

Preparing students for exams *and* the real world

Steve Taylore-Knowles

Word association

Write down any words and phrases that come to mind in response to this word:

exam

Reasons for teachers' negative attitudes towards exams

- Exams seem to reduce real learning to mechanical tasks ('teaching to the test').
- Exams seem irrelevant to the real world.
- Exam preparation is dry and boring.

Effects of teachers' negative attitudes towards exams

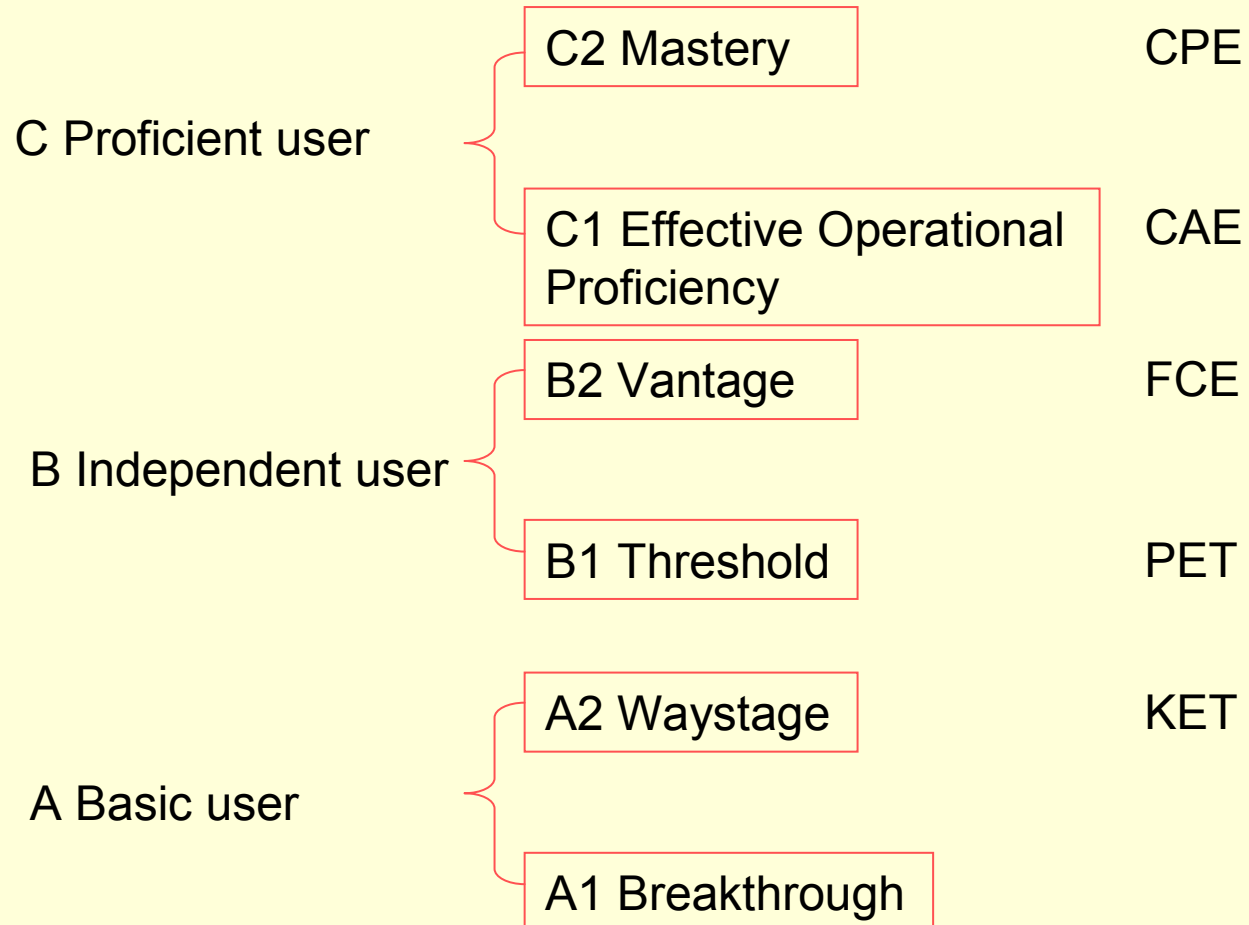
- We unconsciously communicate our attitudes to our students.
- Negative attitudes in students increase stress levels and affect performance.

How can we approach exams differently?

Can we see exams as more relevant to real world skills?

Common European Framework

Cambridge ESOL



'Can Do' performance descriptors: B1

Global scale

Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

'Can Do' performance descriptors: B2

Global scale

Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.

