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Why choosing the Test of Interactive English (TIE) for your students?

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How many of you teaching in the EFL classroom do not consider exam preparation teaching time a tedious, nerve-wracking and stressful experience? How many of you have not spent substantial time finding the best exam preparation books for your students in order to provide them with as many opportunities for exam practice as possible with the aim of increasing the possibilities for their successful performance on the day of the exams? Going over past papers, marking compositions, running mock tests, advising learners on how to achieve a passing score, giving out endless lists of de-contextualized vocabulary for memorization are some of the teaching practices that the majority of language proficiency tests have imposed. On the other hand, the students are very much viewed as recipients of the teaching and testing process having little if no control at all over how these two processes are going to proceed. As a result, they feel strongly de-motivated and usually perceive the whole experience as a bad nightmare from which they long to come out.

As a response to this de-motivating procedure, TIE was designed by taking into account the needs and concerns of both teachers and candidates. But what are the competitive advantages of TIE that differentiate it from the other examinations and make it a friendlier alternative for your students?

Contrary to more traditional tests that use discrete-point test items for evaluating candidate performance, half of this test is

built around the material each candidate brings to the exam room. Therefore, prior to an examination, the learner is expected to carry out mandatory task-based preparation that involves: a) making an investigation on a topic of their choice, b) reading a book in English and c) following a news story from two different media sources. At the same time, the test procedure is flexible so as to easily adapt to the prepared items selected in advance by each candidate. On the other hand, in order to maintain comparability of performance, the other half of the test presents candidates with standardized, spontaneous tasks which are not prepared for in advance. The specific tasks concern topics of general interest that all candidates despite their age or background knowledge will be able to address during the examination.

By taking part into the selection of the examination material, the learner becomes intrinsically interested in learning. In this way, not only is learner autonomy developed, but also lessons become more productive and enjoyable and your students' language skills are improved. In terms of the actual test procedure, it actively engages and empowers the candidates, thus increasing their chances to achieve the desired result.

Another differentiating characteristic of TIE is that it aims at assessing language use in authentic contexts of communication that encompass all the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) paying less emphasis on language form and accuracy. In doing so, it adheres to most contemporary language testing theories that view language as a means of communication and not as a system of rules. Therefore, in contradiction with the other language proficiency exams which contain four discrete test modules for the assessment of reading, listening, speaking and

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writing, in TIE listening is assessed through speaking and reading through writing. However, when it comes to assessment, there are specific evaluation criteria that measure the four skills distinctively. The innovative format of TIE, consisting of two exam papers instead of four, significantly reduces the time of the whole examination rendering it less tiring and less stressful for the candidates.

Further advantages of the TIE examinations are the free re-sit and second chance offers. Candidates who achieve the desired exam level in only one of the two parts of the test are eligible to re-sit the other part without paying an extra fee. The re-sit offer is valid for once. On the other hand, the second chance offer is given once to the candidates who take the examination and achieve a lower level certificate than the one they originally aimed at in both parts of the test. These candidates are entitled to retake the whole examination at a discount, thus paying lower exam fees than the first time.

Finally, another examination advantage that needs to be stressed out is the on demand exams that can be offered throughout the year with administration available on dates requested by foreign language schools. Therefore, unlike the majority language proficiency tests that administer exams twice a year, TIE exams can be conducted at times suitable for schools and learners serving their individual needs.

Concluding Remarks

Undoubtedly, what discriminates the TIE Examination from the plethora of language tests offered in Greece is the fact that it offers exams that value and incorporate each candidate individually recognising their central role in defining the learning and the testing process. In this way, learners improve their language skills in the classroom and perform to the best of their abilities in the exams.



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How can teachers achieve teaching different levels of ESL students simultaneously

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Most teachers believe that a homogeneous class, a group of learners who are at the same level, is the norm and therefore easy and manageable for the teacher. However, as each learner is unique, there is no such thing as a “homogenous” class. Ur (1991) makes a blunt comment pinpointing the fact that all classes with more than one learner are heterogeneous. Therefore, heterogeneous classes are the rule, not the exception. But what is the definition of a heterogenous class?

A heterogenous class, or as it is also commonly known “mixed-ability class” is believed to consist of learners whose differences in level of performance in foreign language are evident. But literature suggests that a mixed-ability class consists of learners who present differences in many areas such as language learning ability, language knowledge, cultural background, learning style, attitude, mother tongue, intelligence, world knowledge, learning experience, knowledge of other languages, age, maturity, gender, personality, confidence, motivation, interests, independence, self-discipline, and educational level (Ur, 1991).

The majority of teachers are extremely worried and anxious when having to teach in a heterogenous class, as they believe that planning lessons and especially their execution is rather problematic (Harmer, 2007). Research has indicated that the most common teaching problems in such environments are the learners’ discipline, the correction of assignments, engaging students’



interest and achieving their active participation, effective learning for all learners, finding appropriate materials and finally not being able to follow all learners’ progress and therefore not having individual awareness (Coleman, H. et al., 1989). It is therefore logical for teachers to avoid teaching such classes and preferring streaming classes according to language ability and performance.

