

Academy Stars

Learning to learn
test-taking skills notes



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Learning to learn and tests

A core feature of *Academy Stars* is its focus on *Learning to learn*. We want to teach the children to become more motivated, confident, active and reflective learners, and to give them the message that they are responsible for their own learning. It is important that we keep these aims in mind when testing the children.

For more on *Learning to learn*, see the Methodology Handbook pages 31–36.

Tests are a way for teachers to find out what the children know. But tests aren't only useful to teachers – they should also help the children. Taking tests can teach the children effective study skills, teach them to learn from errors and give them confidence to deal with things they don't know. With appropriate preparation and feedback, tests can really help the children to learn.

The children don't instinctively know how to approach tests. They need to be taught:

- 1 How to prepare for tests.
- 2 How to take tests.
- 3 How to respond to feedback after the tests.

These notes provide some suggestions that can help you to make tests a positive and enjoyable experience for your pupils.



Preparing for the tests

When the children take a test, it is important for them to have an idea of what kind of language they will be tested on.

- Talk to them about what they have learned during the unit(s) they will be tested on.
- Ask them to look through the books and predict what vocabulary and grammar will be tested.
- As the children get older, encourage them to do this reviewing in pairs, and to make notes.

One of the biggest challenges in learning a language is vocabulary: children regularly need to learn large numbers of new words. The notes on the following pages suggest some ways of recording and revising vocabulary. Encourage the children to try different methods and to find out which ones work best for them.

Learning to learn and tests

Academy Stars tests mostly focus on the core language, as follows:

- The vocabulary from Lesson 1 (for Levels 1–4).
- The vocabulary shown in the boxes at the top of the Pupil's Book pages throughout the unit (for Levels 5 and 6).
- The core grammar as shown in the Graphic Grammar section (all levels).

The children should start by reviewing this core language. However, language from other parts of the unit may also be included, so once they feel confident about the core language, they can move on to revising other language from the unit as well.



Taking the tests

There are several useful strategies that children can use in all English tests. Introduce these ideas gently and gradually over time. Teach the children to:

- 1 Read the instructions carefully and look at the example answer.** The question explains what to do, and the example answer shows how to do it. The children should look carefully at these before they start writing, otherwise they might approach the task incorrectly.
- 2 Cross out answers they know are wrong** (in activities where there are two or more words / phrases to choose from). In this way, they will be more likely to get the correct answer, even if they are not completely sure.
- 3 Start with the easiest questions** and return to more difficult questions later, if there is time. It is important that they don't miss out on easily achievable marks due to a lack of time.
- 4 Have a go at all the questions** even if they don't know the answer. If they have a go, they have a chance of getting it right and scoring a mark.
- 5 Check their answers carefully** so they don't make careless mistakes. They should read through everything to check that their answers make sense.

Establish appropriate test conditions in your classroom. The children should be seated in such a way that it isn't possible for them to see each other's work. If it isn't possible to separate the desks, then find ways of helping to cover their work so others can't see it.

Marking and feedback

Make sure the children understand that test results help us to learn – they don't tell us how intelligent we are. Encourage them to challenge themselves rather than comparing themselves to others. The notes on the following pages suggest ways to give feedback and how you can teach the children to respond to it.

Starter

At this level, when most children are just beginning their English language learning journey, the main objective of the tests should be to familiarise the children with the testing process. We want them to feel confident and enjoy the tests.

Establish good study habits right from the beginning. Allocate regular class time to the recording of vocabulary, e.g. encourage the children to draw pictures in a vocabulary notebook whenever they encounter a new vocabulary set.

Preparing for the tests

As the children get used to taking tests, gently introduce them to the idea of revision. Review and practise the target language for each test, explaining that this will help them to do well in the test. Give the children small, achievable revision tasks to complete, e.g. (when revising animals):

- Look at pictures or flashcards and say the words to a friend.
- Draw a picture of an animal, and ask a friend to guess what it is.
- Go home and tell their parents the names of some animals.

Prepare the children for the kinds of task types they will find in the tests, so that they are not taken by surprise.

