

EXAM PREPARATION: TRADITION AND INNOVATION

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Abstract: The paper explores the nature of examination preparation. The washback effect is discussed. Two conventional approaches – format-oriented and strategy-oriented ones are described and commented on. Complementary techniques to deal with negative washback are provided. The conclusion about the effectiveness of the suggested methodology is drawn.

Exam preparation plays an important role in English classes, since more and more students take unified examination in the English language as well as internationally recognized exams. Russian traditions of teaching foreign languages have always been orientated towards monitoring. The emphasis is on training, in other words, the methodology of teaching is substituted by the methodology of training. The problem of washback effect is neglected. The very existence of washback is questioned. A lot of researchers are still avoiding the term and they use others like test impact, test feedback, curriculum alignment, measurement-driven instruction. However, it does exist and might be defined as “the connections between testing and learning” [1, p. 298], “the effect of testing on teaching and learning, which might be detrimental or beneficial” [2, p. 1] “the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning” [3, p. 241]. L. Prodromou suggests that washback can be overt or covert, positive or negative. In its overt forms it means doing a lot of past papers as preparation for an exam, which is a crude mirror-image of what happens in traditional exams. Other hallmarks include the use of fragments of language (often inauthentic), a concentration on word-and sentence-level linguistic features, a focus on skills which are easier to test. Covert testing involves language learning in a stressful, text-bound environment [4, p. 13].

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At conventional exam preparation lessons learners are exposed to a number of practice tests. We define this approach to teaching before an exam as a format – oriented one. We accept that a primary benefit is that it helps learners to become familiar with the format of the examination, the exercise-types favored in the particular examination as well as to assess their language ability, give them an idea of the level of their English. However, the problem with the format-oriented approach is that doing a lot of past papers is unlikely to teach anything, especially if feedback is limited, it just shows test-takers those things they don't know and the results can be demoralizing. Thus backwash effect in its overt, negative forms is created. Characteristics we normally associate with negative washback effect are as follows: exercises vs. tasks, failure vs success, weakness vs. strength, error phobia vs. learning from error, marks vs. achievement, fear vs. confidence, anxiety vs. pleasure, individualism and competition vs. co-operation, impersonality vs. personalization, isolated sentences vs. text, form vs. content, text and questions vs. lead-in and follow-up, solemnity vs. humor, boredom vs. interest, extrinsic motivation vs. intrinsic motivation, product vs. process [4].

Recently there have been attempts aimed at providing learners with methodical guidance and support. We recognize this approach as strategy-oriented. It means developing specific test-taking strategies, acquiring exam tips. In skim reading part, for instance, the strategies are as follows: read the questions first in order to read the text purposefully and highlight key words that tell you what you must look for, don't read every word of the text carefully, don't worry about understanding every word of the text, look for the match between different ways of expressing the same idea.

Completely different strategies are applied in reading for detailed comprehension. Here in contrast, the exam tips are the following: read carefully, perhaps rereading certain bits, before looking at the four choices try to answer the question in your own words, and only then choose the option closest to yours.

While reading a gapped text in order to restore it, students are recommended to read the text through once, then look at the removed parts underlying key words (people, places, time, events), then go back to the text paying attention to the lines immediately before and after the gap, looking for a sentence that continues the "flow", put the missing paragraphs into the gaps, making sure they fit grammatically and follow the sense of the text, follow this process with the remaining paragraphs, look carefully at the key words and phrases to make sure you build up a logical sequence of sentences.

When taking a speaking test don't just give one-word answers, show off your grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency so that the examiner has some language to assess, use linking phrases to make your argument clearer, develop and exemplify each of your main points.

The suggested approach to the writing paper involves reading the task and highlighting the points that must be covered, planning the writing, thinking about a range of language and linking words, choosing the appropriate style and layout.

The advantages of the strategy-oriented approach are apparent. Following the instructions encourages the development of strategies of extracting information, facilitates the whole process and prevents test-takers from making mistakes. Yet the problem of negative washback effect remains, a lesson continues to look more like an assessment rather than an exciting and educationally satisfactory teaching procedure.

Having identified and explored the existing nature of exam preparation, which is associated with negative backwash effect, we could propose ways to promote the potential for the positive backwash effect. We suggest additional and alternative procedures which are more language-based, and could be used to develop communicative competence, which is a true key to doing the test well. These complementary activities might demand greater flexibility and imagination from teachers. The purpose is to overcome negative washback effect, transform examination preparation into educational activity, make test takers more highly motivated and perform better.

Firstly, testing materials can be used to develop inference strategies to deal with difficult words by using the clues provided by the text, the situation, the learners' relevant background knowledge. Some possible techniques are as follows: matching two lists, one contains unknown words from the text and the other has their dictionary definitions or synonyms; matching definitions/synonyms with the words learners have to find in the text; producing by pupils their own approximate definitions/synonyms; reading and comprehension "a gapped text" in which difficult inessential words have been deleted by a teacher and when pupils have finished reading they are asked general comprehension questions on the text. We believe that students will find this approach much more educational and beneficial than the conventional ones, since it teaches them to distinguish between essential and inessential vocabulary, to ignore words that do not affect comprehension and doing the test, to be tolerant to ambiguity. More crucially, test-takers learn to infer the meaning of unknown but essential vocabulary on the basis of the information they have, it saves time and effort, builds up confidence.

