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### **Credits**

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## 1. About this book

This book is for you if you're studying for the First Certificate exam, or the Cambridge First or FCE as it is also often called.

The book assumes that you already have B2 level (Upper Intermediate) as this is the level of the exam. If you don't already have this level, I don't recommend doing the exam. Unless someone else is paying and the result is not important! If you're B1 (Intermediate), it would be better for you to concentrate on improving your English and then, after reading this book, you can think about doing the exam.

If you're B2 or higher, read this book before wasting any more time or money on things you might already have been doing to try and pass First Certificate. Those things might have included:

- An exam preparation course in a language school
- A private teacher to help you with the exam
- Buying exam preparation books
- Doing an online course to prepare for the exam

I am not saying those things are bad, but the most important thing is that first, YOU take responsibility for passing the exam. I have seen a lot of students over the years start an exam preparation course with no idea what the exam they are taking is, or what they need to think about to study for it. They put all their faith in the teacher or the school or the course book. But those things are just tools. The person that's going to pass (or fail) this exam is YOU. So this book is going to prepare you for that.

I will help you choose whether you need to enrol in a school or find a private teacher, and which books you really need. Don't spend any more money without reading further!

### 1.1. Is this book going to be translated into my language?

You might know my book *Own Your English*, a self-help book aimed at helping students learn English without spending any money. It's more likely that you read the Spanish version *Tu inglés es cosa tuya* as that is the version that has sold the most copies. You might be wondering if I am going to translate this book, *Own Your English: First Certificate into Spanish* (or another language).

The answer is no.

The reason is this:

**If you're having trouble reading this book in English, you're not ready for First Certificate.**

This book is probably lower level than a First Certificate reading text because the vocabulary is not that varied since the topic is the same throughout. So, a little warning:

**Don't take success in reading this as a sign your level is definitely right for First Certificate!**

It might be or it might not be, but you'll need to read on to find out how to know if you're ready for the exam.

1.2. Why use this book?

Those things I mentioned before that you might be doing to study for First Certificate?

They cost a fortune.

Wait to spend your money until you've read this book and then you'll know what to spend it on. Remember there is a HUGE industry built around these exams and everyone wants to take your money. In fact, if you fail, it's kind of a bonus since it means you'll take another course, buy more books and pay more exam fees.

The people who organise these exams do a very good job at marketing and, as a result, the First Certificate is very popular, especially in countries like Greece and Spain. Exams are *massive* money makers. People pay to take the exam and they will spend a fortune on books and practice test materials to help them do it. Language schools can charge more for these classes, and so can private teachers if they're experts in getting students through the exam. Make no mistake, the business of learning English is always looking for new ways to make money from its target customer – You.

The Cambridge exams like to get students into the system early. There are English exams for children as young as seven years old. Like most exams, passing the exam mostly means learning the technique and then applying it in the way that's most likely to match what the examiner is looking for. Most of the time, studying for the exam doesn't actually improve students' English, it just assesses what they know, how well they can guess when they don't know, and how well they've learned the techniques.

Most people studying for the exams are what I call Typical Language Students or TLSs. A TLS studies for an exam in the wrong way.

### 1.3. Studying for First Certificate like a TLS

A TLS studies for the exam, but they don't really *learn*. They've got whatever exam book the school or teacher told them to buy, or one they were able to borrow easily. If their teacher sets them a writing homework, they usually do it but only if they're not too busy with work or school. If there is a reading homework, they usually do that too – as quickly as possible. When they get their marks back, they don't look at the paper to see what their mistakes are. The score is the important thing.

TLSs don't learn much new vocabulary during the course because so many words they don't know come up in the reading texts and it's too much. In the Use of English paper, they make a lot of the same mistakes and their mark doesn't improve much. That's OK though, they think, that paper is the hardest one and it's just bad luck if you get questions you don't like.

### 1.4. Studying for First Certificate like an SLL

SLL means Successful Language Learner. I've explained more fully what this is and how to become one in my first book, *Own Your English*. Here, I'm just going to give you a brief description of how an SLL studies for the exam, but it should be enough for you to start to understand what an SLL is like.

An SLL has the books they need for class, if they are going to classes, but they've also gone to the bookshop and looked for the books with past exam papers in. They study on their own with this book. But they don't just take the tests, get their mark and then forget about it. They actually use the content of the tests to improve vocabulary and listening. If they have a teacher, SLLs do their writing homework every week and concentrate on the feedback and corrections they get from their teacher. Then they rewrite that homework and get it marked again with the improvements. When they have reading, listening or Use of English to do, they make sure they learn the new words and expressions from the texts. An SLL is active, engaged and responsible for their learning.

With the methods I'm going to suggest, taken together with my book, *Own Your English* which teaches you how to be an SLL instead of a TLS, you will use the exam preparation to actually improve your vocabulary and language knowledge. (Though I have to stress that taking an exam is not the best way to improve your English. The best way to do that is not wasting time thinking about exam technique. I'll be repeating this later with more explanation, but, if you don't need the qualification, First Certificate is not as good for learning English as working on your general English skills.)

