

## 8. Training Students for Exam Success

**Peter May, Freelance teacher**

### Abstract

This paper focuses on practical new ways of developing students' exam skills while at the same time helping to improve their language skills. The activities are particularly relevant to the Cambridge First Certificate and the Cambridge Advanced English, the Baccalaureate and the TOEIC. These learner-training activities are designed to encourage students to think about both their exam preparation and more general language learning. They are task-based techniques which aim to help learners find out for themselves about the kinds of questions that will appear on the exam and what they need to do to answer them successfully.

**M**y overall aims as a materials writer and teacher are to make exam preparation more relevant to language learning, to make it more interesting for learners - especially younger ones - and to improve their performance in the exam itself. The suggested activities could be used in courses to prepare the UCLES exams, particularly the Cambridge First Certificate/FCE, as well as the TOEIC, TOEFL and other exams. They will help students to analyse the exam itself while they are working on basic exam skills of speaking, writing, reading and "use of English" exercises.

### Speaking

This first activity in the box below is an ice-breaker, suitable for the beginning of a course, but also useful later on in the year as a way of helping students to get to know others in the class if the teacher wishes them to change partners or work in groups. It could also be done as a role-play, with partners acting as examiners.

*Use these prompts to practise asking and answering questions with somebody else in the class. When it is your turn to answer, give as much information as you can.*

- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| • What/name and where/come from?                | • Which part/town/live in?    |
| • Where/studying? or Where/work?                | • Why/preparing/exam?         |
| • What/finding easy and what/finding difficult? | • How/usually spend/evenings? |
| • What/doing after/lesson?                      |                               |

It could be used for various language aims including the contrast in the present tenses and their varying uses - permanent/temporary states, developing actions, repeated actions, future reference and so on - and the formation of *Wh*-questions with and without *do*. These aims would also be suitable grammar areas for the beginning of an intermediate or upper-intermediate course, particularly as revision work.

### **Exam Tasks**

This is another task best suited to the beginning of the course, before the class has done any exam practice. Apart from its learner-training element and its function as a starter icebreaker, this activity should provide some useful feedback on class wants and needs.

Using the worksheet in Annex 1, students could be asked to identify each of the exams 1 to 3, and to state in which paper or part of that exam the question types listed were used. (They are: 1. FCE Paper 3 "Use of English", 2. TOEIC Section 2 "Reading", 3. Bac B "Compétence linguistique".) Students could then choose 'their' exam and fill in the table. The ensuing discussion would involve 'likes and dislikes', learners' feelings about the materials they were using, and so forth. The aims of the activity are to encourage self-assessment and oral exchange of opinions.

Students could also draw up a table similar to the one on the worksheet. When they have ticked the appropriate boxes, they do a survey of class feelings. Groups (in larger classes) or individuals would be allocated a question type and they would ask everyone else for their opinions on it, noting down the results. The findings would then be discussed as a class and, if time allows, the process would be repeated with another paper of the exam.

Learners would be told to keep the tables and survey results for comparison purposes when they do the activity again later in the course. A possible follow-up activity in a subsequent lesson, after they have practised doing all the question types, would be to compare their scores to their self-assessment in the table. They would be asked which they overestimated or underestimated their ability to do. As a second follow-up, further into the course, they would repeat and compare the results, noting any changes and thinking about why.

The teacher should keep the results, so that when planning practice activities or revision, more class time could be allocated to those question types which the students themselves regard as difficult.

### Writing

These activities contrast with the traditional format of giving learners a list of *do's* and *don'ts* to study. Variations might include *should* and *shouldn't* or the more involved *shouldn't*, *mustn't* and *don't have to* (thus giving practice with 'negative obligation' forms at the same time). Their aims are to improve exam skills through intensive reading and oral decision-making. The discursive composition activity helps develop reading skills through work with sequence of ideas, reference words and other cohesive devices. The useful information of these exercises is more likely to be retained by the learner when presented in this kind of task-based form.

#### 1 Writing an essay

**Which of these things should you do and which should you not do?**

***In each case put Do or Don't at the beginning of the sentence.***

- 1 ..... highlight the key words in the title on the question paper.
- 2 ..... write about something different if you don't like the question.
- 3 ..... spend time planning your essay.
- 4 ..... write more than the specified number of words.
- 5 ..... answer all parts of the question.
- 6 ..... think about mistakes you made in the past.
- 7 ..... leave a gap if you can't think of a word.
- 8 ..... write a draft of your essay and copy it out.
- 9 ..... put an alternative in brackets if you think you may have made a mistake
- 10 ..... leave five or ten minutes at the end to check your work.

## 2 Discursive composition

*The text below tells you about it, but three sentences have been removed. Choose from the sentences (A-C) the one which fits each gap (1-3)*

You may be asked to express your ideas in a discursive composition. This could be in the form of writing a balanced discussion, for example giving the advantages and disadvantages of something. This may mean you have to write arguments you do not necessarily agree with. 1 .....

One way of organising this kind of composition is to give reasons for and against each point in turn. 2 .....

For most people a better way is to divide your composition into four parts, beginning with an introduction to the topic. Start with a short, interesting sentence. 3 .....

In the second paragraph, give the points on one side, with reasons and possibly examples. Then, in the third, do the same with the points on the other side. Finally, write a brief concluding paragraph, giving your own opinion.

- A This will attract the reader's attention and should make him or her want to read on.
- B If you find this difficult, note down your opinion about a point and then imagine what someone who disagrees with you might say, and note that down too.
- C The problem with this kind of organisation is that you may end up writing very long and complicated sentences, which is not a good idea unless your level is very high.