- Explain that all the test activities at this level are listening tasks, with the teacher reading out the script.
- Get the children used to listening for extended periods by doing drawing and colouring dictations in class (the children listen and follow a set of instructions, then compare their pictures at the end).
- Before you take each test, make sure the children are familiar with the task types it contains, and explain the task types to them if necessary. Make sure the children can read and understand the following words: *join, circle, tick, number, colour, match*.



Taking the tests

As the Unit 1 test is the first one they will do, you can use this as a kind of demonstration, giving them as much help as they need.

- Hand out the test papers and let the children look at it. Read the instructions with the children, with pencils down. Make sure they understand what they have to do.
- Tell them to pick up their pencils. Read the script, pausing after each item to allow the children to complete the activities. Let the children ask questions if they don't understand what they have to do.
- Read the script through again so that the children can check their answers and correct them if necessary.

You can do the rest of the tests in more formal test conditions if you think that the children are ready for this. Always read the scripts through twice to allow the children to check and correct their answers.

Marking and feedback

Mark the tests and give numerical marks as per the mark scheme. Use a particular colour pen to put in the correct answers on the test paper, so that the children can easily see what language they need to practise more.

We can motivate children by telling them things that they have done well. Before handing back the tests, prepare something positive to say to each child about their test paper. For example, praise them for neat, clear work, or for getting a better mark than last time, or for getting something right that they usually find difficult.

Introduce the children to the idea of self-evaluation. Challenge them to find something that they think needs more practice, e.g. two or three words that they don't know very well. Do a class activity to practise the vocabulary set, then ask the children if they think they know all the words now. Praise them for finding something to work on, and explain that this is a very important part of learning.

We suggest that you give the children who didn't get full marks a second chance to do the test. Children of this age can feel very discouraged by the experience of getting things wrong, and most will be happy to try again and improve their score.

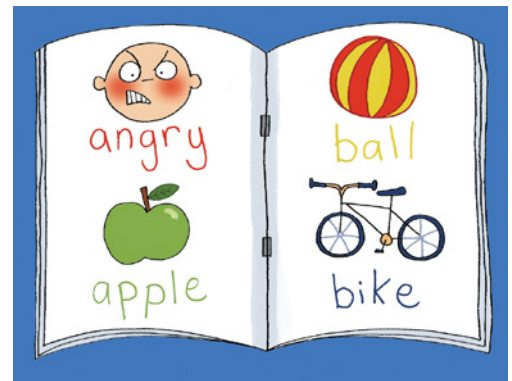


Levels 1-2

Through working with the *Learning to learn* boxes in the Pupil's Books, the children should be starting to develop good study skills – with lots of support from you as the teacher, of course. They will be developing an awareness of how English works, and learning some strategies that will help them to become effective language learners (e.g. guessing a word from its initial sounds, practising spelling using the 'look, copy, cover, write, check' technique, and using alphabetical order). They will be starting to learn various ways of recording vocabulary that will help them to remember the words. For example:

- Drawing pictures around words.
- Writing words in groups.
- Making picture dictionaries.

You can also ask the children to make flashcards, with a word on one side and a picture on the other. Drawing pictures and writing words are good ways of helping the children to memorise vocabulary. But in addition to this, the children can then enjoy using their own cards in many different ways to practise the vocabulary (see suggestions below).



Set the children a variety of tasks, using different recording methods, so that all the children experience all of the methods, e.g. ask them to draw pictures of food around a set of food words. Help the children to become reflective learners by spending time discussing these methods in class. Ask the children which methods they enjoy most, and which methods they think help them most.

Preparing for the tests

Make sure the children understand that it is important to revise if they want to do well in tests. Allocate time for them in class to revise vocabulary in pairs. Here are some simple activities that you can use when practising a particular vocabulary set:

- Child A says a word and Child B points to the appropriate picture in the Pupil's Book or Picture dictionary, or to the appropriate flashcard.
- Child A points to a picture and Child B says the word.
- Child A spreads out their homemade flashcards of the vocabulary set with the picture side facing up. Child B spreads out their flashcards with the word side facing up. They take turns to match a word with a picture and pick up that pair of flashcards.
- They spread out a set of flashcards with either the word or picture side facing up. Child A closes their eyes, and Child B removes a card. Child A must open their eyes and say what word is missing.
- Child A sees how many items they can name from the vocabulary set. Each time they say a correct word, Child B puts that card down on the table.

