

## TEACHING WRITING IN EXAM CLASSES: RUTINA OR CREATIVITY? Vinogradenko T.V. Email: Vinogradenko648@scientifictext.ru

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**Abstract:** *the article analyzes some specific features of teaching writing in exam classes, looks at positive and negative impacts of washback on learners' motivation and performance during the preparation course and at an exam. Different approaches to teaching writing are analyzed and evaluated from the perspective of students' immediate needs in an exam class and their personal development in the long run. Some recommendation on how to modify and combine well known strategies in teaching academic writing to help learners achieve the best possible result at an exam and build up their academic skills, creativity and make classes more enjoyable.*

**Keywords:** *exam classes, teaching writing, writing skills, academic writing, washback, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, product approach, genre approach, process approach, product-process approach, format, vocabulary, creativity, personal development, boredom, anxiety, stress-free environment, brainstorming, drafting, redrafting, immediate feedback, fun activities.*

### ПОДГОТОВКА К ПИСЬМЕННОЙ ЧАСТИ ЭКЗАМЕНА ПО ИНОСТРАННОМУ ЯЗЫКУ: РУТИНА ИЛИ ТВОРЧЕСТВО?

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**Аннотация:** *в статье анализируются особенности подготовки к письменной части экзамена по иностранному языку, рассматриваются положительные и отрицательные стороны мотивации учащихся на экзамен, влияние такой мотивации на их прогресс в течение курса и на конечный результат - оценку на экзамене. Рассматриваются и оцениваются различные походы к обучению письму с точки зрения текущих потребностей студентов в экзаменационном классе и относительно перспектив их личностного роста. Статья рассматривает некоторые способы модификации и комбинирования хорошо известных подходов к обучению академическому письму, которые могут помочь учащимся достичь наилучшего результата на экзамене, развить свои творческие способности и получить больше удовольствия от процесса обучения.*

**Ключевые слова:** *экзаменационные классы, обучение письму, навыки письма, академическое письмо, внешняя и внутренняя мотивация, подход, ориентированный на конечный продукт, жанровый подход, процессуальный подход, формат, словарный запас, творчество, свободное от стресса пространство, мозговой штурм, немедленная обратная связь, развлекательные виды деятельности.*

УДК 372.8

Every experienced teacher knows that preparing students for an examination is a huge responsibility because 'exam results can have a significant effect on their lives and careers.'(1-, 2) In this article I would like to have a look at preparing for a writing part of an exam in a foreign language, some specific features and problems of this course and discuss possible approaches which can help solve the issues. Also it would be interesting to find out if creativity and playfulness suit this kind of a class or just distract learners from their main goal.

It is well known that any exams 'affect the classroom teaching that leads to them: this is so called washback (also *backwash*)' [6, 228]. Exam students are usually motivated and prepared to work really hard which is definitely positive. Unfortunately there is also a significant negative washback impact. Although exam students are ready to learn with great enthusiasm to get the result which they need 'the fact that the exam results are usually really important can cause a lot of anxiety in many students and the teacher has to be prepared to help' [1, 2]. In other words, being aimed exclusively at getting a good grade at their examination, students may feel too anxious. With the anxiety a so called affective filter can come into play. According to Krashen 'the **affective filter** is an impediment to learning or acquisition caused by negative emotional ("affective") responses to one's environment' [4, 32] which can prevent students from acquiring new linguistic information, making educated guesses in listening and reading tasks, approaching speaking and writing in a more creative way.

Another issue is boredom. Exam preparation is usually a comparatively short course which does not allow a teacher to deviate from its syllabus and 'leaves less space for spontaneity in class' [1, 2]. Topics for writing

essays are often complicated and not interesting for students and issues which should be addressed in letters or e-mails can be very different from their personal needs and life experience. Moreover, even if a topic is inspiring and can trigger some creative ideas these ideas are not likely to be evaluated by experts in such exams as Russian State Exam (ЕГЭ) or Cambridge exams (KET, PET, FCE etc). According to criteria a learner is expected to produce a reasonably accurate and well-organized piece of writing where each aspect of the task is covered. All these factors might add to boredom in the classroom.

Both anxiety and boredom directly result from the fact that a good mark at any exam is an extrinsic motivation which definitely works but often slows down the development of creativity and independent thinking. V. Milman in his article *Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation in Learning Process* supports this idea with experimental data and proves that in the long run learners with intrinsic motivation show much better results [7, 5].

In short, two main problems in teaching examination writing which are anxiety and boredom can be addressed if we shift learners' focus from the result to the exam preparation process and help them develop intrinsic motivation. On the other hand in my view one cannot be trained for an exam which does not appreciate creativity high (unfortunately!) in a totally creative way. Routine repetitive tasks and templates cannot be totally abandoned.

Bearing all these factors in mind let's consider the following question: which approach to teaching writing for exams can be the most beneficial?

