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# TOEFL Preparation: Teaching With Time Constraints

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There is no simple and single criterion according to which one can be said to know a language. However, there are varying criteria for successful learning that can be described in terms of linguistic knowledge, communicative functions, situation, interlocutor or the ability to perform a described task, usually a test (Spolsky, 1992). According to these criteria, The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is one measurement of knowing a language even though a high TOEFL score does not necessarily mean one can communicate with his/her peers. Combine these ambiguous indicators of language proficiency with the international demand of students wanting to take the test, and you have a need for successful test preparation, often within time constraints.

This paper will provide some practical suggestions for the development of a TOEFL preparation class based on a Japanese University course with only 20 hours of instruction. The goal of this limited instruction, is an increase in students' confidence in taking the TOEFL, maintain motivation, and more importantly, increase substantially student scores. It is my intent to provide a guide for those teaching TOEFL or offering advice to students on what to study. This guide is based on my own success with teaching TOEFL over the past seven years at Japanese Universities. This paper will examine the problems associated with test preparation, an outline of the TOEFL, preparing for a TOEFL class, addressing the affective needs of students, practice in test taking, the selection and use of materials, a course outline and finally an explanation of the course content.

**Key Words:** TOEFL, multiple choice tests, language proficiency tests

## **Introduction — An Overview**

Tests are used for a variety of purposes: to measure students' knowledge in relation to future tasks they may need to perform, to place students, to grant certificates, to determine whether students can continue in future studies or have the language proficiency to do so. Whatever the purpose, test anxiety exists and the results obtained from these tests have a strong impact on the lives of the individuals taking them. TOEFL is no exception, in fact it may be more problematic for students as the objective test format tells test takers that there is only one correct answer, i.e. one "truth," one interpretation. This is especially problematic in the testing of reading comprehension where there may be many interpretations of a similar text since as readers construct meaning differently depending on their background, age, views, etc. (Shohamy, 1993). For these reasons, it is necessary to provide students with a TOEFL preparation course that eliminates test anxiety and provides the necessary confidence building, motivation, language and skill development needed to improve test results, despite their level of English proficiency. Another important factor for any TOEFL preparation class is the reality of time constraints. Current TOEFL textbooks on the market are designed to be completed in 90 hours (Rogers, 1997). However, this is a luxury rather than a reality when it comes to actual hours of available instruction. Most university courses meet once a week for 90 minutes for two semesters, or as in my institution, for only one semester. The question is then, what to teach and how to teach it in order to meet the goals stated above. In order to meet these goals, one must first have an understanding of the TOEFL itself; this understanding comes with time and experience, however, I will provide a basic overview of the TOEFL as it stands in

its present format.

### **The Test Of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)**

The TOEFL is a norm referenced (NRT) language proficiency test with 140 items objectively scored. Norm referenced proficiency tests are most often global measures of ability in a language or other content areas. They are not necessarily developed or administered with reference to some previously experienced course of instruction. These measures are often used for placement or selection. Norm referenced tests compare students' performance with others who took the test. The purpose is to spread students out along a continuum of general abilities (Brown, 1995).

The TOEFL was first administered in 1963-64 with the primary intention of evaluating the English proficiency of nonnative speakers who wished to attend colleges and universities in English speaking countries. Section 1 (Listening Comprehension — 35 minutes) measures the ability to recognize and understand English as it is spoken in North America. This section is divided into three parts. Part A requires that students listen to two line conversations between two speakers. In Part B, students listen to a longer conversation between two speakers. In Part C, students listen to an extended talk given by one speaker. Section 2 (Structure and Written Expression — 25 minutes) measures the ability to recognize selected structural and grammatical points in English. Section 3 (Reading Comprehension — 55 minutes) measures the ability to read and understand short passages similar in topic and style to textbooks one would encounter at a university or college in North America (TOEFL-Test of Written English Guide, Fourth Edition, 1996). Unlike the Test of English for

International Communication (TOEIC) which is designed to test real life business type English, TOEFL tests the ability to understand academic English.

Teachers need to understand two important aspects of the test before beginning to teach or offer advice on the test. First, high TOEFL scores are not necessarily effective indicators of academic success, contrary to what many students and educators believe. Students need to know this information in order to approach their academic studies in foreign institutions with realistic expectations about their future performance. Predictive validity studies which have been conducted for TOEFL (see Hale, Stansfield and Duran 1984) and for The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) (Criper and Davies, 1988) are, however, inordinately time-consuming and still leave considerable doubts as predictors in making university admission decisions as to possible academic performance. However, one 1983 study conducted at Kirkwood Community College in Iowa showed that students who obtained a high TOEFL score after completing their English as A Second Language (ESL) program prior to college, did achieve high grade point averages — length of English study, age, sex, country of origin and major were factors used in the study (Rosenberg, 1983). Although this study found clear patterns concerning the effect of ESL classes on students' academic success, they concluded that further research was needed. Another study showed that there is a significant correlation between TOEFL and the number of graduate credits earned (Light, et al, June 1987). Therefore, students who enter foreign institutions with high TOEFL scores will more likely succeed in completing a program than those students who enter with lower scores.

