

## MA ESL comprehensive exam study guide

**Instructions:** The MA ESL comprehensive exams will be drawn from this list of questions. There are five types of questions in this study guide, and the exam will draw on each of these type. They are (a) terminology questions, (b) short answer questions (paragraph level response), (c) short essay prompts (2-3 paragraph level response), (d) long essay questions (3-4 paragraph level response), and (e) response to student writing questions. The length differences are to give you a sense of the scope expected in answering the question. In many questions you are asked to give examples. You should be prepared to do this.

### Terminology

For a given set of terms, write a paragraph in which you use each term in a way that shows its significance to the field of ESL.

1. affective variables  
communicative competence  
fossilization  
input hypothesis  
predictable problem  
schema  
silent period
2. authentic assessment  
cloze tests  
holistic evaluation of writing  
Test of Spoken English (TSE)  
TOEFL  
standardized tests
3. Communicative Approach  
Natural Approach  
TPR  
Grammar-Translation Method  
Audio-Lingual Method  
Eclectic approach

### Short answer questions (paragraph response)

#### ***Language Acquisition***

1. Explain the differences between language learning and language acquisition. Explain how Stephen Krashen defines each of these. For each, given 1 example of a classroom activity (i.e., one activity that promotes learning and one that promotes acquisition).

2. Contrast the concepts of intra- and inter-language transfer and how each might affect the learning goals of the ESL classroom. Give examples of each.
3. What is meant by learning styles? Learning strategies? What must an ESL teacher know about each concept?
4. How has our understanding of the following influenced how we teach languages? For each write 2-3 sentences:
  - a. Learning styles and strategies
  - b. Personality style
  - c. Cognitive style
  - d. Multiple intelligences

### ***Language Teaching Methods***

1. What are some of the characteristics of the *Direct Method* that make it so different from the *Grammar Translation Method*? What elements from these approaches could you draw into teaching in a primarily communicative or content-based teaching context?
2. What approaches or methods are most appropriate to teach speaking and listening? For one of the approaches or methods you list, discuss the advantages and disadvantages associated with using it to teach speaking and listening.
3. Discuss the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. What are some of its characteristics and implications? Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this approach and how and in what teaching context you would utilize it.
4. Compare and contrast the *Audio-lingual method* and *Total Physical Response*. What elements from these approaches could you draw into teaching in a primarily communicative or content-based teaching context?
5. Reflect on *Translanguaging*, *Community Language Learning*, *Total Physical Response*. What aspects of language could be appropriately taught using elements of these approaches? Describe 1-2 ways you would apply elements of each of these approaches.
6. Consider the *Natural approach*, *Whole language approach*, and *Direct Method*. What aspects of language could be appropriately taught using elements of these approaches? Describe 1-2 ways you would apply elements of each of these approaches.
7. Reflect on the *Audio-lingual method* and *Participatory approaches* to language teaching. What aspects of language could be appropriately taught using elements of these approaches? Describe 1-2 ways you would apply elements of each of these approaches.
8. Discuss the difference between the Whole Language and Phonics approaches to reading instruction. Name at least one particular issue in using each approach with non-native

speakers of English. Does it make a difference what the student's native language is and whether the student is literate in that language?

### ***Grammar and forms teaching***

1. Many language teaching experts recommend that grammar teaching include information on the form, meaning, and use of a grammatical structure. Describe what each of these (form, meaning, and use) is. Select an English grammatical structure (such as comparatives, past tense, embedded questions) and explain the form, meaning, and use of this structure.
2. One aspect of teaching grammar is teaching both grammatical forms and pragmatic meaning. Select one of the pragmatic intents below, and demonstrate how this meaning can be expressed through different sentence types. You should include a declarative, interrogative, imperative, subjunctive, and exclamatory sentence.
  - a. Pragmatic intent: The speaker wants the listener to close the window
  - b. Pragmatic intent: The speaker invites the listener to a party
  - c. Pragmatic intent: (speaking on the phone with a receptionist) the speaker wants to talk to a specific person (John Brown) in the company.
3. You have marked some errors in a student's essay. The student comes to talk to you after class, and complains that he has heard native speakers of English make some of the same errors that you marked. How would you respond? Write a short paragraph (4-6 sentences)
4. Part of your curriculum for advanced ESL speakers requires you to teach them how to use present perfect (e.g., 'I have gone' vs 'I went'). Describe one activity that you could use to teach this. For each activity, explain what you would ask the students to do, and how this would help them to learn to use the present perfect.
5. In teaching English grammar, we frequently use 'rules of thumb' that are generally (but not always) accurate (e.g., 'Use 'a/an' for the first time something is mentioned, use 'the' for the subsequent mentions") is an example of a rule of thumb. A student of yours has noticed native speakers using speech that does not follow a rule of thumb you have taught. How would you respond to the student?
6. One question in language teaching is the extent to which courses should be either form-based (focused on teaching and learning grammar and vocabulary) or meaning-based (focused on understanding and using language to communicate meaning). Imagine that another teacher questions your perspective on form and meaning teaching. How would you respond? What do you see as the role of grammar teaching? What principles/classroom factors guide your decision to focus or not focus on grammar teaching?

