TOEFL Note Taking and Answer Strategies

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Abstract: This paper will describe a comprehensive TOEFL iBT course for EFL students at a Japanese university which students were taught note taking and answer strategies with answer templates. This paper will provide an outline of a method of note taking and answer strategies for the reading writing, listening and speaking sections of the test. Knowing that some students would be taking the TOEFL iBT in the near future in order to study abroad as part of exchange programs, the class was designed to be based around improving the students’ test taking ability for the test. This paper will describe how the class was set-up implemented the class; this paper will discuss problems that encountered and what we did to overcome them. This paper will also share student feedback from an end-of-the-semester survey and interviews. Finally, I will make specific recommendations to other educators hoping to use this teaching method in the classroom in a similar way. The purpose, therefore, of this paper is to share what I did in this class and what I learned, in the hope that it may be beneficial to other educators interested in this type of strategies to improve their students’ reading writing, listening and speaking abilities or for TOEFL iBT training.

Keywords: TOEFL, Note Taking, Answer strategies, Templates

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to provide a strategy approach to the TOEFL test. Developing student strategies and applying these strategies into reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The reason I decided to take this approach for this class was that I was assigned to teach an advanced comprehensive TOEFL class that was to teach all four skills for the TOEFL test. The class met once a week for ninety minutes for fourteen weeks. The challenge that I saw in this class was that I would have little time to spend on each of the four skills. Instead of focusing on improving their four language skills, I decided to focus on the skills that the students already had and to focus on note taking and answer strategies. When appropriate, using note taking templates and answer templates for each question. My reason for this approach was that it would give the students an opportunity to have experience with each question, knowing what to expect and have a note taking and answer strategy for each question. By using these strategies, note taking skills and templates, students would know what to expect for each question. This allows the student to predict typical outcomes and responses to situations.

Using this method, other than teaching strategies for each section of the test, I hoped to teach the students to take clearly organized notes that at times could be used in response scripts. Notes that are clearly organized and only need to be inserted the notes into an answer script. Most of the scripts usually include a first sentence to the answer and a structure of how to organize their answer. Such a strong first sentence makes the student more confident to give the rest of their answer. The scripts also provide structure to the students answer, this way the student does not have to think about how they are going to organize their answer. The template organizes the answer for the student; the student only has to fill in the empty spaces on the template.
I found note taking and template strategies to be valuable because it is not enough to
know what to do, but it must be done quickly and correctly.

**TOEFL Exam**

Every year almost a million people across one hundred sixty five countries take the
TOEFL exam (Educational Testing Service, 2010) as part of their efforts to secure
admission to schools of their choice, win scholarships, gain professional accreditation,
apply for visas, etc. Described as a test aimed at “measuring non-native speakers’
ability to use English to communicate effectively in college and university settings,” it
is used by over six thousand colleges and universities world-wide, as well as by
government organizations and agencies (Riley & Wyatt, 2009).

Whether or not we, as language educators, believe the TOEFL to be an accurate
measure of a learner’s true command of the English language, or even whether we
disagree with the whole premise of a worldwide, standardized English test
(McCrostitie, 2006) or its inevitable wash back effect in language education (Bailey
1999; Cheng, 2008), the practical value of the TOEFL to young, ambitious people is
real: they simply need a good TOEFL score to open the doors necessary to realizing
their future dreams. In addition, the types of skills required in the test (i.e., the
reformulation of arguments heard in lectures in both written and spoken discourse)
might well be skills required in future studies or careers.

The TOEFL iBT was introduced in 2005 as an alternative to the TOEFL paper-based
and computer-based versions, which had already been in use. Because the iBT is a
four skills test, it responded to criticisms of TOEFL lacking a speaking component
(Powers, 2010). There was also a reformulation of the tasks in the TOEFL iBT to
correspond to the actual skills required of students in an English-language academic
setting (e.g., the integrated writing and speaking task), rather than the testing of
discrete knowledge about forms of the English language that could be coached,
leading to negative wash back effects on teaching and learning. In addition, by being
Internet based, the iBT offers flexibility for candidates who can now take the TOEFL
with greater regularity and even make multiple attempts over a relatively short span of
time. Without a doubt, the TOEFL iBT remains a popular measure of a student’s
English ability by academic institutions in North America and around the world
(Ohkubo, 2009).