The other important consideration is that the content of TOEFL is at times culturally biased. That is, due to the fact the Educational

Testing Service (ETS) is an American institution, the TOEFL tends to reflect an American bias for example, the listening and reading sections often deal with current issues in the United States. Students need to know that TOEFL does not represent all English speaking countries or cultures; hence, they need to know that TOEFL is culturally specific (Ward, 1994).

### **Preparing for a TOEFL Class**

In order to achieve a realistic and effective response to what students need in order to obtain an increase in TOEFL scores, five test preparation techniques should be addressed before beginning to teach a TOEFL preparation class,

1. address the affective needs of the student
2. practice in test taking to familiarize students with the test format and procedures
3. select and use the most relevant material
4. focus on language and skill building
5. train the students in test taking techniques based on the tests design features as used by the test creators.

Practical applications of each will be explained in this paper based on current theory in TOEFL test preparation and from my own experiences.

### **Address the Affective Needs of the Students**

Research over that last 15 years has shown that a variety of affective variables relate to the success in second language acquisition. According to Krashen (1991, pg.31), most of those studied can be placed

into one of these three categories:

1. *Motivation*: Performers with high motivation generally do better in second language acquisition. (usually, but not always)
2. *Self-confidence*: Performers with self-confidence and a good self-image tend to do better in second language acquisition.
3. *Anxiety*: Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety.

Although the three factors stated above relate to second language acquisition, in my experience, the same can be applied to test preparation. One may question the need for addressing the affective needs of a student in a test preparation class, however, I have found that this is a critical factor in an individual's success on the TOEFL, and the preparation needed to achieve this success. Studies on what factors contribute to successful language learning seem ultimately to give a very high place to the role of motivation. Learners who are positive about acquiring the language, and want to learn, will have a higher degree of success than those lacking these characteristics. One study conducted with Yemen students in the United States showed that "there was a positive correlation between motivation and self-esteem, associated with high TOEFL gain" (Palmer, 1989, pg.31). My experience has shown that initially, most students are motivated in a TOEFL preparation class, as they have some ultimate goal for wanting to do well on the test. However, the problem is maintaining this high level of motivation as students can quickly become discouraged if they do not see any improvement in their performance. If students are continually faced with what they deem as "failure", then self-esteem is

decreased, anxiety is increased and the desire to learn is severely hindered. Consequently, successful performance and a sense of achievement must be maintained throughout the entire course. It is impossible for me to explain everything I do in order to maintain this sense of achievement since many of the techniques I utilize are instinctive and vary from class to class. However, aspects of how I try to ensure some measure of success, and therefore maintain motivation, are explained in many parts of this paper.

### **Practice in Test Taking**

In order to familiarize students with the TOEFL, and to develop confidence in taking the test, it is important to administer the test in full or part, as frequently as possible during the course. It is my suggestion that teachers take the tests with the students. Experiencing the test first hand is the only way to truly appreciate its complexity, the types of questions and level of difficulty those taking the test are faced with. The more practice teachers have, the better prepared they are to answer questions students may have about the test. They also gain a better understanding of what students need in regards to content. When teachers speak about the test, they speak from experience; therefore the level of trust and comfort is increased in the classroom (Ward, 1994). However, simulated tests should be administered judiciously so that in a course faced with time constraints, the majority of time is spent on language and skill development. As time constraints are the reality with the courses I have taught, I organize practice test taking in the following way.

In order to evaluate the level of the students' TOEFL skills, and to provide a tool for monitoring progress, students need to take a com-



plete TOEFL test at the beginning of the course administered under the conditions that simulate an actual exam. In subsequent classes, students study each section of the test (listening, grammar and reading). Once study is completed in each section, a partial test should be taken of that section in order for students to monitor their progress. This is a powerful motivating tool when students are able to see a substantial increase in their scores after such a short period of time. Although the actual increase in score varies from student to student, my experience has shown that the majority of students do see relevant increases. Depending on the class I have taught, the average increase in listening scores after completing study in that section has ranged from 40 to 70 points. A complete TOEFL test is also administered at the end of the course as a final indicator of the progress students have made in all three sections of the test.

Studies have shown that examinees who repeated taking the TOEFL within 1 to 12 months following the initial testing, registered substantial average net gains in performance (Wilson, 1987). Therefore, the need to have students take the test or part of the test throughout the course is imperative as it familiarizes the students with taking the TOEFL, increases motivation and self-esteem and at the same time reduces student anxiety towards the test.

