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Student Test-Taking Strategies

Although teaching and assessment differ, the cornerstone of validity ties them closely together: *Test what you teach and how you teach it.* In your instruction, strive to emphasize important objectives and demonstrate ways in which they could be assessed. Make sure students are familiar with all formats and rubrics that they will encounter in assessment situations, and encourage students to use them to develop review tests for each other. For writing assignments, make your scoring system clear and familiarize students with it through self- and peer assessment.

In today's universities, grades are substantially determined by test results. So much importance is placed on students' test results that often just the word *test* frightens students. The best way for students to overcome this fear or nervousness is to prepare themselves with test-taking strategies. This process should begin during the first week of each semester and continue throughout the school year. The key to successful test-taking lies in a student's ability to use time wisely and to develop practical study habits.

Effective Test-Taking Strategies

Effective test-taking strategies are synonymous with effective learning strategies. This section provides suggestions for long-term successful learning techniques and test-taking strategies, not quick tricks. There is nothing that can replace the development of good study skills.

Here are some of the things Ms. Wright does to help students approach tests with confidence. She encourages them to:

- make a semester study plan that includes assessment and due dates for assignments
- come to class regularly and immediately check on any missed work
- use good review techniques individually and in study groups
- organize pre-exam hours wisely, allowing time for both review and rest
- understand how to take different kinds of exams and practice these skills in the classroom under low-stakes conditions
- use strategies appropriate to the particular skill areas
- strategize an exam plan by planning for what will happen on exam day
- reflect on each assessment experience and regard it as part of learning
- build learner autonomy because students are acquiring life-long learning techniques and strategies, not just short-term ways to get through a particular exam or course

Make a Semester Study Plan

Students need to plan their study time for each week of their courses. They should make schedules for themselves and revise them when necessary. These schedules should:

- **Be realistic.** Keep a balance between classes and studying. Block out space for study time, class time, family time, and recreation time.
- **Include a study place.** Finding a good place to study will help students get started; don't forget to have all the materials needed (i.e., pens, paper, textbooks and reference books, highlighter pens, etc.).
- **Include a daily study time.** Students forget things almost at once after learning them, so they should immediately review materials learned in class. Students should go over the main points from each class and/or textbooks for a few minutes each night. Encourage students to do homework assignments during this time as a good way to remember important points made in class.

- **Allow plenty of preparation time for important assessments.** Teachers should provide students with as much advance notice as possible about upcoming tests and due dates for assessments such as projects and portfolios. Students can learn useful time management skills in breaking down their preparation for these major events into smaller steps such as submitting drafts, reviewing certain textbook units, or taking practice tests.

Attend Class Regularly

For language learning to take place, students need to come to class on a regular basis. It is not surprising that poor attendance correlates highly with poor test results. Teachers need to point out early in the semester what constitutes legitimate reasons to be absent and stress the advantages of regular attendance.

It is also important that students feel motivated to attend regularly and see that they are making progress. Learning a language is an uneven process with times of rapid development mixed with plateaus when students seem stuck at one level. Journals, vocabulary notebooks, reading rate charts, and portfolios provide positive evidence that students are indeed moving ahead. Encourage students to use such tools to monitor their own progress.

Use Good Review Techniques

If students make a semester study plan and follow it, preparing for exams should really be a matter of reviewing materials. Research shows that the time spent reviewing should be no more than 15 minutes for weekly quizzes, two to three hours for a midterm exam, and five to eight hours for a final exam.