## Short essay prompts (2-3 paragraph response)

### **L2 Reading**

1. Cummins (1981) wrote about the Common Underlying Proficiency model, which says that skills developed in one language transfer to the acquisition of a new language, despite differences in alphabets or writing systems, vocabulary, grammar, etc. Discuss some of the skills related to reading that would transfer from one language to another. How can a teacher use the knowledge of these underlying skills to enhance reading instruction? Be specific about techniques, materials, and activities.
2. Choose a simple text- something we are all familiar with, such as a poem, fairy tale, folk tale, etc. Describe a sequence of activities using this text to help develop reading skills. Be sure to consider background/cultural knowledge students would need, pre-reading, through-reading and post-reading activities. Can students be prompted to do repeated readings of the text? Discuss what language, other than vocabulary, they might develop through these exercises. Try to include activities that bring in listening, speaking and writing practice as well.

### **Culture and Language Teaching:**

1. One part of teaching in a multicultural setting is being aware of your own culture and how that impacts the assumptions you make about others. We can often see what is different about other's cultures, but are pretty unaware of the culturally-transmitted behaviors and beliefs that we carry. For this question, (1) describe how your own cultural background can influence your impressions of students from other cultures. Be sure to include at least 2-3 specific examples. (2) Now, consider how your awareness of your own culture could impact your language teaching and help you to teach culture more effectively. As you respond to this, make specific connections to the examples you gave earlier, considering how awareness of each aspect of your culture described in those examples can help you teach more effectively.
2. Imagine that you are teaching ESL in a K-12 setting, in a school where the ELL population includes students from a range of background. Some of the mainstream teachers tell you that they don't like having ELLs in their classrooms, feeling that it's hard to get to know these students and get them to participate in the classroom. You suspect that cultural differences may play a role in these struggles. What advice could you share with these teachers to help them overcome cultural barriers? Be sure that your response includes reference to research on the impact of valuing student culture on their achievement.
3. One of the differences between high and low context cultures is the level of directness expected in communication. Explain the distinction between high and low context cultures, and give an example of how this impacts the directness of a speech act like apologizing, inviting, or requesting. How can a teacher from a low context culture help students from a high context culture adapt to communication norms? Give 2-3 specific

examples of classroom situations that might result from a difference between high and low context cultures, along with advice to a novice teaching on handling each situation.

### **Assessment**

Choose one of the following situations, as appropriate to your current or desired teaching situation:

- a. You are teaching in k-12 class in the U.S. You have several non-native speakers of English in the class. Describe the activities/tools/tests you would use for formative assessment throughout the year, to determine what progress they are making.
- b. You are teaching adults, some of whom hope to go on to do academic work in an English-language higher education program (college or university, in the US, U.K. Australia, etc.), while some are learning English for their professions. Would you use the same or different assessment tools with these students?
- c. You are teaching in an EFL setting, in country where English is not the first or main language. Your school requires certain standardized tests at the end of each term, but you are able to choose your own assessments throughout the term to let your students know whether they are progressing adequately, and to inform you on how effective your instruction is.

For the context you select, please describe 2-3 some assessment tools you would use. Be specific about how you would assess all the skills- speaking, listening, reading and writing. Discuss whether each method of assessment is traditional or alternative and if it is authentic and if it is standardized. For example, you might describe one of the assessments like this:

“One activity I might use to have students practice comparatives and superlatives is to take them outside and have them measure each other’s shadows. I would then model and have them practice orally. The assessment would be to have them write about what they learned, which might elicit sentences such as “My shadow was longer at noon than at 10 am.” Or “Jai has the longest shadow at 3 pm.” This activity incorporates some content-area knowledge, and results in an authentic use of language to talk about science and make comparisons. I would evaluate their written sentences on the appropriate use of comparative and superlative forms. I could differentiate this by having less proficient students draw pictures and label them with the comparative words- “longer”, “shorter”, etc. This is an example of a non-standardized, authentic, and alternative assessment.”

