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## The CATESOL Journal

### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0cj3j12b>

### Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 30(2)

### ISSN

1535-0517

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### Publication Date

2018

### DOI

10.5070/B5.35953

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## Creating Buy-In: Integrating IEP Core Curricula and TOEFL Prep

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is the standard in the college admissions process, leading to the inclusion of preparation classes in Intensive English Program (IEP) curricula. But does preparing for the TOEFL in isolation yield optimal results for IEP college hopefuls? In this article, we will share information about the structure of the test as well as skills needed to perform successfully. In addition, we will offer teaching strategies and activities that we have found useful in increasing student buy-in, strengthening their test-taking abilities, and building their skills in order to increase their test scores. We believe that if we can better connect what we are teaching in our other intensive English classes to skills assessed on the TOEFL, it could lead to decreased resistance to particular activities.

“Um ... sorry. I didn't do my homework because I had to study for the TOEFL.” This common utterance made to Intensive English Program (IEP) instructors is an indication that students fail to see the connection between skills taught in IEP courses and how these are aligned with the tasks on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). With more than 24 million test takers since its inception (Labi, 2010), the TOEFL is the most widely used assessment of English proficiency by universities. Of 138 institutions surveyed, 100% used TOEFL as an admission gatekeeper (Andrade, Evans, & Hartshorn, 2014) and 86% of IEP students participate in test-preparation courses either as part of their institution or as a supplemental course (Ling, Powers, & Adler, 2014). However, taking TOEFL prep in isolation has not been correlated to an increase in scores, specifically in the writing section, when compared with regular academic writing courses (Green, 2007). Most important, students do not see the direct relevance of classroom activities to improving scores (Stoller, 1999).

When we began teaching test-preparation courses at the University of Pennsylvania, we were a little nervous. What did we know about the TOEFL?

Sometimes students told us, instructors in the Intensive Program (IP), about their experiences taking the test, or maybe they complained about having to study for the TOEFL in addition to their regular core courses, but since we ourselves had not taken it and had no reason to learn about it, we were a little intimidated. We knew how to teach prep activities; we knew how to present test-taking strategies; we were experts in teaching reading, writing, listening comprehension, and speaking improvement. Indeed, we were even certified examiners of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, another standardized English language tool for assessing competency. Despite these qualifications, we thought we needed firsthand experience taking the test. Therefore, we decided to take the test ourselves to better understand the experience for our students. It was an eye-opening experience.

The way the test was administered led to high levels of anxiety. For example, we were checked in with airport-like security and restricted from having water in the crowded test room. Since there were at least 15 other test takers in the room, background noise was a concern. It was quite distracting to hear candidates in the speaking section while we were trying to concentrate on other sections of the test. Additionally, it was not unusual for computers to malfunction during the test. Twice we had to get up and seek help, only to miss vital instructions. Even as native English speakers, we found these complications distracting and anxiety inducing.

Even though we shared our students' anxiety while taking the TOEFL, we also gained immeasurable insight from that experience that helped when preparing our test-preparation courses. In addition to helping us prepare the test-preparation courses, one thing that stuck with us was that most of the skills assessed on the TOEFL are skills that are covered in many of the IP core classes. For example, the TOEFL assesses listening and reading comprehension using similar types of questions found in our curricular materials. In addition, cohesion in writing and speaking is measured by a test taker's ability to use transition words and referents or attribute source material. Again, this is a topic that is addressed in several parts of the IP curricula. We found this overlap surprising because in our experience, students seemed to regard IP courses and test preparation as separate, opting to take a different and/or additional course specifically designed for TOEFL preparation and in some cases prioritizing that class over the general reading/writing or listening/speaking courses. Once we recognized this overlap, we shared it with our students in the core classes, and we felt an increase in student buy-in for those activities.