### **Selection of Materials**

One of the first things students and instructors want to know about preparing for TOEFL, is what textbook they should use. At present, there are many TOEFL preparation books on the market. Each text offers the same basic format but may be stronger in one area than another. After reviewing a variety of books, I decided to use Heinle

and Heinle's, *The Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test*. I feel that it provides students with both the language and the necessary test taking skills needed for success on the TOEFL. Although I do not use this book exclusively, (in fact I use a variety of materials both original and from other sources) it has provided a foundation for my course and provides students with excellent study material plus three complete practice tests.

It is my belief that learning is enhanced when the learners are convinced that the knowledge and skills they will acquire is worth the effort and is related to their needs and aspirations, in this case, when the material presented has not only intrinsic value but also practical value. Class activities should help learners see the relationship between what they are doing in the class and how it will benefit them on the test. When one considers the vast amount of material presented in the many TOEFL preparation books and the time needed to cover it, the task of selecting the language and skills that will have the greatest relevance for the students, considering the duration of the training and the various levels of ability, is a difficult one. I feel that I have managed to choose material that has enabled students to increase their TOEFL scores significantly (average increase of 70 points) after only 20 hours of instruction. Although the actual number of skills covered may seem somewhat limited, I believe that students should develop some mastery of the language and skill areas being taught. If one tries to teach too many things, students never really have the opportunity to internalize and use successfully what they have learned. This translates to not seeing direct results of their study on the test. However, as with any course, the material covered needs to undergo continual change in order to maximize success, and in this case achieve even greater increases in student TOEFL scores.

## Use of Materials

Considering classes of mixed ability, it is important that the material used provides each student with the opportunity to achieve some form of success. In order to do so, one must present the material being studied in two ways. At first, as an introduction to any specific skill, the activity should be simple yet relevant to the TOEFL so that students can become familiar with the language and at the same time, gain an understanding of how it is used on the actual test. And then, the activity should be repeated but now reflecting the language level found on the TOEFL. How I utilize this technique can be seen in the following example of the way I have students work with the language associated with agreeing and disagreeing. The activities described are adapted from the Hienle and Hienle, *Complete Guide to TOEFL*, however the methodology is my own.

### **Working with Agreement and Disagreement Statements**

One of the skills studied in class, is the ability to recognize agreement and disagreement statements. In listening Part A, students will hear the second speaker agree or disagree with what the first speaker has said. In order to familiarize the students with the actual statements used on the TOEFL, we simply go over the list provided in the text. I then go over these statements by calling them out loud and the students simply respond as a group whether it is an agreement or disagreement statement. The next activity, requires students listen to a series of two line conversations at the same language level used on the actual TOEFL, and simply identify if the second speaker agrees or disagrees with the first speaker. After going over the correct answers, I have the students listen again and write down the actual statement

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heard. In general, all students do very well with this activity, and thus achieve a measure of success. Next, the students do a practice exercise which reflects the actual TOEFL. After this exercise, the ability of the students is clearly defined as the range of correct answers varies greatly. In order to maintain motivation in the students who did not do well, it is important to once again provide an opportunity for them to succeed. I do this in two ways depending on the number of questions answered correctly, 1) I turn their results into a possible TOEFL score. For example, if a student achieved 8/15 or 53% of the correct answers (which some students would view as an almost failing score), I inform them that it is equal to about 475 on the TOEFL. This can have a powerful effect on some students. They then view what they thought was a failure as a success. 2) I have the students listen again and write down the agreement or disagreement statement that was used. Once again, most students, despite their level of ability, are able to identify most of the statements used and know whether the person is agreeing or disagreeing. I make it a point of telling students that even though they may not have answered correctly as many questions as they would have liked, just being able to recognize the language and understand what it means is an accomplishment in itself and is an indication that they are learning.

By presenting the material used in class so that the focus is on what the students can do, a high level of motivation is maintained, students are faced with a series of successful experiences, and they develop a higher level of self-esteem. This in itself cannot increase their scores, but it does provide one of the necessary tools for doing so.

## Course Outline

The following is an outline of language and skill development I presently teach in my TOEFL preparation class lesson by lesson. The intent is to only provide instructors with a guideline of what to teach or what to advise students to study given time constraints in instruction or of the individual. (Most of the content of the course I teach can be found in almost any textbook on the market.) Explanation of the language or skill studied in each lesson will be explained later. Although I only focus on a select amount of material, the pace of each of the classes is quite vigorous, as there is still a lot to cover in a limited period of time.