Secondly, testing materials can be used to develop learners' ability to identify the main idea of the text and to distinguish between the main idea and secondary ones. Passage after passage pupils are asked to express in one phrase or sentence what it is about and what facts just support/illustrate this main idea. In addition to testing stuff, authentic materials provide the opportunity to teach skim reading. A teacher could find 8-12 newspaper articles, and ask students to match them to headings. In scan reading it is important to be able to scan the text quickly looking for required information. We suggest an exercise for developing the skills for scanning; it is based on authentic material and makes exam preparation effective and motivating. At the lesson each student gets a copy of a page from a telephone directory or television program or any other page containing lots of information. The teacher asks questions, like Where does Mr. J. Brown live? What is Mrs. K. Brown's telephone number? Whose number is 01567 325987? The student who finds the right answer first is encouraged. All students are actively involved in the process and they feel no pressure because it is a game.

Then, the problem with multiple-choice format is that students might find distracters confusing, since they contain the words from the text but the general meaning is different, or the given choices exaggerate the meaning by using the words “all, never, totally, always, extremely”, or the options contain the information that is mentioned in the text but in connection with a different person/situation, or another tense is used. One of the ways of dealing with this problem is to teach students to ignore the options before considering their own answers. The teacher writes down on the board all the questions without giving the options and encourages pupils to produce their own answers before looking at the choices. After finding the answer closest to the one the pupils gave in their own words, arguments against other distracters can be discussed. The technique encourages speaking rather than ticking off the options.

Practice materials can help to develop prediction strategies in order to listen efficiently. Before listening pupils use any information: instructions, questions, sentences to complete. They are asked to brainstorm words/sentences they are likely to hear, their ideas and expectations about the content. The underlying idea is that before listening questions provide the information rather than ask for information. The situation, questions, uncompleted sentences encourage semantic, linguistic prediction. While listening learners concentrate on the stressed words which are notional words and thus they carry the main part of the message. If they can hear these, the rest can be easily guessed thanks to the context and common sense.

Test materials can be used to develop listening skills, to improve understanding authentic speech, to overcome phonetic difficulties. We suggest some exercises to achieve that. A phrase might be repeated “ideally” and then pronounced imitating the speaker. This is followed by discussing phonetic peculiarities which caused understanding problems. The tape is played as many times as necessary. Another technique involves working with a script; students listen and follow the script underlying stressed syllables, crossing out vowels / consonants which were not pronounced, highlighting those sounds which affected each other and produced a new one. Students often complain about “bad sound”, noise, which makes listening and comprehension difficult. So playing the tape quietly or playing two tapes – one with the test and one with music/noise trains students to listen carefully ignoring other noises.

Preparation for the speaking paper involves models of answers for analyzing and discussing, in terms of their good and bad sides, interesting ideas, variety of grammar and vocabulary. Learners are provided with the bank of useful functional phrases to initiate a conversation and keep it going, to make suggestions, to give arguments for and against, to react to your partner’s ideas, to encourage a partner to come up with some ideas too, to make a final decision.

English in use paper is good for building up learners’ linguistic competence. We suggest a number of techniques: using each option in a multiple-choice test in the appropriate context and commenting on semantic and grammar differences, giving synonymous verbs to match phrasal verbs, personalization of test items to remember them better, filling in the tables with different parts of speech and using the resulting words in appropriate sentences, paraphrasing and so on. Thus using various additional exercises, which require more than filling in the gap with one of the options given, could develop linguistic competence, namely increase vocabulary, grammar. Besides, the tasks

are aimed at developing the students' idea of what authentic language use is by clarifying the difference between the words which might look similar or have similar meaning.

In conclusion, we could say that it is possible to use testing materials for creating positive effect of testing on teaching English. Examination preparation methods, lead-in, while and follow-up activities we suggest are communicative and humanistic, they promote positive washback, namely teaching, learning, achievement, confidence, pleasure, interest, intrinsic motivation rather than monitoring, product-obsession, failure, anxiety – features associated with traditional exam preparation. Tests are applied to develop all language skills as well as thinking skills, communicative competence, to broaden the learners' awareness of what authentic language use is. In other words, exam preparation becomes an educational, curriculum-oriented process.

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Подготовка к экзамену: традиции и инновации

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Ключевые слова и фразы: эффект обратного влияния; подготовка к экзамену; подход; форматно-ориентированный; стратегически-ориентированный; программно-ориентированный; тестирование; обучение; методы.

Аннотация: Рассматривается специфика подготовки к экзамену. Исследуется эффект обратного влияния. Описываются и анализируются два традиционных подхода – форматно-ориентированный и стратегически-ориентированный. Предлагаются новые приемы подготовки к экзамену, минимизирующие эффект обратного влияния. Делается вывод об эффективности предложенной методики.

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