

# Teaching Reading and Listening for Exam Preparation\*

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## INTRODUCTION

In **Part 1** I briefly discuss the 'philosophy' of exam preparation and provide a framework for reading/listening lessons. In **Part 2** I present teaching procedures relevant to the different exam exercise types. In **Part 3** I suggest techniques to help learners deal with vocabulary and pronunciation difficulties.

## PART 1: GENERAL TEACHING GUIDELINES

### ON EXAM PREPARATION

I would like to begin by stressing that we should not confuse teaching with testing. The fact that we use testing materials to prepare learners for the exam does not mean that we should recreate exam conditions. On the contrary, our aim is to provide learners with methodical guidance and support so as to make them able to operate successfully under exam conditions.

### OUTLINE OF A READING/LISTENING LESSON

As a rule of thumb, you can think of a reading/listening lesson as having the following stages:

#### Before reading/listening

This is the stage before learners actually read or listen to the text. The function of this stage is to prepare learners to tackle the text and questions as effectively as possible. This is done by directing learners to activate relevant (language and general) knowledge and form expectations. That is, before reading or listening they will have already formed an idea about the content and type of the text. What is more, they will have limited their expectations of the type and range of vocabulary they will encounter. This will enable them to read/listen in a focused and purposeful manner.

#### During reading/listening

This is when learners actually read/listen and answer the questions. Guidance from the teacher is essential during this stage.

#### After reading/listening

This stage can have a variety of aims and forms. In our case it will be concerned with work on *vocabulary attack* (i.e. training in inferring the meaning of unknown vocabulary) and *ear-training* (i.e. helping learners cope with phonological difficulties).

#### Feedback & Guidance

This is **not** a distinct stage. Feedback & guidance should take place throughout the lesson. Here the teacher not only checks whether learners have got the answers right, but, more importantly, receives information regarding the procedures through which they decided on an answer. As a general guideline, do not assume that non-completion of an exercise or wrong answers necessarily show lack of comprehension; or that correct answers are necessarily a sign of comprehension. Always check how learners came to a conclusion, elicit sources of problems and provide guidance regarding effective reading/listening strategies.

### FEEDBACK AND GUIDANCE

The aim of exam preparation is for learners to be able to use the procedures described in the article effectively without being prompted by the teacher or the task. Therefore, guidance and feedback are vital procedures. This is when the teacher helps learners to gradually use these procedures 'automatically'.

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It follows then that the point is not so much for learners to come up with the 'right' answer/suggestion. What is of primary importance is for them to understand the way they should think and the strategies they can employ when performing similar tasks. Similarly their awareness should be raised regarding 'tricks' and pitfalls in the exam questions.

### **Practical Suggestions**

#### ***Before reading/listening***

- Ask learners whether the question is about facts or opinions.
- Ask them whether they expect to find the answer in one specific part of the text, or they will have to combine information from different parts, or they will have to combine clues from the text with their own relevant knowledge/experience.

#### ***During reading/listening***

When learners seem to have difficulties, guide them to:

- become clear about the sequence of events.
- read on for more information/clues.
- go back to previous parts of the text in order to trace the beginning of the line of argument, or remind themselves of helpful clues.

#### ***When checking answers to an exercise***

- Do not acknowledge right/wrong answers immediately. Always ask learners to justify their answers providing evidence from the text.
- Always ask learners to outline the train of thought which led to their decision. Encourage them to share their approaches and discuss them. Provide tips regarding effective strategies.
- Ask learners whether the answer was located in a specific part of the text, or it was put together as a puzzle from information in different parts of the text.
- When the right answer has been given ask learners to look at the other options and discover the hidden pitfalls/tricks.

### **TIMING**

Timing is crucial for both reading skills and exam training. As skills training is concerned, it is not enough to ask learners to 'read quickly', or to 'read carefully'; we should set a time limit so that learners can pace themselves. The time limit should be appropriate to the level of learners and the length/difficulty of the text. Of course, the teacher should also keep in mind the time available in the exam. During exam training the importance of accurate timing is self-evident.

