objection I would argue that in answering question (4), candidates have to articulate ideas which combine knowledge of Keats's awareness of his own mortality and the refusal of death exhibited by the 'immortal bird'. Such ideas would surely have to be couched in the appropriate language of literary criticism, requiring a very high level of language proficiency on their part; their analysis of the literary text would clearly involve not just their memory, but their mastery over language and their ability to situate themselves critically in relation to secondary sources, a key aspect of academic study (Wolf, 2024).

TYPE 2 EXAMINATION TYPE: DESCRIBE AND DISCUSS

This type of question to which Carter and Long (1990) refer as the most frequent in literature testing invites candidates to describe characters as well as to discuss their motives for an action. One encounters a number of these questions with an emphasis on description and exemplification rather than discussion in the *Lower Certificate in English (1972)*:

5. 'What sort of person was Margaret Peel? **Illustrate** your answer by referring to her relationship with Dixon and Catchpole.
(Lower Certificate in English, 1972)

6. **Describe** the conditions at the London Hospital at the time when Thomas Barnardo was a medical student.
(Lower Certificate in English, 1972)

At the more advanced 'Certificate of Proficiency' level, the discussion and analytical dimension of the questions is more in evidence:

7. "Her characters move in a tightly knit and restricted environment, ironically observed." With detailed reference to Highbury and its inhabitants, **discuss** the truth of this comment.
(Certificate of Proficiency in English, 1975)

8. Give a brief **character sketch** of Mr Beebe. Why do you think Forster introduced this clergyman into *Room with a View*?
(Certificate of Proficiency in English, 1975)

The above questions invite candidates to provide a descriptive account of the co-text of the prescribed novel, leading to a discussion of Jane Austen's treatment of irony in Q7, and a descriptive character sketch leading to a discussion of his place in Forster's novel (Q. 8).

Carter and Long (1990) offer no criticism of this type of examination other than it also advantages students with good memories. They seem, however, to overlook the second member of the examination rubric, i.e. discuss, which requires candidates to provide a coherently and cohesively written argument based on the preceding description. In (7), for example, a candidate who has read *Emma* as a prescribed text is not only required to describe the 'restricted environment' in Highbury, but also to show how the characters they describe therein, e.g. Miss Bates, Harriet, Mr Elton, illustrate the quotation concerning the ironic observations of a tightly-knit community. Besides, such a candidate would be expected to show an understanding of what constitutes Austenian irony.

TYPE 3 QUESTIONS: EVALUATE AND CRITICISE

The third type of questions 'evaluate and criticise' are clearly directed at more advanced types of students. Here, Carter and Long (1990) observe that such questions require a critical stance from the candidates who are invited to show how successful the writer is in conveying a particular idea:

9. Show how Muriel Spark's acute social observation contributes to the humour and effect of the *Ballad of Peckham Rye*.

(CPE, 1975)

Carter and Long (1990) point out that the questions are often psychologically oriented with students expected to evaluate characters as 'complete psychological entities' whose behaviours can be explored on the basis of 'common sense' knowledge of human nature. The essays elicited, they argue, are ones in which texts are seen as sources of sociological ideas. It is not clear why the texts are sources of exclusively sociological ideas rather than ideas from other fields of inquiry, i.e. philosophy, theology, linguistic, to name a few. A more important point to consider is whether the candidates' display of knowledge and understanding of ideas can be assessed as an integral part of their linguistic ability. I believe it is possible to apply the same argument to type 3 questions as to those of type 2, namely that a competent evaluation of characters based on sociological, philosophical or any other theoretical framework used by candidates necessarily requires a high level of linguistic skills.

It may be conceded that there was a shying away from the text as a 'formal linguistic artefact' (Carter and Long, 1990) and possibly, an imbalanced focus on 'sequences of events, facts and a set of behaviours', However, the claim that questions do little to develop candidates' linguistic and interpretive skills is not as justified as it appears when one considers how candidates were expected to situate themselves critically in relation to secondary sources, itself an essential characteristic of literary criticism and academic writing.

Having said that, there is a long tradition of assessing students' comprehension of literary texts from the perspective of language, and the next section will look at the pedagogical implications of using these types of assessment.

LANGUAGE-BASED TESTS OF COMPREHENSION: CONTINUITY BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE PRACTICES

Unlike the analytical questions we looked at earlier, language-based tests of comprehension generally consist of questions or multiple choice items which look for evidence that the candidates have understood what is expressed in a

literary text. Such language-based tests of the candidates' interpretive skills can range from elementary comprehension questions to more complex issues related to literary meaning at the higher levels.