If you have the time, it can be very helpful to the children to make Graphic Grammar cards in order to practise the structures with your class. For example, to practise affirmative and negative present simple sentences (from the Graphic Grammar presentation in Level 2, Unit 2), write the following five words and a full stop on six cards:



Levels 1-2

Mix up the cards and hand them out to six children. Ask these children to organise themselves at the front of the class so that the cards make a sentence. Then hand the *don't* card to a seventh child and ask them to stand in the right place to make it a negative sentence:



You can then repeat the activity with further examples of the structure. This activity can be very memorable for the children holding the cards because they are involved physically, and having fun. The children who are watching will benefit from seeing the grammar being built up in chunks, as in the Graphic Grammar presentations. This activity can appeal to physical and visual learners.

Taking the tests

The children should now be familiar with the format of the tests and used to taking the tests in test conditions, without talking to their classmates. Keep an eye out for signs of anxiety, and try to make the tests a positive and enjoyable experience for the children.

Get the children used to the classroom set-up that you plan to use for tests. Make sure the children see tests as a time that is different from normal class time: it is a time for working quietly, not for collaborating.

The children now need to manage their own time in tests, as they will be working at their own pace. (This contrasts with the *CE:YL Starters* tests, where the pace is determined by the teacher.) Give the children plenty of time to complete the tests but establish a routine so they know what to do when they have finished, e.g. quietly get out a reading book. They mustn't disturb the children who are still working!



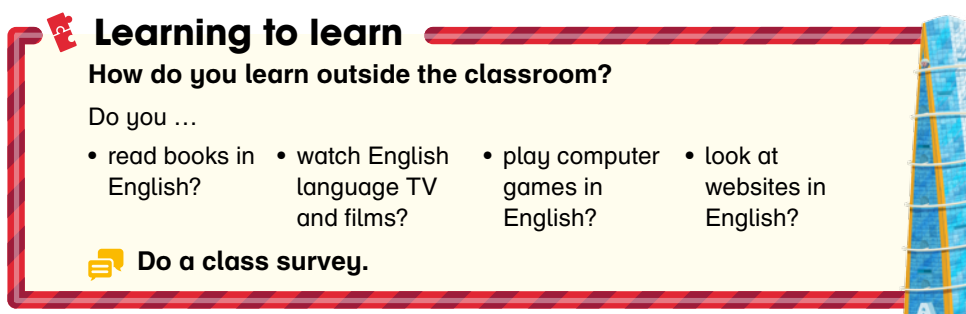
Marking and feedback

When you mark the tests, use a particular colour pen to put in the correct answers on the test paper, so that the children can easily see what they got wrong. But, in addition to this, remember that children can be very motivated by positive, specific praise. Choose a second, different coloured pen, and make sure the children understand that this colour pen stands for positive comments. Try to find something positive to mark on the test paper of every child, especially those who didn't get full marks. You might like to establish symbols for your positive feedback, such as HW for good handwriting and GT for 'good try!' (for a word that they have very nearly spelt correctly).

Levels 3-4

The children should by now be using various methods of recording, practising and memorising vocabulary, and should be becoming more independent learners. Many of the *Learning to learn* sections in the Pupil's Books and Workbooks focus on self-motivation and self-reflection. Some of the learning points from previous levels are repeated, and some more ideas are added, e.g. colour-coding words as you record them (using different colours for nouns, verbs and adjectives). Encourage the children to try different methods, and spend time discussing them. Ask the children which methods they enjoy most, and which ones are the most helpful.

An independent learner is always looking for opportunities to learn more. Encourage your children to look for ways to learn more English away from the classroom. Suggest that they come and tell you when they have read or listened to something in English, or if they have a conversation with someone in English.




Learning to learn

How do you learn outside the classroom?

Do you ...

- read books in English?
- watch English language TV and films?
- play computer games in English?
- look at websites in English?