Reception

Overall listening comprehension
Understanding interaction between native speakers
Listening as a member of a live audience
Listening to announcements and instructions
Listening to radio and audio recordings
Watching TV and film
Overall reading comprehension
Reading correspondence
Reading for orientation
Reading for information and argument
Reading instructions
Reception strategies: identifying clues and inferring

Production

Overall spoken production
Sustained monologue – describing experiences
Sustained monologue – putting a case
Public announcements
Addressing audiences
Overall written production
Creative writing
Reports and essays
Note-taking
Processing text
Production strategies: Planning
Production strategies: Compensating
Production strategies: Monitoring and repairing

Interaction

Overall spoken interaction
Understanding a native speaker interlocutor
Conversation
Informal discussion
Formal discussion and meetings
Goal-oriented co-operation
Obtaining goods and services
Information exchange
Interviews
Overall written interaction
Correspondence
Interaction strategies: turn-taking
Interaction strategies: co-operating
Interaction strategies: asking for clarification

Linguistic competences

General linguistic range
Vocabulary range
Vocabulary control
Grammatical accuracy
Phonological control
Orthographic control
Sociolinguistic appropriateness
Flexibility
Thematic development
Coherence and cohesion
Spoken fluency
Propositional precision

Sample detailed descriptors (B2)

Goal-oriented co-operation

Can understand detailed instructions reliably.

Can help along the progress of the work by inviting others to join in, say what they think, etc.

Can outline an issue or a problem clearly, speculating about causes or consequences, and weighing advantages and disadvantages of different approaches.

Obtaining goods and services

(higher end) Can cope linguistically to negotiate a solution to a dispute like an undeserved traffic ticket, financial responsibility for damage in a flat, for blame regarding an accident.

Can outline a case for compensation, using persuasive language to demand satisfaction and state clearly the limits to any concession he/she is prepared to make.

Information exchange

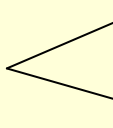
(lower end) Can pass on detailed information reliably.

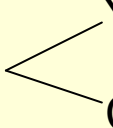
Can give a clear, detailed description of how to carry out a procedure.

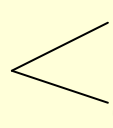
Can synthesise and report information and arguments from a number of sources.

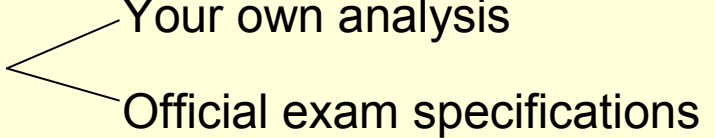
(higher end) Can understand and exchange complex information and advice on the full range of matters related to his/her occupational role.

Exam analysis: questions we need to ask ourselves as teachers

1 What does a given exam task test?  Your own analysis
Official exam specifications

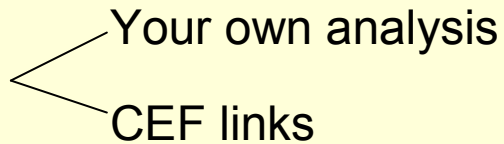
2 How is that related to the real world?  Your own analysis
CEF links

3 How can we prepare our students?  Practice exam tasks
Other options

1 What does a given exam task test? 

In this part of the paper the focus is both lexical and grammatical and a range of structures is tested. The ability to express a message in different ways shows flexibility and resource in the use of language.

FCE Handbook for Teachers

2 How is that related to the real world? 

Selected CEF descriptors (B2)

Production strategies: Compensating

Can use circumlocution and paraphrase to cover gaps in vocabulary and structure. (CEF Section 4.4.1.3)

Interaction strategies: asking for clarification

Can ask follow-up questions to check that he/she has understood what a speaker intended to say, and get clarification of ambiguous points. (CEF Section 4.4.3.5)

3 How can we prepare our students?

Practice exam tasks

Other options

'Taboo' game

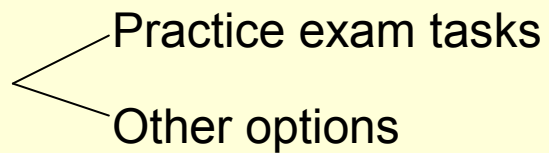
Students are given cards with words and phrases they have to describe to their partner. On the card are other words and phrases they are not allowed to use in their descriptions.

car

drive

road

means of transport

3 How can we prepare our students? 

‘Just a minute’ game

Students have to talk for a minute on a subject, without repeating themselves. If another student spots a repetition, that student takes over for the remaining time.

1 What does a given exam task test?

2 How is that related to the real world?

3 How can we prepare our students?

Many exams test real world skills, although exactly how they do it isn't always obvious at first glance.

By analyzing the tasks, we can see (and help our students see) how they are, in fact, relevant to the real world.

By practising the real-world skill an exam task tests, we can prepare our students for exams *and* the real world.

Preparing students for exams *and* the real world

Steve Taylore-Knowles

stevetk01@gmail.com