### Course Outline

- Lesson One** — complete practice test — Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression  
— assign Reading Comprehension section for homework
- Lesson Two** — go over answers for Reading Comprehension section  
*Section I—Listening Comprehension—Listening Part A*  
— idiom development  
— concentrate on the second line of the dialogue  
— working with synonyms  
— paraphrasing activity — homework
- Lesson Three** — idiom development  
— review homework (paraphrasing)  
— listen for key vocabulary  
— listen for negatives in the second line of the

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- dialogue
- paraphrasing activity — homework
- Lesson Four**
  - idiom development
  - review homework (paraphrasing)
  - listen for agreement/disagreement statements in the second line of the dialogue
  - guessing technique for agreement/disagreement statements
- Lesson Five**
  - idiom development
  - Guessing Techniques:*
    - choose a guess letter
    - choose the answer which is most different
    - opposites in answers
    - review of skills in Part A
    - practice test Part A only
- Lesson Six**
  - idiom development
  - Listening Comprehension* — Part B and C
    - predicting questions
    - follow along with the answers
- Lesson Seven**
  - idiom development
  - practice test — Listening Comprehension section only
  - Section II — Structure and Written Expression*
    - helpful hints — what to study
  - Written Expression*
    - word form
- Lesson Eight**
  - idiom development
  - parallel structure
  - subject verb agreement

- Lesson Nine** — idiom development  
— singular and plural nouns  
— practice test — Written Expression only
- Lesson Ten** — idiom development  
— practice test — Structure and Written Expression only
- Section III — Reading Comprehension*
- helpful hints  
— recognize the different types of questions
- Lesson Eleven** — idiom development  
— working with direct questions  
— assign reading section of complete final practice test for homework
- Lesson Twelve** — complete practice test — Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression

(Each lesson is one ninety minute class.)

It is clear from my course outline that the majority of time is spent on the listening section of the test, more specifically, Part A. I have found that students tend to experience great difficulty with listening comprehension as they have not received a significant amount of training in this area. The Japanese English language education system at the Junior and Senior High school level has traditionally emphasized a grammar and reading curriculum as these are the skills tested on most university entrance exams. For this reason, students have a strong background in these areas, and once direction is provided (skills specific to TOEFL) they are better prepared for success with independent study.

## **Explanation of Course Content**

In order to have a clear understanding of the content of my classes, the following is an explanation of the material used in each lesson including some examples of activities actually done.

### **Lesson One**

#### **Complete Practice Test**

As this is the first class, a complete practice TOEFL test is administered in order to determine the students English proficiency level, and as a starting point in which to monitor student progress. For best results, one should try to administer the practice tests under the same conditions as the actual test. (listening to instructions, no breaks, no turning pages when done, no going back to check work) However, due to time (90 minutes per class) this becomes impossible. For this reason I have the students do the reading section at home and go over the answers in the next class.

### **Lesson Two: Listening Part A**

#### **Idiom Development**

Idioms and phrasal verbs are two of the students' major stumbling blocks on the TOEFL. Although idioms and phrasal verbs appear throughout the test, the listening section tends to use them frequently. They are tested directly in Part A of the listening section. The following is an example of how they are used on the test.

Students hear:

Man: Have you finished your work yet?



Woman: I haven't even scratched the surface.

Narrator: What does the woman mean?

Without the knowledge of what the idiom means, students can only guess at a possible answer. Consequently, I spend a great deal of time in the course focusing on idioms. The Heinle and Heinle Preparation Book mentioned earlier, has extensively outlined the commonly occurring idioms found on the TOEFL. (approximately 260 idioms) The text, however, only provides students with a short explanation of the idioms followed by a cloze exercise for some of the idioms introduced. If students are to acquire any mastery of the idioms useful for application on the test, then more extensive practice is needed. In order to achieve this, I have the students create their own sentences using the idioms in the same way they are used on the TOEFL and then have them do an "idiom quiz" based on the idioms studied which also follows the TOEFL format. These quizzes need to be created by the teacher, however once developed, they become an invaluable resource for any TOEFL preparation class.

### ***Concentrate on the Second Line***

In the listening section of the TOEFL students need to know exactly what to listen for in order to increase the likelihood of choosing the correct answer. In Listening Part A, students need to focus their attention on the second line of the two line conversation, as most of the questions can be answered correctly from the information found there. Practice exercises should follow the TOEFL format, and the conversations used should go from easy to more difficult. In doing so, you provided all students with practice while addressing all levels of language ability in the class.

As an extension activity for all the listening activities done in class,

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I have found that using the transcripts of what was spoken is very useful. Students are required to read the conversations and find the information in the second line needed to answer the question correctly.

This provides students with:

1. written material of what they are studying
2. opportunity to confirm what they understood either partly or entirely
3. chance to see what they didn't understand
4. ability to see more clearly how TOEFL is designed and utilizes the skills they are studying.

