

Teaching Tips for the London Test of English – Reading 3

Working out meaning

LTE candidates should be prepared to expect vocabulary in the exam which is unfamiliar and which they do not understand. To deal with this without recourse to a dictionary, they need to understand that they can often use the context and the words they do know to work out a good enough idea of what the text means.

Here are activities to help students deal with unfamiliar language, and also to help prepare them for exam tasks where they match words to definitions.

Activity 3 *Helping students to work out meaning*

- 1) Give the students a text with several words blanked out. In pairs, the students must use the context to work out what parts of speech (noun, verb ...) they think the missing words are most likely to be.
- 2) Next, they should decide what clues there are to the words' meanings, and then suggest some possibilities (A common clue is a synonym (e.g. 'animal' – 'creature'), an antonym ('happy' 'sad') or a hyponym ('animal' – 'dog') in the text).
- 3) Go through the text as a class, revealing the actual missing words, and seeing how close they are to the students' ideas. If they differ but the students made a rational guess it is important not to let the students think that they 'got it wrong'. We want to show them that they *can* often cope with unfamiliar language adequately enough to understand the text as a whole. If we destroy their confidence they might feel that they cannot survive without a dictionary.

Dictionaries can be very useful. But they can be unhelpful if students rely on them too much, instead of using their brains. The meaning of a word is much more likely to be understood and remembered if it is acquired through mental effort, than if it is quickly read from a page or from a computer screen.

It is also important for students to realise that many English words have a number of different possible meanings, and it is only possible to say which meaning applies in any situation by examining the context. A dictionary can tell them what meanings are possible, but cannot tell them which is the right meaning in any particular text.

Activity 4 *Dealing with words' different possible meanings*

- 1) Find a text and underline several words which each have a number of different dictionary-meanings (e.g. 'mind', which can be a noun or a verb, or 'head' which has many meanings other than the part of the body).
- 2) Write the words on the board, and discuss the different meanings they can have.
- 3) Give the students the text, and get them to decide which meaning the underlined words have in this particular context, and which meanings are impossible.
- 4) Discuss their ideas, and discuss whether they think they are better off using a dictionary or using their own reading skills to get a quick idea of the meaning of the text.

For extra reading practice, Penguin Longman (<http://www.penguinreaders.com/>) has an enormous range of graded readers, with accompanying cassettes so students can practise their listening, too.

For all parts of the LTE exam, the [LTE Handbook](#) gives details of the language and format for each level.

For more ideas for exam classes in general, an excellent book is [How to teach for Exams](#) by Sally Burgess and Katie Head (Longman 2005 ISBN: 0 582 42967 6).

There will be more Teaching Tips available next month.