

ON IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE EXAMS TASK FOR IMPROVING SPEAKING SKILLS

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This article touches upon the possibility and prospects of implementing the speaking part of the most sought-after international English language exams (IELTS, TOEFL, CAE and CPE) in the educational process by the example of the students of the Faculty of International Relations of the Belarusian State University. It largely presents the feedback of International Law students who underline the importance of such types of tasks for the development of their soft skills: time management, stress resistance, confident public speaking. The algorithm of class organization by applying the speaking part format of the IELTS international language exam is described. The conclusion about the possibility of further promotion and implementation of the format in the educational process for the development of reading, listening, and writing speech activities has been formulated.

Keywords: international language exams; speaking skills; English teaching methodology; soft skills.

ОБ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИИ ЗАДАНИЙ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ЯЗЫКОВЫХ ЭКЗАМЕНОВ ДЛЯ РАЗВИТИЯ УМЕНИЙ ГОВОРЕНИЯ

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В данной статье рассматриваются возможность и перспективы внедрения устной части наиболее востребованных международных экзаменов по английскому языку (*IELTS*, *TOEFL*, *CAE* и *CPE*) в учебный процесс на примере студентов факультета международных отношений Белорусского государственного университета. Главным образом, представлены отзывы студентов-международников, в которых обучающиеся подчеркивают важность таких видов заданий для развития их «мягких навыков» (*soft skills*): в частности, тайм-менеджмента, стрессоустойчивости, уверенного публичного выступления. Подробно описан ход проведения занятий с применением формата устной части международного языкового экзамена *IELTS*. Сформулирован вывод о возможности дальнейшего продвижения данного формата и его внедрения в учебный процесс для развития других речевых аспектов (чтения, аудирования и письма).

Ключевые слова: международные языковые экзамены; умения говорения; методика преподавания английского языка; «мягкие навыки».

In the era of intense globalization the knowledge of foreign languages has increased in importance. In most cases, international academic exchange programs, getting education abroad, working for a multinational company and other numerous career opportunities require an appropriate command of English as an international language. In order to achieve any of these goals, candidates often have to pass an international language exam in order to prove their linguistic competency [1].

A standard international English language exam normally consists of 4 parts that correspond to the types of speech activity: namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking. Cambridge exams contain one more section on grammar and vocabulary use. Among the most popular English language exams are IELTS (International English Language Testing System), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), CAE (Certificate in Advanced English) and CPE (Certificate of Proficiency in English) [2; 3].

The listed exam formats have their own peculiarities in terms of diversity of reading and listening tasks. The same is true about the speaking section: unlike CAE and CPE, IELTS

and TOEFL do not include interaction with other candidates. The person who opts for these types of language exams has to make a dialogue just with one evaluator.

It has to be mentioned that a certain number of students of the Faculty of International Relations are quite motivated for getting an international language certificate in English. Some of them aspire to study at universities and other educational establishments abroad, International Law students may be interested in getting an LLM (Master of Law). Such goals are achievable on the condition that a candidate has fluent written and spoken colloquial and academic English. The language level has to be high and match the future professional needs of a test-taker, be it understanding scientific texts, communicating with peers and professors from all over the world, or writing qualification papers.

What do we see as major benefits of taking (and, hopefully, passing) international language exams? First of all, the core advantage is an impartial, independent, highly-qualified and precise assessment of a candidate's language competency. One thing is to think that you have a particular level of English. It may be based on your personal perception or that of your tutor at university. However, no one is insured against subjectivity and bias due to the specifics of the long-term relations. It is much better to have tangible evidence of your English proficiency based on neutral assessment. Apart from that, a recognized certificate of an international language exam can make you very competitive on the job market. At least, your CV will look more presentable and attractive for a potential employer. On the one hand, many people claim that the knowledge of English has become a must for everyone and it will not surprise an HR-specialist. But, to be honest, there are few people who can say that they use English confidently and speak it fluently for professional purposes.

Listing the advantages of implementing the types of tasks that are used in international language exams in the educational process at the Faculty of International Relations, we can mention their focus on the development of the learners' speaking skills. This correlates with the specifics of the oral state examination which the students are supposed to take at the end of their undergraduate studies and deliver an unprepared monologue for about 3-4 minutes on the suggested situation. During the whole academic year of 2021–2022 our undergraduates were practicing typical oral tasks of the international language exams (chiefly, IELTS and Cambridge exams). The results were as follows: the majority of the 4th-year students were well prepared for the state examination and passed the English exam with good, very good and excellent marks.

