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Monica Ruda tenders a tool for focusing on efficient feedback.

Most language exams include a reading element, usually with more than one text and several types of tasks. I have taught many students on exam preparation courses, and most of them agree that they find reading the most difficult part of the exam. It is not surprising, then, that a large proportion of any exam course is allocated to working on a variety of reading tasks, such as multiple choice, matching, true/false/not given and sentence completion. Although the difficulty of the tasks is what worries the *students* the most, giving feedback is the *teacher's* real challenge. In fact, giving and receiving feedback is a crucial step in practising reading tasks, the step in which learning could (and should) take place to ensure language improvement. To help both my students and myself, I have designed a grid which facilitates task completion, while doubling up as a tool for feedback.

A double-edged sword

Giving and receiving feedback after reading tasks is often perceived by students as a pointless but necessary evil, with – for them – the sole purpose of finding out how many questions they managed to answer correctly. It is true that the feedback process can become a boring, predictable and time-consuming chore for the whole class. Moreover, the typical ‘Question 1 – answer B; question 2 – answer A’ drill can often be confusing

and unclear for weaker students, who tend to get left behind and remain uncertain as to the reasons why their answer was wrong.

Teachers who are unfamiliar with teaching exam classes sometimes lack the experience and awareness necessary to make reading feedback engaging and effective. A further consequence of inadequate task feedback is that even the most student-centred lesson may become very teacher-led at this point, often involving too much unnecessary teacher talking time. In an attempt to tackle these issues, some teachers adopt and develop their own techniques. Some write the answers on the board, which can provide the students with a visual aid and a written record to help them avoid losing track during the checking process. Others trawl the internet in search of interactive and communicative alternatives to make task feedback more appealing. Nevertheless, the feedback still might not be as effective as the students and the teacher hoped.

Tricks of the trade

Teaching exam classes requires teachers to develop their own strategies and techniques which will suit their students, who are – fortunately – mostly focused and driven. It also pushes teachers to adapt their teaching style to synchronise with a very specific syllabus, always keeping the ‘deadline’ of the exam in mind. Like most general English teachers who have ventured into exam preparation courses for the first

time – in my case, teaching FCE and IELTS students – I have had to learn the tricks of the trade through trial and error. Obviously, it is not easy to understand what changes to your teaching practice should be made, and how to implement them, without formal training and/or with little guidance.

What became clear to me, however, was the commonality of the features which most reading tasks revolve around: for example, synonyms/antonyms and collocations in terms of language skills, and skimming and scanning in terms of reading skills. Although I was able to help my students with each of these features individually, I struggled to present them cohesively; I could not show how each feature was linked to the others, like cogs in a wheel. A possible solution to this problem came to me almost unexpectedly: a reading task grid. As I have found that writing the students' answers and their comments on the board has always been beneficial – not only for the students but also for me – I gradually managed to turn this student-led note-taking exercise into a tool to guide my students through the process of doing their reading tasks. Of course, becoming familiar with a new process can take some time and effort for both students and teachers alike. It is also true that filling out the grid that I am suggesting makes completing a reading task more time-consuming. However, I believe that students soon pick up the pace as they practise and become more familiar with the technique. Most importantly, they will quickly notice the benefits of using the grid: their language and exam skills will improve and their confidence will get a boost.

Using and adapting the grid

The reading task grid is a simple tool that can be easily adapted, depending on the type of task at hand. The main aims of using it are:

- To provide guidance for teachers who are new to exam preparation classes during reading task feedback.
- To raise the students' awareness of the importance of the process involved in working through reading (or, indeed, listening) tasks.
- To shift the focus from the answer itself to the strategies required to get the correct answer.

In addition, the grid will support the students in their language development, facilitating the discovery of synonyms and expressions required for paraphrasing. It should also help them through the stages of skimming and scanning.

For the purpose of a reading task, for example, the grid can include the following categories:

- **Question number** – Which question are you working on?

- **Keywords from the question** – What specific word/number or piece of information taken from the question can help you find the answer in the text?
- **Paragraph** – In which paragraph can you find the keywords from the question? Are there any paragraphs you will not need for this question?
- **Sentence** – In which sentence of each relevant paragraph can you find synonyms/antonyms or a paraphrase of the keywords in the question?
- **Clues from the text** – What specific word/number or piece of information taken from the text do you find useful? Why?
- **Distractors from the question** – What specific word/number or piece of information taken from the question do you find confusing or misleading? Why?
- **Distractors from the text** – What specific word/number or piece of information taken from the text do you find confusing or misleading? Why?
- **Answer** – Having considered all the information collected in the previous categories, what do you think the correct answer might be?