Here's the best part about studying my way for the First Certificate:

By the time you take the First Certificate, you'll be halfway to passing the Advanced, or CAE exam.

Now, how can I say that?

#### 1.5. Using First Certificate to get to Advanced

Well, I have prepared students for both exams. I know them inside out. And the jump from First Certificate to Advanced takes people about two years. And they often still fail the Advanced. Why?

They don't practise the Use of English paper enough. They never understood the techniques and strategies so, when the questions get much harder, they are lost.

They don't practise writing enough and they didn't really learn how each type of writing question has its own techniques and strategies. So, when they have to produce longer, more complex writing, they are lost.

Another common reason is vocabulary. Most students I have seen who go from First Certificate to studying the Advanced simply do not have a wide enough vocabulary range. And so they are *really* lost.

If you know something about how the First Certificate is marked, you start to understand why it's difficult to go from First Certificate to Advanced. I'll explain in more detail later but it's possible to pass the First Certificate by achieving only 60% average on all parts of the exam. This is equivalent to the First Certificate mark 3 out of 5. And 3 out of 5 is equivalent to 1 out of 5 at Advanced. That's 20% and that's a very bad fail at Advanced.

If you're studying in a language school, they should make sure you are Advanced level before putting you into an exam preparation class. But, as I discuss in more detail in *Own Your English*, when schools move students up from level to level, often the students' actual level has not changed.

#### 1.4. Maybe the First Certificate isn't right for me then?

It might not be!

If you need it because your employer or university requires the certificate, then you need it. If you're thinking of future employment and you're not sure if the qualification will give you an advantage or not, it's time to do some research. Find people in the

kind of job you're looking for and ask them. Call HR departments in a few different companies and ask them. Use Linked In to search for people with that job title and see if they display the First Certificate or other language qualifications in their profile. Or write to them directly and ask. Or post the question in a group or forum related to that industry.

If you need First Certificate because you want to improve your level, then studying for the exam *in the way I am going to show you* will help raise your level. Studying for the exam in the way Typical Language Students study for it in a school won't help your English. In fact, it will probably demotivate you. However, even though I am going to show you the right way to study for First Certificate, the way that will improve your English, the best way to improve your English is to simply forget about the exam. Instead, read my book *Own Your English* and find out how to really be better at English. Don't even click the buy button on this First Certificate book!

Let me make this clear.

**If you "need" the First Certificate because you want to improve your English, you really don't need the First Certificate.**

**You need general English.**

Most of the preparation for an exam is learning exam technique. And that's so specific it's only useful for sitting in that exam room, responding to fake situations, texts and tasks dreamed up by someone who wants to make a profit out of you.

#### 1.4.1. Know your level

You need to have B2 to comfortably pass the First Certificate, though I have seen people with high B1 scrape a pass with intense effort and concentrating on technique. Generally speaking, if you have been studying in language schools for a while and passing their end of course tests, it does not mean you have the level they say you do. The only way to be sure is to take a LEVEL test, not a PROGRESS test. Progress tests come at the end of a term or a course book. Level tests, or placement tests as they are sometimes known, are what a school gives you when you enrol for the first time.

There are a couple of ways to get your level tested.

You could go to a school that you have no history with and pretend you want to enrol. They should give you a free level test. They might even have an online system for you to do the test. This could be free on their website. After the test, there is no obligation to enrol on the course so DON'T!

Or Cambridge English have a level test on their website here:

<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/>

Or if you search "test your English level" in Google, a host of sites come up. A good one is:

<http://www.examenglish.com/leveltest/index.php>

Using Cambridge or another online test will not test your speaking level, but a school might get a teacher to do a quick interview with you to assess your level. It is likely that your writing and grammar will test higher than your speaking. However, students from Russian and Arabic speaking countries often test lowest on writing because they have such a different writing system in their own language and they typically score low on writing.

If you test at B1 or lower, you will be wasting your money trying to take First Certificate as it's unlikely you will pass. You would be better off learning the 3,000 most common words in spoken English, improving your listening with the techniques in *Own Your English* and trying the level test again in the future.

#### 1.5. Should I do Advanced instead?

Maybe.

If you are thinking about getting the Advanced after the First Certificate, you are probably thinking about paying for two exams. If you have time and there is no-one waiting for you right now, demanding that you have the First Certificate, then I'm going to make a suggestion.

If you might not need the First Certificate, use this book, study for the First Certificate in exactly the way I say, and use past papers to test yourself. When you're getting 80% or higher on Reading, Listening and Use of English, you're ready to start studying for Advanced. When you're getting 4 or 5 out of 5, or 80% or more for your Writing\*\* and Speaking\*\*, you are definitely ready. You're responsible for your English so you can decide if you need both exams.

