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A Survivor's Guide to School-Leaving Exams

In an ideal world students would be motivated and interested in the subject they learn. However, we do not live in an ideal world so the average teacher has to face a varied group of teenagers who chat on their smartphones, are bored to death, not understanding why they should be interested in foreign languages and they often misbehave. No matter what the students are like, our ultimate goal is to get them safely through the exams, to the other bank where they are handed their high-school diploma.

As the written part of the leaving exams is already behind us, let me focus on the oral part of matura exams. It is divided into three parts; the first one is speaking on the basis of (usually) two or three photos. Lower level (B1) simply describes the photos, the higher level (B2) has to compare and contrast them. To make sure our students manage this task with ease we have to train them well beforehand. From first grade on, we have regularly given them pictures for description. They should know by now they have to use present continuous to describe people or actions in pictures. We taught them colours and shapes, hairstyles, types of clothing, furniture, objects in nature etc. Part of their training is the ability to guess what could have happened before the picture was taken and what might happen afterwards. We have used several types of visual aids from family photos through movie stills or newspaper clippings even to famous paintings that contain a lot of action or details. If we did this on a regular

basis, our students should have no problems with picture-based tasks.

The second part of the oral exam is considered the most difficult one as the examinee has to speak independently on a given topic for ten minutes. Some topics are quite easy to handle because they are close to the age and interests of teenagers, such as free time and hobbies, young people and their world, family or sports. Others, like science and technology, environment or social issues are highly unpopular due to their heavy factual content. With them, students must have a certain degree of information connected to history, social studies etc., they cannot simply rely on their experience. It is a good idea to watch films dealing with such issues (lend them DVDs or sacrifice a lesson or two). Choose films that are not very 'vintage' and are entertaining – e. g. Erin Brockovich for environment or The Island for science. After watching it, discuss it in class and make them note down the key vocabulary and the main conflict in the film.

Also, all students should create a 'virtual portfolio' of articles read during their studies: articles from English-language magazines for learners like Hello, Friendship etc. Focus on the problematic topics: your students should keep the clippings of these articles to use them in their preparation for the exams. The teacher's main strategy should be simple: always talk about, practise and examine those topics that are difficult for the students. Make them get used to the possibility of being examined. Students

tend to avoid those issues they are not familiar with hoping they would be lucky enough to get the easier ones. Do not let them rely on fortune. Also, it is not a good idea for them to think they will find everything they need in the dictionary used at the exam. Students sometimes waste time with looking for key vocabulary in the dictionary with no time left for the preparation proper.

The third part is a situational role play between the student and the examiner. A good teacher is aware of the importance of being able to start, lead and end a dialogue with the proper language means. Use open dialogues all through the pre-senior years. Teach students to argue and defend their arguments. If you ask them a question never accept a yes-no answer, but require them to complement the answer with a 'because-clause'. It is only a question of training to get intelligent, original opinions from your teenage students. If you have time for reading, choose literature discussing some of the issues contained in the school-leaving exam.

Last but not least, there are times when you have to be uncompromising, but this should be during their studies, not necessarily at the exam. Students simply have to learn vocabulary, especially set phrases that are very common in English. It is somehow annoying when you hear things like 'on the picture' or 'according to me'. If you set strict rules and expectations at your lessons your students will be well prepared for the final exams either on the lower or on the higher level.