What I would suggest is that during the initial stages of training the time limit should exceed the exam limit, so that learners do not become discouraged. The teacher will then gradually decrease the time available for the reading tasks until learners are able to successfully complete the task for each text in less time than they will be allowed in the exam. The reason for this is that learners tend to under-perform in the exam.

### **USING AVAILABLE CLUES**

Guide learners to use questions, statements, pictures as well as the instructions in order to establish the context (i.e. the time & place, as well as the participants, their relationship and their purpose). In this way, learners can get the general idea or form focused expectations about the content. Teachers can include special slots in lessons aiming at helping learners interpret instructions and extract clues to context/content. When learners read/listen in such a focused way they can cope better with difficulties regarding unknown vocabulary, speed of speaking and phonological aspects.

### **A NOTE ON LISTENING**

It is essential that learners **use the first listening to answer all the questions and the second listening to check and correct their answers**. If they use the first only to get the general idea and the second to give answers, they will not have the opportunity to check, but will have to rely on their memory.

## PART 2: DEALING WITH DIFFERENT EXERCISE TYPES

### MULTIPLE CHOICE (MC)

#### Before (reading & listening)

Learners are asked to read the questions and unfinished statements **only** - not the MC options - for two reasons:

- The distracters may confuse them, particularly during listening when some words may be misheard.
- They waste time checking each MC option against the text.

Some unfinished statements may need rephrasing before they are given to learners. When rephrasing, the MC options should be taken into account. Following is an example (from UCLES 1990. *Cambridge First Certificate Examination Practice 4*. Cambridge University Press.):

ORIGINAL SENTENCE
<i>If learners need to apply for the autumn term</i>
A <i>they should check whether the course is full.</i>
C <i>applications must be received by August 1st.</i>
B <i>the college would rather they apply by post.</i>
D <i>they must apply in person.</i>
REFORMULATION
<i>What information is given for learners who want to apply for the autumn term?</i>

Initially, teachers can write the questions or rephrased statements on the board to ensure that learners do not take MC options into consideration. Nevertheless, learners need to be trained into disregarding MC options unprompted in order to be able to follow the proposed procedure under exam conditions. Sometimes the text is accompanied by a title or illustrations. In such a case the teacher should direct learners to use these as additional clues. Learners say or note down what they can infer about the text in terms of:

- the type of text (e.g. article, advertisement, excerpt from short story, informal discussion, news broadcast),
- the situation (i.e. what they think the text will be about), or the plot, as well as the participants and their relationship/roles,
- words/expressions they expect to find in the text.

#### During reading

- Learners read quickly to check their predictions from the 'before' stage.
- Learners read carefully and note down their answers, or complete the unfinished statements (again the MC options are ignored).
- Learners read the MC options and choose the one matching their own answer.
- Learners read the text again to check their answers/choices.

#### During listening

- Learners listen and answer the questions in note form.
- Between the first and second listening they read the MC options and choose the one matching their own answer.

### MULTIPLE MATCHING (MM)

#### Before

Do not give MM options to learners. Instead, ask them to read/listen for some of the following: general situation; setting (time & place); writer's/speaker's identity, purpose/aim, attitude/feelings. Teachers should consult the exercise first and choose which aspects they will ask learners to concentrate on. The clues learners use here are the title and any illustrations/pictures, as well as clues provided by the lists (e.g. questions, facts, unfinished statements).

### During

Again learners are asked to disregard the list of options. They read in order to come up with their own titles, provide their own answers, locate sources of information/views, complete unfinished statements etc. Then they check their answers against the list of options to find the closest match.

### TRUE/FALSE

#### Before

Teachers have two options: either turn statements into questions (rephrasing them if necessary), or leave them as they are. The criterion here is whether this transformation removes helpful clues or not. Let us take the following two examples of T/F statements (from UCLES. 1993. *Cambridge Proficiency Examinations Practice 5*. Cambridge University Press.):

- (1) *The meeting will decide which team will develop the area*  
 (2) *The first objector suggests the meeting is a waste of time*

Statement (1) should remain as it is, because its reformulation to a question (*What will the meeting decide?*) will withhold two vital clues:

- (a) *develop the area* = the meeting will decide on the development of an area.  
 (b) *which team* = there are at least two competing teams/firms interested in undertaking the project.

