

Lesson: Study Skills – Short answer questions

Level: Intermediate and above

Age: Teenagers and adults

Time: 60-90 minutes, depending on level

Language objectives: to practise the skills of scanning and skimming academic reading texts in order to answer comprehension questions

Key life skills: analysing and extracting key information, evaluating content of a reply or argument, time management

Materials: one topic card per student; one short answer exam task per student (e.g. from an IELTS exam)



Procedure

1. Tell the students that each of them is a reporter who is writing a special feature about a rather obscure topic for their respective newspaper. In order to write their features, tell them that, in a few minutes, they are going to meet an expert in the field of their chosen topics.

Give each student a topic card – these can be anything, depending on the level of the class but the more obscure they are, the more the students seem to enjoy it. Some topics that I have used are *The history of the t-shirt*, *The origin of sliced bread* and *Monkeys*. Once the students have their topics, ask them to write their topic as a heading on a blank piece of paper, followed by six related questions based on what they think the readers of their newspapers might like to know. Encourage open questions as opposed to ones requiring a yes / no answer. Make sure that they leave a space between one question and the next, and that they avoid using pronouns in their questions. Eg: *When was sliced bread invented?* as opposed to *When was it invented?*

2. When the students have finished writing their questions, collect the papers and redistribute them at random.

Tell the students that they are now the 'experts' on the topic that their new set of questions are based on. Tell them, however, that they are in fact frauds who lied about their expertise and in reality know absolutely nothing about their given topic. Their job is to make up the answers to the questions, making them sound as convincing as possible. Give the students a few minutes to read through the questions to make sure they understand them.

On a separate piece of paper, the students now write out a short paragraph which answers the six questions. They can be as creative and as far-fetched as they like but remind them that since they are 'experts', their writing should be quite formal and technical.

Make sure that they do not write the topic as a title this time. In addition to answering the questions, the experts should also include three extra pieces of information.

Monitor as the students write, checking for language problems and dealing with any questions.

3. When the paragraphs are ready (it is a good idea to set a time limit for the writing part so that everybody finishes at roughly the same time), hand out scissors and ask the students to cut the questions they've just answered up so that each question is on an individual slip of paper.

Collect the questions and redistribute them so that each student gets a set of six questions based on six different topics (the best way to do this is to collect the questions one set at a time and then hand them out around the room one at a time). Make sure that nobody gets a question that they have just answered in their role of 'expert'.

Tell students to read through the questions and underline what they believe to be the keywords. While they do this, collect the paragraphs and blu-tack them to the board where they can be read without having to be moved.

Tell the students that they now have to find the answers to their questions as quickly as they can. They must do this by leaving the questions on their desk and, starting from the first one, race over to

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the board to find the answer. This involves skimming each paragraph until they find the appropriate one, then scanning the text in order to find the answer. Having located the correct answer, they return to their desk and write the short answer on the slip before moving on to the next question and repeating until all six answers are found.

The first student to finish should inform the teacher.

When all the students are ready, move on to part four.

Note: During part four, some students will be tempted to pick up all their questions and take them to the board with them. If this happens, do not interrupt the activity but when it is over tell these students that although they finished the task before the others, they would have been penalized and lost points in the exams because they failed to follow instructions!

4. Point out the necessity of scanning and skimming and inform the students that it only took them _____ minutes to read through all the paragraphs to find the information they needed. Tell them this is what they will have to do in the exam if they don't want to run out of time.

Give out the exam task and give them ten minutes to complete it. Feed back as a class and go through any corrections.

Variations: This lesson can be used to practise listening and speaking skills ... Instead of writing full paragraphs, tell the students to write points to prepare a speech on the topic. Each student then gives a speech as the others listen for the answers to their questions.

As a final variation you might ask students to research the topics on the internet in order to get the real story and then write up a report.