### Reading: multiple-choice questions

This activity introduces a different way of encouraging students to think about exam advice and, in this case, to follow a recommended sequence of steps when tackling an almost universal task-type.

**Put these steps for doing a reading text in the right order and give a reason for each one.**

**Example: 1b - First you want to get the general idea, and not every part of the text is tested.**

- a) Watch out especially for answers that contradict the text or suggest ideas that are not in it.
- b) Quickly read the whole text, without worrying too much about difficult words or sections.
- c) Look at answers A/B/C/D and decide which is nearest what you have understood.
- d) Move on quickly to the next question and repeat all these steps except the first one.
- e) Mark the part of the text which relates to the first question.
- f) Look for evidence that the answer you have chosen is right and the others are wrong.
- g) Study this part of the text to understand what it says about the topic.
- h) If you still can't decide which one is right, eliminate the impossible answers and guess.
- i) Look at the first question or unfinished statement, but not answers A/B/C/D.

Which of suggestions a) to i) have you never thought of before? Underline them.

Compare the ideas you have underlined with your partner's and discuss these questions:

*Are any of the ideas surprising? Why? Which do you think are the most useful?*

### Use of English

This, the final section, is an example of the many ways in which a text-based task-type can be exploited. After an initial soft-focus task such as "Read this text in two minutes, without filling in any gaps, and decide on its purpose", students find out about another part of the exam by completing the text.

*For questions 1-15, read this text and decide which word A, B, C or D best fits each gap. There is an example at the beginning (0).*

In Part Three of FCE Speaking you work (0) ...*D*... with a partner. You have to do a (1) ..... task which usually (2) ..... about 3 minutes. One possible task is 'problem (3) .....', which means you have to look at some (4) ..... information and then (5) ..... the problem with your partner. You may be shown photos, drawings, diagrams, maps, plans, advertisements or computer graphics and it is (6) ..... that you study them carefully. If necessary, check you know exactly what to do by (7) ..... asking the examiner to (8) ..... the instructions or make them clearer.

While you are doing the task, the examiner will probably say very (9) ..... and you should ask your partner questions and make (10) ..... if he or she is not saying much. If either of you have any real difficulties the examiner may decide to step in and (11) ..... Normally, however, you will find plenty to say, which helps the (12) ..... to give you a fair mark. This mark depends on your success in doing the task by (13) ..... with your partner, which includes taking (14) ..... in giving opinions and replying appropriately, although in the end it may be possible to 'agree to (15) .....'.

0	A close	B united	C joined	D together
1	A single	B lonely	C unique	D once
2	A exists	B lasts	C stays	D maintains
3	A solving	B working	C making	D finding
4	A seeing	B looking	C noticeable	D visual
5	A argue	B discuss	C talk	D have
6	A essential	B needed	C helpful	D successful
7	A formally	B officially	C politely	D sincerely
8	A insist	B copy	C tell	D repeat
9	A little	B much	C few	D many
10	A ideas	B statements	C speeches	D suggestions
11	A complain	B help	C suggest	D fail

12	A judge	B referee	C assessor	D observer
13	A competing	B struggling	C opposing	D cooperating
14	A changes	B sides	C turns	D sentences
15	A contrast	B disagree	C argue	D object

### Closing remarks

Making exam teaching more relevant to students' everyday lives could be achieved by focusing on tasks, texts, rubrics, examples or exam techniques, as there is always something that the teacher can do with any task type to help bring the exam syllabus to life.

Peter May is a freelance teacher, teacher trainer, writer and translator based in Brussels, Belgium. He taught in Spain for fifteen years, including six years with the British Council and the British Institute for Young Learners in Madrid. There he worked as a teacher of CFE and CPE classes, co-ordinator and Cambridge oral examiner. He also helped to run a number of summer courses in the UK. More recently, he has taught at the Centre de Langues in Luxembourg and the University of Trier in Germany and has helped individual students prepare for other exams including PET, CAE, IELTS, the International Baccalaureate, and TOEFL. He has written numerous articles on teaching for exam classes and three books dealing with the Cambridge Proficiency Exam: *"The Complete Proficiency Practice Tests 1 and 2"* and *"First Choice for Proficiency"* (Heinemann). He welcomes comments on his ideas and can be contacted in Brussels at this email address: [PeterMay3@compuserve.com](mailto:PeterMay3@compuserve.com)

### Bibliography

The materials used were taken from the following books:

*Exam Classes* (Resource Book for Teachers series), Peter May, Oxford University Press, 1996.

*Knockout First Certificate* (Coursebook), Peter May, Oxford University Press, 1999.

*Annex overleaf*

## Annex 1

<i>What do you feel about each type of question?</i>			
1 EXAM: .....	PAPER/PART: .....		
	<i>Easy</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Difficult</i>
<i>Multiple-choice cloze</i>			
<i>Open cloze</i>			
<i>Key-word transformation</i>			
<i>Error correction</i>			
<i>Word formation</i>			
2 EXAM: .....	PAPER/PART: .....		
	<i>Easy</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Difficult</i>
<i>Incomplete sentences</i>			
<i>Error recognition</i>			
<i>Reading comprehension</i>			
3 EXAM: .....	PAPER/PART: .....		
	<i>Easy</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Difficult</i>
<i>Sentence completion</i>			
<i>Translate sentences</i>			
<i>Sentence transformation</i>			
<i>Word-building grid</i>			