On the other hand, statement (2) can and should be rephrased as a question: *What is the first objector's opinion about the meeting?* Not only are the clues still available to the learners (*the first objector* = there are at least two people expressing reservations about the meeting), but also the omission of *a waste of time* prevents learner bias during listening.

### SELECTION ('TICK WHAT IS MENTIONED')

#### Before

The list of options includes distracters, that is items which learners are likely to misunderstand. Their presence in the list will probably lead uncertain learners towards the wrong choices. Teachers are advised not to give learners the list, but to devise questions asking for the same information. Questions can be based on the exercise instructions, or even be reformulations of them. For example (from UCLES. 1991. *Cambridge First Certificate Examinations Practice 4*. Cambridge University Press.):

#### ORIGINAL INSTRUCTIONS

*Tick the boxes to show which activities organised at the Community Centre are mentioned by Michaela. If the activity is not mentioned, leave the box blank.*

#### ADAPTED INSTRUCTIONS

*Listen and note down the activities organised at the Community Centre mentioned by Michaela.*

### SENTENCE COMPLETION, GAP-FILLING, NOTE-TAKING

#### Before

Ask learners to decide what type of information they will have to provide. This helps them restrict the scope of possible answers. For example, in the text giving information about a Spanish language course, learners are asked to complete the sentence: *Grammar lessons are in....* This sentence can be completed with three types of information: 'language', 'time of day', or 'place'. By eliciting this you direct learners to form focused expectations and avoid providing irrelevant answers.

You may also prevent wrong answers due to grammar/vocabulary shortcomings. For instance, suppose the text provides the following information: 'in Spanish' and 'at 10 o'clock every day'. Some learners may not notice the wrong collocation and complete the sentence with '10 o'clock'. By training learners to consciously pay attention to such matters you help them avoid similar mistakes in the exam.

**Note:** Train learners to use the following techniques:

- Writing parts of words only, e.g. *univ* for *university*,
- Writing key words (or part of them); that is, words which will remind them of the whole phrase,
- Scribbling instead of trying to write neatly.

They will have time to complete the words/phrases and improve their handwriting during and after the second listening. Between the first and second listening they should only concentrate on the **content** of their notes.

## PICTURES

Although pictures are not exercise types themselves, they may pose additional problems. It is a good idea to train learners in the following techniques/ strategies:

- Consciously checking they understand the situation in each picture,
- Identifying words/expressions in each picture which will help them choose the correct option,
- Identifying key similarities and differences in the pictures,
- Predicting which elements will help them differentiate the correct from the wrong options.

**Note:** Deal only with the elements of the pictures which are **relevant** to the exercise. Avoid asking learners to describe the pictures in detail, as this will distract them.

## DURING LISTENING

During the first listening learners provide answers to the questions or take notes under headings given by the teacher. Then they look at the exercise and try to find the closest match to their answers/notes. During the second listening they check their choices.

## PART 3: VOCABULARY ATTACK & EAR-TRAINING

### VOCABULARY ATTACK

#### Vocabulary and learners

On the one hand, one of the main problems of learners when reading/listening is unknown words/expressions. On the other, it is unrealistic to expect learners to have learned all the vocabulary they are likely to encounter in the exam. It is evident, then, that helping learners to cope successfully with unknown vocabulary should be an integral part of the preparation. That is, learners need to be taught how to:

- Distinguish between essential and inessential vocabulary. **Essential** vocabulary is the words/expressions learners need to understand in order to answer the questions correctly. **Inessential** are the ones which do not affect successful completion of the task even when they are unknown.
- Recognise and ignore inessential vocabulary. This strategy has two positive effects: (a) it helps relieve anxiety as it reduces the number of unknown words/expressions learners have to cope with, (b) it saves times as learners do not try to infer the meaning of vocabulary they do not need.
- Infer the meaning of essential unknown vocabulary. Inference is based on clues provided by the text, the situation, and the learners' relevant background knowledge.