***Working with Synonyms/Paraphrasing***

***Choose an Answer Which is Similar in Meaning***

Choosing answers which are similar in meaning to words, statements and complete sentences that are spoken in the second line of the conversation appear in high frequency in Part A of the listening section. This can be seen in questions that ask "What does the man/woman mean"? For this reason, time must be spent in class focusing on this aspect of the test. While many of the textbooks provide exercises that deal with synonyms, unfortunately, none of the textbooks I have seen include practice exercises with paraphrasing. Thus, I create my own exercises that are used both in class and as homework. Students work individually and in small groups to paraphrase sentences at various levels of difficulty over a period of several classes.

**Lesson Three**

***Listen for Key Vocabulary***

Another important skill in Part A is for students to learn to listen

for key words mainly in the in the second line of the conversation, in order to help them answer questions that ask, “Where does the conversation probably take place?,” “What is the speakers probable occupation? and “What are the speakers doing?” One key to mastering this skill is to be able to recognize that one of these questions will be asked based on the answers provided; for example,

Students read:

- A) at a beauty salon
- B) at the beach
- C) in a sandbox
- D) at an outdoor restaurant

Once students have determined that the question to be asked will deal with place, they can then focus their attention listening for key vocabulary in the spoken statement that will help them choose the correct answer; for example,

Students hear:

Man: What can we do for you today?

Woman: I would like my haircut and my make up done.

Nar: Where does this conversation probably take place?

Even if students do not completely understand what they heard, but were able to hear the key vocabulary such as “haircut” or “makeup” then they have enough information to answer the question correctly. This is a skill that is very valuable to students, one they find easy to understand and apply and therefore have a great deal of success when they encounter these types of questions on the actual test. This skill is also useful in Part B, as similar questions are also asked.

### ***Listen for Negatives in the Second Line***

The use of negatives are very common in Part A of the listening

section. Students need to be able to recognize what a negative statement is and be able to choose an answer which reflects their understanding of the use of these negatives in spoken English. However, due to time restraints, it is impossible to teach the students all they need to know in order to gain a deep understanding of the use of negatives. In order to achieve some success with this particular skill, I combine both language development and a “guessing” technique in my lesson. Since TOEFL is scored according to the number of correct answers one achieves, it is imperative that students learn techniques that may increase the likelihood of choosing a correct answer through guessing. For this reason, I try to provide students with guessing techniques as much as possible. Although these techniques do not work all the time, they do provide students with tools to utilize when they are forced to guess an answer. (Other guessing techniques will be explained later in this paper). The following is an example of how I teach negatives using both language development and productive guessing.

With regular negatives “not or n’t” or with “nobody, none, nothing and never”, I have students focus on choosing an answer which has the same meaning as the negative, but expressed in the positive form. For example;

Students hear:

Tom is not sad.

In this case, students should choose an answer that contains the word “happy”. In addition, I tell students not to choose an answer that contains a negative when a regular negative expression is used in the conversation. The following is an example of how these techniques can be applied on the actual test. The underlined words are the key words students should focus on.

Students hear:

Woman: They made it to New York in only five hours?

Man: They didn't drive slowly on the trip.

Students read:

A) They couldn't drive more slowly.

B) They drove rather quickly.

C) They didn't want to drive at all.

D) They wanted to drive slowly.

Because A and C both use negatives, and a regular negative expression was used in the spoken statement, students can eliminate these as possible choices.

For negatives that use the prefixes, “un, in, and dis”, I teach students and have them practice choosing an answer that has the same meaning. For example; “the patient was insane” which equates to “the patient was crazy”. Again, if students don't understand what was spoken, but are able to hear “insane”, and recognize it as a negative, they then have a greater chance of guessing the correct answer.

## **Lesson Four**

### ***Agreement and Disagreement Statements***

What I do in class to teach agreement and disagreement statements has already been explained in the section entitled “Use of Materials”. However, I will now explain another guessing technique I teach to help increase the chances of guessing the correct answer if comprehension of the spoken statement was not achieved. As stated earlier, guessing techniques do not work unfailingly but do provide the students with a better opportunity of guessing the correct answer.

When an agreement or disagreement statement is heard in the

second line of the conversation, students should choose an answer that contains a word associated with agreement or disagreement. These words are as follows; *opinion, thinks, feels, believes, agrees, or agreement*. These words may also appear in the negative form, *doesn't have the same opinion, doesn't think, doesn't feel, doesn't believe, disagrees, is not in agreement*.

## **Lesson Five**

### **Other Guessing Techniques for Listening Part A**

As previously stated, the development of productive guessing techniques is an extremely worthwhile activity for students when approaching the TOEFL. It is important to provide students with some generic guessing techniques that can be applied to all the questions in Part A of the listening section. Once again, these techniques do not always work but are only taught as a tool so they can be used when the student needs to guess.

