

TEACHING PREPARATION FOR THE TOEFL COURSE AT BAIKAL INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS SCHOOL: EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVES© **Luganskaia E.V., 2023**

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Providing a rationale for continuing to teach preparation for the TOEFL course in the current situation, the article describes a new approach to teaching the discipline and offers a different perspective of using TOEFL materials, tasks, and methodology. After giving the test overview and analyzing some literature on the topic, the paper discusses how preparation for TOEFL can help students gain not only language competences but also essential academic and professional skills. Specifically, this course embraces all the four language competences in a balanced manner, which gives our alumni a competitive edge, and teaches the English way of thinking and organizing oral and written responses and different academic products. Besides, it exposes students to academic English with its style differences and teaches North-American culture and international academic values that will help them succeed as students and future specialists.

Keywords: teaching English, TOEFL preparation, TOEFL materials, language skills, language competences, academic English

In a fast-changing world, universities have to learn quickly to adapt to different challenges. Recently there was a pandemic with distance learning, and now there is a new reality affecting students' needs and interests that has to be dealt with. Several years ago the American program offered by our University in partnership with the University of Maryland Global Campus was rather popular with the students; however, due to the high dollar rate and the political situation, enrollment numbers are falling, and curriculum developers and teachers have to reevaluate their approaches to teaching and the courses taught.

Our English curriculum includes a preparation for the TOEFL course because getting a passing score for TOEFL is a basic requirement to take a bachelor's degree from the US College. However, to embrace all the students' needs, we have to switch the focus from teaching to the test to using TOEFL materials to teach important language and strategic skills alongside with competences relevant for

students and future managers. This enables us to prepare those willing to join the American program to do so and to take into account the interests of those who are not going to take the exam and take the American bachelor's degree. After analyzing literature on the use of international exam materials and methodologies in teaching English, this paper goes on to discuss the benefits and outcomes of incorporating TOEFL into language instruction.

Background and Context

Before describing the experience of delivering the preparation for the TOEFL course, it is necessary to give an overview of the test. The primary purpose of TOEFL is to measure the academic English proficiency of non-native English speakers seeking admission to English-medium colleges. This international test has existed since 1962 and has undergone several revisions which resulted in the current version consisting of four parts. According to the Educational Testing Service, a service that developed it,

«TOEFL iBT test is a reliable, fair and accurate measurement of the four language skills — reading, listening, speaking and writing — the way they're used in an academic environment» [1].

The TOEFL iBT Reading section assesses how well test-takers can read and understand materials used in an academic setting. It includes three passages with 10 questions per passage. The passages are excerpts from university textbooks that could be used in introductions to a topic. The TOEFL iBT Listening section is designed to measure the ability to understand campus conversations and lectures in English. It includes listening for basic comprehension, understanding the speaker's attitude and degree of certainty, and connecting information. There are 3 or 4 lectures, some with classroom discussion, each 3–5 minutes; there are 6 questions per lecture and 2 or 3 campus-based conversations, each 3 minutes long with 5 questions per conversation. Speaking is the third part of the test and lasts for about 17 min. It measures the ability to speak English effectively in an academic environment. The four tasks resemble real-life situations that can be encountered both in and outside of a classroom. Three out of four questions are integrated, and test-takers are expected not only to speak but also to read and listen. Finally, the writing portion of the TOEFL consists of two writing tasks: independent and integrated. In both the cases, test-takers are required to write essays [1].

Not only is the test tough and long (3 hours) but it is also rather expensive, and now can be taken from home by Russian students. Getting a passing score (usually 80 out of 120) is a basic requirement to enter a foreign university.

Even though for different reasons, after completing the course few of our students take TOEFL and enroll in the American program at the moment, we continue teaching freshmen to the TOEFL. Not so many universities in Russia provide dual-degree programs that enable Russian students to get both a Russian and an American diploma certificate studying in Russia — all this at a reduced cost. To the best of my knowledge, there are only two universities to the east of the Urals that offer such an opportunity: Far Eastern Federal University and ours. Moreover, the cost is rather attractive although it might not seem so for parents and students who are not familiar with the current tuition fees in the USA. While getting a bachelor's degree in America costs at least \$40,000 for foreigners per year, amounting to minimum \$160,000 for the whole program, our business school provides a much cheaper option. Thanks to the contract between our partner University of Maryland Global Campus and ours, students have a chance to earn an undergraduate degree from an American university thirteen times cheaper than in the USA. This is a unique offer that our business school would like to keep, and that is why our English curriculum includes a preparation for the TOEFL course. It is worth mentioning, though, that preparation to the TOEFL is not the only English course delivered to students. Besides it, there are other courses and modules, focusing on Grammar, Academic Writing, Business English and Leadership, Mass Media, and Home Reading.

