



The International Institute
of
Written Oxford English



Q Master

Pedagogical Rationale



Q Master: Pedagogical Rationale

The Q Group is proud to present **Q Master**, a 60-hour self-paced fully online English course designed to help students succeed in an academic environment.

Who is Q Master for?

Q Master was developed specifically for university undergraduates and high school students preparing for university, as well as for professionals who would benefit from an academic English course. It is designed for students with an entry-level TOEFL score of approximately 550. The estimated exit level after ten units is a TOEFL score of 650. **Q Master** was also designed in line with the specifications defined by the Common European Framework for students entering C1. The course brings students up to C2 of the Common European Framework.

Overview

Q Master consists of ten theme-based units on current topics that are suitable and of interest to many academic and professional environments. The themes are: Information Technology, Astronomy, Psychology, Telecommunications, Electronics, Business and Law, Nanotechnology, Genetic Engineering, Life Sciences and Robotics, and Literature. Each of the units consists of three lessons—a reading lesson, a lesson with which combines reading and listening, and a guided writing lesson—all with interactive activities in a variety of formats.

Main Pedagogical Principles

Theme-based Learning

Q Master is *theme-based* in that the topics of all reading passages, listening passages and writing tasks in any particular unit are on the same theme. In the literature on teaching English for Academic Purposes, this is often referred to as *content-based teaching*, or *sustained content-based teaching*. In academic settings, in order to acquire knowledge in a particular academic discipline or



professional field, students are typically required to read a series of texts on the same or related topics, to participate in classes in which they hear lectures on these topics, and then to perform written or oral tasks in which they must integrate information from the lectures and readings in the course. Many experts have referred to this as *reading to learn* and *writing to learn*. This means that the purpose of reading and writing is to facilitate the acquisition of content knowledge, as opposed to *learning to read* and *learning to write*, which refers solely to learning the language skills of reading and writing. An English course for academic purposes should simulate this characteristic, allowing students to develop the English language skills applied to the tasks required in an academic environment.

Task-based Approach

In the three lessons included in each of the units of **Q Master**, the learner works on tasks typical of academic settings, learning and applying the required strategies. In each unit, learners have to read a text on a particular topic, listen to related lectures and debates, understand main ideas, details, and different points of view on the topic, integrate information from written and oral sources, and finally write a text analyzing this information or expressing an opinion about the issues at hand. Therefore **Q Master** is also *task-based*, and is an especially effective resource for preparing students for the English needed in academic and professional settings.

Skills-based Design

Finally, although it adheres to a theme-based and task-based design, **Q Master** is also *skills-based*, as the three components in each unit address reading, listening, writing, and speaking. With regard to speaking skills, **Q Master** features an innovative **Speaking Lab**, in which learners can listen to a native speaker pronounce phrases or sentences that they have already encountered in the units in **Q Master**, record themselves saying each phrase, and compare both recordings, receiving both written and graphic feedback. Since the Speaking Lab contains approximately 200 phrases from the ten content units in Q Master, it



provides contextualized practice in all the different sound and intonation patterns that learners from different language backgrounds might find difficult in English. Another important principle implemented in **Q Master**, which is also relevant to the Speaking Lab, is the use of authentic language.

Vocabulary Acquisition

As confirmed by research on vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language, learners need multiple exposures to any particular word in order to learn it and retain it in long-term memory. Therefore, one of the advantages of the content-based design of Q Master is that it facilitates contextualized vocabulary acquisition, which is also cumulative, since learners are repeatedly exposed to many of the same vocabulary items in meaningful contexts.

As various activities, tools, and structural features will attest, **Q Master** also incorporates an *explicit* focus on vocabulary to complement *incidental vocabulary acquisition*. This combined approach is also recommended in the literature on teaching English as a foreign language. Specifically, each unit or theme has a list of general academic words and topic-specific words that are used repeatedly in the unit. These two lists are listed in the **Word List** tool, which the user can access from anywhere in the unit. In all three lessons in each of the units, there are vocabulary activities which also serve to expose the learner to definitions and simple synonyms for these words, thus helping learners actually learn and retain new vocabulary items.