#### **1. Choose a Guess Letter**

This technique can be applied to all three sections of the test. Simply stated, students choose one letter (A, B, C, or D) and use the same letter each time they guess an answer. In the past, I have divided the class into two groups while taking practice tests. The first group used this technique while the second group did not. Students were asked to mark which questions they guessed. The results showed that students who used this technique increased the overall percentage of answers guessed correctly compared to those students who randomly use a different letter each time the need arose.

#### **2. Choose the Answer Which Is Most Different**

This technique can be used more effectively for Part A of the

listening section. In order to teach this technique, I have students do a pre-listening exercise, where they are instructed to read the possible answers for the upcoming listening exercise and choose the answer that looks the most different from the others.

Students Read:

- A) The puzzle was very difficult.
- B) The puzzle was difficult to find.
- C) He figured it out after only one try.
- D) The puzzle wasn't as difficult as they thought.

When students apply this technique, the best possible choice would be "C" as it is the most different looking from the others. They then listen to the tape and choose the correct answer based on what was said. When we go over the answers, students find that all the correct answers are the ones they choose before listening to the tape. I created this exercise myself in order to teach the technique and to provide students with practice using it. However, on the actual test, this technique does not work 100% as it is very difficult at times to be able to distinguish which answer looks most different, especially with only the 12 seconds between questions. It should also be stated that the answer that looks the most different isn't always the correct one. I tested this technique myself on several tests, and was able to guess the correct answer about 30% of the time. Even though it is not a guarantee that if students use it, they will choose the correct answer, it does help to lessen test anxiety as students have yet another tool to help them in a guessing situation.

### 3. Choose an Answer Where Opposites Appear

Another guessing technique students have found useful in Part A of the listening section, is when two words appear with opposite meanings in the four possible answers, then one of these answers is correct.

Students Read:

- A) He has never been fishing on Lake Ontario.
- B) He thinks fishing on this lake is boring.
- C) He would do anything to fish in this lake.
- D) It would be exciting to fish on this lake.

It is clear that “B” and “D” have words with opposite meanings and therefore, one of these answers is the correct answer. Students then have eliminated two possible answers and now have a 50% chance of choosing the correct one. Unlike the previous guessing techniques, I tried this on several tests and have found that it works all of the time.

### ***Review of All Skills Studied in Part A/Practice Test Part A Only***

In order to refresh students minds on what has been covered so far, I outline the skills studied and write them on the board. I then administer a practice test for Part A only. After completing the practice test, I go over the answers and have students compare their results with the scores they achieved on their first practice test. When students see an increase in their scores (which is the case the majority of the time) their confidence is increased, and motivation is maintained.

### **Lesson Six — Listening Part B and C**

The two skills studied for both Part B and C of the listening section of the test are “predict the questions” and “follow along with the answers”.

#### ***Predict the Questions***

Before any talk begins, students should skim the answers and use the information provided to predict the possible questions. Once the



students have made these inferences, they are better prepared for the talk they will hear as they have some idea of what the questions might be and therefore what information to listen for. It must be noted that on the actual test, there isn't much time for students to apply this skill. However, my students have indicated that they benefited from this practice because it helped them to recognize quickly certain types answers that always elicit the same types of questions.

In order to help students to use this skill successfully several activities are done in class. First, students are given a list of questions that are most commonly asked on parts A and B of the listening section. They are then given copies of a practice test for parts B and C and are required to work in pairs to determine which question may be asked based on the information provided in the answers. I then elicit possible answers and have students explain to the class the information in the answer which led them to decide their choice of question. This is done for the benefit of those students who might not have made the connection.

### ***Follow Along With and Answers***

Once the practice in predicting questions is completed, I hand out a series of answers which are based on one talk, similar to what they would experience on an actual test.

1. A) in an office  
B) in the factory of a printing company  
C) in a storeroom on the second floor  
D) in a store
2. A) thousands of cans of paint  
B) thousands of pans  
C) a painting of a can

- D) a can of paint
- 3. A) water wouldn't put out the chemical fire
  - B) the fire spread to the other buildings
  - C) the fire was too big
  - D) the factory was filled with a lot of chemicals
- 4. A) 5:00 AM
  - B) 4:30 AM
  - C) 4:30 PM
  - D) 5:30 PM

I then explain that the questions in sections B and C are sequential, and that students should look for key words and phrases in the possible answers and follow along with what they hear. In other words, question one will be about information given at the beginning of the talk and the other questions follow in predictable order. Therefore, they should be looking at the information in the answers so they know what to listen for in the talk. I then read the story and have students choose answers when the information needed to do so is provided in the talk. As the first story is always relatively easy, and the information very clear, the students almost always choose the correct answers. I repeat this activity several times increasing the level of difficulty. This is done in order to allow all students to experience success, to gain confidence with their listening ability and to fully understand how to apply the skill they are learning. (These are mini talks I have created on my own or have taken from sources other than the TOEFL). In order to expose students to the language level and content found on the actual TOEFL, this procedure is then repeated using several TOEFL practice tests. Although some students have indicated that this skill is difficult to use with every talk, as some are more difficult than others, they do find it helpful in being able to answer at least some of the

questions correctly.