From these relevant experiences, we felt better prepared to tackle the prep courses with more confidence and knowledge. In this article, we would like to share some information about the test, in addition to offering teaching strategies and activities that we have found useful in increasing student

buy-in, strengthening their test-taking abilities, and building their skills in order to increase their test scores. We believe that if we can better connect what we are teaching in our other intensive English classes to skills assessed on the TOEFL, it could lead to decreased resistance to particular activities. Students seem to appreciate the acknowledgment of that direct relevance between IP lessons and testing material (Powell, 2001).

### **Overview of the Receptive Tasks: Reading and Listening**

The reading section is the first section of the test and it consists of three to five passages ranging in length from 600 to 700 words and 39 questions. The section is generally an hour long, depending on how many passages the students receive. The reason for some variability in the number of passages is that the Educational Testing Service (ETS) uses the reading and listening sections to test out some experimental passages, although test takers will not know which sections are not counted in the total score (Sharpe, 2006). The content of the passages mimics the language and concepts covered in a 100-level university course. The vocabulary includes 36-73 low-frequency words that international students are not expected to know or words with a number of varied meanings (Phillips, 2013). The listening section is the second section of the test and it consists of two conversations (campus-related) and four lectures (5 to 6 minutes in length), although there could be an experimental section here as previously mentioned. It takes approximately an hour to complete the listening section. It is only after the recording is played that the questions are revealed to the test taker one at a time.

### **Overview of the Productive Tasks: Speaking and Writing**

The writing section consists of two tasks: independent and integrated. The independent response is based on a general opinion-oriented question. One example could be: Describe a custom from your country that you would like people from other countries to adopt. For the integrated writing, students need to first read a 250-300-word passage on an academic subject in 3 minutes. Then they will hear a 1-2-minute lecture. The test taker has 20 minutes to then write a 150-225-word essay on how the two sources of input are related. The total time for these two tasks is 60 minutes and test takers are evaluated using a 5-point rubric (see [iBT Next Generation TOEFL Test Integrated and Independent Writing Rubrics](#) on the ETS website).

The speaking section consists of six tasks: two independent speaking and four integrated speaking. The independent speaking tasks are each 45 seconds long, with only 15 seconds to prepare. Independent topics are similarly opinion-oriented questions that ask the student to defend a preference or describe a personal experience. The integrated tasks ask the test taker to read, listen, and then orally respond. During the six speaking tasks, the test taker will hear multiple beeps indicating the beginning and ending of

each task. Test takers are evaluated on a 4-point rubric. Students need near perfection in all categories to be awarded the full points (K. Griffin, TOEFL rater, personal communication, November 13, 2015). For example, students must score a 4 in all three categories (delivery, language use, topic development) to receive a high score of 4/4 on the speaking task. The total time for these six tasks is 20 minutes (see iBT Next Generation TOEFL Test Independent and Integrated Speaking Rubrics on the ETS website).

## **Skills and Activities for Reading and Listening**

### **1. Question Analysis**

The questions in both the reading and the listening sections are mostly multiple choice and can be divided into several categories: main idea or gist, detail known as factual or negative factual, vocabulary or reference, inference, author's purpose, sentence restatement, or summary. (For an in-depth discussion of each question type, see Rogers [2007].) Understanding what the question is asking is the first key step in answering the question. Explaining these question types to students empowers them to move faster through the questions and look for explicit information in order to choose the answer response. It is important to note that these types of questions are not limited to the TOEFL test-taking experience. Many of the curricula and textbooks used in IEPs use these question types to check for comprehension of either a listening or a reading passage. Making this connection clear to students may increase their buy-in and subsequently their motivation in their general classes. For example, in-class analysis of texts can focus on the author's purpose in order to provide deeper meaning. Asking students to summarize the topic sentences or main ideas is also useful for creating comprehension of the entire text. When the instructor uses these activities in class and connects to the TOEFL test, students are better able to see the relevance of their classroom efforts.

