

# The Exaver Project: Conception and Development México <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Exaver is the name given to a battery of tests aimed at measuring proficiency in the English language. These tests have been developed over the last seven years by the Universidad Veracruzana (UV) in collaboration with the British Council, the University of Cambridge and, more recently, Dr Barry O'Sullivan of the University of Surrey-Roehampton. The tests have been designed in accordance with the guidelines established by the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEF) and the Association of Language Testers of Europe (ALTE) and are offered at three levels of proficiency: elementary, lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate (1). This paper represents an updated version of a report originally published by the British Council in 2004.

## Background

The origins of Exaver are to be found in the multiple contexts in which English is taught at the UV. As a result of a major curriculum change conceived in 1998 and known as the *Modelo Educativo Integral Flexible* (MEIF), English instruction is now compulsory for all undergraduates in the form of two low-level courses. These courses are given at the language centres attached to the five major campuses, in the faculties themselves or in special self-access centres. In order to maximize standardization of instruction and evaluation on these courses, there is a special committee charged with designing and administering a series of achievement tests to cover the various permutations. Some faculties, however, require higher levels of English, usually on postgraduate programmes but also, occasionally, at the undergraduate level. Such instruction is usually provided at the language centres, which offer a variety of courses to both university students and the general public. Each centre usually has its own syllabus and evaluation system, usually in the form of some kind of achievement test. Finally, instruction in English is also provided at the Language School (*Facultad de Idiomas*) on its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as well as on those courses designed for other university students and the general public. There is, however, no direct link between the Language School and the language centres, as they are administered independently. The English BA programme (*Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa*) has a system of departmental examinations, which are generally of the achievement type but with some features of proficiency tests.

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In nearly all cases, with the exception of the English BA programme, students can be exempted from taking required English language courses or placed in higher-level courses by producing evidence of proficiency, usually some kind of international certificate accepted by the UV. Unfortunately, despite the increasing demand for language certification at the UV, there are no generally accepted criteria for determining proficiency levels, course objectives or assessment. Indeed, there is no single department with responsibility for supervising course design, instruction or certification in the area of foreign languages. Moreover, international certificates tend to be rather expensive and, while obviously essential for those wishing to study or work abroad, may not be so suitable at a public university with a generally low-income student population.

Faced with this situation, the previous Rector, Dr. Víctor Arrendondo Álvarez, who was committed to promoting the use of English throughout the university, conceived the notion of a series of English language tests, all based on a single proficiency scale and which would cover all contexts while adhering to international norms. Such a system would provide certain benefits that the UV's existing accreditation systems lacked. Essentially, students would have proof of having attained a particular level of proficiency in English, proof that they could then use for various purposes: exemption from certain required courses, entry to postgraduate study within the UV, or obtaining suitable employment. Moreover, being locally produced, these tests would be much cheaper than international tests (2).

With a view to setting up such a system, the Rector approached the British Council in 2000. Through its Special Projects Coordinator, Pat Grounds, the Council agreed to oversee the creation of a battery of tests which would cater to the UV's needs while remaining consistent with the national trend towards professional certification. As part of the agreement, the Council then approached the ESOL Division of Cambridge Assessment, then known as UCLES (3). This special partnership eventually gave birth to Exaver and, in 2001, the UV's local design team was formed and began to receive training.

### **The Structure of Exaver**

As explained in the Introduction, the Exaver examinations occupy a position ranging from low to mid-high on a global proficiency scale. They correspond approximately to the levels of A2, B1 and B2 on the CEF's scale (A1-C2) or Levels 1-3 on the six-point scale used by ALTE (See Table 1). For those readers who are familiar with Cambridge ESOL's "main suite" of examinations, the tests are approximately equivalent to the KET, PET and FCE (4) examinations (See Table 1 below). This places the Exaver battery firmly within the Basic and Independent User categories, sufficient for most English language learning contexts (5).

Table 1: Equivalent Proficiency Levels

Common European Framework			ALTE	Cambridge ESOL	Exaver
Proficient User	C2	Mastery	Level 5	CPE	
	C1	Effective Operational Proficiency	Level 4	CAE	
Independent User	B2	Vantage	Level 3	FCE	Level 3
	B1	Threshold	Level 2	PET	Level 2
Basic User	A2	Waystage	Level 1	KET	Level 1
	A1	Breakthrough	Breakthrough		

Exaver is keyed to the CEF in at least three ways. Firstly, it is based on the detailed specifications contained in the three documents called *Waystage 1990*, *Threshold 1990* and *Vantage*, the first two of which were originally published in the mid 1970's and were instrumental in promoting the communicative approach to language teaching. Secondly, the tests are related to the corresponding Cambridge examinations through a statistical procedure involving the application of a short "anchor" test. This is "[a] test with known measurement characteristics, which is administered in association with another test. Performance on the anchor test provides information about the other test and about the candidates who have taken both of them" (AssessNet, 2006). Finally, each set of tests receives detailed feedback from Cambridge ESOL before being administered. In addition to suggestions for modification or deletion of items, such feedback invariably includes comparisons with Cambridge's own levels. Nevertheless, it should not be inferred from this that the Exaver examinations are simply clones of those designed by Cambridge ESOL. The tests have, naturally, been influenced by those of Cambridge but they are not identical and, in fact, one of Cambridge's conditions for providing assistance was precisely that our tests should not be too similar to theirs and should not compete.