When reviewing for a test, students should do the following:

- **Plan review sessions.** Review the course outline, notes, and textbooks and list the major topics. How much time was spent on each topic in class? Did the teacher note that some topics were more important than others? If so, these should be emphasized in review sessions.
- **Take a practice exam.** By taking a practice exam, students will have an idea of the tasks/activities that they will encounter on the actual exam and the point allocation for each section. This information can help them plan their time wisely. Increasingly, practice exams for major tests are available on

the Internet. Print versions of practice exams are available in bookstores, including some of the large national chain book dealers. In addition, many textbook publishers have a student website to accompany the textbook that includes online practice tests and quizzes. Students can access these sites wherever they have an Internet connection. However, teachers should caution students not to practice the same exam repeatedly because the increase in their scores reflects familiarity with the exam (to the point of memorization), not increased skill mastery. If students will take a computed-based test (CBT), it is especially important that they take a tutorial before the actual exam so that they understand the features of the program such as scrolling reading passages, indicating answers, and navigating from one section to another.

- **Review with friends.** Studying with friends in a study group offers the advantage of sharing information with others reviewing the same material. Small groups work best so that each student has an opportunity and a group responsibility to actively participate. Some students thrive in study groups because they feel more comfortable talking with their peers than talking in class. Explaining something to other students in the group is often helpful in clarifying a process or content. A study group, however, should not take the place of studying individually.

Organize Pre-Exam Hours Wisely

Students who have regularly reviewed course materials throughout the semester don't have to cram at the last minute. They can concentrate their efforts on their particular areas of difficulty and conduct an overall review of the material to be tested.

Physical and mental fitness are important considerations for good test-taking. These can be best achieved with adequate rest and nutrition in the hours preceding the exam. A well-rested, well-fed student who has prepared thoroughly is likely to be calm and self-confident, two other important factors for successful test-taking. Some teachers have found it useful to encourage students in stress-reducing activities such as exercise or listening to music in the pre-exam period.

Become Familiar with Instructions and Formats

A recent research project investigating the reading skills of English students has shown that students frequently fail to read directions or read them superficially to save time. Teachers can help students be more successful on tests by familiarizing them with the language of rubrics or instructions, particularly the cue words or phrases commonly used to give directions for the tasks students encounter. For example, if an instruction says to select the *best* answer for a multiple choice question, it implies that several answers may be partially correct but that one is superior to the others. In the following item, all the answer options have the same general meaning, but option A, "watch," is a better choice than the others.

My favorite television program comes on at nine. Do you want to _____ it with me?

- A. watch
- B. look
- C. view
- D. observe

Alert students to special formatted words such as **bold**, *italic*, or underlining because words treated this way are often especially important.

Students also need to understand exactly how they are supposed to answer the questions. If they are supposed to select an answer, make sure your instructions are clear about how they are to select it (e.g., *circle the letter of the best answer* or *answer in three words or fewer on the line below the question*). On some standardized tests, students are not allowed to mark the question paper and must indicate their answers on an answer sheet. If a scan or "bubble" sheet is used, make sure that students know how to fill it out, whether to use a pen or pencil (some scanners don't read pen marks), and to fully erase a changed answer. Point out that an optical scanner will read an incompletely erased mark as the answer and will not accept two answers for the same item.

The policy on guessing answers varies on different exams. In most classroom tests, all questions are scored and the student's grade is based on the percentage of correct answers. Under these circumstances, students should be encouraged to guess if they don't know an answer and to not leave any questions unanswered. The guess may result in the correct answer, but the students' chances are much improved if they learn to eliminate unlikely options. This works best with objective format items, but may also work with short answer formats. On some standardized tests, there is a penalty for guessing. Familiarize

yourself with the guessing policy on exams your students take and give out accurate information about it.

As noted in previous chapters, teachers should ensure that students are familiar with all formats they will encounter on classroom or standardized tests. If similar formats do not appear in the textbooks or other teaching materials, introduce them within the context of teaching. Model how new formats work and then give students hands-on practice with them. Provide time for discussion and questions about the new formats and attempt to clear up any misunderstandings.