And, if you've been studying in the way I'm going to show you, you'll have better vocabulary than any TLS (and that's almost everyone I have ever seen who goes from First Certificate to Advanced) which is the biggest weapon you have for passing Advanced. Advanced is a really hard exam. You can't do it without a really wide vocabulary and an instinct or a "feel" for grammar. The only way to pass Advanced is to have Advanced level English and good exam technique.

The good news about that is, most of the techniques are the same as for First Certificate.

And just in case you're wondering ...

\*\* You will need someone qualified to assess Speaking and Writing for you.

## 1.6. What makes me the expert on the First Certificate?

Well, like most teachers with a lot of experience, I have done plenty of exam preparation classes, preparing students for KET, PET, First Certificate, Advanced, CPE and IELTS. (The only major exam I've not got any experience in is TOEFL.)

As well as my years of experience teaching in different countries, I am a trained and qualified Cambridge speaking examiner. I've examined in Turkey and Spain for the Young Learner exams, KET, PET, and First Certificate. In the UK, I organised exams for a summer school. I wrote a one month intensive course syllabus for PET and First Certificate which the students studied in order to take the exam and our pass rate was extremely good. I also arranged for speaking examiners to examine at our centre which, as you'll see, has given me even more insight into what goes on "behind the scenes."

## 1.7. What you'll need to buy

When studying for an exam, unlike studying general English, there is no way to avoid spending some money on books. I am going to give you the absolute minimum shopping list. If you are studying with a school, they will probably make you buy an exam preparation course book. However, I think, if your general English level is high enough, you can use the past papers books to replace the need for an exam preparation course book.

### 1.7.1. A notebook

If you've been using the techniques from *Own Your English*, you will already have, and be using, an Active Vocabulary Notebook. If not, you need to buy a plain notebook that you organise to make your own personalised study book which you use regularly. It's not just a list of new vocabulary, it's an organic, growing reference and study aid.

There is a specific technique to making this book work for you and I recommend reading the relevant section of *Own Your English* to find out how easy it is to set up and use.

### 1.7.2. Past papers

There is a complete free sample paper on Cambridge English's site here:

<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/first/exam-format/>

Use this paper as your diagnostic test to see how well you perform on the First Certificate exam. As you study more, you will be able to see your scores improving from this Base Mark. More on this later in section 1.9.

You'll need Cambridge English's Practice Papers book, the most up-to-date version you can find, especially as the exam has changed slightly since 2015. The latest version is essential for doing timed practice tests. However, earlier versions are OK for practising general technique. As far as the format of the writing and speaking papers are concerned, the general nature of the tasks is more or less the same, but the way the questions are framed is different now. It won't hurt you to do old past papers but when you get closer to the exam, switch to the new papers to get used to how the questions are worded.

Look on Amazon or at a local bookshop, or second hand book seller for one of these two books:

Cambridge English First 1:

<http://www.cambridge.org/es/cambridgeenglish/catalog/cambridge-english-exams-ielts/cambridge-english-first-1-revised-exam-2015>

Cambridge English First 2:

<http://www.cambridge.org/es/cambridgeenglish/catalog/cambridge-english-exams-ielts/cambridge-english-first-2>

NB: There are books called Cambridge English First for Schools. The "For Schools" exam is a version slightly modified for school children with questions and topics that are less adult. The level is the same. You are only likely to be taking this version of the exam if you are sitting the exam Sept-June and are in a high school.

There are exam practice books by other publishers and they are often a lot cheaper. When I've used these books, or bought them for other teachers to use during intensive courses, I have had feedback that the questions are not as hard as the actual exam. It is probably (and unfortunately since they are more expensive) best to use the official past papers as they are written by the same people as the exam

itself. However, you can still learn technique and vocabulary and expressions from "easier" practice papers so you could buy a cheaper one for the beginning of your self-study and switch to the Cambridge book later.

### 1.7.3. Saving money on books

Look for second hand books or find other people studying for the exam (try Facebook groups or ask around your friends or social media networks) and share books.

I don't advise buying pirate copies of books online as you can end up with nasty viruses or malware on your computer.

Finally, don't write in any of your books and you can sell them when you pass your First Certificate!

### 1.8. Free resources online

There is a LOT of material online and I am not attempting to cover everything. These are sites I have used myself, or know have a good reputation. Google may not be your friend when looking for exam practice material because the same material is often reproduced on multiple sites and you can waste a lot of time finding things you've already seen.

- Cambridge English itself has two papers available for free:  
<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/first/preparation/>
- [www.examenglish.com](http://www.examenglish.com)  
This site has plenty of practice questions and mobile apps with tests you can do. There is also a level test. They make all their money on advertising and don't charge you for anything on the website, but you have to pay (a small fee) for apps.
- [www.flo-joe.com/First Certificate/students/tests/](http://www.flo-joe.com/First Certificate/students/tests/)  
Another well-known site with practice tests, tips and techniques.
- <http://englishexamhelp.com/First Certificate/>  
This has some free and some paid practice questions and plenty of tips on technique.



If you want to read more, *Own your English: First Certificate* is available from [Amazon](#) or as a [PDF](#) on my website