You can download an example of a reading task grid from the ETp website at www.etprofessional.com/media/30917/etp-116-onlineresources_onthegrid_monicaruda.pdf.

Note: Not every question (or every task) will require the students to complete the 'Distractors from the question' row, so this category can be ignored if it is not needed. Furthermore, the 'Answer' row has been deliberately placed at the end of the grid, to downplay the importance of the answer itself, highlighting, instead, the 'pieces of the puzzle' that will lead the students to the final result. It is important that the grid is completed in the order given. The students should find the logical sequence of the rows easy to follow – it has a 'funnel' shape, starting from general information (eg the relevant paragraph) and ending with specific details (eg the synonyms).

A sample lesson

On the next page, there is a sample lesson to demonstrate how the reading task grid can be integrated into a reading lesson. ■



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Sample lesson

Lead-in

Aims: To engage the students in the topic and to activate previous knowledge of the topic.

- Write the title of the text on the board and ask the students to predict the topic.
- Get the students to list some vocabulary they expect to find in the text and then share their predictions with the class.

Introduction to the grid

Aims: To familiarise the students with the grid and to maximise cooperation during task completion.

- Hand out copies of the grid and give the students time to look at it and discuss how it might be used.
- Share ideas as a class.
- Guide the students to complete the grid, starting with the question numbers in the 'Question' row.

Task analysis

Aims: To raise awareness of different task types and to emphasise the importance of instruction reading.

- Ask the students to read the task instructions individually and then, in pairs, to share the information found in the instructions (eg type of task, number of questions, how many speakers, etc).
- The students report back to the class.
- Individually, the students read the questions and identify keywords for each one.
- The students complete the 'Keywords from the question' row as they read through the questions.
- They check their answers in pairs or small groups and then report back to the class.

Process demonstration

Aims: To demonstrate how the grid process develops, and to allow the students to familiarise themselves with the grid and build their confidence in using it.

1 Skimming and scanning

Aims: To understand the general meaning of each paragraph; to practise a time-saving reading technique; and to demonstrate that many answers can be found just by skimming the text (first and last sentence of each paragraph).

- Before the students begin to read the text, explain that the reading activity will be broken down into stages and that they need to follow strict instructions. (*Tip: At this point, the students should number the paragraphs in the text to make them easier to refer to later.*)
- Tell the students to read only the *first* and the *last* sentence of each paragraph (skimming), looking for information related to the keywords they noted down in their grid (scanning) – they

can underline the information in the text as it comes up. They should then compare their results in pairs.

- Starting with the first question, ask *Which paragraph(s) relate(s) to question 1?*
- All the students can contribute their answers and, as they do so, the paragraph number(s) can be written in the grid (in the 'Paragraph' row).
- Now ask the students to find more details about question 1. For example, to the question *In which sentence did you find information related to the keywords?* they might reply that it was in the first sentence, in the last one or in the middle of the paragraph. They write their answer in their grid ('Sentence' row).
- Now guide them to move on to the 'Clue from the text' category. Looking at the sentence agreed upon as the one most relevant to question 1, the students discuss and note down in their grid what pieces of information will help them to answer question 1 (eg synonyms/antonyms, word relationships, etc).

For example:

Keywords from question (Question 1): chilly

Synonym from text: cold

Antonym from text: warm

Keywords from question (Question 1): wedding

Word relationships from text: bride/groom/guests, etc

- Now get the students to work on the 'Distractors' column. They can discuss and note down which words/expressions can be confusing (and why) and might, therefore, lead to the wrong answer (eg false friends, unfamiliar vocabulary, collocations, idioms, paraphrases, etc).

For example:

Keywords from question (Question 1): low quality

Unfamiliar vocabulary from text: downmarket

Keywords from question (Question 1): I fail to understand ...

Paraphrase from text: I can't see why ...

- Finally, ask the students to decide which is the correct answer for question 1 and note it down (in the 'Answer' column).
- Now you can choose whether to let the students work independently (either in pairs or individually) on the remaining questions, or to carry on guiding them until they become more confident with using the grid.

2 Feedback

Aims: To provide a more inclusive and communicative way of giving feedback and to improve its effectiveness.

- Draw the blank grid on the board.
- Once the students have finished the task independently and completed their grids, ask them to share their answers with the class.
- As you guide them through the exchange of answers, complete the grid on the board using the students' ideas. (*Tip: The students might have different answers and opinions. Rather than spoon-feeding them with the answers, encourage discussion among them to promote peer-assistance.*)