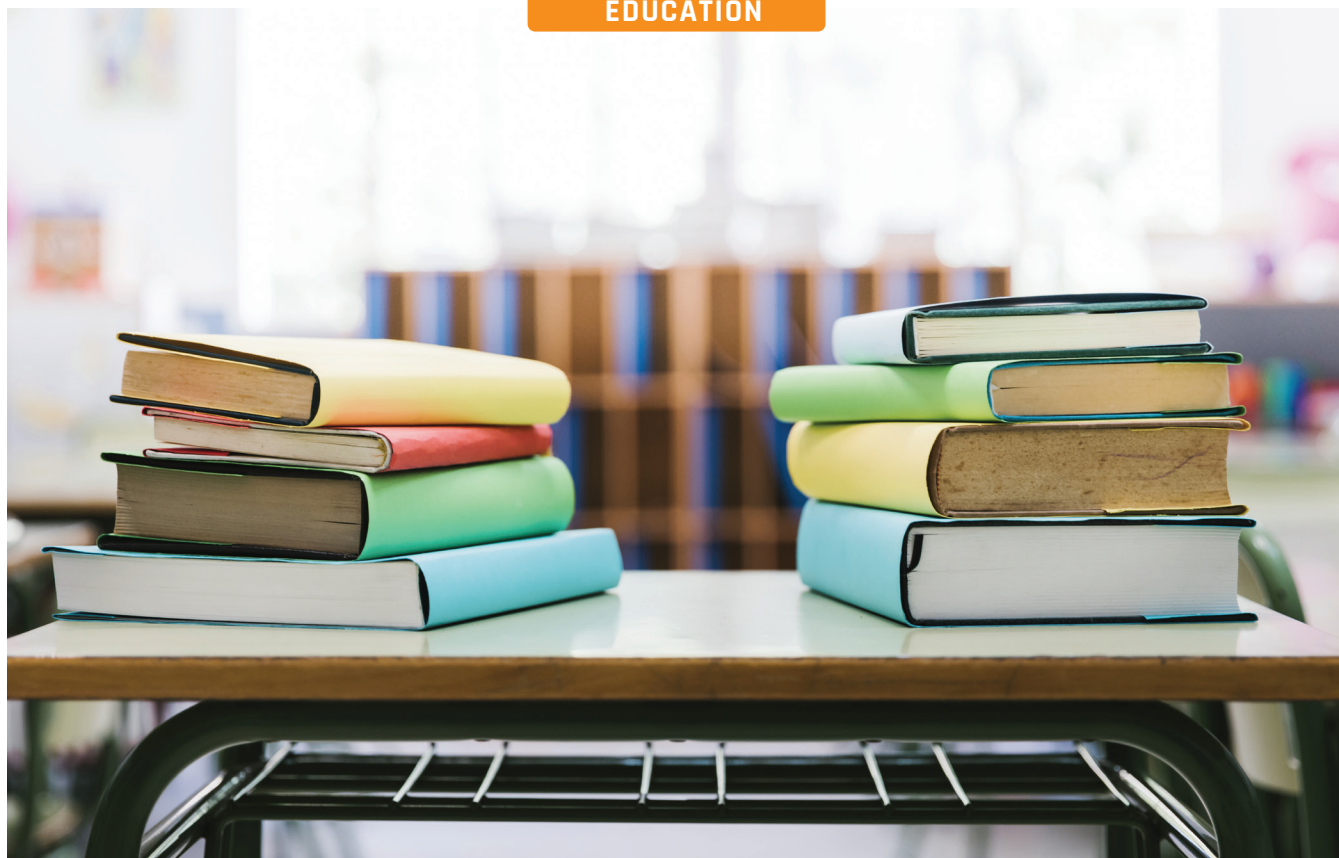




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BY ANGELIKI CHEILARI AND DAVID CONIAM

Angeliki Cheilari is Head of Assessment, Business Development & Marketing at LanguageCert. **David** Coniam is Head of Research at LanguageCert.

Preparing for **Teaching** **Exam Classes** in the New School Year

One factor that greatly differentiates exam classes from general English classes centres on learner purpose. Since learners in exam classes generally have the same aim (that of passing the exam, they are more willing to work to achieve their goal. They tend to be highly motivated – at least at the beginning of a course.



At the start of the academic year, this short piece examines the roles and expectations of both teacher and learners in exam classes by presenting a brief overview of key issues, before showing how a simple needs analysis might dovetail with aims, objectives, teaching materials and methods. Although Needs Analysis (NA) is usually

MOTIVATION

While learners may be either intrinsically (from within) or extrinsically (instrumentally) motivated in exam classes, extrinsic motivation tends to be dominant. While motivation levels are high at the beginning of an exam course, motivation levels are prone to fluctuate, with learners

Two key issues are: learner autonomy – that is learners taking responsibility for their own learning and actively participating in the learning process; and metacognition that involves an awareness of how they learn, an evaluation of their learning needs, generating strategies to meet these needs and then implementing the strategies”.

