

Examination Preparation Classes

What Instructors need to consider before commencing the first lesson

Harry F. Carley

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HARRY F. CARLEY III

Research Department, School of Business,
Matsuyama University, Matsuyama, Ehime,
790-8578 Japan. hfcarley@matsuyama-u.jp

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explain and discuss some of the formidable tasks that Examination Preparation instructors may encounter. Many instructors are responsible with teaching EFL courses along with exam preparation lessons although each of these requires a different set of teaching criteria. Examination preparation courses with their ultimate goal of exam success can be especially stressful for learner and lecturer alike.

INTRODUCTION

The ultimate preparation for taking a future examination would be nothing but taking and retaking practice tests. Indeed, some students expect the whole course to consist of doing one practice paper after another, and the fact that this does not happen can be a source of great frustration for individuals. (Burgess, Head, 2005). Unfortunately as instructors we all know that is neither practical nor reasonable to accomplish for learners. Students need other forms of encouragement to do well other than the pressure of constantly taking and retaking practice tests.

Examination preparation classes have a defined clear cut goal to attain. This goal, to pass some set examination or increase a previous score, adds a greater obligation to the instructor. The teacher has a responsibility to the students that may not seem so delineated with conversation based EFL lessons. Once the Exam prep. is completed and the student takes the exam, there will be concrete evidence of the success or failure of the preparedness. The next examination can expose how much the level of preparedness prospered in numerical figures and percentages.

RESPONSIBILITY and REASONS

Responsibility of the instructor is the greatest factor in examination prep. classes. This is due to the overall effect that the exam may have on the student's life.

Reasons for enrolling in an examination preparation course may include;

- **Advancement to a higher level course or certification (STEP, TOIEC test)**
- **Gaining admission into a certain school (going overseas, graduate school)**
- **Acceptance into a chosen profession (lawyer, accountant, teacher)**

These motives not only add stress on to the students but also added pressure for the instructor. Exam prep. classes are after all more than getting a letter grade or passing mark. Their effect on the learner's later life goals can be immeasurable. Therefore the need to convey the importance of taking the course should be unquestionably understood by both learner and lecturer alike.

With this overall understanding of its importance and ultimate goal of future exam success, each lesson of the course will display more stringency and rigidity in its outline and curriculum. Time for spontaneity or creativity in lessons may be marginal.

FACTORS FOR CLASS INSTRUCTION

There are other determinates that affect examination preparation courses. One of the major factors is the make-up of the class. In any given class there could be:

- Weak-low level learners**
- Average-mid level learners**
- Strong-high level learners**

The weak learners are the ones that may have the loftiest goals but they encounter the most difficulty in obtaining them. Their occasion for setback is extreme. Many times these poor learners may be preparing for an exam that they are doomed to fail before they even commence. The reasons may be numerous but often it is just basic misunderstandings of the requirements of the examination. Additionally, there may be outside pressure from someone such as a parent. Whatever the case, these learners need to be made aware of the realistic outcome of their future exam.

The class of average or good learners is usually all about refining and expanding on knowledge already obtained. Through normal and frequent rehearsal for the exam their potential can be reinforced and upgraded. Their success is by no ways guaranteed though. This group of learners needs to be made aware of the fragility of not properly preparing for the exam.

Strong high level learners on the other hand, are naturally at more of an advantage when it comes to in their insuring their success. Again while no one learner's outcome is guaranteed, students at this level can feel less pressure. Their wealth of prior knowledge and familiarity of the examination can work to their advantage.

The make-up of the class is not the only determinant though; others are class size, age of learners, language context, time frame and composition of the class itself. Each of these can play a significant role in an exam preparation course.

- **Class Size.** The size of a class although obvious, can play a huge role in the success or failure of exam preparation.

The overlying question to be solved; "how to deal with each individual's learning weaknesses in a group of many capabilities?" Early on, we should establish the kind of climate that encourages students to help one another or ask for help from fellow students. Cooperation works better than competition in the large class: cross ability grouping allows the more able learners to improve their language skill by honing their ability to explain, to state clearly, and to give effective examples, while it provides the less able with considerable support (Hess, 2001) Accomplishing this though depends on the experience of the instructor and their expertise in the components of the exam itself.

- **Age.** The age of the learners similar to make-up, can dictate the pace and details of each lesson, Younger learners naturally be more active and easily distracted by longer periods of concentration. This may mean fewer formalities while still dealing with the aims of the course.

Older learners though will not only want but expect more precise lessons centering on the ultimate goal of the course. Their whole life or future success in a given profession may depend on their exam score.

- **Language Context.** The consideration of language context for course instruction is an important factor. A context of L1 or L2 can have an

immense effect on the overall course. Exam prep. in L1 offers not only a more comfortable and accessible learning environment within the class but also a broader range of study material outside of the classroom. The use of L1 most importantly offers the extra opportunity for further clarification of any minor points that may arise. The use of L2 in the given examination language is not without fault though, as it gives valuable experience in using the examination vernacular. Whichever is chosen, there is an underlying advantage for the students. All second language learners, regardless of age, have by definition already acquired at least one language. This prior knowledge may be an advantage in the sense that the learner has an idea of how languages work (Lightbrown, Spada, 2002).