In the past, miscommunications between teachers and students sometimes prevented open discussion about how some common testing formats work. Teachers were reluctant to provide information as a matter of security and students' anxiety increased because they didn't understand how they would be tested. Transparency means that teachers have a responsibility to share what they know about formats. Student-designed tests or quizzes make students more aware of how items are written, resulting in greater ability to answer test items. It is neither difficult nor time-consuming to build such activities into class sessions. For instance, if the reading task is a scientific passage, ask students to mark up the text to focus on points tied directly to the lesson such as specific vocabulary or use of the passive voice. For vocabulary, students could devise a matching exercise with a list of synonyms. They could transform passive sentences to the active voice. In the process of developing items, students will hone their comprehension skills.

Use Strategies Appropriate to the Skill Area

Teachers should train students in effective strategies for the various skill areas to be tested. Important activities (i.e., like note-taking for listening and writing tasks) should be demonstrated to students during classroom activities. Some new test-preparation books emphasize general language skill-building instead of specifically focusing on how the skills are tested in a particular examination. For example, *The Michigan Guide to English for Academic Success and Better TOEFL® Test Scores* (Mazak, Zwier, & Stafford-Yilmaz, 2004) prepares students for the TOEFL® iBT exam by building academic skills in reading, listening, writing, and speaking, not just on tasks similar to the test. In listening, for example, subskills include focusing on main ideas and details, note-taking, and listening for inference.

Spend time analyzing the particular skills that your students will encounter on standardized exams and then build strategies for these skills as part of classroom instruction. For example, many tests use a sentence completion format

where students have to select a multiple choice option to fill a gap. When you introduce new vocabulary that includes phrasal verbs, collocations, or idioms, point out that these words occur together and if one is missing, it is important to look at all of the words surrounding the gap before making an answer choice. Draw students' attention to markers such as *but*, *although*, *so*, and *therefore* so students become aware of the shifts in meaning that these words signal.

Alert students to the words in reading instructions that indicate what kind of reading they need to do in order to answer the questions. It is futile to spend a great deal of time on a close reading of a long passage if the task requires extracting specific details to transfer to a chart. On the other hand, instructions that include words such as *author's intention*, *opinion*, and *inference* indicate that students will have to do more than quickly skim or scan the text. In fact, they may have to read very carefully to detect information that is not actually written. Reading for main ideas is often signaled by instructions that refer to *best title*, *paragraph topic*, or *key words*. Make students aware that main idea questions can refer to the entire passage, a single paragraph, or to information contained within certain line numbers that are found in the margins of the reading. Students who are aware of these conventions will be much better prepared to demonstrate their reading skills on examinations.

When you consider the development of good test-taking skills as synonymous with good learning skills, it is easy to integrate them into your classes. Refer to the skills chapters of this book for suggestions on particular strategies to include in your teaching.

Strategize Your Exam Plan

An important factor in test-taking is planning for what will happen on exam day and not leaving anything to chance. This builds your students' confidence and reduces anxiety.

Mechanics

Students feel better prepared if they have the mechanical aspects of taking an exam well in hand. They should arrive early at the designated exam room and find a seat. All books and personal effects (with the exception of student ID cards and writing materials) should be left at the front of the room. Students should come prepared with several pens or pencils and an eraser.

As soon as the exams have been distributed and students have been told to start, the student should write his or her name and ID number on all pages of the exam.

Procedures

If one section is given first, such as the listening portion of English exams, the student should focus attention on this section. With any section of the exam, the student is well-advised to do an overview of the questions, their values, and the tasks required. At this point, students should determine if the exam must be done in order (i.e., listening first) or if they can skip around between sections. The latter is not possible on some standardized exams where students must complete one section before moving on to the next.

Time Management

An important consideration in effective test-taking is time management. When exams are prepared, review time is usually factored into the overall exam design. Students should be encouraged to allocate their time proportional to the value of each exam section and to allow time to review their work. Teachers or proctors can assist students with time management by alerting them to time remaining in the exam. Computer based tests (such as the TOEFL® iBT) often show a countdown of the remaining time. Students should be made aware of this feature during practice exams.

