

## Preparing for First Certificate — and for real life!

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Students doing a First Certificate course want to do their best in the exam, of course. But we mustn't forget that the real reason they're learning English isn't just to get a certificate to show to parents or employers. They're learning for the future — to help them to communicate in the real world: when working, studying, socializing, travelling — and talking to people who don't speak their language.

Unfortunately, all exams require candidates to 'jump through hoops' and perform some tasks which they might never have to do in real life. When we read a magazine or listen to a broadcast or watch TV we don't expect to have to answer comprehension questions afterwards! Most of us don't have to do much writing — and if we do, we don't have to write 120–180 words against the clock! When we talk to other people we don't usually compare photographs or talk uninterrupted for a minute — and we don't lose marks when we make mistakes!

In an examination preparation course there must be a sensible balance: a balance between helping students to be successful in the exam — *and* helping them to improve their ability to communicate with people in English in real-life situations. An examination certificate is of little practical value if the proud holders can't actually use their English in communication!

Here are few ideas which may help to liven up an exam course — and make it more relevant to real life:

- Get your students to do gap-filling exercises in pairs. Discussing the possible answers and trying to reach agreement is a really good way of using English to communicate ideas. Doing reading comprehension tasks in pairs is also a great way to practise communicating.
- Discourage students from looking up (or asking you) the meaning of all the unfamiliar words in a reading text. Even in the exam, it's not necessary to understand every single word in a reading text — and certainly not in real life. The gist is often more important than the details. Help them to decide which new words are useful and worth remembering — and which to disregard.
- Encourage students to use every opportunity to learn useful new words. Using a **yellow highlighter** to mark new words in context on the page is a great way to help you to remember them.
- Discuss topics in small groups, not as a whole class. This gives more students a chance to give their opinions, rather than saying or thinking: "I agree with what she just said." Many students feel shy about talking in front of the whole class, and feel more relaxed and confident in a small group — and this is more like real life situations where they'll use English.
- After a listening exercise, don't just announce the correct answers. Put the students into pairs and ask them to compare their answers. If there are discrepancies, there's a strong motivation to want to listen to the recording again and find out who was right.
- Use video for listening comprehension practice sometimes. In real life (except on the phone or on the radio) we can see the people who are talking. It's easier to empathise with people we can see than disembodied voices coming from a cassette or CD player. It's also easier to follow what they're saying when you can see their faces and body language.
- After students have written a composition for homework, put them into small groups and ask them to read each other's work. Any piece of writing should be an attempt to communicate ideas to a reader. If students know that their peers are going to read their work, they're more likely to try to make it interesting and informative — and entertaining! If you, their teacher and 'critic', are the only reader, the process of writing is much less motivating. Encourage them to suggest small improvements and corrections to each other before handing the work in.

- When marking students written work, remember how discouraging it is to receive back a paper covered in red marks! Don't forget to give praise and encouragement too — use plenty of ticks and remarks like “Good!” and “Nice!” and “Lovely!” in the margin.
- Encourage students to use the internet in their free time, to follow up topics they enjoy and to explore new topics. Suggest some good websites they can explore, such as [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk) and [about.com](http://about.com) — and ask the students to talk about their own favourite sites. Using [google.co.uk](http://google.co.uk) will help them to find pages from the UK — in English.
- Introduce topical material from time to time: newspaper articles about recent events, about their country, about topics your students enjoy. Help them to feel that English isn't just something that only exists in their course book and in the classroom — but is part of the real world and real life!



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