- **Time Frame.** The length of the course can affect many aspects of the lessons. The main facet being that of pressure. In shorter courses learners may become extremely anxious as the need to cram quickly arises. A slower more methodical approach although more logical may not be always beneficial or possible. Some experts have argued that a relatively short period of introducing students to the content and format of the tests is sufficient to produce scores equivalent to those obtained by students who have spent the entire year in test-prep mode (Kohn, 2001). Additionally the solo nature of exam preparation can work to the learners favor if time allows. Learners may be able to concentrate on their own individual weaknesses, working at their own pace, while still being part of the overall group.
- **Composition.** This is similar to the make-up of the class but when considering composition; all other factors must be considered together. In addition, there may be some learners who may not even want to be there, so motivation and clear direction in the examination goals can be another underlying difficulty for the learner.

STUDENT REQUIREMENTS

All of the components that comprise an examination course can be vexing for an instructor. To ease an instructors burden there are some basic requirements students should be made aware of. These can help ensure a student's mental well-being throughout the course and assist in their achievement.

1. **The student's belief in success**
YES, We Can!
2. **Motivation & Motivation maintained**
3. **Understanding progress doesn't happen overnight**
4. **Success involves studying in/out of the classroom**
5. **Understanding and accepting stress**

TEACHER REQUIREMENTS

Instructor's requirements although similar, are also equally important. These are:

1. **Belief in the Exam**
2. **Belief in success (instilling confidence)**
YES, They Can!
3. **Understanding the exam. Knowing where to go for answers**

Additionally and more specifically;

Things teachers should do

- Make sure the students know exactly what is in the test; the number of passages they will listen to and the approximate length, the type of questions they will answer, and how many times the recording will be played..
- Prepare the students for the types of topics that occur and make sure they have mastered the basic vocabulary pertaining to these topics.
- Make sure the students know administrative issues such as where they will write their answers and how long the whole test will last.
- Do several practice tests; preferably in the same room which the real test will take place. If possible, set up the room as it will be for the test.
- Include an easy initial question to increase confidence and allow the students to 'tune-in' to the speakers.
- Go over the answers in the practice test in order to demystify the exam. Get students to justify their answers, including their correct ones (Wilson, 2009)

Practicing the examination itself is extremely important for the students. Not only for learners to get an idea of their placement and abilities for a future scoring but also to understand the workings and logistics of the test. Reducing the stress that may come with the build-up to the future exam is also beneficial. For this reason, instructors will need to allocate time for practice examinations. It is also important for the instructor to assume the appropriate role toward the test takers

...the teacher will need to stop behaving like a class teacher and start behaving like an invigilator (during the exam) and an examiner (when marking) As ‘invigilator’, the teacher must follow the rules of conduct stated in the exam regulations, for example, checking that students’ mobile phones are switched off, controlling start and finish times, and refusing to answer questions. As an ‘examiner’, the teacher should mark strictly according to the formal criteria set by the exam board, and award grades (Burgess, Head 2008)

Although not easy to do for some instructors, it is necessary teachers to transform from friend to foe to authenticate the conditions of the examination. This ‘tough love’ approach may seem harsh to some but overall it is what’s best for the learners in their preparation up to the actual examination.

EXAMINATION PREP COMPARED TO EFL

All of these requirements share the underlying base of knowing and understanding the examination to be taken. While examination preparation courses all share this common theme, EFL courses may not be so comprehensible in their aim.

Learners as is often the case in higher level areas of education may be only attending an EFL course to rack up credits toward their graduation. Many on the other hand may have real interest and a need for EFL attainment.

Whichever the particular instance, the pressure for success is usually not at such a level as if preparing for an examination. Many learners, if they are English majors in particular in a university course may find real enjoyment in their EFL lessons. This could mean that motivation for attendance, course participation and outside work may not be a problem. Just their natural willingness to learn may be enough.

This higher level of motivation on the part of the students can offer an added opportunity for inspiration on the part of the instructor that would be unthinkable otherwise. These opportunities for expanding teaching techniques contrast sharply to the more stringent lessons of exam prep.

CONCLUSION

Examination preparation courses and English as Foreign Language classes each have their own ultimate goals. Each needs an outline of what should be accomplished within the course timeframe. The styles of instruction and learning objectives differ for those of learner and lecturer alike. Although contrasting, both varieties of educational environments can be rewarding for the instructor as well as beneficial to the learners overall lifetime goals.

Instructors at the university level especially, may be tasked with instructing both. Examination preparation classes at this level can carry great weight and responsibility for the learner and instructor. The pressure should not be overwhelming but instead the pleasure of success should prevail for all.

Classes consisting of students preparing for a specific type of examination need not be all work and totalitarian in its instruction method. The importance of the exam itself is most often understood by all, therefore with a clear goal in mind, the right attitude and preparation can lead to future positive accomplishments by the student.

The teachers reward is that same hard fought target that the learners themselves (with some assistance) merited.

AUTHOR

Harry Carley, Lecturer, Research Center, School of Business, Matsuyama University, Ehime is involved with a variety of EFL and examination preparation courses. He has taught at all levels of the Japanese education system. He has resided in Japan for over 20 years.

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