

A MORE STUDENT CENTRED APPROACH TO CAMBRIDGE PROFICIENCY

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Abstract

This article suggests ways of adopting a more student centred -and more successful- approach when teaching students, including younger ones, preparing for exams such as Cambridge Proficiency. Practical classroom ideas are put forward, some of which can also be used with Cambridge First Certificate and Certificate in Advanced English students. These activities consist of :

- Intensive study by students of the correct answers and marks given for past exam papers by UCLES (Cambridge University).
- Intensive classroom pairwork.
- Training students how to write exam-style items similar to those in the Cambridge exams.
- Oral examination roleplaying. The more advanced students interview those at a lower level, giving marks as in Proficiency or First Certificate.
- Focusing on the results with Spanish students of these techniques.

Resumen

Este artículo propone desarrollar una actitud más activa y eficaz en la preparación de los alumnos, incluidos los más jóvenes, para exámenes como el de Cambridge Proficiency. Se describen varias actividades prácticas, algunas de las cuales se pueden también emplear con los alumnos de nivel Cambridge First Certificate o Certificate in Advanced English. Estas actividades consisten en:

- Estudio exhaustivo por parte de los alumnos de las respuestas correctas y las puntuaciones ofrecidas por UCLES (Universidad de Cambridge) en anteriores exámenes.
- Colaboración más intensa entre los alumnos para trabajar juntos en clase.
- Enseñar a los alumnos a elaborar preguntas como las que figuran en los exámenes de Cambridge.

- Simulación de exámenes orales. Los alumnos de nivel más avanzado entrevistan a los de nivel más bajo, puntuándolos como en el examen de Proficiency o First Certificate.
- Asimismo se comentan los resultados de estas técnicas con alumnos españoles.

The main aim of this paper is to focus on improving results through greater learner independence in an area where the nature of the exam has meant that change in the classroom has been very slow coming. Many of us will have heard comments such as: "We would like to use more student-centred methods but this is Proficiency; it has to be taught". This may be no more than an excuse, symptomatic of a tendency to underestimate what students at this level, including younger ones, are capable of.

What is proposed is that we involve them far more in the learning process by showing students how test items work, how to write them for each other and how to correct each other's scripts. Although the emphasis is primarily on Proficiency, techniques suggested here could be used for First Certificate, CAE and other exams.

First let us consider why students need more help to pass. About half of all Proficiency candidates fail and results vary widely from country to country: from a pass rate of over 70% in areas of northern Europe, for example, to less than a third in parts of the south. Some say that this is because too many young students are taking the examination, and there certainly is enormous pressure on them from parents, peer group and schools to pass as soon as they can -before the school work load builds up with the approach of major exams.

While it is true that a 14- or 15-year-old may have trouble handling some of the concepts dealt with in the interview and in the texts, she (nowadays 75% of CPE candidates are female¹) can often make up for it with excellent pronunciation, as well as good oral and written fluency. Of course it is our duty to discourage students from taking this, or any other, exam before they are ready to do so, but we must face up to the fact that if we teach exam classes it is up to us to make sure

¹ University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate. 1994. *FCE/CPE Revision Project, Bulletin 5*.

that our students do themselves full justice in those exams. And giving them more responsibility for their own learning is the key.

So how do we help them do that? Exam practice certainly does have a part to play: it is possible to increase their marks by 20% or more just by doing lots of past papers -the old way of endless gap-fills, multiple-choice and so on. But that figure is obviously only useful if there is first a solid foundation of language skills on which we can build.

What, then, we should initially be doing is training learners in reading, writing, listening and speaking - plus a systematic study of the structural patterns of English. Students should work through a good grammar practice book until they have a detailed knowledge of (and, crucially, the ability to use) a wide range of structures. Advanced-level students will often find this both familiar (from L1 and L2 courses at school) and welcome: they may well see it as an essential feature of any "proper" course.

This may look like rather a long process but it must be borne in mind that reaching examination standard is a long-term project. UCLES figures [2] show that the vast majority of Proficiency candidates, worldwide, have been studying for at least 5 years and that about 40% have been doing so for 9 or more years.

That is a long time in the classroom. They will have gone through a lot of materials, tests and teachers. Even if they are very young we can surely expect more of them - and them of us - than merely making them repeat the same old exercises again and again. We should show them what the examiners want, demystify the exams and treat them as adults, which they may not be in years but in terms of experience as learners they might well be. We cannot expect them to show the maturity of approach required for success in higher-level exams if we treat them like kids.