Looking for evidence for something in a text to show that one understands it at a fairly basic level is nothing new. It is to be found, for example, in an English textbook for French learners of English in their third year of learning at secondary school (Richard and Hall, 1967, 106). The students, after reading a simplified passage from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (see Appendix 2) in which the heroine, Maggie, cuts her own hair in defiance of the teasing she receives from her family, are asked a number of comprehension questions. The questions start off by testing a very basic level of understanding, i.e. Q1. 'What did Mrs Tulliver tell Maggie to do?', Q3 'What did Maggie take out of the drawer?' The level of complexity increases slightly with a more open-ended questions 'How did Maggie answer Tom?' which requires learners to understand that Maggie did not produce an utterance in reply to Tom's request for information. Q9 'What did Tom say and do after he had cut Maggie's hair?' is also more demanding than the earlier questions in the sense that it requires learners both to identify what was said and done, and to use a reported speech sequence with the required change in tenses.

More complex comprehension questions can focus explicitly on language points in the studied novels/poems. The purpose of such questions is to gauge the extent to which the candidates are able to 'make inferences' (see Robinson-Pant and Wolf, 2017) based on their understanding of the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions of the text. Interpretation of figurative meaning may often be required here. Taking Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale' as an example (see text in Appendix 3), the following questions could be used:

Q. 1 What adjectives are used to refer to the way the nightingale lives and sings in the trees? (stanza 1) What does the use of these adjectives suggest?

Q. 2 In what way is the nightingale 'not born for death'? (stanza 7). In your answer, please refer to stanza 3.

Clearly, such questions are concerned with the use of language and how it contributes to imagery and symbolism. In answer to Q1., students are expected to show they understand how the use of adjectives such as 'happy', 'light-winged', and 'full-throated' introduces a contrast with the drug-induced heaviness of words such as 'drowsy, drunk, opiate, drains, sunk' in the first stanza of the poem.

Turning back to the 'Certificate of Proficiency in English (1975), we do find questions concerned with style, language, imagery, metaphors and figures of speech. In relation to prescribed sonnets by Keats, candidates are asked to:

10. 'Write a brief appreciation of any one of the prescribed sonnets by Keats, giving an account of its structure, **imagery, figures of speech and suitability of language**'.

A familiarity with the language of *Antony and Cleopatra* is also called for in the question:

11. "Downy windows, close: And golden Phoebus never beheld
Of eyes again more royal."

(Antony and Cleopatra).

Show how characteristic are these lines of the atmosphere, the attitudes and the **language** of the play.

(Certificate of Proficiency in English, 1975)

The answer here would require knowledge of the contextual background of the characters and how it is encoded in the language of the play. This is because literary texts present ambiguities which frequently have to do with accessing unusual frames of reference and specific linguistic knowledge and denotations that may have become obsolete.

In order to recover the full meaning of characters' utterances in a Jane Austen novel, for example, a student of English literature would need to have the contextual knowledge that the ideal of an 18th century clergyman is one whose conduct is allied to a sense of what is useful to the community. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward, a future clergyman, interrupts Marianne's romantic praise of the neighbourhood by saying, with a note of irony:

12. 'You must not inquire too far, Marianne; remember I have no knowledge in the picturesque, and I shall offend you by my ignorance […] I shall call hills steep, which ought to be bold; surfaces strange and uncouth, which ought to be irregular and rugged; and distant objects out of sight, which ought to be indistinct through the soft medium of a hazy atmosphere.

(Austen 1811/2006: 112)

His observations are a reflection of his disagreement with Marianne's romanticism and his sensibility one which combines beauty with a sense of what is useful to the community. And so Edward is not fond of "crooked, twisted, blasted trees" or of "ruined, tattered cottages" (Austen 1811/2006: 113), however sublime and picturesque in a Mariannesque conception of the world they may be, simply because they imply social decay, disorder and bad husbandry.

These contextual frames of reference are particularly relevant to foreign language learners for whom the cultural and historical inferences related to

Edward's utterance are not readily accessible. Indeed, in an earlier study I conducted (Wolf, 2011) of French translations of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, I found that the inferences concerning Edward as a clergyman differed in French from those in Jane Austen's novel. There was evidence that when the passage was translated into French (1979), a number of lexical choices tended to erase the characteristic neoclassical relationship between beauty and utility. Whereas the valley looks comfortable and snug (Austen 1811/2006: 112) in English, thus conveying a general sense of beauty united with utility, the valley is 'cachée' (hidden) in the French translation (Austen 1811/1979: 99). The woods which are full of fine timber (Austen 1811/2006: 112) are, in the translation, planted with 'de beaux arbres', i.e., decorative rather than useful trees.