But, such teaching environments are rendered by certain advantages which if taken into consideration and exploited appropriately, mixed-ability classes can become an amazing experience both for the teachers and the learners. More specifically, such classes provide a huge variety of human resources (Hess, 2001). In other words, learners have varied opinions, interests, ideas, life experiences and knowledge, which can be proven more that beneficial in the classroom interaction and daily routine. Moreover, the contact with people with different values, personalities, cultures increases learners’ knowledge, awareness of others and the world, tolerance

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and understanding (Hadfield, J. (1992). Thus, participants benefit extensively as learners and as individuals. Additionally, peer-teaching and collaboration among learners can foster a continuous atmosphere of cooperation. Learners can work together, teaching each other, interacting, actively participating in the learning process and thus helping the teacher in the daily teaching process. Finally, such conditions require creativity, innovation and professional development for teachers, which although in the beginning may seem demanding and time consuming, once planning and experiencing this procedure, teachers get a feeling of achievement.

Specific teaching solutions can definitely aid teaching and therefore learning in mixed-ability classes. In her book, Ur (1991) provides specific teaching “solutions” for the heterogeneous classes.

- **Personalize teaching** through the design and adaptation of tasks, so that they allow a variety of responses based on learners’ experience, background, personality and knowledge base.
- **Individualize learning** by providing some choice and freedom on tasks and materials.
- **Invest in interesting activities** which enhance learners’ active participation and engagement. Using a variety of topics, methods and texts, learners’ interest and motivation increases.
- **Encourage collaboration** among learners. Learners will get the chance to interact and exchange ideas and views, while learning from their peers and from those who may be more advanced in the target language.
- **Use open-ended question.** Such questions allow advanced learners to provide more elaborate responses, while learners of

lower levels can provide basic information.

- **Implement the compulsory plus optional instructions.** These will foster learners’ interest, motivation and therefore learning. Concerning the compulsory plus optional, teachers ensure that everyone will complete tasks of a certain level and difficulty, allowing only the more advanced learners to go further ahead and complete the more demanding ones.

To sum up, teachers need to be reminded that they already deal with heterogeneous classes in a greater or lesser extent. Therefore, they should not be intimidated to be assigned mixed-ability classes. The key to a successful mixed-ability class is in terms of differentiated learning, a variety of learning options around students’ different needs, abilities and interests (Tomlinson, 1995). The fact that there are numerous guidelines, such as the ones mentioned above on how to manage such classes, makes the whole process attainable and eases the burden, while teachers can achieve realistic mixed-ability teaching.

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The Classic International ESOL Examinations: An alternative to English proficiency testing

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The Classic IESOL is a traditional 4-mode English language examination, with the Candidate entered for a specified level. It tests the four elements of language ability, i.e., Speaking, Writing, Listening and Reading, via four separate examination papers produced and assessed by Gatehouse Awards. The responsibility for the administration of the examinations in Greece, which are currently offered at the B2 and C2 levels, lies with Gnosis Assessment.

There are many factors that make the Classic IESOL Examinations an excellent choice for candidates and teachers who are keen on a

more traditional language proficiency examination approach. First and foremost, the incorporation of a prepared task in the speaking assessment paper that requires from the candidates to prepare a brief spoken presentation on a pre-selected topic in order to deliver and answer questions about in the examination. For this reason, twice per year, Gatehouse Awards publishes up to 5 presentation topics per level for Candidates to choose from. The prepared task in the speaking assessment is an opportunity for the candidates to activate their background knowledge to talk about a topic they know well. At the same time, they are given the opportunity to achieve higher marks in this part of the examination.

Another important characteristic of this examination is its straightforward, simple format which remains unchanged across the two levels (i.e., B2 and C2). Thanks to this, teachers can adjust the learning process to the examination material which consists of very specific task types (i.e., multiple choice and multiple match)

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and train learners on how to answer the types of test questions incorporated in the examination either for comprehension or for production purposes. In addition, as the format of the examination across the two exam levels is the same, the transition from one level to the next is expected to be smoother for both learners and teachers.

Another factor that makes this examination candidate friendly is the small number of reading and listening comprehension test questions (i.e., only 22) included in the relevant units of the examination. As a result, candidates have plenty of time to contemplate their responses and complete all the tasks of the examination. What is more, all of the questions across the assessment tasks are equally weighed and there are no minus marks for wrong answers. This means that candidates can guess if they are not sure about some answers and still manage to achieve the expected passing score. With regard to written production, which is traditionally considered to be the ability in which most Greek learners are weak at, the tasks used in the examination include extra guidance for the candidates, in the form of hints, that is expected to assist them in developing the content of their produced texts as well as in organizing their ideas in a logical and coherent way. It is also important to underline that monolingual dictionaries (English-to-English) are permitted in the reading and writing units of the examination.

Last but not least, an important advantage of the examination is the re-sit offer. More specifically, candidates who fail to pass one or more units of the examination are not requested to re-take the whole examination, but only the specific units in which they scored below the minimum required. The re-sit offer is valid for two years and it is free of charge. During this time period the candidates can

concentrate on their weaknesses until they have progressed to a sufficient degree before they retake the requested assessment units.



Concluding Remarks

The Classic IESOL constitutes, beyond doubt, an excellent choice for teachers and learners. Thanks to its simple, straightforward format, it can be combined with all course books and both teachers and students will find it easy to adjust to it. At the same time, it offers learners plenty of opportunities to achieve higher scores in the examination (i.e., through the prepared task in speaking, the extra guidance in writing, the small number of listening and reading test questions, and the use of a monolingual dictionary in the written part of the examination). The Classic IESOL examinations open up new perspectives in the field of English language testing and seem to have a very promising future ahead.



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