Literature Review

Although there are extensive publications on the preparation for international exams, there is little literature

about the use of these exam materials beyond their main goal. Among those writing about it, there are some authors that justify their use in the English curriculum and suggest incorporating exam materials into English courses for various purposes. To illustrate, N.V. Kopylova and Yu.G. Lipko [2] describe their positive experience of using TOEIC to teach future managers. In particular, they consider TOEIC to be not only an effective and appropriate instrument for assessing the level of communicative language proficiency of students majoring in management but also a basis for further development of English language teaching materials to help students improve business communication skills. What is more, they claim that the integration of this test into the Business English syllabus helped them boost students' motivation due to the exposure to authentic professional dialogs and texts. Ye.V. Koss and A.V. Kirillova [3] use TOEIC as a tool of formative and summative assessment. They believe that preparation for an international English examination makes a future specialist more competitive in the job market.

S.A. Zhemchugova, L.N. Evseeva, and E.L. Safronenko [4] also share their experience of applying international Teaching Knowledge Test to develop future teachers' English language skills. Revealing the educational potential of the above-mentioned test, they justify the efficiency of incorporating its content and methods into the language program. The article by N.P. Soboleva and L.N. Yuzmukhametova [5] discusses how IELTS is used at Kazan Federal University to teach students majoring in humanities. Specifically, the authors describe how certain exam tasks and sections help them develop the four language competences: reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

Considerably less is recorded in the pedagogical literature about the practical use of TOEFL content in teaching English. Some practitioners [3, 4, 5, 6] admit the objectivity, versatility, and practicality of measuring linguistic competences with the help of international exams suggesting that they be used in our Russian education to monitor students' academic performance and language proficiency. Namely, the study by R.A. Ivanova, A.V. Ivanov, and S.Yu. Filippova [6] describes the practice of Nizhny Novgorod HSE to assess students' reading skills in the testing format. For this purpose, they use CAE, TOEFL, and IELTS. As they pay specific attention to developing different reading skills (scanning, skimming, and reading for detail), the aforementioned exam materials prove to be an effective tool to monitor undergraduates' progress, which allows them to make rating scales vividly demonstrating students' achievements in learning a language.

As for foreign literature, there are very few publications on the topic as well. TOEFL appears to be used primarily for guiding admissions decisions at universities. Nevertheless, a study by J. Smart [7] suggests using TOEFL scores for other purposes. In his research article, he provides a review offering guidelines for further investigation into the TOEFL's potential as an assessment tool for placement. Actually, he recommends using writing sub-scores in identifying course placement needs for second-language writers. Also TOEFL sub-scores might be considered when

placing student applicants in language support classes [7]. However, language instructors do not seem to use the test much to teach English. This study fills the gap and provides the rationale for applying TOEFL tasks and methodology to language instruction.

Discussion

One of the most important reasons why we expose students to TOEFL is that the test preparation goes well with our approach to teaching English. We believe that the best way to do it is to teach all language competences simultaneously, paying equal attention to reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The test checking language ability comprehensibly requires that all the four competences be taught and mastered. According to our undergraduate curriculum, each student group has 10–12 hours of English, which is quite enough to deal with all language skills. Usually at most universities and language centers some language skills are underestimated and, therefore, neglected. This is especially true of writing. However, at our business school, writing gets sufficient attention and is taken seriously. There is a comprehensive program that starts with basic writing for freshmen and ends up with more advanced academic writing for older students. Using TOEFL materials for teaching, we assess progress with the help of TOEFL tasks and methodology. If the groups are low-level, we use TOEFL materials developing basic skills, and if undergraduates have high language proficiency, it is easy to adapt by offering them more advanced textbooks for TOEFL preparation.