In timed exams, students need to pace themselves so they finish within the allotted time yet still have time for planning and review. If you give exams with separate timings for each skill, time management may be easier. Encourage students to continue the good habits you built in the classroom. For a writing exam, if you emphasized brainstorming and outlining as a way to organize ideas, set aside a few minutes for these tasks before starting the actual writing. In fact, for classroom exams, you can encourage this by allocating some of the grade to evidence of planning. Similarly, show you value editing by expecting that students will allow time to look through their writing before considering it done. Suggest that students reserve a few minutes at the end of a section to review their answers and make sure they haven't forgotten or overlooked something important—such as questions on the reverse side of the test paper!

Sometimes students get bogged down on items or tasks they cannot answer. Advise them to leave those areas and focus on the sections of the exam they can do. If they have time at the end, they can return to the incomplete items and attempt to answer them. Find out in advance if there are sections of computer-based exams where this can be done.

Learn from Each Exam Experience

Each test should be part of the overall learning experience. Review test results with students, noting both strengths and weaknesses. If possible, give students a feedback sheet they can use for remediation or improvement. This feedback sheet could include scores on each section of the exam, the student's mean or average score on the entire exam, and an indication of areas where the student did well (strengths) and areas for improvement (weaknesses). Some teachers provide specific suggestions for further practice. If a student experienced a problem as a direct result of a test-taking skill, point that out so it doesn't happen again. For example, if a student didn't read instructions or ran out of time before completing a section, provide some suggestions for not repeating the error. Each exam students take should help them do better on the next one.

Build Learner Autonomy through Self-Assessment

Students will not always have a teacher to guide them. As they progress through life, they will usually have to rely on their own assessments of what they know—and don't know. For example, a new driver won't schedule a license examination until there is some degree of confidence in passing it. An employee will approach her manager for a raise when she is quite certain that her self-assessment of abilities will meet with success. Teachers can promote learner autonomy through self-assessment.

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment plays a central role in student monitoring of progress in a language program. It refers to the student's evaluation of his or her own performance at various points in a course. An advantage of self-assessment is that student awareness of outcomes and progress is enhanced.

Oscarson (1989), a noted scholar in the field of self-assessment, gives five reasons that self-assessment can be beneficial to language learning. First, he stresses that self-assessment truly promotes learning. It gives learners training in evaluation, which results in benefits to the learning process. Second, it gives both students and teachers a raised level of awareness of perceived levels of abilities. Training in self-assessment, even in its simplest form like asking "What have I been learning?" encourages learners to look at course content in a more discerning way. Third, it is highly motivating in terms of goal orientation. Fourth, through the use of self-assessment methodologies, the range of

assessment techniques is expanded in the classroom. As a result of using self-assessment, the learners broaden their range of experience within the realm of assessment. Fifth, by practicing self-assessment, the students participate in their own evaluation (Dickinson, 1987). In effect, they share the assessment workload with the teacher.

Self-Assessment Techniques and Procedures

Student Progress Cards

Oscarson (1984) describes student progress cards as simple self-assessment tools that have been used in a variety of educational settings around the world. Quite simply, student progress cards define short-term functional goals and group them together in graded blocks at various levels of difficulty. Both students and teachers can participate in this activity. The students can check off (in the student column) each language skill or activity that they are sure of performing successfully. The teacher can later check off (in the teacher column) the activity once the learner has mastered it. Here is a sample progress card for a four-skill travel project.

Objective	Student	Teacher
Read and understand texts on a travel theme		
Listen to and understand passages on a travel theme		
Talk about past and future trips or vacations		
Write an itinerary for an upcoming vacation		

Rating Scales, Checklists, and Questionnaires

With rating scales, checklists, and questionnaires, learners rate their perceived general language proficiency or ability level. They often use "ability statements" such as, *I can read and understand newspaper articles intended for native speakers of the language* (Oscarson, 1984).

Learner Diaries and Dialogue Journals

Learner diaries and dialogue journals have been proposed as one way of systematizing self-assessment for students. Learners are encouraged to write about what they learned, their perceived level of mastery over the course content, and what they plan to do with their acquired skills. These techniques are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4.

