

Bringing exam tasks to life: Things we've tried that work

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This presentation reported on a series of lessons in which trainee teachers used tasks from past examination papers as the basis for their teaching practice. For the trainee teachers, it is useful experience to devise interesting and creative lessons while gaining familiarity with exam tasks. For the students at the beginning of their exam preparation, these lessons provide an accessible way to work with authentic exam materials, developing their exam skills while also building their language competence.

Reading

A reading lesson generally consists of several stages, and there is no reason why a lesson based on a reading comprehension task from an exam should be different. One lesson, based on a text about a memory test, started with Kim's game, where students have a minute to memorize a list of words and then have to recall them. Next, the students took a memory test on the BBC website, which introduces a memory training technique similar to the one described in the exam task. Having practised this, the students were then primed to read the text and although the preparation made it more meaningful to them, the actual exam task – matching headings to paragraphs – was unchanged.

Similarly, a lesson based on a cloze passage, although this is eventually an exercise in lexico-grammar, started out as a reading lesson, with a warm up and gist read before the gap-fill. The same principle applies to any passage in the Use of English paper.

To prepare students for an exam task that involves putting paragraphs in position in the text, once again the first stage was to set the context. A text about the life of an artist is accompanied in the practice test book by a detail of one of her pictures. This and additional pictures were used to stimulate students' interest in the topic. As this text is a biography, it is organized chronologically, so the gist read task was to arrange the missing paragraphs on a timeline in rough chronological order.

This gist activity activated the students' existing knowledge of the world (schemata) while taking a top-down approach to the text as a whole. This allowed them quickly to decide roughly where in the text each paragraph belonged. The main read activity, which was the actual exam task, completed the task of allocating each paragraph to its precise position using bottom-up processing to identify specific reference links.

Listening

As with reading, the listening lessons included pre-listening activities to make the topic more accessible. For example, a task where candidates have to decide which travel guide each statement refers to was introduced by a discussion of whether the students ever use travel guides, followed by a task where each group was given an actual guide and had to:

- discover what kinds of information it contains
- find some specific information
- discuss why each type of information is important for tourists
- decide if the guide is a good one or if they would make any changes

Writing

For writing tasks, we firstly demonstrated a topic-based approach, where the teacher began with a discussion of the topic and introduced relevant vocabulary before linking this to the writing task. The other approach which we illustrated began with an examination of the features of some of the genres which candidates are required to produce, before drafting an outline for a text in one of these genres.

Conclusion

Allocating tasks from past exam papers for trainee teachers to use as the basis for some of their teaching practice has proved to be an effective way of encouraging their creativity. As these materials are designed to test, not teach, the trainees are obliged to create other activities to complement them, and in doing so gain a good insight into the staging of a lesson. It also gives them a chance to gain some experience of working with exam preparation classes, which is particularly valued by potential employers in our context.

One effect of presenting the exam tasks in this type of lesson framework is that they are made considerably easier. This approach would not be suitable for candidates who are just about to take the exam, but it does give students a gentle introduction to the requirements of exam tasks, building their confidence while developing their ability to handle such tasks.