

## Preparing young learners for exams

Many children around the world, especially teenagers, have to take formal English language examinations. These may be internationally recognised exams like the Cambridge First Certificate or a local examination like the Sri Lankan O Level or Hong Kong Certificate in English.

This month we are looking at how teachers can help students do as well as they possibly can in these exams, while maintaining motivation and enjoyment in English classes.

Some of the problems of preparing students for English exams are:

- Preparing for exams can be very stressful for students
- There never seems to be enough time
- Exam preparation classes can become very boring
- Teachers find it hard to find suitable materials for exam preparation lessons apart from practice tests
- Doing practice tests can be very demotivating for students when they do badly in them
- Teaching turns into testing

Yet in many ways the examination preparation class could be seen more positively as:

- Students are motivated to pass their exams
- Students are all working towards the same goal
- There is a set syllabus to follow
- It is easy for teachers to justify what they do in lessons if it's useful in the exam
- There is a real challenge for students and teacher alike
- The satisfaction of knowing you are doing well is very motivating

So we must attempt to build on these positive factors and reduce the negative. Here are some tips and practical suggestions on how to do so:

**Exam preparation classes should not just practise doing exams but teach students examination techniques and make these transparent.**

- Students must know what the exam includes and what the examiner is looking for. Look through old exam papers with your students. Let them discuss what each question is testing e.g. a composition tests grammar, vocabulary, structure, punctuation, organisation of ideas, ability to interest the reader, ability to answer the question thoroughly and sometimes creativity and imagination, too.
- Explain that examiners mark many papers and that can be a boring job. They are pleased when handwriting is tidy and easy to read and when students are imaginative. (I used to mark up to 1,000 examination compositions every summer and can tell you it's wonderful when students are truly creative and interesting. Once I had read the 50<sup>th</sup> story that ended with '*and I realised it was just a dream*' I was ready to scream – driving the marker crazy is not a good way to get top marks in an exam.)
- Please do not encourage students to learn model compositions by heart or even model paragraphs. Markers can spot these immediately and students will get no marks for this.

- Students must get used to interpreting rubric (the instructions at the beginning of the exam and before each separate part of the exam) correctly. Many students lose marks by skimming over the rubric and, for example, writing more than one composition when only one is required. You can play a yes/no game with students here. Let them read a rubric and then ask questions like:

Will you write in pencil?

Will you answer all the questions?

Will you spend one hour on part one? etc.

Let them call out *yes* or *no* or raise their arm if they agree with your statement. This will bring to their attention the need for careful reading. You can also insist that they spend the first 5 minutes of any test/exam reading the paper carefully and are not allowed to pick their pens until those 5 minutes are up. This will ensure they don't start off without a careful reading of the instructions and is also useful for calming them down at the start of the exam. I've made my teenage classes sit on their hands for the first 5 minutes to stop them grabbing their pens and writing immediately.

**Merely going through practice tests only shows the students what they don't know and doesn't actually teach them very much.**

- Practice tests are useful for students to get to know the format of the exam and to get used to the timing, but should be used sparingly. They take up a lot of time, teachers have to do a lot of marking and the results can be very demotivating.
- You should continue to be 'teaching' English all the way up to the exam and not just recycling or testing. This will help keep students motivated and make good use of the limited time you have.

**Exams test many different skills. Be aware of what these skills are and ensure you practise them in isolation as well as in exam mode.**

- By isolating them you can help students understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Also students will be aware of the skills they should be displaying during the exam. Many young students go into an exam with the sole aim of surviving it and getting out as soon as possible. These students do not do very well in exams. The exam is, after all, meant to be a showcase for what they are able to do.

Below is a breakdown of some skills that are tested in different papers in an exam and some suggestions on how to practise them in class (or for homework). **It is important that you explain to students how the skills you are practising in these activities can be used in the exam – point out the links.** For example if you do some editing/correction work on a piece of writing in class, explain how this is also important to do in the exam.

## Reading

In reading comprehensions students are faced with a lot of text and a time limit. Activities that encourage them to read effectively – to skim and scan and notice key words can be fun as well as effective.

### Reading games

**Scanning quickly:** Copy a page from an English telephone directory or a TV guide (any page that has a lot of information on it). Hand out a copy to each student. Call out questions like: Where does Mr J.Z. Brown live? What is Mrs K.B. Brown's telephone number? Whose phone

number is 01567 325987? etc. The first student to answer gets a prize or a round of applause. Students will be really trying to move their eyes efficiently over the page to find the right information. It's a game, so they won't be stressed.

**Finding key words and understanding gist:** Find 8- 12 small newspaper articles. Cut them out and separate the headlines from the articles. Put the articles and headlines on the walls around the classroom. Each one should be numbered. The students move around the class reading them and have to match the articles to the headlines by writing the correct numbers together on a paper. The first student to come to you with the correct matched pairs is the winner.

Students often panic when they find words they do not understand in a reading passage. They should develop skills to deal with this and avoid getting upset in the exam.

