



TOEFL Speaking

Test Preparation and Strategies

Preparing for any international English exam can be a stressful and time-consuming experience. But if you've gotten this far, congratulations! It takes a lot of hard work to arrive at this level. Now is when the real work begins. Taking an international exam requires discipline and not only a high level of English, but also a strong understanding of test taking strategies and a deep knowledge of the structure of the test. This document will address the structure of the speaking section of the TOEFL test and give some strategies to help you best tackle the exam.

Overview

Sources:

http://toefl.uobabylon.edu.iq/papers/ibt_2015_1842462.pdf

<http://www.testden.com/toefl/speaking.htm>

<https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/about/content/>



The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is an international exam written and assessed in the United States of America. On the speaking section of the exam, test takers are given six questions to respond to with a variety of response and preparation times. Likely the most important thing to know about this section of the test is that you will not be speaking with test administrator but rather recording your answers into a microphone. Someone in the USA then listens to your answers and gives you a grade. This can often feel a daunting task for students because it is uncomfortable to be speaking to no one, and additionally have other people around you speaking at the same time. It is definitely something that requires practice in order to adjust to the unique feeling of taking this section of the exam, but should not be something that influences your decision not to take the TOEFL.

This exam, like most international exams, follows a very strict pattern for each test. The speaking section of this test is no different. The questions on this section of the test can be broken into groups of pairs. Below you will find an overview of the questions of the test and some strategies for each question type:

Questions 1&2

Here you will be asked about topics that are important to you and your personal preferences. Once you hear the question, you are given 15 seconds to prepare your response and 45 seconds to speak.

Question 1	Question 2
Typically, a personal question about a person, place, object or event that is of value to you. Ex: Talk about a place that is important to you and explain why it is important to you.	Usually a preference question, asking you to choose one thing or another thing and justify. Ex: Do you prefer to work in groups or individually? Please explain why

Some strategies for these questions on the exam:

1. Get in the Habit of Answering ‘Why’

On these questions, your most powerful tool is your ability to explain *why* something is important to you or *why* you prefer one thing to another. Do not waste time simply listing or reciting and try not to repeat the question. Instead, spend as much time as possible justifying your answer with sound reasoning. Using words like ‘because’, ‘due to’ and ‘since’ will help you to illustrate your point.

2. Don’t Feel Beholden to the Truth

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The test administrator will never know whether the reasons you are giving are your actual beliefs, so the truth is not required. Oftentimes we may feel that one point or idea is easier to justify or argue than another, so feel free to follow the path of least resistance. One thing to keep in mind is that lying or improvising in your second language is not a simple task, so experiment with this one out before you put it into practice.

3. Tell a Story

One of the best ways to justify your thinking on a certain idea is to use a personal anecdote. By doing this, you can illustrate your reasoning in a highly personal and tangible way that can show the test grader a deeper understanding of the topic.

Questions 3&4

This section will require you to first read something, then listen to something, and finally speak about the relationship between those two things. You will be given around 45 seconds to read, and the listening will last approximately 90 seconds. You will then have 20 seconds to prepare and 60 seconds to respond.

Question 3	Question 4
Reading: Some sort of announcement or notice in an academic setting such as library hours or bus route changes on campus.	Reading: Some sort of academic topic in fields such as sciences or the humanities. Between 75-100 words.
Listening: Conversation between two or more people, with one of them expressing their opinion about the new changes.	Listening: Academic lecture about the same topic as the reading, either showing practical application of or opposition to the reading.
Speaking task: Discuss the person's opinion relative to the announcement.	Speaking task: Discuss how the lecture either illustrates or contradicts the reading task.

Some strategies for these questions on the exam:

1. Take Notes

It is highly recommended that you find a way to take notes effectively during this section because you will have limited time with the reading passages and only one attempt at the listening. Making a two-column chart can be very effective, putting the characteristics of the reading in one column and the listening in the other. During your 20 seconds of preparation, you can then draw conclusions on your chart easily and feel confident in your speaking.

2. Answer the Question

Before you start planning your speaking, be sure to read the prompt and frame your answer in the correct way. If the prompt asks about the speaker's opinion, then do not spend a lot of time reviewing the facts of the reading and vice versa. Part of getting a strong score in this section

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relates to your understanding of how to answer the question correctly, so addressing it from the right point of view is essential to your success.

3. Stick to What You Know

During the course of the reading and listening, remember that the most important task is to show your understanding of the relationship between the two. It can be tempting to throw in details about each in order to demonstrate your abilities but do not make guesses. If you are sure about the information you are giving then use it to your advantage, but trying to show your understanding and being wrong can be detrimental to your score.