## **Lessons Seven**

### **Practice Test — Listening Comprehension only**

The skills studied for the listening section are once again reviewed, and students take another practice test for the listening section only. Once the answers are provided, students are then able to see the progress they have made in this section of the test.

## **Lessons Seven, Eight and Nine**

### **Section II — Structure and Written Expression (Grammar)**

Before teaching any grammar, I provide the students with a list of “helpful hints” that will benefit them with this section of the test. This list is made up from my experiences teaching the course, from various textbooks and from what previous students have found helpful when taking the test. (When advising students of what grammar structures they should study, refer to *Heinle and Heinle’s Complete Guide to TOEFL*. In this text, the author outlines the most commonly tested structures for both the Structure and Written Expressions sections of the test.) Thus, this list is used as the guide for all grammar study done in class. Although there are two parts to Section II, Structure, which has students complete often long complicated sentences, and Written Expression which has students identify a grammatical error in a sentence; the main focus of study is on Written Expression. I do this for two reasons, first, it contains the most questions and second, because students seem to find it easier to do. Experience has shown that because the Structure section requires more reading, students tend

to spend too much time on it. This is especially true with lower level students. Consequently, students do not have enough time to complete the Written Expression which, as stated earlier, make up the majority of questions in this section of the test.

## Structure and Written Expression

### Helpful Hints

1. Answer the questions in the Written Expression Section first as this section makes up 25 out of the 40 questions in the grammar section of the test. Also, this part is easier and requires less reading as you must only identify the error in a sentence. It is better to do this section while your mind is still fresh. Remember you only have 25 minutes to complete this section of the test.
2. When deciding on an answer in the Written Expression section, don't try to figure out why it is wrong, just choose your answer and move on to the next question.
3. Go with your gut feeling, if it feels correct, then choose it.
4. Say the sentence in your head as though you were speaking. Sometimes you can choose the correct answer only because it "sounds" strange to you.
5. Use the following checklist as the focus of your grammar study. These are six of the most commonly tested items in the Written Expression. (Rogers, *The Complete Guide to TOEFL*)
  - a. Word Form
  - b. Parallel Structure
  - c. Subject/Verb Agreement
  - d. Word Choice
  - e. Singular/Plural Nouns

f. Pronouns

6. Whenever one of the following words appears in a sentence in the Written Expression section, choose it. The designers of TOEFL are testing to see if you understand the correct usage of these words.

Alike, Like, Unlike

Do, Make

Another, Other, Others

Say, Tell

7. Watch for multiple word prepositions in the Written Expression section of the test. TOEFL will often omit or use the wrong word combinations.

such as

consists of

famous for

account for

surprised at

effect on

based on

in addition to

responsible for

in spite of

lead to

necessary for

with the exception of

in view of

insist on

in which

**Working with Grammar Structures**

In lessons seven, eight, and nine I work solely on the grammar structures stated on the course outline, which are also found in number five of the “Helpful Hints”. I provide students with explanations about each structure, have students do practice exercises using them and then finally have them apply this knowledge to actual TOEFL like questions.

After all the structures have been taught, I then have students take the written expression section of an actual TOEFL test used in the past. Students are encouraged to refer to their “helpful hints” guide during

this exercise. Once completed, I go over the answers, and as a class, we decide which of the structures taught was tested in each question. Although not all the questions test one of the structures covered, a large majority do, therefore providing students with assurance that they don't need to study every grammar structure in the English language in order to achieve a high score in this section of the test. This is very motivating for students, as they now have some direction in which to continue studying on their own.

## **Lesson Ten**

Before starting the reading section, I have the students do a practice test for the Structure and Written Expression section of the test. Once again, this is part of the monitoring process as students can compare their results with the test taken on the first day of class.

### **Reading Comprehension Section**

Students often express the difficulty they face with the reading section of the TOEFL. The most common complaints about this section are: a) they run out of time before they can finish all the passages, b) the passages are too difficult for them to understand, c) they don't know where to find the information asked in the questions, and d) they tire easily as this section requires too much concentration and is the last section of the test.

It is my believe that many students don't possess the necessary content schema (background knowledge) to bring to the text in order to interact with it and draw from it the information needed. Carrell and Esterhold (1983) point out that "much of the meaning understood from a text is really not actually in the text, per se, but in the reader, in the

background or schematic knowledge of the reader” (pg.559) The TOEFL reading passages are similar to those found in English university textbooks dealing with subjects such as biology, astronomy, botany, literature etc., so if students do not have background knowledge in these areas, they are then faced with the difficult task of trying to draw some understanding from the text within a short period of time. Students also tend to read the passages at a “study like speed”. Because TOEFL is a test, and one which is very demanding, students don’t have the time or energy to approach the passages in this manner. In order to address these problems, and the complaints students have voiced about the reading section of the test, I provide them with the following advice, and later, practice in how to use it.