Metacognition

In many different ways, **Q Master** strives to enhance metacognitive awareness, thus also teaching skills that are transferable to other areas. For example, each activity focuses on a particular language strategy. Learners can read a short definition and tips on how to master this strategy or skill by clicking **Tip** in each activity, or by clicking **Language Tools** in the right toolbar. The Comprehension Tips, Writing Tips and Text Tips, which are included in the Language Tools, together comprise the core teaching points for the skills and strategies required



for a course in English for Academic Purposes. As described below, the design of the guided writing component also guides learners through the writing process, thus also fostering metacognitive awareness.

Feedback and Assessment

Since feedback is an essential component of learning and is both motivating and reinforcing, the design of Q Master is unique in that it incorporates several kinds of feedback and assessment. Firstly, all interactive practice activities have automatic feedback. Learners can check their answers and repeat all activities as often as they wish. As noted above, the Speaking Lab provides learners with both written and graphic feedback on their pronunciation and intonation. The Writing Lesson includes a Grading Chart which learners can first view and then use to receive a final grade, based on the goals of the lesson. While writing, learners can also check their work and improve it using the special software embedded in Q Master. Since learners may wish to receive additional feedback on their writing, learners can also save their preparatory work on their own computers, and e-mail it to a peer or a teacher. Finally, after doing all ten units, learners can take the final achievement test. At all stages, learners can view their progress report.

The Structure of Q Master

The structure of each lesson in **Q Master** embodies the pedagogical principles underlying the design of **Q Master**. In addition to the Speaking Lab tool mentioned above, **Q Master** also includes several additional features, briefly highlighted in the description below.

The Reading Lesson

The reading lesson includes a pre-reading section, a reading passage for the lesson, and ten interactive practice activities about the reading passage. The pre-reading section presents learners with the topic of the reading passage and with questions to think about before reading the passage. In the language teaching



literature, this is often referred to as a *top-down* approach to reading, in which learners are encouraged to apply their background knowledge to the reading passage to facilitate comprehension and to render all subsequent activities more meaningful.

The pre-reading section also serves to facilitate the explicit focus on vocabulary noted above. It is here that learners are first presented with the words for the units that also appear in the Word List tool. These are the words selected for practice in explicit vocabulary activities, although learners will also encounter them in meaning-based comprehension questions and answers.

By clicking **Reading** at the top of the screen, the learner opens up the reading passage for the lesson, which can also be accessed from the interactive exercises in the Practice section. The ten interactive activities in the reading lesson help the learner to work through the ideas and information presented in the text, and, at the same time, teach the reading skills and strategies learners need at this level. In addition, many of the activities in the reading lesson simulate the format of items on standardized tests such as TOEFL, or TOEIC, such as inference questions, and the format of many of the questions that focus on vocabulary and on references.

The Lexicon

Q Master also features a lexicon. Although the lexicon includes entries from all three types of lessons in the ten units, the lexicon is a tool that is especially pertinent to reading and to improving reading skills. The **Q Master** lexicon includes approximately 200 words per unit with simple definitions —often using simple synonyms that are then also used in the interactive practice activities. The lexicon is easily accessed either by clicking words in the reading passages, or through the toolbar on the right side of the screen in any of the lessons. In addition to providing definitions for all entries, the lexicon also allows learners to hear native speakers pronounce each word or phrase.



The scope and format of the lexicon also helps learners get used to using a monolingual dictionary, as opposed to a bilingual dictionary, which merely provides translations of the words in question. In institutional settings, the lexicon can be utilized by teachers for a variety of classroom activities. However, in the Comprehension Tips for example, learners are also given tips about when in the reading process and for what kinds of items they should use the lexicon. Thus, the Lexicon was designed to complement the activities and the reading and listening passages in teaching learners various strategies.

Mixed Skills: Integrating Information from Different Sources

The second lesson in each of the units further implements the theme-based design of **Q Master**. Although some units have two reading passages and one listening passage, learners usually listen to two different passages (lectures, debates, or conversations) and read an additional text on the same content theme as the reading lesson, and often on the same topic.

Firstly, this design facilitates vocabulary reentry and is therefore conducive to vocabulary acquisition, since the texts are on the same or related topics as the text in the reading lesson. Also, learners practice both reading and listening strategies in English. However, what is especially important about this design is that it allows users to practice integrating information from a variety of sources, a task that is authentic to academic and professional settings. Like the reading lesson, this lesson also has ten interactive activities—two comprehension activities for each of the audio passages and for the text, and four additional activities in which the learner is required to integrate information from all three sources in the lesson.