Literary discourse also engages students with older varieties of English and obsolete denotations. A line from Shakespeare's Sonnet 43 was recently used as a test for literary comprehension in university students of English as a second language (Bauer et al. 2022).

13. When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see
    For all the day they view things unrespected,
    But when I sleep, in dreams they look on thee,
    And darkly bright, are bright in dark directed.

When foreign language students were confronted with the sonnet, they were asked by the test writers (Bauer et al., 2022): 'What is the relationship between part 1 of the line ('When most I wink') and part 2 ('then do mine eyes best see')?'. This required candidates to have acquired the linguistic knowledge that 'wink' was used to mean 'to close one's eyes' in early modern English rather than 'blink' in contemporary usage. From that linguistic knowledge, the inference can be derived that the speaker sees best when he 'winks' most, i.e. when he sleeps, and that the image of the beloved best appears in his imagination.

As Bauer et al. (2022, 358) observe, the particular challenges of literary texts are to do with comprehension. This is because literary language confronts students with frames of reference and denotations that are not readily accessible. Although it may be argued that these difficulties will put students off, it has been observed (see Widdowson, 1983, 32) that writers as quintessentially English as Jane Austen, 'have relevance for people living in a totally different society'. When faced with such difficulties, learners' processing efforts do increase but, as in all worthwhile communication, their efforts are rewarded by their language resources being enhanced, which Widdowson (1983:32) refers to as their 'meaning potential'. In the above example, Bauer et al. (2022,358) observe that learners, being aware that language changes across time, are encouraged to 'consult a historical dictionary, and apparent contradictions

such as the fact that the speaker sees most clearly when he winks will motivate them to read up on rhetorical and stylistic devices'.

Although some have argued that there is nothing special about literary language (Kramsch, 1993; Edmondson, 1997), a more in-depth look at literary discourse reveals that 'the language of literature is noticeably different in that it is typically more interesting and varied and ultimately more representative than the language of dreamed-up dialogues in chemists' shops or reprinted AIDS leaflets, as found in many of the best intentioned classrooms today' (Hall, 2015, 12; see also Paran (2008) and Bernhardt (2010) for the importance of literature in language teaching).

Literary texts, and by extension literary tests of comprehension, then enable students of foreign languages to access a rich tapestry of linguistic, cultural, historical, etymological and rhetorical references which form the basis for a sound, serious and yes, scholarly study of the subject.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My intention in this article has been to argue the case for a historical approach to literature testing in which an account of the benefits and challenges related to the literature section of the Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE) is provided, and in which scholarly and academic concerns, rather than utilitarian and economic considerations, are the primary outcomes. By taking a historical approach, I found that literature testing was gradually downgraded by being made optional with a view to discontinuing it altogether in 2002. My argument has been both linguistic and cultural, concerning the nature of literature testing, namely that despite its demise in the U.K., it is still perceived as an effective means of developing, amongst others, the linguistic, cultural, rhetorical and historical competence of foreign language students and related inferential abilities (Bauer et al. 2022; Wolf, 2024).

The study has certain limitations; although it provides valuable information about a historical perspective on literature testing in one examination, it would benefit from exploring the subject further in an international context where the testing of literature still occurs. Nonetheless, though it is a localised study, it may inspire practitioners and language assessors to take a look at the issue of literature testing afresh. And so, to answer the question I started off with, yes, the *Cambridge Syndicate* do seem to have thrown the baby out with the bath water.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

CREDIT AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Wolf-Writing – review and editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The study drew on comments made by the *Cambridge Assessment Archives Team* as a result of a freedom of information request (2024).