### **2. Dealing With Unknown Words**

Students can become very frustrated when they encounter a word or phrase with which they are unfamiliar. When this happens in a classroom setting or at home, a student may briefly stop reading and turn to a dictionary or a translator. This interruption creates a challenge when the student is asked to reflect on the main ideas of the reading. In a testing scenario, that same student, stripped of his or her dictionary or translator, can become frustrated. This discouragement, or dwelling on that unknown term, can lead to the slowing of reading speed or the loss of focus during a listening or reading task. It can also lead to an all-out failure to understand many of the ideas of a passage or lecture. It is important in the IP classroom as well as the test-prep course to teach strategies for overall comprehension despite the occurrence of unknown words. This is not just a test-prep issue. It is an

issue that students will face in their next academic setting, extended reading that goes beyond the word and sentence levels.

In our experience, it is helpful to remove the curtain between test writers and test takers by explaining to students that TOEFL passages and lectures are filled with field-specific jargon and that even native English speakers are not expected to be familiar with 100% of the words used on the test. The passages contain academic and field-specific terminology and part of the objective of ETS's using this type of language in this context is to prove a student's ability to work around or even through these issues in academic settings. This explanation can prompt students to examine their own reading strategies to prepare for how they will deal with unknown words in their reading or listening sections of the test. Research has shown that helping students to practice and use an interactive meaning-based model can help them to read faster and comprehend more. Students can move past "being bound to the level of words" and learn to "prioritize higher-level, meaning-centered strategies" without being "dominated by words" (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997). What this means is challenging students to continue reading even when they encounter a word with which they are unfamiliar in order to focus on the main ideas of the passage rather than on the meaning of each word. Significantly, IEP reading and vocabulary courses often help students develop strategies for dealing with difficult words, such as learning to guess, skipping, and looking for context clues.

### ***3. Skimming and Scanning During Reading***

Since the TOEFL test is timed, learning to read quickly is a valuable skill. Students can be encouraged to use skimming techniques to understand the main idea and organization of the passages, rather than spending a lot of time trying to understand everything. Two types of speed-reading activities can be helpful for this practice. *Timed reading* exercises allow students to read passages of the same level of difficulty and length, marking the text as they read. Each student records the time it takes to read the passage. Then the student answers eight multiple-choice comprehension questions; however, the student is not allowed to go back into the text. Once she or he has completed the eight questions, the student calculates her or his word-per-minute rate and records that on a Timed Reading Practice Log. This log helps the students track their progress with timed reading. Finally, the instructor gives the students the correct answers to the multiple-choice comprehension questions, and each student records her or his score on the log. A valid reading sample is one on which the student can answer a minimum of six of the eight questions correctly. If a student scored less than 6, then she or he should slow her or his speed and see if that assists with her or his comprehension of the text (Mikulecky & Jeffries, 2007).

The second type of speed-reading exercises is called *paced reading*. In

this exercise, the instructor informs the students that the average reading speed of a native English-speaking college-bound high school graduate is 180 to 200 words per minute. Each student is given a text and after every 180 to 200 words, there is a mark in the margin. Once the students start reading, each minute is timed. The expectation is that each student will get to the end of a given section within that minute. The students are notified after each complete minute passes. The students must begin the next section at the start of the minute, even if they have not finished the last section. After reading the entire passage, students answer eight multiple-choice comprehension questions. In this exercise, students can see how much they missed in each section and strive to read faster (Ewert, 2015).

Scanning games are useful for helping students to find specific information quickly. A variety of academic texts from different fields can be used and quickly prepared with specific questions. Teams compete to find the answers to the questions quickly. Again, this is a common activity used in IEP reading classes to help students practice searching for answers without needing to read large amounts of data for comprehension. This skill set can help students find specific parts of the reading passages in TOEFL in order to dig deeper for responses to the questions.