The first step, then, is to study test items in some detail. Use of English, where the gap in performance between weak and strong students tends to be greatest, is a good place to start. Students look carefully at questions (a) to (e) below, imagining the situation for each: if it's spoken, who's talking to whom, where and why.

Type 1

- (a) He wasn't offered the job because he couldn't provide references.
If.....
- (b) She gave him a friendly smile as she left.
She smiled.....

Type 2

- (c) In no way.....blame for what happened.

Type 3

- (d) There was no-one I less wanted to see than Margaret.
LAST
.....
- (e) The accusation that he had stolen the money was unfounded.
WRONGLY
.....

(An observation often made about Proficiency items is that many native speakers would have difficulty answering them. Like all UCLES questions, the above have been pre-tested with students.)

For (a), all the context questions above could be answered, with particular attention to the purpose of the utterance. If students get the form wrong, re-present and practise as part of a test-teach-test approach, re-testing it using another exam item requiring the same target structure, either from published material or -better still- writing your own. b) should be identified as probably coming from a written narrative. The main feature is the grammar point involving -ly adjectives: elicit the rule for changing them to adverbial forms and get more examples. In (c) the context is important, determining the register. A courtroom scene, perhaps: a judge reassuring a witness?

The target language in (d) is often rather different, focusing more on idioms than on grammar. The vast range of idioms may seem daunting compared to what students see as a finite number of structures. Ensure exposure to lots of authentic language.

After considering the source of (e) we look more closely at the answer: "he was wrongly accused of stealing/having stolen the money". Students are asked how many marks they would give this answer. How would they split it up for marking purposes? Would they draw a line after "accused "and give two marks? Apart

from showing students what the examiners are looking for, this activity shows learners how to mark each others' work and underlines the importance of doing as much as possible of each answer.

The next stage is to show students how to write test items. Start with simpler, FCE level structures, working them into the everyday practice of grammar points. In this example using the present perfect, learners write in "I haven't" and then give the item to their partner to complete. Then they write the questions for a, b and c.

In each case, write a test item using the form or function indicated.

Example: Type 1: present perfect
It's ages since I saw a good film.
I haven't.....

(a) Type 1: reported speech
"I was thinking about it yesterday," she remarked.
.....

(b) Type 2: future perfect
By next year I imagine the price will have gone up a lot.
.....

(c) Type 3: preference
I like the idea of sailing much more than flying.
.....

Possible items:

- (a) She remarked that.....
- (b) By next year I imagine the price.....gone up a lot.
- (c) RATHER

Students also enjoy designing gap-fill exercises for each other. With practice, some can rival the material writer's ability to spot a target item a mile off. In the extract below, students in Madrid aged 15-17 were asked to delete five words as test items:

Fill each of the numbered blanks in the passage with one suitable word.
It is illogical that the railways should be required to show an 8 per cent return on investment, while no such return is or can be expected from roads, except on the basis of cost benefit analysis. This is the rough tool used to assess the notional benefits brought by road construction.

The most popular choices were: "an" (line 1), perhaps due to the frequently corrected L1 mistake "a rise of an 8 per cent" differing from this adjectival use; "on" (line 1); "of" (line 3) and "rough" (line 3).

These were a fairly representative sample of the word classes chosen. They tended to be prepositions, conjunctions and articles, perhaps a good indication of what learners themselves regard as hard -rather than the usual teacher-centred view of what they should find difficult.

The only weakness seemed to be the occasional selection of unfamiliar adjectives or adverbs "rough" and - in a few cases - "notional" from the extract above, but learning that these are unlikely test items in itself helps to raise their awareness of what the examiners are looking for. And even though the correlation with test-writers' choices was not high, the overwhelming majority of the gaps made were plausible test items. This materials writer, incidentally, chose "should", "such", "is", "of" and "This" - though obviously the selection would also vary among teachers and item writers.

A useful starting point for Section B of the Use of English is the sample answers plus examiners' comments at the back of *The Complete Proficiency Practice Tests 2*². We need to train students in gist reading for source, purpose and main content, plus identification of the part or parts of the text relevant to the question and careful study of the marking scheme. Below is an example of this.

.....He called this group the 'false confessors'. He compared them with eight people who had been charged with crimes but persistently denied them in spite of evidence, the 'deniers'. 30

(j) Who are what were the 'deniers' (line 30)?