Another advantage of TOEFL is that it is a test designed to check not how well students know English, but rather how well they can use it. Knowing a language and actually using it are very different things, and teaching the TOEFL course helps us develop essential competences important for future managers. In particular, one of the competencies (YK-4) that English is expected to build is that undergraduates should be able to take part in both oral and written communication in every-day situations and in the professional sphere. Paying equal attention to all the four language aspects, we achieve a higher level of English language proficiency overall among our students. Consequently, TOEFL-related tasks are used in formative and summative assessment because what is tested affects what is taught and what is learned and vice versa. As Powers states, standardized tests are almost always fairer to those who take them when multiple methods and multiple question formats are used [8]. Besides, it is hard to disagree with the researchers discussed before that preparing students for international tests does give them a competitive edge. With a sufficient TOEFL score, they can take master's degree programs abroad and in very prestigious Russian universities where English is chosen as a medium for instruction.

Moreover, TOEFL embraces both every-day vocabulary and grammar structures and academic materials. The idea of the TOEFL test is to check not only how well students can survive in a new setting, but also how well they can cope with the study program. This means that they should be able to find themselves on campus, to sign up for programs and clubs, to live in dormitories, manage schedules, deal with their studies, eat, do sports, and entertain. In order to prepare

students for this, the listening and the speaking parts of the test have dialogs between students and university employees which show how students are expected to interact with professors, university staff, and their peers, how they can solve different problems with the schedule conflict, pay tuition fees or parking tickets, choose courses or enroll in work-and-study programs, settle issues with room-mates, and so on. Alongside with that, there are also academic lectures on a variety of academic disciplines ranging from business, political science, history, technology to various life sciences including geography, geology, astronomy, biology, chemistry, environmental science, and medicine. These materials help us expose students to different language styles (informal and formal) and acquaint them with the differences in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.

One more benefit is that TOEFL helps us teach students how to organize thoughts effectively and structure oral responses and written texts in a way that can be understood by native speakers. For instance, one of the three criteria for evaluating oral responses is topic development, which implies that students are expected to start with an introduction, continue with the body, and wrap up with a conclusion. In other words, all responses should have a three-part structure. In addition, the body should be developed properly with preferably two arguments and a sufficient support for them. When providing support, students are supposed to come up with specific personal examples, not general explanations. This organization teaches students to be brief, clear and explicit. By practicing TOEFL speaking questions, they learn that such topic development is an effective way to communicate any message in English. If they stick to the Russian way of answering questions, getting to the point too late, being general, or not developing ideas and providing support for arguments, they get few points.

After mastering this pattern, they apply it successfully not only to short oral responses but also to numerous common academic products: an argumentative speech, a presentation, a summary, a synthesis, or an essay. For instance, an argumentative speech should have a thesis statement containing their opinion on the issue and arguments with support. After learning different types of supporting materials, they can vary their evidence for constructing arguments and, as a result, acquire better persuasive skills critical for managers. TOEFL also allows us to teach presentation skills. Even though a presentation is a more advanced academic product, basically it is structured similarly. It should have an introduction, a body and a conclusion where the body has to be well-developed with several solid arguments containing support. So it is easier to teach undergraduates to do these assignments after they have got the necessary basic preparation during the TOEFL course. A summary is another task often assigned to students after reading an article, watching something, or listening to a video. This is an activity that comes in handy at English classes, as well as many classes in Russian. Have learned to summarize short TOEFL lectures and conversations, students can easily do so with longer articles, chapters, or books in other classes. Also TOEFL teaches students to combine different sources effectively. Most

TOEFL speaking and writing tasks are integrated and contain both reading and listening materials, and the students have to synthesize information from the two sources and reproduce it either in speaking or writing. So through TOEFL they learn a universal methodology of persuading, making presentations, writing or telling summaries, or synthesizing.

In addition to these, TOEFL teaches other important strategic skills: inferring pragmatic information, sequencing according to expected frameworks, paraphrasing, note-taking, and even managing time. Both reading and listening passages have questions asking how a professor felt about a certain issue or what he or she meant or implied. Although these questions turn out to be challenging for students at the beginning, with time they learn to read between the lines and infer this pragmatic meaning. Another difficulty that most students encounter is meeting time requirements in the speaking section. However, following the guidelines and using templates, they manage these questions with practice.