Each examination comprises three papers: the first focuses on reading and writing, the second on listening, and the third on speaking. The reading and writing paper consists of five parts, ranging from matching and multiple choice tasks to modified cloze passages. Text types vary according to the purpose of the task and the level. However, despite the ostensible nature of the paper, there is currently no direct test of writing. The listening paper is composed of four parts and ranges from comprehension of short, relatively informal conversations to longer conversations and monologues of a more formal nature. Finally, speaking skills are assessed through three tasks, whose exact nature varies according to the level but which generally involve some kind of interview format, a discussion phase and a section in which long turns are elicited from the test-takers.

All tests are designed according to a detailed "specifications" document, one for each level (For details of what such a document should contain, see Alderson, Clapham and Wall, 1995, pp 9-39). The document specifies topics, situations, communicative functions, grammatical patterns and lexis for all papers at that level. In addition, it supplies task-specific information concerning such features as task and text types and the nature, number and length of items. Finally, it provides a sample task for each section of each paper. Like every other aspect of the design process, the specifications document is subject to revision, the aim being to update it every two years or so. The first set of specifications was designed in 2000-2001 by the British Council's team following consultation with Cambridge ESOL. Subsequent updates have been made by the local team subject to approval by Cambridge ESOL. At the time of writing, a major revision is being undertaken under the supervision of Dr. Barry O'Sullivan who, as explained in the Introduction, has taken over Cambridge ESOL's role as external adviser.

In general, it is recommended that candidates should have received at least 200 hours of instruction before taking Exaver Level 1, while 400 hours are suggested for Level 2 and 600 hours for Level 3. However, these are only approximate figures, as so much depends on each candidate's ability, motivation and learning strategies as well as the quality of instruction and opportunities for genuine practice.

## **Organization**

The composition of the local production team has varied over the years but currently consists of eleven members: a general coordinator, six item writers (two for each level), a local editor, a text/graphics designer and webmaster, a statistician, and an administrative assistant. The team's main duties involve designing and editing items, training test administrators and oral examiners, maintaining the web page, collecting and analyzing data, maintaining the test item bank and supervising registration procedure and test administration at each of the various testing centres on the UV's five campuses: Xalapa, Veracruz, Poza Rica-Tuxpan, Córdoba-Orizaba and Coatzacoalcos-Minatitlán-Acayucan. External support is provided by the British Council, which supervises overall training, liaises with external advisers and organizes workshops, most recently with Dr. O'Sullivan.

## **Test Construction Process**

The process by which a particular Exaver test develops from initial item writing to formal administration is relatively long, requiring from several months to a year or more. In general, the process is similar to that described by Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1995). The first step involves the initial writing of suitable items according to the specifications document for each level. The papers for each level are then assembled and sent to the local editor, who may request

modification or even deletion of certain items, in which case the items in question are returned and the process repeated. When all items of all papers have been examined and approved at the local level, they are forwarded to the British Council representative, who in turn sends them on to Cambridge ESOL, where the tests undergo a further rigorous examination and comments and suggestions are made. After this second editing phase, the tests are returned to the British Council, where they are provisionally modified according to Cambridge ESOL's recommendations. The tests are then forwarded to Xalapa, where the local editor makes final adjustments. At about this time, the scripts for the listening papers are recorded and the whole package is then turned over to the graphic design department, after which the tests are printed, distributed among the testing centres and, a few days later, administered. After the administration phase, the tests are returned to Xalapa, where the various kinds of data are recorded and analyzed. Marks are tallied, and raw scores are adjusted and divided into one of six bands, A-F, of which A is the highest while C represents a bare pass. Previously, the analysis was carried out by Cambridge ESOL, but it is now undertaken by the local team, using specialized software. Finally, test-takers are notified of their scores and certificates are awarded.

### **Formal Administration of Exaver: The Story So Far**

In December 2001, the Exaver examinations were piloted with a total of 631 non-paying volunteers, taken mainly from the language centres and the Facultad de Idiomas: 276, at Level 1, 184 at Level 2, and 171 at Level 3. All volunteers received a diploma for their efforts, but no official certificate containing scores. Following a detailed analysis of the results, it was decided that the first formal administration would take place in June 2002. A total of 212 candidates took the test, distributed as shown in Table 2.

