

The Importance of Human Sources of Knowledge in the Cambridge English Exam Preparation: Different Generations, Distinct Levels of Insight

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Abstract

This paper aims at highlighting the importance of using family and friends as resources in the preparation for the English Cambridge Exams as a variety of informal learning. For a teenage student, some topics like employment, history or retirement might prove challenging and would need documentation and research. This paper suggests, as an alternative to digital or online sources of information, a return to the human sources that would be very beneficial to all participants in the act of communication.

Learning can be amazing. It can occur in classrooms or workshops as well as in supermarkets, at a party, in hospital or during a visit to one's grandparents. While the latter may occur spontaneously and take quite the unexpected turn for learners, learning (and teaching for that matter) in a classroom is more structured, carried out by licensed staff and supported by textbooks and auxiliaries. However, it is not difficult to comprehend why, if the desired knowledge cannot be found in the materials provided, we tend to resort to the informal or non formal resources - our family or friends.

In 2003, UNESCO started referring to continuous, lifelong learning and in 2009 it summarized the distinction between three types of learning: formal learning, which occurs as a result of intentional experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support which leads to certification and non formal learning, which is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and is intentional from the learner's perspective. The third type is informal learning, which results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and

typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional.¹

Thus, learning is defined as a continuous process shaped by intent, context and objectives, tailored to each learner in particular. However, it is a known fact that only a small part of what we know is taught via formal education, while the rest lies awaiting under various shapes and sizes on the internet, in the media paraphernalia or books, ready to be absorbed in informal or non-formal learning. Censored or not, adapted and filtered for specific ages, ready-to-be-used information is available, waiting to be absorbed in instances of informal or non-formal learning.

But do we make the most of these more effective ways of learning? How often do we consider individuals with a wider life experience than us, such as family or friends, a valuable source of knowledge? Apparently, not often enough. We tend to ignore how useful a source they can be or forget how essential they have proved during our childhood in making us acquire our basic life skills, moral values and early mindset. Also, we often disregard how effectively a synchronous conversation would serve the purpose, instead of us spending hours browsing, clicking links and leafing through virtual pages for relevant visuals. Under the spell of the internet and its riveting stimuli, we tend to stay on the beaten path, which means using the common search engines.

One instance where having practical experience and awareness of the surrounding world is crucial is the Cambridge English Exam. For teenagers or adult candidates, the exam starts from the same premise, namely that content, coherence, range of vocabulary, pronunciation, register and layout carry equal weight. The speaking exam in particular, structured on individual response, pair discussion and grounded decision making, sheds a punctual limelight on the candidates' spontaneity, personal imagery and fluency.

In Part 4 of the CAE Speaking Exam, the examiner will ask questions for both candidates to discuss, the nature of the queries being more abstract. However, even for teenage students who have put a lot of elbow grease into their thorough preparation, some questions from Part 4 of the Speaking Test might prove quite tricky. Let's consider the following:

*"Do you think that life is easier now than it was in our grandparents' day? Why/Why not?"*²

*"Do you think that people's interests and priorities change as they get older? Why/Why not?"*³

¹ UNESCO, *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*, Hamburg: UILL, 2009, p.27

² N. Kenny, J. Newbrook, *Cambridge English Advanced Plus 2 with Key*, p. 31

³ *Idem*, p. 57

“Many young people think that traditions are old-fashioned and not relevant to them. Do you agree with that view? Why/Why not?”⁴

“Should there be a compulsory age for retirement age or should people be allowed to work as long as they like? Why/Why not?”⁵

How would a teenager know how to answer such a question, if not by allowing a person from a different generation to reveal aspects of life from their past or by inquiring about the life goals and expectations of a different generation? In truth, without tapping a human source of information, a high school candidate might not be able to expand on such a subject about Life with capitals, let alone in the manner imposed by the exam, which supposes spontaneous answers and no drafting time. But, having previously talked casually to a parent or grandparent, knowledge will be fresh, at hand, easy to be synthesized or corroborated. Moreover, the oral manner of acquisition, complete with the fillers, hesitations and comebacks, will provide the student with the building blocks of authentic speech.

The same stands for the Writing component of the Cambridge Exam, which may also rely on the use of information that is genuine and realistic, as specifically required per task, which is mandatory. Below, another relevant example:

“You attended a public lecture given by a visiting professor of economics who proposed that early retirement (at age 55) be made compulsory in all EU countries. You made the notes below:

A case for compulsory retirement at age 55

- Young people can't enter the workforce if older people stay too long in their jobs – unfair
- Older people do no longer have the same energy they once did – younger people will increase creativity
- They could choose part time jobs over a long working week, which would be better for them and for society

*Write an essay for your own economics lecturer discussing two of the points from your notes. You should explain whether you think **the proposition is realistic** and provide reasons to support your opinions.”⁶*

To deal with this, now it would be time to approach retirement from the point of view of the retiree. Only a retiree would genuinely render what retirement feels like and how it differs from the so-

⁴ *Idem*, p. 137

⁵ *Idem*, p. 97

⁶ T. Bradbury, E. Yeates, *Cambridge English Advanced (CAE) 2*, p. 83

called “active life”. Also, a retired person could highlight what coping strategies they apply in order to face that feeling of uselessness so many older people are labeled with after their service to society comes to an end. I find this topic particularly challenging - it is a delicate one and might probe into deep emotions, these being best shared with trusted individuals.

As a teacher, one is certainly aware of the trials and tribulations of a teenage mind. Disrespecting authority, outbursts of creative energy, boisterous industry combined with the occasional dreamy, moody isolation will not make a student easily comply with the teacher’s request of talking to family about different subjects. Hence, it is a life’s work to make them good communicators by gradually encouraging them by using the array of speaking exercises in textbooks. This endeavor should be not so much a school of “doublethink” as a way of experimenting with wording, meaning and connotation.

In our informal or non-formal learning endeavors, we should return to the human knowledge that surrounds us. Ray Bradbury, in *Fahrenheit 451*, couldn’t have stressed this enough in his fiction. In this novel, society is forced to elude an oppressive regime and to preserve its universal literary treasures in the memory of rebellious members and pass it on to children verbatim. As the early version of the audiobook, the characters store the content and should a person forget a word or a line, the book is lost, as its version has been burned in an attempt to smother a culture or individual freedom. Similarly, we should esteem our forefathers as vessels of wisdom and life experience that resist oblivion, much with our support.

To sum up, considering grandparents or parents to be data banks has many benefits, most of them mutual. Asking them to deliver may show them they are valued and may drive away the obnoxious feeling of loneliness and futility so many claim to have experienced. It is an act of learning and communication that has to be tuned on both sides to the verbal mannerisms of different generations and therefore a delicious strain. Students that were advised to try this approach have returned with a most positive feedback. Moreover, as a social activity, it strengthens family bonds and reduces the generation gap that often may make relationships so tense that they are avoided. I strongly believe that older generations will stand the test of time and win the race with technology just because of its frailty and vulnerability that makes it ever so human.

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Biodata

I have been a teacher of English since 1997 and have been teaching in “Lucian Blaga” High School in Cluj-Napoca ever since. An enthusiast in working on Comenius, iEarn and eTwinning projects, I am also fond of literature and poetry, translation and linguistics. Therefore, all my papers revolve around wording and have started from some practical issue (a hurdle, an epiphany, a challenge, a trend out of control) I have encountered in class and chose to share with the teaching community.