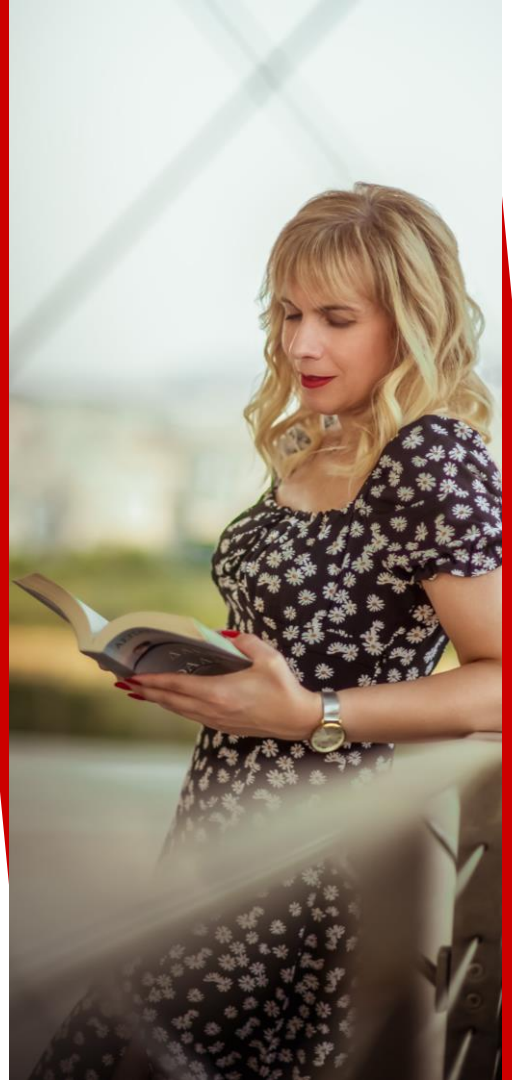


The Human Side of Exams

Building a mindset
that leads to success

Speaker: Katherine Reilly
ELT Author & Teacher Trainer

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***“Sometimes the best exam tip isn’t
about technique; it’s about mindset.”***

– MM Publications

‘Mindset’ is about encouraging students to stay calm, trust their preparation, and focus on progress rather than perfection during exams.

Why do this presentation?

A long overdue presentation inspired by:

- My experiences as an examiner
- Emotional outbreaks in class
- Misuse of exam prep materials

Our students' needs have transcended **passive reception of information.**





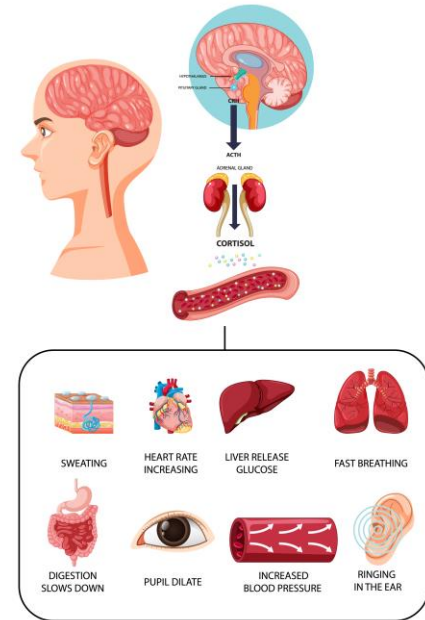
01.

Emotional Readiness

Why Emotional Readiness Matters

Students don't fail because they're unprepared; they fail because they can't access what they know under pressure.

- Stress ignites 'survival mode': access to knowledge is hindered.
- Anxiety reduces working memory.
- Calmness grants access to cognitive abilities.
- Emotionally regulated students perform closer to their ability.



Prefrontal cortex

Recognizing Emotional Barriers

These behaviours look like poor performance, but they are actually emotional responses.

- Freezing (mind goes blank)
- Negative predictions (“I’ll fail this”)
- Catastrophic Thinking (“One mistake = disaster”)
- Rushing (speeding through tasks)
- Avoidance (refusing to start, skipping tasks or even classes!)

Which of these behaviours do you notice in class? How do you deal with them?



The 1-Minute Grounding Technique



Slow inhale / Slow Exhale

5 second inhale followed by 5 second exhale. Repeat both 6 times.



Feet on the floor

Classic grounding technique that shifts attention from anxious thoughts.



Name the moment

Micro-statements that reduce emotional intensity: “I am grateful”, “I am loved.”, “I am proud of myself.”, “I can do this.”

***“Almost everything will work again if you
unplug it for a few minutes, including you.”***

– Anne Lamott



02.

Cognitive Readiness

Building Exam-Ready Mindsets

Techniques used before the start or after the end of the lesson.

- The 1-Minute Grounding Technique (applies to lesson as well)
- The “Small Wins” Check-In (training students to notice growth)
- Setting small goals (e.g. “Today I will learn three words.”)
- Post-lesson reflection (knowledge, mistakes, approaches)

How else would *you* boost their mindsets?

Building Cognitive Organisation

Work *smarter*, not *harder*.

- Associate learning materials with stimuli (video, role-play, games, et al.).
- Chunking Information (e.g. group expressions, routines)
- The 3-step refocus method when stuck:
 - *Pause, lift your head, and breathe.*
 - *Identify the problem.*
 - *Choose the next micro-action.*



03.

Growth Mindset

A photograph of four students in a modern classroom setting, each seated at a wooden desk and focused on working on papers. The students are a young man in a blue sweater, a young woman with curly hair in a white shirt, a young woman in a white sweater, and a young woman in a white shirt. The background features a wall with a geometric pattern of white and brown triangles. A red vertical bar is on the left side of the image.

