

Public examinations: Junior and Leaving Certificate

NOTE: The introduction, in 2004, of the use of dictionaries by candidates whose mother tongue is not English has provided a significant support for students in public examinations. **HOWEVER**, frequent and constant use of a dictionary is inevitably going to impact on time management in examination conditions. It is very important, therefore, that students are

1. capable of dealing with standard examination materials and approaches, and
2. able to use a dictionary efficiently and effectively (see *Dictionary-based activities* produced by IILT).

1 Preparing for the challenge in language support class

Initial access to examination questions is through the **wording** of different types of questions. It is important, therefore, to introduce language support students to examination-type questions by:

- Identifying and working on the range of VOCABULARY used in exam questions for different subjects (describe, compare, explain etc.)
- Establishing ROUTINES for approaching questions
- PRACTISING the routines regularly so that they become second-nature to students (use questions in textbooks, sample papers etc.)

2 Routines for approaching exam questions

Students must develop habits, through practice, which they can learn to depend upon. The time spent working with the QUESTION is critical because of the increased danger, for non-English speakers, of misunderstanding the point. This time is also valuable as it allows the candidate to begin to mentally formulate the ANSWER.

A good approach is as follows:

1. Read the questions, highlighting the key words
2. If the question seems unclear, read it again
3. If it still remains unclear try to find another question instead
4. Check tenses of verbs (does question refer to past, present or is it hypothetical etc?)
5. Check to ensure that question is not stated in the negative
6. Check other details such as prepositions (e.g. is it 'before' or 'after' ...)

3 Preparing an answer

Language support students face particular challenges in examination conditions for the following reasons:

1. They must activate both SUBJECT knowledge and the range of appropriate LANGUAGE to go with it. Different categories of subjects demand different styles of language use as well as vocabulary (see *Language Proficiency Benchmarks*)

2. They must have previously-developed STRATEGIES in order to overcome particular language problems
3. They may encounter inability to access a particular item of VOCABULARY
4. They may be uncertain about a GRAMMATICAL structure

4 Gathering the necessary language for an answer

Having made decisions about the choice of questions (paying attention to compulsory sections) the student must now return to a question in the next process of preparing the answer. For this it is necessary to:

1. Re-read and focus on the single question to **activate ideas** for the answer
2. Getting the ideas will, in general, automatically activate the **necessary language**
3. Jot down (and group) the **words/phrases** as they come to mind
4. Use this collection of words and phrases as a basis for constructing the text

It is important to separate this planning phase from the actual writing of the answer. Producing the necessary vocabulary is, for a non-native speaker, a different process to constructing text. It is important not to attempt to mix the two tasks. Introducing this phase makes valuable use of time with the result that writing will be both easier and better.

5 Writing the answer

The important aspects of a piece of written text are:

1. Organising and sequencing information appropriately
2. Linking different parts of an answer
3. Ensuring clarity of opinion, description, comparison etc.

These aspects of writing may be practised frequently during language support by using questions at the end of units in text books and, when appropriate, exam questions. It is a good idea to begin with short pieces of written text gradually increasing the length until the text is more or less representative of an examination answer.

6 How can the student prepare?

He/she must LEARN the language for:

- The particular subject and theme including specialised vocabulary (use textbooks, learner dictionaries etc.)
- Words and expressions for linking information and opinions – in addition, however, on the other hand, as a result of, in the first place etc.
- Words and expressions for indicating process, change, time etc. – after that, the next stage, following the ...

7 What should the student practise in the classroom?

The following classroom tasks provide good practice and raise students' awareness to the demands of written text:

- Sequencing paragraphs of text (e.g. cut up and re-assemble)
- Using linking words/connectors appropriately

- Writing short pieces of text for different purposes – describing a place/thing etc, describing a process, making comparisons between two things/situations, expressing an opinion etc.

Tip:

If a student's level of literacy is low on entry to language support, it is a good idea to get the student to 'talk' a sentence or two to the teacher. The teacher writes this, correcting as necessary, cuts it into phrases or single words and the student sequences the text. This approach allows the student to begin working with written text from an early stage.

8 Two important points about writing

- 1. Using reading to stimulate writing and using experience of writing to analyse text in a reading task will help to develop the student's awareness and understanding of how text is structured.**
- 2. Regular and varied practice dramatically improves writing**