The most common ways to deal with writing are well-known product, process and genre approaches. The first and the last ones seem to be quite similar

Product writing implies thorough study of a model text, analyzing its structure, organization of paragraphs and the use of typical lexical and grammatical clichés which is followed by creating a similar text on the same or similar topic using the examined model as a template. The main difference between product and genre approaches is that the genre approach suggests more genre-focused analysis of a model text. These approaches (or their mixture) are widely used in many textbooks preparing for different kinds of exams.

At first glance, product and genre approaches seem to be the most appropriate for exam preparation as their focus on form correlates with most of exam writing assessment criteria (effect on a target reader, cohesion/coherence, range, accuracy etc.). Thus these methods look like a short cut to getting a good mark at an exam and in my experience might be a good choice for a short-time preparation course.

Having said that, we have to take into account that coping from different modals throughout the course is usually extremely boring especially for creative people. Obviously, their motivation and, as a result, performance might go down. Also, the genre approach like the product approach focuses on the model and ignores the process of writing itself. Paltridge notes that 'just looking at text alone might give our students a description of a particular genre, but not an explanation or understanding of why it is as it is' [5, 18]. Another drawback of these approaches is that they encourage too much concentration on creating an appropriate final product which can lead to stress and anxiety [4, 32] and deteriorate students' performance at an exam. In other words, product and genre approaches take into account mostly extrinsic motivation which might be not productive in the long run [7, 9].

Let's look at the procedure which is offered by the process approach.

When the topic is given students are asked to brainstorm ideas which might be used later in their writing. This stage can be of great help in a mixed ability group as it allows peer cooperation. Some focus on the quality of ideas is in my view also useful as it takes students attention away from a final result to the process of expressing their real opinions on a topic, supporting them with examples. In this situation weaker students might feel more confident as their ideas are valued in spite of limited vocabulary or poor accuracy. Immediate feedback on their suggestions can boost their motivation and make them work harder to find ways to express themselves more precisely. The stages of planning and first drafting normally take place in groups where peer teaching can happen. Peer evaluation and correction will give a chance to all the learners to look at writings from a reader's perspective and help them write better in terms of effect on a target reader. In my experience, after brainstorming, planning, drafting/redrafting and peer evaluation creating their own pieces is much easier even for weaker learners.

Turning to the negative impact of this method, we should say that the procedure is time consuming. Another point is that this approach can give students a false impression that the content is a priority for exam writing.

So, while the product-genre approach might be used to familiarize learners with the exam writing format and give them repetitive practice in it, process approach can reduce anxiety, help learners develop more creative approach to writing and enjoy the course more. However, as we could see none of these methods is perfect and the answer probably lies between these two extremes.

As both approaches (the product-genre and process-) have their pluses we may try to use both of them (probably with some modification) in one course

As an illustration, to make product-genre writing more enjoyable and focus on form more clear some fun activities can be offered from time to time: e.g. students can be given some 'ridiculous' topics which sound

similar to exam topics, e.g. 'Many people believe that school uniforms should be in pink colour. What's your opinion?' etc. Topics like these are easy to understand and they do not require any special vocabulary which will also make it easier for weaker learners concentrate on the format of an essay. Feedback after such a task should be given mostly on the format, coherence and cohesion.

Also, to avoid boredom we may try to use some game-like activities taken from a general writing course. E.g. students can be instructed to write an introduction for an essay on a given topic, following the template. Then students pass their papers to their neighbor on the right (or on the left) and write the first paragraph of the essay which should fit the introduction written by the previous author. The procedure is repeated until all papers are finished. These and similar activities help learners concentrate on the exam writing in the context of the product-genre in a more enjoyable way and might give them a break from exam topic writing

To boost vocabulary on challenging topics, encouraging peer teaching (especially with mixed ability groups) and building up confidence and develop creativity, process writing can be used in exam groups from time to time. In this case a good idea might be to evaluate not only form, but first of all interesting ideas and appropriate vocabulary used in essays

Another option is to use both of these approaches at the same time in a combined version (which is known as a genre-process writing). A synthesis of the process and the genre approaches, which Badger and White [2,15] have 'aptly termed the process genre approach,..., allows students to study the relationship between purpose and form for a particular genre as they use the recursive processes of prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing' [ 5, 3]. In this approach when the topic is brainstormed, planning is done and first drafts are ready they are compared with models . Significant genre features of models are analyzed (paragraphing, linking, level of formality, cliches etc) and used by students to create their final drafts.

To sum up challenging and serious exam writing course can be enjoyable and even stress-free. Moreover, taken too seriously , with too much eagerness to get a desired grade, preparation can make students frustrated and anxious. Flexibility in using different approaches, alternating fun activities similar to exam tasks with practice tests can prevent students from being bored or anxious and as a result help them perform better at their exam.

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