

Success with Exams Classes
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Preparing for exams can be a daunting and stressful task, both for the students and teacher. With exams gaining ever-increasing importance, there is much at stake for our students and often a very fine line between success and failure.

The question for us as teachers is: How can we ensure our students are as well-prepared for the exam as they can possibly be, while at the same time giving them the language and skills they need for life beyond exams?

This talk discusses some winning strategies that can be applied to all exam preparation classes.

Part 1 – English Exams: An Alphabet Soup

There is a veritable alphabet soup of international exams out there today. Do you know the full titles of these exams?

- IELTS
- KET
- PET
- FCE
- CAE
- TOEFL

For a bonus point, what is the **CEFR**?

Part 2 – Exam similarities and skills crossover

CEFR	IELTS Level	Exams
A2	3.0 to 3.5	KET, Final State Exam (ГЭА)
B1	4.0 to 4.5-5.0	PET, Unified State Exam (ЕГЭ)
B2	5.5 to 6.0-6.5	FCE, Unified State Exam (ЕГЭ)
C1	6.5 to 7.5	CAE

Match the skills required to the exams.

KET (A2)	PET (B1)	FCE (B2)
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The student...

- Is able to skim and scan texts for relevant information and answers
- Can use common linking devices (such as 'and', 'but', etc)
- Has an understanding of appropriate register
- Can use a limited range of cohesive devices (however, although, etc)
- Can produce non-rehearsed answers to basic questions asking for personal information
- Can understand the writer's purpose or attitude
- Can use appropriate interactive strategies when speaking

Good news for teachers!

Although the language difficulty and skills do change depending on the exam, many exams have similar tasks and require similar skills, even across levels. This fact means that we can apply similar strategies to teaching exam preparation classes.

Part 3 - What are the rules of success for exam classes?

Teaching exam classes is all about **finding a balance through testing, training and teaching**. We need to prepare students for the pressures and specifics of exams while avoiding the negative aspects of the 'backwash effect'. We need to ensure that we don't 'over-test' our students or neglect the skills and language students will need for life beyond exams.

Rule 1. Teaching the test: knowing *what* to do

These are some general rules that apply to all exams:

- Students need to be familiar with 'micro skills' such as skimming, scanning, and predicting
- Students need to know the test: format, timing, word limits
- Students need to have sufficient practice with the test
- Students need to know useful exam strategies and tips
- Students need to be familiar with sample answers and compare these next to the marks received

Rule 2. Teaching the right skills and language and knowing *how* to do it

Not only do we need to teach the test, we also need to teach the language and skills the students will need for the test. We shouldn't neglect this in favour of over-testing our students

Remembering the points below will help:

- Build up micro skills: reading and listening for gist, specific information and detail, prediction techniques and guessing meaning from context
- Personalising learning makes it more memorable – integrate this into exam work
- Integrate exam and revision advice with skills and/or language work
- Don't be afraid of games and engaging activities
- Build confidence: motivate and encourage learners with step-by-step help
- Take a break: things such as songs and writing projects can be a fun way to give exam tasks a rest, while at the same time covering key language areas

Rule 3. Don't forget we are preparing students for life beyond exams!

Teach students the skills and language they will need beyond the test, including independent study skills and strategies. This will students with further study and life outside the classroom.

See Macmillan *English World* and *Gateway* for successful approaches to exam preparation for primary and secondary learners!