Learners are provided with the opportunity to practice listening to native speakers speaking in a natural context and at a natural speed, and about topics that are often intellectually challenging. Although this may be difficult in a foreign language, this takes place in the sheltered and structured environment of a theme-based course in which the learner encounters the same ideas from several different angles. The various activities are designed to elucidate these



ideas, teaching learners to cope with difficult content in English. Succeeding at such tasks will ultimately boost learners' confidence in their ability to meet English requirements in their academic and professional careers.

In addition, learners often find it difficult to correctly decode and identify words that they hear in a foreign language. That is, they cannot always associate a word they hear with its written form, and as a result often misunderstand both spoken and written language. In this lesson in **Q Master**, since all texts and audio passages are about the same theme, learners have actually seen many of the words they hear while doing the listening tasks in earlier parts of the unit, and may therefore find it easier to identify vocabulary items. Especially in the case of English, which is notorious for its erratic spelling, it is important for users to learn to correctly associate the sound of a word or phrase with its written form.

The Writing Lesson

Although this lesson is also related to the general theme of the unit, the focus is on guiding learners to develop the skills needed to write text types such as academic essays, stories and reports. Learners see a model text, do interactive activities related to this model text, plan their writing and then write their own text. Each unit focuses on a different kind of text. The guided writing component in **Q Master** is innovative in its focus on full-length text, guiding learners in a highly complex task. Learners need to organize their ideas in order to produce a coherent full-length text, while also dealing with a variety of language issues at the word and sentence level.

Model Text and Practice Activities

Learners are first presented with a model text that exemplifies the genre chosen for the unit. Learners then do related interactive practice activities with automatic feedback in which they are guided through the features of this particular type of text and the important strategies for writing such a text. As in the other two



lessons in the unit, learners can click **Tip** in order to read a short definition and tips related to the strategies taught in each activity.

Focus on Grammar and Vocabulary

In writing in English for academic or professional purposes, non-native speakers of English are particularly challenged by the need to express complex ideas in their often limited vocabulary, and by the requirements that they write accurately without grammatical errors and use the correct style. Therefore, in addition to focusing on the organizational and communicative features of the text type for the unit, the ten interactive activities in the writing lesson include one activity that serves as a short review to focus the learner's attention on one particular form or grammatical topic. In addition, the unit always contains at least one vocabulary activity. However, an attempt has been made to make the focus of this vocabulary activity more productive than vocabulary activities in the Reading Lesson or the Mixed Skilled Lesson, since learners now need to actually use the words learned in the unit for their writing task.

Writing Planner

After learners do the closed-ended activities that are related to the model text, they work through the Writing Planner, which is an open-ended activity that helps them outline and prepare their own text to be completed in the Writing Task (see below). The Writing Planner also has a metacognitive function; in effect, it illustrates an essential stage in the writing process. Before completing the Writing Planner, users can view the Grading Chart, which defines all the goals of the task for the unit and explains the basis for evaluating the final product. Learners can also click **Tip** for a brief tutorial on the text type that is assigned in the Writing Task. Both of these tools have a teaching function, and like the Writing Planner, also serve to raise metacognitive awareness.



Writing Task

Learners write their own text based on what they have learned from the model text and the interactive practice activities in the lesson. Learners can edit their text using the toolbar at the top of the screen. As noted above, they can also improve the accuracy and style of their writing by clicking **Check**, which activates English editing software embedded in **Q Master**. Learners can then click the appropriate cells in the Grading Chart to grade their work based on the goals defined for the lesson, and to receive a final grade. Finally, as recommended in the literature on teaching academic writing, learners are encouraged to undergo a revision process.

Conclusion

Grounded in sound pedagogical principles, **Q Master** is a fully online and self-paced English course designed to help students succeed in academic and professional environments. **Q Master** features interesting content and a variety of innovative tools, teaching complex strategies in tasks that are particularly relevant to academic and professional settings. Focusing on all four language skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) and combining a theme-and task-based approach to language teaching, all course components are designed to complement and reinforce one another. Special attention has been devoted to details such as the level of language used throughout the course, the diversity of activities and tools, and the clarity and appeal of the interface to produce a course that would be clear, challenging and enjoyable.