MATERIAL SELECTION

Material selection for exam classes is key. Test content and testing techniques have to be aligned with the objectives of the course in order that harmful backwash be avoided (Hughes, 2003).

DIFFERENT LEVELS WITHIN A CLASS

As it can be challenging for teachers need to deal with different levels within an exam class, lesson plans and the selection of materials may need to be adjusted in order to meet the needs of different levels of learners, e.g., using a variety of tasks and simplified versions of more demanding tasks, so as to avoid frustration and demotivation.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

Richards (2001) defines needs analysis as “the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language”. Needs analysis is a useful tool for exam classes, helping teachers maintain a balance between teaching and testing, avoid harmful backwash, diagnose learners’ weaknesses, sustain learners’ motivation levels and enhance learner autonomy.

Needs can be objective or subjective needs. In order to collect both objective and subjective data regarding the needs analysis process, two existing survey instruments are worth considering:

- The first probes learners’ personal information (Nunan, 1988). This involves their knowledge of the exam they want to take, their learning goals, their preferences, areas of interest, and their perceived strengths and weaknesses.

The final element in course design is the evaluation of the course. In part, this will be seen though learner end-of-course surveys. It will also come from seeing learners’ results in the exam proper.

employed in ESP, academic study skills and English for Occupational/Vocational Purpose courses, many of the strategies and techniques are also applicable to examination classes.

KEY ISSUES

Washback can be defined as the (hopefully positive) influence of testing on teaching and learning (Cheng et al., 2004), the direct or indirect effect of examinations on teaching methods, (or the connections between testing and learning.

losing their initial motivation due to the repetitive nature of exam practice or the pressure of the looming exam course.

TEACHING VS TESTING

“The proper relationship between teaching and testing is surely that of a partnership”, says Hughes (2003). However, factors such as course length and time constraints can make the ideal teaching / testing balance hard to achieve.

LEARNER AUTONOMY

- The second probes learners' learning styles (Willing, 1988); are they concrete learners / analytical learners / communicative learners / or authority-oriented learners?

The next step involves running a diagnostic test to gauge learners' strengths and weaknesses. The sensible baseline starting point is a sample paper of whatever exam learners are aiming at – administered under exam-like conditions to provide the teacher with further information regarding learners' time allocation. Tasks should be marked against used by exam board's mark scheme.

SYLLABUS DESIGN

Details of learners' background details, preferences and a general picture of learners' abilities enable the teacher to mould them into a set of priorities that are fed into the design and subsequent implementation of the course syllabus.

A 'syllabus' usually contains a description of the contents of a course of instruction and the order in which they are to be taught. Nunan (1988), who suggests that a 'syllabus' is the subcomponent of a curriculum, focusing on the selection, sequencing and justification of experiential and linguistic content, divides syllabuses into two types:

- Product-oriented syllabuses focus on the teaching and testing of discrete language items. They may be grammatical, functional or lexical.
- Process-oriented syllabuses focus on the process of acquiring language knowledge and skills.

Based on the two choices and learners' needs, decisions are needed about combining an analytic, skills-based, content-based and process-oriented syllabus. There may also be some product-oriented elements and objectives in this syllabus regarding vocabulary and the process of writing.

After having identified the teaching approach and materials and defined the content, the syllabus has to be sequenced into a coherent whole. Graves (2001) notes that "one of the main principles of sequencing in putting a course together is based on the common-sense principle of building".

To exemplify, let us assume, that, in order to achieve a balance between teaching and testing, a task-based teaching methodology has been adopted. This would mean that a skills-training stage would precede a testing stage. During the skills-training stage, activities might be exam-type but shorter ones, so that the learners may focus on skills development. Tasks and materials will also be designed as far as possible to reflect learners' needs and preferences and enhance learners' motivation.

ASSESSMENT TOOLS

To assess progress and development, as well as enhancing learners' engagement and motivation, certain formative and summative methods are proposed.

Formative Assessment Tools here (Gattullo, 2000) include learner diaries, vocabulary notebooks, vocabulary tests, peer assessment, teacher formative feedback in lessons. To encourage learner autonomy and learning outside the classroom, a learning diary and vocabulary notebook is recommended – two practical tools for regular revision and the self-study crucial for exam classes. Further, to create beneficial washback, errors can be viewed as learning opportunities with feedback consequently extensive and detailed.

Summative assessments for the course naturally consist of sample exam papers administered at key points in the course (usually the middle and the end). They should be administered, marked under exam conditions but also used for formative feedback.

COURSE EVALUATION

The final element in course design is the evaluation of the course. In part, this will be seen through learner end-of-course surveys. It will also come from seeing learners' results in the exam proper. Both elements should provide information to the teacher who may then use this detail to help her close the feedback loop in subsequent needs analyses.

While the set of procedures outlined above are not cost-free as they involve teachers and learners in a certain amount of time and effort, the focused nature of such a need analysis always pays dividends. ●

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