 **Do a class survey.**

Preparing for the tests

Ask the children to look back through their books and their vocabulary records (notebooks, Picture dictionaries, etc.) and to experiment with different ways of revising vocabulary. Some children like to test each other; others may prefer to work alone and to write words repeatedly, or test themselves by covering and uncovering words.

Here are some class games you might like to play when revising vocabulary for the Unit tests:

- **Memory:** Hand out pieces of paper and challenge the children to write down as many words as they can remember from the target vocabulary set. They score one point for each word, with a bonus point for each word that is spelt entirely correctly.
- **Scramble:** Write anagrams of the target vocabulary on the board and see how many words the children can unscramble within a given time limit. You could let them work in pairs.
- **Bingo:** Write the target words on the board. Tell the children to choose five of them and write them down. Now describe one of the vocabulary items, or give a definition of the word. If the children think they have this word, they tick it. The winner is the one who first ticks all five words and calls out *Bingo!*

The following team games (played with two teams) work well when revising for the Mid-year and End-of-year tests.

- **Shout it out:** Give one team the name of a vocabulary set (e.g. school subjects), and give them one minute to shout out as many words related to this subject as they can. Allocate one point for any word that is part of that set, even if it isn't one of the target words from the book. Then repeat with the other team and another vocabulary set.
- **Guess the picture:** Write all the target vocabulary on a sheet of paper. Ask a child from one team to come to the front, choose a word from the list and draw a picture on the board. That child's own team must guess the word. Allocate one point if the word is correctly guessed within the given time limit, e.g. 30 seconds. Now the other team have a turn.

Levels 3-4

The children should also by now be doing some revision at home. Suggest some ways in which they can do this, e.g. asking someone in the family to test them by pointing at pictures in a book or holding up flashcards, or by practising writing the words.

Note that the tests now include some task types where the children are expected to write whole sentences, but always with a word pool box or structured in some other very clear way.

Taking the tests

Tests should by now be administered in a more formal manner, as with an external exam.

When you hand out the test papers, tell the children to keep them face down, and only to turn them over when you tell them to start the test. Set a time limit, making it generous. You don't want them to run out of time, but you do want them to get used to working within a time limit. We suggest the following timings:

- 15 minutes for a Unit test.
- 30 minutes for a Mid-year test.
- 60 minutes for an End-of-year test.

You can of course adjust these timings to suit your class. Make sure there is a clock positioned where everyone can see it, and that everyone knows what time the test will finish.



Marking and feedback

As with the previous levels, look for positive things on the test papers that you can praise the children for. Where possible, use symbols to highlight these things on the test papers. You can also give the children positive verbal feedback when handing back the test papers. Praise them for writing neatly, for improving their marks or for approaching questions in the correct way (even if they didn't get all of the answers right).

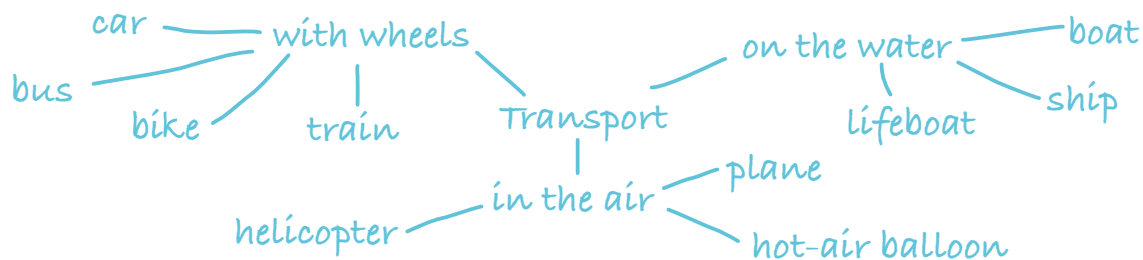
Establish a routine so that when the children receive their marked test papers, they know what to do with them. For example, you could expect them to turn straight to their notebooks and to spend some time practising words or sentences that they got wrong in the test. It is important to praise the children for these good study habits as well as for good test results. Praise them too for any effort they make in recording and reviewing language before the tests, and help them to see the connection between hard work and good results!