Find a suitable passage for a reading comprehension and blank out every fifth word (or the right hand third of the paper – whichever you prefer). Start with an easy version and make them more difficult once students get used to this. Get students to do a usual comprehension exercise (multiple choice or questions) asking them to guess what the missing words might be. Students could do this in pairs, as this way they will share their strategies and it will be more of a learning than a testing task.

Picking out key words and speed reading:

#### Objects Quiz

For the **Objects Quiz** give a time limit of 3-5 minutes. This is good for helping students to read effectively and pick out key words. After they do the task, go through how they were successful – highlighting the skill of focussing on the key words that carry most meaning in a text.

Also encourage extensive reading through class libraries or readers. The more students read in English, the easier it will be for them to approach an unknown text in an exam.

### Writing

See the page on [Writing Compositions](#) for classroom ideas on how to break down and practise different writing skills. All the skills described are transferable to the exam situation.

### Grammar

Grammar is of course being tested in all parts of any English exam, but specifically in a test like the Use of English in the Cambridge First Certificate.

It may be hard to break down the aspects of the exam to practise, but when practising these tests let students work in pairs or small groups, so they get a chance to discuss (in mother tongue is fine) why they think their answer is right and they can guide weaker students.

Here is a nice idea from [Learning Teaching](#) by **Jim Scrivener**, Heinemann (an excellent book with lots of practical suggestions especially for teachers who are new to the profession):

**A 'teacherless' lesson:** give the students the chalk or board pens and they discuss and work through an exam paper together on the board. The teacher only looks at (and marks) the board when they have completely finished.

There are of course fun ways of practising and revising grammar, like these below:

[Spot The Difference](#)

This is a good review of the difference between simple past and present perfect tenses.

[Word Order Game](#)

Students can make each other exercises like this, too.

## Listening

Listening is a very difficult part of the exam. Students are easily panicked and distracted and they cannot spend a few minutes recovering as the exam tape will not pause for them.

- Prediction – as soon as students start reading the questions they should begin formulating ideas about what they will hear. This can be done in class: let students read the questions on a listening task, brainstorm what they think they will hear, then play the tape and see how much they were able to predict. The more they can predict, the easier the listening will be for them.
- If students are doing an international exam like the Cambridge FCE, they will hear native speakers. They should have been exposed to the features of natural English like linking, weak forms etc. A good way to do this is to practise listening with pop songs, which do not always have the clearest pronunciation and have features of natural English. See some of the ideas for using songs for listening comprehension on the web page [Using Songs and Music with Secondary Students](#).
- Many students have complained to me that during their listening exams there was a lot of noise outside the examination room that made it difficult for them to hear the tape or that the recording was not very clear. So, when doing listening in class I often also play music. Have another tape playing with some noises on or play the tape very quietly. This helps them to practise listening carefully, cutting out the noise that would otherwise interfere.

## Speaking

Do not leave speaking English out of your lessons. Encourage students to use English as much as possible. This is probably the most stressful part of the exam as they are faced with a stranger and are expected to have a conversation. They won't be able to just learn a few lines of English to use in the exam. Nothing will substitute for regular oral practise.

See the page on encouraging [teenagers to speak English](#) in class.

**Plan your exam preparation programme** backwards from the exam. If the exams are in June, plan how you can spread preparation classes over the term(s), beginning in January (or before if possible). Ensure that all lessons are not dedicated to the exam, but that you continue language development and fun lessons too, as well as covering the required units in the course book.

For example:

February	March	April	May	June
Review and practise reading skills	Review and practise writing skills	Review and practice listening skills	Review and practise oral skills and go over all exam skills	English exams

A typical week in March:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Vocabulary quizzes on adjectives and practise brainstorming for a sample essay	Punctuation exercises and read a funny short story and discuss what made it good	Write a sketch/ dialogue and act it out	Descriptive paragraph writing in groups on OHTs - for class correction	Students design quizzes/games to test each other's vocabulary based on the book units they have covered

The course book can be covered by doing some of it in each lesson or dedicating 2 or 3 lessons a week to it, plus the following, which do not have to be very long activities.

Or

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Reading	Writing	Listening	Grammar	Speaking/Fun

**Make sure that each lesson has variety:** Plan an exam preparation sandwich - start with a light-hearted quiz about language items covered previously and finish with a fun game. These quizzes and games are not a waste of time, but another way of revising language items or skills that may come up in the exam.

- You can use games and quizzes as warmers at the start of a lesson to revise key vocabulary and grammar items. Also you can get students to work in groups and design quizzes for each other – here you double the revision, as students need to check the language while preparing the quiz and then practise it while doing the quizzes set by their classmates. Also this minimises the work you do – your job is to monitor and help students while they prepare and do the quizzes.

Here is an example of a vocabulary quiz.

#### Jobs Quiz

You could do it with a time limit to help students work quickly under time pressure.

#### **Key considerations in exam preparation are:**

- Reduce the stress
- Make it success-oriented
- Make it as much fun as possible
- Make clear what skills/strengths are needed in the exam
- Break down and practise individual skills