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APPENDIX 1

Weir's (2013) table of key CPE events

STAGE 1: (1780–1913) The Beginnings of Theory

1780s onwards The Grammar-Translation method (Meidinger 1783, Fick 1793)

1858 **The University of Cambridge Local examinations syndicate (UCLES) founded**

1870's onwards: 'The Direct Method' (Berlitz schools

1882 onwards: The Reform movement: (Viëtor – 'Quousque tandem?' (1882); Sweet (1899) The Practical Study of Languages. A Guide for Teachers and Learners; Passy's essay on the direct method (1899) and Jespersen (1904)

1886 Foundation of the International Phonetics Association

1888 Edgeworth's papers on reliability

1892 Foundation of the Modern Language Association of Great Britain

1913 The Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)

STAGE 2 (1921–c1970) Oral-structural-situational approaches to Language Teaching and Testing

1920s onwards The Oral method (Palmer 1921a) aligned with systematic, graded structural progression The Oxford English Course Parts I–IV (Faucett 1933–34) Essential English for Foreign Students (Eckersley 1938–42) The Structural approach (Bloomfield 1926, 1933 and Fries 1945)

1925 J O Roach joins UCLES as assistant secretary (until 1945)

1932 CPe: Phonetics paper and grammar knowledge questions disappear

1936 Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (Faucett, Palmer, Thorndike and West 1936)

1939 The Lower Certificate in english (LCE)

1941 The UCLES-British Council Joint Committee

1950s onwards The Situational Approach (Hornby 1950) Pattern Practice (Fries and Lado 1962) The Oxford Progressive English Course (Hornby 1954–56)

1956 CPE: Use of English paper included as an option

1957 UCLES Executive Committee for the Syndicate's examinations in English for foreign students

1960 The audio-lingual approach (Brooks 1960)

1960 Lado's visit to UCLES 1960 in a personal capacity to discuss testing matters

1966 Wyatt (secretary of the syndicate 1961–72) visits ETS Princeton

CPE revision: availability of a language-only pathway

CPE: Use of English Paper, 3-option multiple-choice items introduced

1970 LCE: Structure and Usage paper

STAGE 3: (c1971–) Communicative approaches to Language Teaching and Testing

1971 onwards: Rüschlikon Symposium 1971; Council of Europe initiative on European Language Curriculum; The Threshold Level (Van Ek, Council of Europe (CoE) 1975); Notional Syllabuses (Wilkins 1976); The notional-functional syllabus (CoE); English for Specific purposes (ESP) (munby)

1975 The First Certificate in English (FCE)

Dedicated reading and Listening papers in FCE and CPE

1978 Teaching Language as Communication (Widdowson 1978)

1980 Preliminary English Test (PET); ELTS test

1987–89 The Cambridge–TOEFL Comparability study (bachman, Davidson, ryan and Choi, 1995)

1988 Peter Hargreaves, appointed Head of the EFL Division, arrives from the British Council

1989 IELTS test Creation of the EFL evaluation unit (later the ESOL research and Validation Group)

1990 Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing (Bachman 1990)

1991 Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)

1993 Business English Certificates (BEC)

1994 Key English Test (KET)

2001 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001)

2003 onwards Studies in Language Testing (SiLT) 'Constructs' project: a socio-cognitive approach

APPENDIX 2

Maggie cuts her hair

"Maggie," said Mrs Tulliver, "go and brush your hair."

"Tom, come with me," whispered Maggie, pulling his sleeve as she passed him. "There's something I want to do before dinner."

Tom followed Maggie upstairs into her mother's room. He saw her go to a drawer, and take out a large pair of scissors. "What are they for, Maggie?" he asked.

Maggie answered by seizing her hair and cutting it straight across the middle of her forehead.

"Oh, Maggie!" exclaimed Tom. "You'd better not cut any more off." But he could not help feeling that it was rather good fun. Maggie would look so strange.

"Tom, cut my hair behind," said Maggie.

"You'll catch it, you know," said Tom.

"Never mind –hurry up!" said Maggie impatiently.

The black hair was so thick; nothing could be more inviting to a boy who had already cut the pony's mane. He took the scissors and began to cut gaily; the hair fell heavily on the floor.

"Oh, Maggie!" said Tom. "Oh! How funny you look! Look at yourself in the mirror! You look like the village idiot!"

Maggie looked at herself in the mirror, while Tom laughed and clapped his hands. Her cheeks turned pale, and her lips began to tremble a little.

"Maggie, you'll have to go down to dinner now," said Tom. "Oh, how funny you look!"

"Don't laugh at me, Tom," she said in an angry voice. "Go away!" He hurried downstairs and left poor Maggie sitting among her black hair.

George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (adapted), 1860

APPENDIX 3

Ode to a Nightingale

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
    My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
    One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
    But being too happy in thine happiness,—
        That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees
            In some melodious plot
    Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
        Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
    Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
    Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
    Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
        With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
            And purple-stained mouth;
    That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
        And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
    What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
    Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
    Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
        Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
            And leaden-eyed despairs,
    Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
        Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
    Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
    Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
    And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,

Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades

Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
    Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep
        In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
    Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?