#### Vocabulary and teachers

Of course, in order to be able to help learners it is important that teachers themselves are clear regarding the different categories to which unknown vocabulary may belong. In particular, teachers need to be aware that **unknown vocabulary may not always be inferable**. There may be cases when the text does not provide clues, or learners do not have the relevant background knowledge or experience. In such cases teachers need to train learners to expect and tolerate the unknown and guide them to cope as best they can by using all other clues available. The following table provides an outline of the categories as well as tips for teachers.

UNKNOWN VOCABULARY	
ESSENTIAL	INESSENTIAL
<b>INFERABLE</b> Use in voc. attack tasks	<b>NON-INFERABLE</b> Train learners to tolerate ambiguity
	Guide learners to ignore

## Practical Suggestions

### Complete text

After you have dealt with exercise answers, give learners two lists: one with unknown vocabulary from the text and one with their definitions/synonyms. Ask them to match the vocabulary with the definitions/synonyms. If learners have developed good inference strategies give them only the list of definitions/synonyms and ask them to find the corresponding vocabulary in the text. At a higher level of learner competence, just indicate unknown vocabulary and ask them to infer their meaning.

**Note:** When providing definitions and synonyms, keep in mind the following:

- They have to be clear and straightforward so that learners can understand them. Make sure that they are not more difficult/complicated than the target items in the text
- Do not use dense dictionary-type definitions. You can adapt dictionary definitions or formulate your own. An lengthy but clear definition is much more helpful than a concise but unclear one
- Use the meaning which the words/expressions have in the text. Remember that the aim is development of inference strategies for more effective reading -not vocabulary learning.

### Text with gaps

- *Before the lesson*, go through the text and blank out unknown words/expressions. Use the text as if it was complete; tell learners that you will deal with vocabulary later.
- *During reading*, ask learners to do the reading exercises as if the gaps did not exist. Provide guidance regarding clues and inference strategies. If the word/expression is inessential, ask them to blank it out (using their finger) and read the problematic part again. If it is essential and inferable, guide them to look for clues in the surrounding text (e.g. synonyms or explanations). Alternatively, ask them to use the general meaning of that part combined with their background knowledge and experience.
- *After feedback* on exercise answers, ask learners to fill in the blanks with a suitable word/phrase, or to infer the meaning expressed in the gap. **Do not expect learners to come up with the exact word/expression** (remember, the vocabulary in the gaps is *unknown*). This procedure boosts learner confidence regarding unknown vocabulary. Learners will feel that since they are able to understand a text with missing words, they will certainly cope with one in which the words are there to provide them with even more clues. It also helps learners become aware of the fact that not all the vocabulary in a text is essential to completing the task.

## EAR TRAINING

The procedures outlined here focus on familiarising learners with the organisational and phonological idiosyncrasies of spoken English.

### Use of context, content, background knowledge

- Stop the tape before the speaker has finished and ask learners to provide a plausible continuation. Learners should be guided to use any clues available to them. Such clues are: the situation, what has been said so far, the stressed words, the speaker's tone of voice etc.

### Use of phonological clues

- Stop the tape and ask learners to repeat the last phrase. There are two steps. First ask for the phrase in 'ideal' form (i.e. learners pronounce it very clearly). Then ask them to repeat the phrase as it was pronounced by the speaker. You can also ask them to describe any differences in pronunciation. They can show the changes by deleting/changing letters or putting them in parentheses. You may also need to teach some phonemic symbols. It needs to be stressed that during such activities you should play the tape as many times as learners need.
- Play a short phrase and ask learners to say how many words they have heard. Elicit and discuss any phonological features which caused problems or provided helpful clues.
- After listening, give learners a short extract from the transcript and ask them to listen and:
  - underline the stressed syllables
  - put unstressed vowels into brackets
  - cross out vowels/consonants which were not pronounced
  - circle vowels/consonants which have 'interacted' and produced a 'new' sound
- Alternatively, you can give them the transcript before listening and ask them to identify any of the above; then learners listen to check and modify.