Questions 5&6

In the final part of the speaking exam, you will have a longer listening passage and will be asked to respond in your speaking. Again, 20 seconds are provided for preparation and 60 seconds for speaking.

Question 5	Question 6
<p>You will listen to a conversation between two people. One of those people will have a problem or dilemma, and two solutions will be presented.</p> <p>Speaking task: Present the problem, the two solutions and which solution you prefer and <i>why</i>.</p>	<p>You will listen to an extended academic lecture of 3-5 minutes on a single topic. There will only be one speaker</p> <p>Speaking task: Summarize the main points of the lecture speaking in as much detail as possible.</p>

Some strategies for these questions on the exam:

1. Pace Yourself

Having enough time to cover all of the requirements in this section is very important. For instance, in question five, the most important aspect is explaining which solution you would choose and why. In question six you must try to summarize as much as possible within the 60 seconds. You will not be penalized for leaving empty time, but not completing the task is harmful to your score.

2. Know How You Take Notes

Because these sections can often present a lot of information, it is important to know what type of note-taking style suits you best. Some people prefer a linear word-based form while others might prefer to draw pictures or create a flow chart. There is no golden key here except to know which one is the most effective strategy for *you*.

3. Look for the Main Ideas and the Details Within

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Structuring your note taking and response will be of high importance on these questions. Your first goal should be to acquaint yourself with the main points of the listening, and then seek the details once you have a stronger understanding of the structure. The test grader wants to know that you understand the concepts and can draw conclusions based on what is being presented, not that you can simply recite facts and figures.

Finally, here are some general strategies for the speaking of the exam:

1. Focus on Content

The TOEFL is an exam that assesses your ability to draw conclusions and communicate concepts in English. These things should be your number one goal. Yes—you should strive to speak flawless English, but your focus must be on conveying ideas, not worrying about your accent or if you should have used past continuous or past simple. Once you feel very comfortable with the content of your speaking, move on to your effective use of the technicalities of the language.

2. Practice the Test Conditions

The only way to get comfortable with the format of the speaking test is to practice it consistently. It is certainly an odd feeling to be recording yourself into a microphone, but there is not another option. Also, when you practice, use the recording as a learning tool and listen to yourself. You will be amazed at what you both do well and need to improve on, and the recording does not lie. This can be one of the most effective ways to self-correct in your preparation for the exam.

3. Implement Key Phrases

Coming to the test with a few idioms in your back pocket can be very helpful. Phrases and idioms demonstrate a mastery of the language because native speakers use them constantly. However, be careful—do not come with a list of 20 phrases and use them only if you feel very comfortable. Having a manageable list of five is much easier to work with, and incorrectly using a phrase can be damaging to your score, so be sure that you know not only the phrase but the context of its usage as well.

4. Planning is Paramount

When taking notes and planning, it is very important that you limit your writing to key words or phrases. If you try to write a script of what you plan to say, you will certainly not finish and likely be forced to improvise a large part of your speaking. It will also be obvious that you are reading something, which will very likely lower your score. Spend your time planning the structure of your speaking and giving yourself some key words that can help to keep you moving throughout your speech.

5. Understanding the Time

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It is very important on the TOEFL to know how to manage the short time that you have to speak. Running out of time and not completely addressing a prompt will lower your score, however finishing early and leaving some silence at the end is not penalized.

6. Flow and Calm

Speaking in this type of structure can often be stressful and difficult, especially in a high-pressure test situation. Concentrate on your flow and connection of your ideas to help keep you calm and remember that everyone needs a pause now and then, and that a few hesitations will not kill you, but panicking about those lapses will. If you have a few pauses and begin to panic, remember that you are missing more time to speak during your freak-out session. Take a deep breath and remain calm, panic sessions rarely help.

7. Study the Rubric

Typically available to you online or in a test preparation book will be the rubrics that test graders use to evaluate your speaking. Study this rubric in detail and know what exactly they will be looking for when they grade your paper in order to be more informed about your writing. These same criteria will be used to grade you, so studying it can only benefit in your practice for the exam itself.

8. Practice Makes Permanent

The notion the “practice makes perfect” is a very flawed one. How you practice is how you will perform on the test. If you practice inconsistently and don’t have a plan, this will reflect in your test score, but if you look at the details and practice your weaknesses, you will certainly be more successful. Coming up with a plan, and seeking out valuable resources will undoubtedly result in a more ideal score and hopefully save you some time and money in the long run.

9. Take a Preparation Course

If there is one thing that is true about most international exams it is that they are not cheap. Oftentimes making an investment in a preparation course can mean the difference between taking the test once or three times, which can be a sound use of your money in the long run. Because these tests follow a specific formula, studying for the test and mastering test taking skills will often lead to a higher score and more positive outcome for the student.

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