### Long Essay (3-4 paragraph response)

1. You are being interviewed for a position as an ESL/EFL teacher. In the interview, you will be asked about your role as an educator in today's diverse classrooms and your goals for ensuring the success of your multilingual students.

Prepare a response that addresses who you are as a teacher and how your understanding of theories and methods related to language learning and teaching shape your approach to teaching ELLs. In your response, make sure to include answers to all of the following questions:

- How do your personal characteristics and values impact your choice and implementation of your teaching methods?
- What information about ESL history/bilingual education/foreign language education research and language pedagogy research inform your instruction?
- What information about best practices in multilingual and multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching inform your instruction?

Your response should provide a clear picture of who you are as teacher and detail an understanding of the issues around teaching language learners that is grounded in theory and research.

2. There exists an array of approaches recommended for teaching English as a second/foreign language. As the new English language specialist at a school, you have been asked to present an overview of advantages and disadvantages of current methods, and then make a recommendation of how to improve the appeal and success of a language program.

The school has two types of students: a) highly motivated adults at the intermediate level who are hoping for job advancement through passing an English test, and b) their young children (elementary school age), who are at the beginning level and will be attending U.S. public schools after one summer session with you.

Outline the approach you would use for each group, and why it is the best approach. In your discussion include an overview of how each approach defines language, the role of the teacher and the role of the learner. Next, outline the types of course materials you would need to purchase and how teachers would use them in the two types of classrooms.

3. Describe the type of classroom you'd like to work in within the next year teaching ESL/ELL students. Indicate the setting (e.g., adult ESL program, secondary school ESL class, elementary school classroom, in the U.S. or abroad, etc.), the age or grade level of the students, the ethnic, language, and educational background of the students, and their range of English language proficiency.

Next, describe the overarching method(s)/approach(es) that will inform and guide your

language or content instruction. Explain why your decision is appropriate for the classroom setting and students you described.

Finally, describe three to five of the specific strategies and techniques that you will use in your instruction, and explain why you believe these would be effective with your students. Be sure include names of key theories and theorists in your response.

### **Response to student writing**

Given a sample of ESL student writing, provide an appropriate feedback response. When preparing for this question, you should first read through the student writing sample, reflecting on the following questions. It may help you to take notes as you do this.

1. Type of writing: Think about what kind of writing this piece represents and the audience for it (e.g, expressive/personal writing, narrative or fiction writing, expository writing). What type of writing is this and what is its purpose? Has the student made the purpose clear?
2. Organization: Think about how the parts and sequence of this piece of writing are organized (time, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, steps, examples). Has the student organized the essay effectively?
3. Idea development: Think about the topic of the writing and the details the writer includes. Has the student focused on a topic and given appropriate details, examples, and descriptions?
4. Language: Think about the student's choice of words and the type of language used. Consider the use of vocabulary, varied sentence structures, and grammar. Has the student used language effectively to communicate?
5. Writing conventions: Think about punctuation, spelling, capitalization, paragraphing. List what the student knows about the conventions of writing? What does he not know or not do consistently?

Based on these reflections, provide in text and summary feedback to the student on this writing sample. Your feedback should include both positive feedback on what the student did well and constructive feedback on what they can improve. You should not give feedback on all of the areas of writing, but should focus on the most important feedback to help this student develop their writing skills and improve this essay. This should not be more than one page.

In preparing for this question, some students have found it helpful to review the advice for providing feedback to L2 writers found [here](#).

### **Sample Student Essay for Analysis**

Buying or leasing the car is difficult decision for who wants to purchase the car. On the economy market today, some of people is like to lease the car because he or she doesn't want to own the car more than one year. However, eighty-five percent of consumers are buying the car because they want to keep and to own their own car until the car breaking down. I'm also one of consumer, who wants to buy the car; however, I just want to lease the car because I want to drive new car every year. While I still study in college, I don't like to purchase or to own my own car; beside, I don't have a secure job to pay the car note. Leasing car is good way for the students, to have their own car, and they don't have to pay large monthly payment when they have small income. I like to buy a car when I have a good job: moreover, I have high income to pay monthly car note, car insurance, and other payment. Finally, buying car is good way for who want to keep the car to the end.