**HOW DO YOU WORK
ON PRACTICE TESTS?**

Strategy Spotting

Have the students question their approach towards testing.

- Use past papers or practice tests, but pause frequently:
 - “Which strategy did you use here?”
 - “Which one would have been better?”
 - “How did you allocate your time?”
 - “In which order did you complete the test?”

Why: Makes their strategy use conscious, repeatable and internalised.

Setting Focal Points

**Create intentionality → reduce panic →
improve quality of practice**

- Teachers must inspire students to set a focal point e.g.
 - “Today I will manage timing.”
 - “I will underline key words.”
- Set harder challenges:
 - Listening without replay.
 - Deciphering a text with unknown words, grasping the gist, inferring the meaning (implicit vs explicit statements).

Why: Building tolerance for difficulty, preparing for exam pressure

Building Long-Term Resilience in Exams

Use score dips as “data points,” not failures.

	Writing	Listening	Reading	Grammar	Vocabulary	Speaking
Test1	75%	65%	65%	65%	65%	65%
Test2	80%	70%	68%	70%	70%	70%
Test3	60%	72%	72%	80%	80%	78%
Test4	58%	70%	70%	85%	82%	84%

*Positive feedback: “This dip is telling us what to practice next.”,
“Your scores are steady, which is great! Now let’s see how to
boost them.”*

Why: Develops resilience instead of shame-driven avoidance.



04.

Exam Preparation With a Human Lens

Writing Strategies

- Do we need, or even have time for a ‘draft’?
- Prioritizing ‘clarity’ over ‘flawlessness’
- Linking words to avoid repetition → Is rote learning justified?
- Allocating time for reflection; the importance of spare time.
- After completion, breathe, and reassess writing.
 - Calming down provides clarity to correct mistakes or enhance content.

Reading Strategies

- Divide long texts into manageable parts to reduce overwhelm.
- Regulate pacing and prevent frantic scanning.
 - First read = relaxed general understanding
 - Second read = strategy focused
- Get unstuck by eliminating one option → boost confidence.
- Reframing unknown vocabulary (inferring, deduction).

Grammar, Vocabulary & Integrated Skills Strategies

- If unsure: mark, move on, return later.
- Spot the pattern, don't memorise the rule.
 - Reducing cognitive load
- Making an educated guess.
 - Process of elimination or deduction
- Don't disregard a 'simple' answer.
- Circle triggers: time markers, linking words, auxiliary verbs, et al.
 - Supporting faster problem-solving

Speaking Strategies

- Examiners reward communication, not perfection.
- Strategic fillers to enhance fluency: “Hmm. Let me think...”
- Rote learning: Positive statements relieve stress: “I’d be happy to answer.”, “Thank you so much!”, “I appreciate it.”.
- ‘Reset’ before you speak: Training students to take a two-second inhale followed by a two-second exhale before their turn **reduces shakiness, slows tempo**, and instantly **improves coherence**.

Listening Strategies

- Begin with grounding breathwork before listening.
- Train “keep listening even if lost”.
- Focus on keywords and gist.
- Use prediction markers (✓/X/?) to build tolerance for uncertainty.



05.

Case Studies & Approaches

Case Study 1 – Speaking Anxiety Under Pressure

Student: Jessica is a fluent B2 student who freezes during speaking assessment. She rushes, overthinks grammar and feels every hesitation is a failure. Her anxiety prevents her from showing her true ability.

Solutions:

- Advise a 2-second inhale/exhale reset before speaking.
- Use strategic fillers (“Let me think...”) and positive openers.
- Practise low-stakes speaking cycles to normalise hesitation.

Case Study 2 – Reading Overwhelm & Cognitive Load

Student: Dimitris becomes overwhelmed by long texts and unknown words. He scans too quickly, panics when confused, and loses comprehension. His difficulty stems from stress, not ability.

Solutions:

- Divide the text into chunks & slow first pass for orientation.
- Eliminate just one option when unsure.
- Reframe unknown words as opportunities for deduction, using triggers and clues.

Case Study 3 – Writing Perfectionism & Poor Time Management

Student: Ariana writes excellent essays but cannot finish on time. She edits obsessively, rewrites sentences, and panics when her ideas aren't perfect. Perfectionism blocks clarity and flow.

Solutions:

- Produce a draft and pertain to it. Edit upon finishing essay.
- Apply stress-reduction strategies to reduce panic, helping her accept imperfection as part of the writing process.
- Clarify importance of 'clarity' over 'flawlessness'.

Case Study 4 – Listening Disconnect

Student: Markos panics the moment he misses a word in a listening test. He disconnects from the audio and mentally reviews what he missed instead of continuing. His difficulty is emotional regulation, not comprehension.

Solutions:

- Begin with grounding breathwork before listening.
- Train “keep listening even if lost”: focus on keywords and gist.
- Use prediction markers (✓/X/?) to build tolerance for uncertainty.

Happiness Leads to Success



**Remind our students why
they're learning English.**



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RESOURCES

PHOTOS

- Youngsters with notepads along wall by @freepik
- Lovely schoolgirl concentrated on reading by @freepik
- Stress response anatomical diagram with body inner by @brgfx
- Business woman sitting in padmasana pose by @Yanalya
- Cheerful young woman taking notes while sitting on steps outdoors by @teksomolika
- Still life with human brains and watering can by @freepik
- High angle kids cheating at school by @freepik
- Close-up kid drawing on paper by @freepik
- Editor checking words on journal article before publish @rawpixel.com
- Girl sitting at school table with notebook by @freepik
- Teenage student smiling with book on head by @Freepik
- Happy friends graduating by @freepik

Seminar
Materials



Password: KRMM1

THANKS

Do you have any questions?

katherinereilly1@yahoo.com

+30 6933247807

<https://katherinereilly.blog/>



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