To date there have been nine formal administrations of the Exaver examinations, as presented in Table 2 below. Of these, eight consisted of original tests, while one test was repeated. The pilot test and the first formally administered test were designed by the British Council's team while the local team was being trained. All subsequent tests have been designed by the local team, including one that is currently undergoing revision and another that is in the final stages of editing prior to its administration in May, 2007. In all, over 1500 people have taken the formally administered tests, more than half of them at Level 1, which is to be expected under the circumstances. In addition, the tests have been used to determine entry onto various postgraduate programmes at the UV.

**Table 2: Formal Administrations of Exaver Examinations**

Dates	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
June 2002	72	102	38	<b>212</b>
May 2003	19	28	9	<b>56</b>
Nov 2003	67	54	27	<b>148</b>
May 2004	87	37	23	<b>147</b>
Nov 2004	120	44	73	<b>237</b>
May 2005	90	35	20	<b>145</b>
Nov 2005	135	28	25	<b>188</b>
May 2006	103	50	26	<b>179</b>
Nov 2006	166	30	38	<b>234</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>859</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>1546</b>

### Looking Ahead

Exaver is a relatively new project, so there remains a good deal of work to be done. The fact that ten completely different sets of examinations have been developed in six years is, in itself, a remarkable achievement. It is now time to thoroughly evaluate the results of those six years before embarking on another series of examinations.

Without wishing to give the impression of gazing into a crystal ball, I believe that it is possible to make some tentative predictions. The first of these is purely economic: as Exaver represents a heavy investment for the UV, the project will continue as long as the authorities decide that it continues to have potential. This, in turn, will depend on Exaver's institutionalization within the UV and, to a certain extent, on its attraction for other institutions. With regard to the former, the project is set to receive a boost when the English BA programme officially incorporates it into the new curriculum for placement, promotion and graduation purposes. As for Exaver's projection beyond the confines of the UV, some institutions have expressed interest although there have been no official agreements. There also exists the possibility that Exaver will be officially recognized by the Federal education authority (SEP) as a certification option.

As regards the nature of the Exaver examinations, some possible modifications suggest themselves. In the first place, tests could be added both above and below the present levels, at the Breakthrough and C1 levels respectively, thus providing a greater range. To the best of my knowledge, there are no English examinations officially indexed to the Breakthrough level, although such tests exist in French and German (6). There is clearly great potential at this level and it might be worthwhile to investigate the possibilities. As for the other end of the scale, the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered by the Facultad de Idiomas, together with a handful of other postgraduate

programmes could, in the long run, justify such examinations, preferably with a more academic orientation.

Another possible direction might be the incorporation of a direct writing component. Indeed it could reasonably be asked why there is no such component already. It could even be argued that the first paper at each level, called Reading and Writing, is somewhat of a misnomer. In self-defence, it must be stated that Exaver was originally intended to be an indirect test of overall competence, much like that of the paper-based TOEFL, which would maximize reliability by avoiding the considerable logistical problems associated with the nominally more valid direct assessment of speaking and writing: targeting microskills and text types, designing suitable task-types, rating scales and descriptors, training raters and benchmarking, among other features of direct testing. Nevertheless, the local team felt the need for some degree of validity, if only that of face validity. After considerable debate, it was decided that a speaking test would be acceptable but not a test of writing, which would tax the resources of such a small team. This might be the right moment to revise that original assumption.

In the final analysis, the Exaver project has, together with the SEPA Inglés examinations (SEP, 2005), shown that valid, reliable and practical proficiency tests are not the preserve of large commercial organizations and that there is sufficient expertise in Mexico to design large-scale language tests that are attractive, economical and attuned to regional and national contexts.

#### Notes:

1. The meaning of these terms is very subjective. They are used here in the sense adopted by the publishers of most British ELT materials.
2. The current cost of Exaver examinations varies from \$250 pesos at Levels 1 and 2 to \$350 pesos at Level 3. Increased demand would, in all probability, result in lower costs.
3. UCLES stands for University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The name was changed to Cambridge Assessment on July 21, 2005 (For details, see <http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/externalaffairs/Media/New%20Name%20to%20take%20UCLES%20to%20the%20top>)
4. For those readers who are unfamiliar with Cambridge ESOL examinations, here are the full names of the examinations provided in the main suite:  
KET: Key English Test  
PET: Preliminary English Test  
FCE: First Certificate in English  
CAE: Certificate in Advanced English  
CPE: Certificate of Proficiency in English

5. Reference to levels inevitably leads to comparison among international examinations. For many, the point of reference is that of the TOEFL scales, which do not fit easily into the CEF/ALTE scheme. While comparison of levels is notoriously difficult, most attempts at establishing equivalences usually equate a bare pass at PET (B1) with about 450 on the paper-based TOEFL scale, FCE (B2) with about 500, and CAE (C1) with about 550. See, for example, <http://www.besig.org/events/iateflpce2005/ets/CEFsummaryMarch04.pdf>
6. For details, see [http://www.alte.org/can\\_do/framework/table.php](http://www.alte.org/can_do/framework/table.php)

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