1. If possible, avoid reading the entire passage.
2. Be able to recognize the different types of questions and know where to find the answers.
3. Always do the “direct” questions first for all the passages on the test, and then go back and do the others.

It is also important for students to learn that the questions in the reading section, as in Listening Parts B and C, are sequential and generally follow the order of information in the passage. For example, if the answer to question 36 is implied or stated in the passage, the information that will help the student to answer the question will generally come after the answer to question 35 and before the answer to 37.

The key to the reading section is to provide students with techniques of where to find information in the passages by using their knowledge of the questions asked as well as the cues provided in the possible answers. The development of these skills is essential in order for students to approach the reading section of the TOEFL with

strategies to help them achieve success.

### **Recognize The Different Types of Questions**

The reading comprehension section of the TOEFL has two types of questions: direct questions where students can find the information required to answer the question directly in the passage, and indirect questions where information must be inferred in order to answer the question correctly. These questions fall into five categories;

1. Direct Questions about the whole passage:

“What is the main idea?”

2. Direct Questions about part of the passage:

“According to the passage...?”

“Which of the following is not true about....”

3. Indirect Questions about the whole passage:

“What is the tone of the passage?”

4. Indirect Questions about part of the passage:

“It can be inferred that....”

5. Vocabulary in-context questions:

“The word “\_\_\_” in line 5 is closest in meaning to....”

(A complete list of these questions can be found in almost any TOEFL textbook)

Students need to learn these different types of questions to be able to know what information they are looking for as well as where to find the answers. In order to do this, I provide students with a list of the questions asked on the TOEFL, and where to find the information in the passage in order to answer them correctly. For example, the answer for main idea questions can be found by reading the first sentence of each paragraph. I then give students sample reading passages and



they are to identify the questions as direct whole, part or indirect whole, part and highlight in the passage where the answer can be found using the reference sheet provided. I ask the students to learn these for homework so that they will be prepared for a similar type of activity in the next class, but without the use of their reference sheets. Once students are made aware of the value of learning this skill, they are then prepared to take the time to study on their own.

## **Lesson Eleven**

### ***Working with Direct Questions***

Direct questions are asked more frequently on the test than inference questions. This is advantageous for students because the inference questions are more difficult, and give students the greatest difficulty. Direct questions are easier than inference questions because students can find the answers directly in the passages by using topic sentences as well as key words from the possible answers. Since direct questions are easier to answer, and make up approximately 57% of the questions asked (Rogers, 1997), teaching students how to answer direct questions becomes the focus of my class. I continually remind students that if they apply the techniques learned in class to answer these types of questions, the chances of obtaining a high percentage of correct answers is a realistic possibility for them. The more practice they have with these types of questions, the better they get, and often request additional practice for homework.

When students follow the advice given for the reading comprehension section, i.e. they understand that they can answer many of the questions without having to read the passage, can recognize which questions are direct, and therefore easier to answer, learn that ques-

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tions are sequential and thus know where to find the answers, and know that they should answer all the direct questions for each of the passages first before attempting to do try the more difficult inference questions, their confidence and performance in the reading section increases considerably.

### **Final Practice Test — Reading Comprehension**

The students are told to do the reading comprehension section of their final practice test for homework. As stated earlier, this is only done because of the time needed to complete an entire test.

## **Lesson Twelve**

### **Final Practice Test — Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression**

The students do the Listening Comprehension, Structure and Written Expression Sections of the final practice test in class. When finished, the answers are provided for all three sections, and students then have a tool by which to measure their success when they compare their scores with the test they took on the first day of class.

## **Conclusions**

What I have offered in this paper by no means provides the students with all the information they should know or study for the TOEFL. What I have provided, is some focus on what to study given time constraints in order to increase self esteem, and motivation as well as alleviate test anxiety, but more importantly to help increase scores. Students have seen increases from the first day in class ranging from 20

to 150 points. The average increase, as stated earlier, has been about 70 points, and this includes classes where students have been at a very low level of English proficiency. Although some students experience disappointment in not achieving a high increase in their scores, they do realize, however, that they have made some gain and now possess the knowledge of some of the necessary skills needed to continue to study on their own.

Although I do not claim that this course is perfect, I have had much success with the course outlined in this paper. As stated earlier, as with any course, it needs to undergo continual change based on personal observations, updated techniques provided in the texts, and more importantly, feedback from the students. If students do not see the value in what they are learning then it is my responsibility to continue to find new ways to increase their TOEFL scores.

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