#### ***4. Note Taking and Using Abbreviations***

In the listening section of the TOEFL test, students must learn and practice strategies for taking notes quickly and efficiently. Research has shown that taking notes in a nonlinear fashion helps students recognize and remember the information (Piolat, Olive, & Kellogg, 2005). In addition, Piolat et al. indicate that there is a wide variation in abbreviation techniques. Practice is essential to become more efficient at note taking. Using samples of the listening section can be useful in demonstrating to students the level of note taking needed to successfully respond to detail-oriented questions. However, it is often necessary to help students focus on smaller amounts of data in order to develop a system of their own. One of the activities that can be used in class to this effect is to offer the students short phrases and sentences using abbreviations that they can deconstruct. As students gain more experience with developing their own systems, the language can be lengthened to more closely resemble the length of the listening passages on the TOEFL test.

### **Skills and Activities for Speaking and Writing**

#### ***1. Impromptu Speaking***

One method for developing the ability to “speak on your feet” is to use envelopes with common independent-speaking questions. This is also a good way to develop familiarity with a variety of topics. Fifteen seconds is not really enough time to prepare a well-thought-out spoken response, but

with enough practice, students are able to get used to speaking with very little preparation. Class can begin every day with one or two topics from the envelope. Students seem to never want to miss this part of class and, therefore, manage to arrive on time. A by-product of this activity is that students are able to get to know everyone in class since they are walking and talking every day. Another way to practice impromptu speaking is through fluency lines. Students form two speaking lines, each facing each other. The instructor provides a personal question typical for the test (“Do you prefer to read a book or watch a movie?”). Students respond to the person directly across from them and then move on to the next person in line for another speaking prompt. This can continue for several questions. When the number of students in the class is uneven, the instructor can join the students, which allows many students to speak with the instructor on a personal level. Allowing a little time for feedback on responses helps students to use peer evaluations in a way that forces self-reflection as well as providing advice.

## **2. Using Timers in Class**

Getting used to being timed during class can help students deal with time pressures, intrusive beeping during the test, and knowing how much time to spend on various aspects of preparation. Timed activities have been shown to have multiple benefits not only in test-preparation contexts, but also in general ESL instruction. Research has shown that integration of timed activities can help build fluency in reading, writing, and speaking. For example, a study in Taiwan examined the effects on students’ reading speed and comprehension after the integration of speed-reading exercises into an English class with a specific focus on preparation for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). The experimental group exhibited an observable improvement in students’ reading speeds by 25% and corresponding increases in comprehension (Chang, 2010). Earlier in this article, we explored two different types of speed-reading activities: timed and paced. In this section, we would like to further explore the benefits of timed activities for speaking and writing.

One popular fluency-focused timed activity for speaking is called the *4/3/2 technique*. During this activity, students are given a topic and then 4 minutes to talk about that topic. After that first response, they are asked to speak on the topic again, but this time for 3 minutes. Finally, they recite this speech one more time, but in only 2 minutes. Instructors and researchers report that this technique has led to greater words-per-minute rates and fewer pauses and hesitations (Nation, 1989). The 4/3/2 technique can be customized to fit TOEFL preparation specifically by selecting TOEFL-like independent topics, or those that focus on experience and opinion. Additionally, the same technique can be used to accommodate different time frames. In the case of the TOEFL, the final time frame is 45 seconds, so rather than 4/3/2



minutes, one could use 90/60/45 seconds. This activity again can be used to promote general fluency in any speaking-focused class, but for test preparation, the focus is to help prepare students for the time constraints of the speaking section.

