

## BUILDING EXAM STUDY SKILLS

An article by Katie Head, co-author of *How to Teach for Exams*

The following students are all failing, in different ways, to manage their exam preparation work effectively. How would you help them develop better study habits?

1. Student A makes very similar mistakes in all his written work. When you return his homework he checks the mark, then puts it away in his file and doesn't look at it again.
2. Student B comes to you at the end of every class to ask you to explain bits of vocabulary from her out-of-class reading.
3. Student C completes homework exercises on grammar and vocabulary, but never hands in an essay.
4. Student D started the course well, but seems to have lost interest and is missing some lessons.
5. Student E failed the speaking part of her exam last year, and is worried that she will do so again this year.
6. Student F gets her older brother to help her with her homework, and her results are much better than when she works on her own in class.

Exams are significant events in a student's life, and teaching an exam class can be immensely satisfying. There is a shared sense of purpose, a goal to be achieved and a clearly defined syllabus. Getting to the required level, however, requires sustained commitment on the part of both teacher and learner and while most students start their course with a strong motivation to succeed, they are often unprepared for and over-anxious about the workload involved. The behaviours illustrated in the examples above are symptoms of low self-confidence, poor self-discipline, and over-dependence on others; any of these behaviours could drag the student down and impair their performance on the day of the exam.

An important role for the exam class teacher is to encourage good study habits which will enable students to stay focused and maintain a sense of control over their learning. Effective coping strategies reduce stress and help students to manage their workload. Teachers should take time to monitor how their learners are progressing, not just in terms of results but also in terms of how they are organising their studies and coping with the exam pressure. Specifically, students can be encouraged to:

Spend some regular out-of-class time working on their English. Steady commitment is a much surer guarantee of success than occasional bursts of activity.

Review what they did in class. Failure to do this means that they don't know what they don't know, and neither does the teacher.

Make use of reference books such as dictionaries and grammars. Some teachers like to ban reference materials from the classroom, but there is much to be gained from building some study skills training into the early part of the course to teach students how to use these materials properly.

Find a time and place to study where they will not be disturbed. If a student's home circumstances are making it difficult for them to study properly, the teacher may be able to help them find a quiet place within the school.

Organise their paperwork so that they can review their work easily and get a sense of their own progress. Too often, completed work just gets pushed into a file or folder, never to be looked at again. Teachers can help students to set up retrieval systems for reviewing and monitoring previously completed work.

Identify and correct their own mistakes.

Keep an independent learning record. The teacher can produce a simple form for each student, on which they record any work done in their own time.

Note down questions and ask for help with anything they find difficult. Practise using the language as much as possible. Some students think that they can learn all they need to know for an exam by studying books and doing practice exercises and tests. This may have been true in the past but is much less true today, with most current exams designed to test the kind of language used in real communicative contexts.

Research shows that some level of stress is a positive motivator, but that too much stress has a negative effect and leads to impaired performance. Exam class teachers who encourage their learners to manage the pressure by organising their work in some of the ways suggested above, can help them to enter the exam room effectively prepared and confident of doing their best.

There are no correct answers to the exercise set at the start of this article, but here are my suggestions:

1. You can encourage Student A to review his work and learn from his mistakes, so that he doesn't keep repeating them. You will need to demonstrate this by going through several pieces of work with him, and pointing out patterns in the kinds of mistakes he is making.
2. Student B should not be discouraged from doing out-of-class reading, but she must also understand that you are not an always-available, walking dictionary. She needs to learn how to use a good dictionary to find answers to her questions.
3. Student C completes controlled exercises, but is resisting the need to develop skill in expressing original ideas through English. If he is having problems thinking of things to write, it might be helpful to teach him some brainstorming techniques.
4. Student D needs to be taken aside and gently told that you have noticed the change in her behaviour. It is important to show concern and understanding, and encourage her to talk about any problems she is having with her study. You can then discuss with her what strategies would help her to get back on track.
5. Student E needs to understand why she failed the exam last year, and what she can do differently to get a better result. You could help her to

devise a work plan that will give her opportunities for regular practice and monitoring of her speaking.

6. Student F should not be discouraged from seeking help, but her brother cannot take the exam for her and they both need to understand this. It might be good to talk to the brother, as well as the student, about how he can best help her to learn.