The work in class on the relevant speech material consisted of the following stages. First of all, a relevant video resource was selected by the tutor in accordance with the thematic content of the semester. Those were IELTS, CAE or CPE speaking interviews. Secondly, before watching the first part of the speaking section of the exam, the students were instructed to jot down all the necessary questions asked by the examiner, as well as new words, expressions, idioms, and grammatical structures. In such a way the students could enrich their own vocabulary and keep in mind how advanced it should be to leave a lasting impression on the examiner. The tutor demonstrated the video interviews only with the high final grades of the test-takers. After that, the students were encouraged to discuss the new vocabulary and grammar in pairs. In our opinion, it is an appropriate exercise that helps the linguistic material to remain in your mind for a long time: it is not a secret that practice makes perfect. This was followed by short monologues on the suggested cue cards. Such an exercise teaches you to speak in an ordered and structured manner. And, finally, the students were split into several groups by the tutor to give answers to the questions which had previously been jotted down. That is the main stage simulating true-to-life situations that may take place in a conversation with a real examiner. It has to be mentioned that recent IELTS video interviews have an obvious advantage because of the extended feedback on the applicants' performance that is provided by expert evaluators at the end of each part of the speaking section.

The skills obtained by the students during practicing the speaking section of the English international language exams can hardly be overestimated. Among the hard skills we can mention: fluent speaking, lexical resource, speaking at length and grammatical range are on the top of the list of improvements. Such soft skills as stress resistance, inventiveness and structuring of thoughts are also reflected in the students' comments.

Talking about other benefits of the implementation of the speaking section of the international language exams, students' involvement in the studying process cannot go unnoticed. But it is also important to clarify the disputable question connected with measuring students' involvement. Our conclusions were made on the basis that involvement encompasses the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student invests during studying a subject. Group discussion of the questions from the video, telling monologues by each student, commenting on the person's performance from the video and giving him / her a mark are considered to be significant signs of having high student's engagement during the lesson.

The speaking part of the English international language exams is constructed with a view of giving an opportunity for a test taker to demonstrate his / her vocabulary and available lexical resources. That is why it can be used for both students and teachers as a means of picking up new English words and collocations. Further use of educational facilities such as Moodle (applying tool Glossary) lets the students memorize useful words that can be used during their monologues at exams.

The results of the implementation of the speaking section of the international language exams in the process of mastering students' communicative skills in English can be better disclosed under the following bullet-points.

- Increase of interest and motivation of students of English. The average student has an inner desire for learning. With the help of our educational technique this latent desire becomes transparent, students' talents and abilities are disclosed. A teacher starts to play the role of an arbitrator, but not a mere supervisor. All these factors influence the increase of students' interest and motivation in English;

- Students improve their communicative skills and overcome the fear of public speaking. Furthermore, such a format has encourages to develop an ability to speak at length, spontaneously and without any preliminary preparation. We consider it exceptionally important because one is not able to sound naturally, like a native speaker, when the answers to the examiner's questions are given by means of the relevant topics previously learned by heart;

- The implementation of the format gives the students a unique opportunity to determine the English level by themselves and understand which types of topics they have to revise or speak on more frequently. The conditions in which the format is implemented are similar to those in the real speaking section of the exams;

- The students have also got acquainted with the criteria used to estimate the quality of the given oral answers including phonetic correctness, the complexity of grammatical structures, lexical diversity and coherence of speech. Another advantage of the format is a high-quality preparation not only for international English language exams, but also for the state examination. It can be upheld by the fact that the creators of many educational programs concerning the process of mastering foreign languages are striving for the correspondence of the skills and knowledge acquired by the students with those which are vital for international exams;

- Finally, the format has facilitated the development of such crucial soft skills of the XXIst century as stress-resistance and time management. During the second part of the speaking section of the exam the students have to deliver a speech for only 1 minute and speak from 1 to 2 minutes. It turns out to be rather difficult from the psychological point of view because the candidate does not know exactly what kind of situation or topic to expect. The students also have to mind the coherence of their speech, which is very often in no way less important than other criteria of performance.

After all these overwhelming results of the experiment with implementation of international language exams tasks during English classes there is no doubt that this technique is a good tool for improving speaking skills among the students. This research can become not only a detailed guidebook for the English tutors who are seeking for a methodology with a new approach to English teaching, but also a firm foundation for further development of this idea and implementation of all the other parts of the English international exams: reading, writing, listening.

**КАФЕДРА АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА
МЕЖДУНАРОДНОЙ ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ**

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