Timed writing is also useful as students can quickly realize that spending too much time on the beginning of an essay leaves them with very little time to develop their arguments and conclusions. In our experience, students begin writing immediately after receiving the prompt and take a linear approach; they start with the introduction and keep writing until they finish the conclusion or, more often than not, the time runs out. This can cause disfluency in the response. A test-preparation strategy is to encourage students to spend time after receiving the prompt to think about the topic and develop a quick outline before they begin writing. This helps develop their ideas before taking on the next challenge of putting those ideas into words, sentences, and paragraphs. Prewriting is a common strategy found in general IP writing curricula. However, in our experience, students fail to use this strategy in a testing scenario. The only difference between using this strategy in a general IP setting versus a test-preparation classroom is the time constraints. In process-focused writing, IP students are not generally asked to prewrite, draft, edit, and finalize in less than an hour. On the other hand, perhaps timed-writing activities should be part of IP core curricula. If many of the students enrolled are academically bound, then learning to write under time constraints could be valuable university preparation as essay questions are commonly part of larger tests in most university settings. Those tests are generally under some sort of time constraint, and therefore preparing students to prewrite, draft, edit, and finalize in one sitting is a valuable skill that will prove useful after their time at the IP and well after they have taken the TOEFL.

### ***3. Synthesizing, Paraphrasing, and Using Transitions***

To achieve a higher score in the integrated writing or speaking tasks, students need to be able to synthesize input material. For two of the speaking tasks and one writing task, test takers need to combine a reading passage and a listening passage in a way that is cohesive and coherent. Test takers are often tempted to summarize both sources of input, rather than describe how they are related, but describing the relationship between the source materials is vital.

One way to help students understand the relationship between two input sources is to explicitly teach students the types of relationships. The two sources could be oppositional. For example, the lecture might support animal research while the reading offers the opposite perspective. One source might be the explanation of an abstract theory, while the other source is a concrete example of that theory. Challenging students to identify that rela-

tionship and teaching them structures to express that relationship will help them perform well on these integrated tasks and in their university setting.

Paraphrasing is another skill that is very important when attempting the integrated tasks and in academic writing in general. Cultural differences toward authorship and plagiarism can lead to a misunderstanding or perhaps a discounted attitude toward the value of paraphrasing (Hayes & Introna, 2005). It is for this reason that students need this skill, not only on the TOEFL, but also to set them up for success at their next academic institution. Vocabulary instruction in many forms increases students' lexical resources, which will help them when seeking synonyms for the purpose of paraphrasing. Explicit instruction on how to change a sentence from passive to active voice, nominalization, replacing a word with its meaning, or joining clauses will help students express in their own words information they have acquired from source material.

Last, transition words help students clearly and cohesively describe the relationship between the two sources. Exposure and practice with transition words that organize material by cause/effect, chronology, opposition, and classification will ultimately help students accurately report in both the integrated tasks and academic writing. When identifying source material, students can find the phrase "According to ..." a crutch, but oftentimes, students need explicit instruction on how to use this signaling device. Students will try to use "According to ..." to describe a main idea, or they will try to use it when expressing their own opinions. Direct instruction can help students understand that this helpful signaling phrase is used to identify a piece of information and its source. This, along with many other transition words, adds to the cohesion of an essay and help students avoid simply summarizing each source.

### **Conclusion**

Helping our students notice the overlap between university preparation taught in the IEP and the skills tested on the TOEFL has increased student buy-in in our classrooms and furthered our students' understanding of the assessment tool as a whole. We learned a multitude about the testing experience when we took the TOEFL. We experienced the testing conditions and the unavoidable anxiety, but our biggest takeaway was the overlap we found between the test and the skills taught in the IEP. While we understand that it is not possible for all IEP instructors to take the TOEFL, we believe that it is important for instructors to learn about what academically bound IEP students are facing as far as challenges of standardized testing. If instructors can emphasize the crossover from the classroom to test prep, students can start to see that the language of the test does not exist in a TOEFL vacuum. Some of the activities and challenges outlined in this article already exist in the IEP classroom. For example, encouraging students to analyze a ques-

tion on an exam is a useful academic skill. This increases text engagement. Learning how to read a question could be part of any number of IEP classes. Additionally, students in college will encounter words and phrases they have never seen before. Learning strategies for how to decipher meaning despite that unknown word can only help students at their next educational destinations. It is our belief that students need to be explicitly told that the skills learned in their classes transfer to other educational experiences. Once that connection is made, students will be empowered to make meaningful steps toward achieving their academic goals.

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