Some specific language competences (besides reading, listening, speaking, and writing) are other useful skills that can be acquired thanks to the preparation for the TOEFL course. These are such rhetorical skills as register control and the use of connectors and signal words. In fact, the newest TOEFL version makes the difference between speaking and writing sections in terms of style, requiring that students sound conversational, relaxed, and natural responding to speaking questions and show their use of academic English when they write essays. Regarding the use of transitions, it is a must both in the speaking and writing tasks.

One more value of exposing students to TOEFL is learning about culture. The test contains a lot of materials about North American culture. Preparing for the test, students get to know about major American cities, famous inventors and writers, US geography, flora and fauna, the political system, varieties of English, Native Americans and their lifestyle and so on.

Except for the texts in the reading section and the lectures on different disciplines that are revealing of culture, the listening part also acquaints students with US higher education and North American academic values. As an example, through academic conversations, the test shows what liberal arts education is, how hard it is to pay tuition fees or raise money for undergraduates, how students choose courses, what types of programs are available, how they deal with professors, what staff you can find on campus, what rules libraries have and the like. This teaches students American lifestyle and values in general and gives a lot of food for thought, which can be used to compare differences and similarities between their system of higher education and ours. It can be developed into interesting critical thinking activities. For instance, this year my students were involved in debates discussing the pros and cons of liberal arts education. Also TOEFL clearly demonstrates the attitude to plagiarizing, cheating, or not meeting deadlines at American universities. These are the things that surprise students very much. Even though these violations of academic discipline are frowned upon at our universities too, still the Russian system does not take them so seriously and does not punish students very severely.

One more cultural value taught through TOEFL is the importance of being proactive and taking the initiative. There are some dialogs in the listening section that show students complaining about the issues that they are unhappy about. For example, there are conversations where students come to the head of the canteen with the request to add more dishes to the menu for people with food allergies, vegetarians, or vegans. Such dialogs also teach how to criticize constructively because both students and university employees in the conversations are very polite and try to come up with ideas and compromises how to change the situation for the better. Acting out similar dialogs is a useful activity not only to practice speaking skills and strategies but also to discuss effective behavioral patterns. Sometimes TOEFL speaking question 2 instead of the regular reading passage with the university announcement informing students about some change on campus has letters written by students to the university administration asking them to change some university policy they are dissatisfied with. It can be the raise of tuition fees, dissatisfaction with professors' working hours or library hours. By exposing students to these materials, we can teach them how to handle conflicts ethically and how to influence decision-making.

Thus, teaching to the test is not the only goal that we try to achieve with our course. This course embraces all the four language competences in a balanced manner, which gives our alumni a competitive edge; teaches the English way of thinking and organizing oral and written responses and different academic products; exposes students to academic English with its style differences, and, finally, teaches North-American culture and international academic values that will help them succeed as students and future specialists.

Conclusion

In our new political and economic reality, it is useful to reevaluate students' needs and interests and reconsider the courses taught and the methods used to remain successful and competitive. Shifting the focus from teaching to TOEFL only to using TOEFL materials and tests in language instruction and assessment enables to go beyond the test's primary goal and develop more vital skills relevant for future specialists. This approach can open new perspectives and give better outcomes for both teachers and students. ■

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Опыт и дальнейшие перспективы преподавания дисциплины «Подготовка к тесту TOEFL» в Байкальской международной бизнес-школе

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Обосновывая преподавание курса «Подготовка к тесту TOEFL», статья описывает новый подход к его реализации и предлагает новый взгляд на использование тестовых материалов, заданий и методологии. После краткого обзора теста и анализа литературы по теме автор обсуждает, как подготовка к TOEFL может помочь студентам приобрести не только необходимые языковые компетенции, но и важные академические и профессиональные навыки. В частности, курс помогает сбалансированно обучать всем четырём языковым компетенциям, что дает нашим выпускникам преимущество; учит мыслить и организовывать устные и письменные высказывания на английском языке, продуцировать различные академические жанры. Помимо этого, он обучает академическому языку с его стилистическими особенностями, а также культуре и международным академическим ценностям, которые помогут студентам быть успешными в университете и в работе.

Ключевые слова: преподавание английского, подготовка к тесту TOEFL, материалы теста TOEFL, языковые навыки, языковые компетенции, академический английский