People who said they had not committed crimes (1) although it appeared that they had (1). 2 marks

The aim here is to show the kind of answer required: short, but containing two pieces of information. Again, part of the answer will score. Students mark each

² May, P. 1992. *The Complete Proficiency Practice Tests 2*. Heinemann.

other's work, checked by the teacher: they tend to be very strict on relevance - especially in the summary. Practise, if possible, with a teacher's book to each group. Better still, students use the with-key edition of a Practice Tests book such as the above: despite assertions to the contrary by a British politician, cheating is not endemic outside the UK. Otherwise it might be worth writing to the publishers for permission to make copies from the teacher's book.

Marking each other's essays is a useful proof-reading exercise and it may be that learners make more effort if it is not only the teacher who will be reading their work. The first step is to familiarise students with the UCLES marking criteria (but do remember that the wording of these is constantly changing) and to study sample essays with examiners' comments such as those in *The Complete Proficiency Practice Tests 1*³. Finally, the teacher collects and checks both the essays and the marking.

The essay which follows was written by a 16-year-old Spanish student and given to Greek and French L1 students aged 15-19 to be marked. The aim was to see which errors most student markers identified, which they missed and which (if any) they incorrectly underlined as mistakes.

Your parents were away on holiday and you were having a party that had got completely out of control. Suddenly you saw them arriving home. Write an account of what followed. (about 350 words)

When I saw my parents leaving the car I would have preferred to be dead. the only thing I could do was to sit on the grass and watch what my parents did.

Firstly they shouted to all my friends and made them leave the house. I had never heard my father telling so bad words as that night he did. My mother went to the living room and turned the radio off. She sat on her favourite sofa and closed her eyes. For one moment I thought she wasn't very ungrateful (only a bit annoyed) however a few seconds after terrible screams and cries could be heard from there.

I wished I had never organised such an unforgettable party. I closed my eyes too and imagined that I was in my worst nightmare. My father finished with my dreams: "Maria", he said, "come here". I stood up and nearly passed away.

³ May, P. 1990. *The Complete Proficiency Practice Tests 1*. Heinemann.

When I could walk I went to the living room where my parents were waiting for me without any hesitation.

"Let's do they best thing for everybody," my father began to say, "we will go to a hotel for one night. Meanwhile you will be able to clean the house and tidy everything. We will come back tomorrow morning and we will talk about this mess calmly. Come on darling, Maria has lots of things to do". With these words they left the house. I looked around me and couldn't decide what was going to be the first thing to be cleaned.

I had never spend such a long night cleaning, washing and sweeping. There were glasses into the swimming pool, into some lockers and all around in the garden. All the ashtrays were full and all the bottles were empty. I had to use ten plastic bags to throw out all the rubbish.

When I finished, I went to my bedroom to listen to some music and to think a bit about this. I have prefered to write this story in my diary in case my parents kill me when they arrive at their cleanest home. Good luck, Maria!

Students tended to find the more serious errors rather than spelling mistakes such as "prefered", although few spotted the potentially confusing "ungry". Most identified the following: "as that night he did", "finished with", "when I could walk", "I have prefered to write" and "their cleanest home". About half identified "my father telling", "so bad words", "passed away" and "had never spend". Very few noticed "leaving the car", "shouted to", "ungry", "into the swimming pool" or "into some lockers". There were also, however, very few instances of 'incorrect corrections': in most cases they were improvements to the text. It would be interesting to compare these findings with those from work corrected by students who share the same first language.

The Interview can of course be practised by doing mock exams, but with a big class it is difficult to organise and there is not much individual practice. Far more opportunities to speak are provided by inter-level oral examination practice⁴, a technique developed with large classes of 14-17 year olds in Madrid. This involves higher-level students role-playing examiners while those at a lower level act as candidates. The materials, mark sheets and scales are explained and students practise examining by interviewing others from the same class. The one-to-one or two-to-two interviews take place between the classes, with teachers collecting

⁴ May, P. 1993. "Testing time for students". *EFL Gazette*. May 1993.

mark sheets and candidates moving to other examiners' tables. Very little supervision is needed.

As preparation, learners may also benefit from hearing the recorded orals on *The Complete Proficiency Practice Tests 1* cassette, which are followed by examiners' assessments and comments. For a student perspective on the examination as a whole, two young candidates who have just taken it discuss their feelings about each Paper on the cassette of *First Choice for Proficiency*⁵.

⁵ May, P. 1991. *First Choice for Proficiency*. Heinemann.