Videotapes

Video can be exploited in a number of ways to encourage self-assessment in the classroom. For example, students can be videotaped or they can videotape each other and then assess their language skills. An obvious advantage of using video in self-assessment is that students can assess not only their communicative or language skills but their paralinguistic (i.e., body language) skills as well.

Student-Designed Tests

A novel approach within alternative assessment is to have students write tests on course material. This process results in greater learner awareness of course content, test formats, and test strategies. Student-designed tests are good practice and review activities that encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning.

Learner-Centered Assessment

In learner-centered assessment, students are actively involved in the process of assessment. For example, students can select the themes, formats, and marking schemes to be used. Involving learners in aspects of classroom testing reduces test anxiety and results in greater student motivation.

Ten Things to Remember about Student Test-Taking Skills

1. Student test-taking skills are really good learning skills.

Think of teaching and testing working together to build better language skills. Remember, the washback from testing affects what and how your students study.

2. Build skill strategies into your classroom teaching.

Of course, there are differences between what happens in the classroom and in the examination hall, but wherever possible, highlight skill strategies and allow time for regular practice.

3. Spend time on reading and following instructions.

Reading and following instructions is a real-life skill, so time spent on understanding the language and expectations of instructions is valuable for your students.

4. Familiarize your students with a wide range of formats.

Students should be acquainted with most standard formats, especially those they are likely to encounter on standardized exams. Introduce new formats and allow plenty of time for practice.

5. Promote and reward good planning.

Foster a positive attitude toward planning by rewarding students who make an effort. In developing grading schemes for projects, for example, reward completion on time.

6. Discuss and practice timing issues.

Under stress, many students lose track of time. Provide opportunities for practice in timed tasks so that students develop time management skills in a low-stress situation.

7. Encourage a variety of review activities.

At first, students may need assistance in learning to review efficiently. Help students form study groups and, if possible, provide time, space, and materials to get them started. Build a classroom library of suitable review materials and provide a list of Internet resources.

8. Remind students of the importance of rest, recreation, and diet in exam periods.

Point out that athletes don't stay up all night without food before an important competition. Well-prepared students sleep, eat, and exercise before important tests.

9. Provide students with helpful feedback.

Model the importance of reflection about assessment by asking students to write their thoughts in a dialogue journal or discuss them in a brief meeting. Be supportive with suggestions for improvement.

10. Actively encourage learner autonomy through self-assessment.

Regularly use self-assessment techniques to foster learner autonomy. Send students the message that you respect their ability to monitor their own progress.

Extension Activity

Read the transcript of Mr. Knott's conversation with his colleague, Ms. Lee, and identify differences in their opinions.

Transcript of Conversation about Test-Taking Skills

- Ms. Lee:** *The big state exam is tomorrow. Are your students ready for it?*
- Mr. Knott:** *I guess so. I've given the practice exam five times in the last two weeks, and their scores have really improved. Each time, when I ask for the answers, more of them are right.*
- Ms. Lee:** *Oh, you gave the same practice exam five times? Tell me, did the students who still had wrong answers understand why?*
- Mr. Knott:** *Probably not. We didn't have time to talk about it. I just checked the answers. I usually don't like students to mark their own papers. I don't use peer grading either; it's a waste of time. I hear that you have students design their own tests. Is that true?*
- Ms. Lee:** *Yes, it is. I find it's a good way to get them to review, and at the same time, they really understand how tests work. Have you tried that?*
- Mr. Knott:** *That's not for me! I think the teacher should be in control all the time. The students' job is to memorize the material, just like I used to. Why, I'd cram all night and study right up to exam time. I usually forgot to eat breakfast, and one time I almost fainted. I think we coddle students too much these days. No one ever told me what an exam was going to be like or spent time teaching how to read the instructions. Look, in my way of thinking, an exam is just something to get through, then you forget it and move on to the next thing.*
- Ms. Lee:** *Ooooh. There's the bell. Time to go back to class.*