Levels 5-6

By now, the children should be developing a range of study skills that will help them to do well in tests. For example, the *Learning to learn* section in Workbook 5, Unit 2, suggests various ways of recording and practising vocabulary:

- 1 Write the words on labels. Stick them in different places around your home.
- 2 Record the words on your phone, play them back and repeat.
- 3 Write sentences or definitions with the words.
- 4 Draw a picture or diagram in your notebook and add labels.
- 5 Use colour coding for different kinds of words, e.g. nouns, adjectives.
- 6 Create a mini-dictionary on your phone or computer. Organise by topic.

Mind Maps™ can be used very effectively for vocabulary recording and extension, though they don't work for everyone: some children prefer other methods, such as recording words in lists. Encourage all children to experiment with making Mind Maps™, and to look at each other's. Some children will really enjoy making them, once they realise what a flexible tool they can be.



The children should be starting to understand what motivates them and what helps them to learn. Many children will have a preferred learning style – e.g. visual, audio or context – and this may determine what kinds of activities they enjoy. For example, a person who likes audio learning may find that saying words out loud and listening to recordings is more helpful than simply writing them down.

Preparing for the tests

Before they take a Unit test, ask the children to review the unit in pairs. They should look through the unit, reading out words and sentences to each other.

The children should by now be in the habit of revising at home before a test. It is important that they learn to organise their study time. The *Learning to learn* box in Pupil's Book 6, Unit 6, has some useful suggestions:



- Decide when to work – make a time and a plan. Make sure you stick to them.
- Decide where to work – find a comfortable seat and a desk in a quiet room.
- Make sure you have the equipment you need, e.g. paper, pens, dictionary.
- Put away distractions. You need to concentrate to learn effectively.
- Arrange rewards – if you focus and stick to your plan, give yourself a treat! Listen to music or have a snack.

Levels 5-6

Discuss the kinds of conditions that work best for them. Ask them questions, e.g.:

- Do you like to play music while you're working, or do you prefer silence?
- Do you like to sit still or does it help you to move around?
- Do you like making flashcards / index cards, or writing words on sticky notes?
- Do you find it helps to record yourself saying words and play it back?
- Do you like working with a friend and testing each other, or do you prefer to work alone?

In talking to the children about their study habits, you will encourage them to take an interest in how they learn, and to take responsibility for their own learning.

Allocate some class time to explicitly revising grammar for the tests, as well as vocabulary. Here are two activities you might like to try that the children can do in pairs:

- **Fill the gap:** Child A writes a sentence using the target grammar, missing out one of the words (they draw a line where the word should be). Child B completes the sentence, making sure that it is grammatically correct and that it makes sense. Make sure all the different kinds of target structures are practised (e.g. include both affirmative and negative sentences).
- **Make sentences:** Each child writes a sentence using an agreed structure on a long strip of paper, and cuts it up so that each word is on a separate piece of paper. Then each child tries to make a sentence using the other child's pieces of paper. Once they have done this, they can see if any additional sentences can be made by combining words from both sets.



Taking the tests

Your class should by now be very used to taking tests, and you should be able to set the tests with a minimum of disruption, and without taking too much time out from classroom teaching. If you need to rearrange the furniture in order to establish test conditions, you can train the children to do this, and to put the classroom back to normal afterwards. Involving the children in getting ready for the tests can help to prepare them mentally for taking the tests.

Marking and feedback

When you hand the children their test results, let them record their marks. They could draw up a table at the back of their notebook for this purpose, so they will have a ready record of how they are progressing. You might like to ask them to set themselves a target mark for the next test.

Talk to the children about how they did in the test. If they didn't get full marks, ask them if they can identify any things they repeatedly get wrong. Look for errors caused by misunderstanding, e.g. misreading questions, or accidental errors such as writing the wrong thing, or writing things in the wrong place. Ask the children to make a plan to make sure these problems don't happen in the future.

Analyse the marks of the whole class to see which areas need more practice and tell the class what you have discovered. When you do this, make sure you only talk about the class as a whole, rather than about individuals.