**My Comprehensive TOEFL Class**

Japanese takers of the TOEFL test historically tend to rank toward the bottom of test-
takers in Asian countries (Hagerman, 2009) and most recently have continued that
trend (Educational Testing Service, 2009 b), because of this, there is support for the
idea that in Japan there is a need for new, innovative methods for TOEFL training.
My TOEFL class was an elective course, which students had to have a certain level
of English skill based on the university in-house English test to enter the class. The
class was made up of 12 students. As might have been expected for a high-level class,
a few of the students had actually lived abroad as children, while others had done one-
year home stays in high school.
Lesson Flow
My general plan for the course was to have students begin each class with self-directed study on vocabulary for 10 minutes, and then use the remaining class time to focus on note taking and answer strategies for the iBT TOEFL test. For each class I would generally focus on one of the question types from one of the skills.

In the fourteen weeks of the class, we covered all for sections of the test. Next, I would like to explain the general note taking strategy and answer strategy while looking at the general content, goals and flow of each section of the lesson. Figure 1 presents a sample lesson print that students received for reference and for practice. The lesson provided information for students on a specific skill set of a specific skill. The lesson contains an overview of the section; advise for students, note-taking strategies, response scripts, and in class practice.

TOEFL Speaking – Sample lesson

TOEFL Speaking Overview
- The TOEFL speaking section contains 6 questions that you answer with recorded speech
- The maximum possible score on this section is a 30
- Graders are trained to rate your recordings according to strict requirements and will assign each of your answers either a 1, 2, 3, or 4 depending on the quality and strength of your answer
  - A 1 is uncommunicative; students who earn this score may have survival English but nothing more.
  - A 2 is limited; this is for students who can survive comfortably with English but cannot express themselves very well.
  - A 3 is communicative; students with this score are comfortable with English and have next to no limitation with the language.
  - A 4 is nearly fluent; this is awarded to students who display a fluent command of the language
- Does your accent affect your score? It does matter if there are points in your speech that are unclear

Question 1 and 2:
- These questions ask for your opinion.
- Next, you are given 15 seconds to prepare your answer.
- After that, you have 45 seconds to speak.
- A clear, fluent, and organized answer is best.

1. 15 Seconds preparation

Helpful phrases

| In my view . . . for the two reasons . . . |
| First, . . . for example . . . |
| Second, . . . for instance . . . |
| That’s why . . . |
In my view, knowledge is the most important characteristic in a teacher for two reasons. First, you learn more. For example, when I was in university, in New York, I had a professor in chemistry class. He knew his subject very well and his lectures were good because he provided us many details.

Second, it’s more fun. For instance, when I was in history class in California, I had a history teacher who knew a lot about World War Two. The examples were so good that I just enjoyed it very much.

That’s why knowledge is important.

*If you can’t think of two reasons, then give two examples.
Integrated Reading
On the TOEFL iBT reading section, students will read several reading passages, some of which can be up to 750 words long. Taking notes on these reading passages will increase their reading comprehension and will help them to answer the questions, especially those involving charts and schematic tables.

If students have trouble with timing, it's a mistake in strategy. It is important for students to follow a timeline to best distribute effort on each question, not spending too much time on one individual question. As students answer, they will always be able to jump to different questions and spend more time at the end on questions that they were unsure of the answer.

It is important that students don’t read the whole passage before they start answering the questions; if they do, it will be a very inefficient and time-wasting way to read. Instead, students should acquire a basic idea of the reading and prepare their mind for what you’re going to read about by first reading the title. Then, read the first sentence (which is the all important topic sentence) of every paragraph. Do this to get a quick introduction to the reading before you read it in detail.

Only spend 1 minute doing this. Anymore than that and it will be too much time, spend all of the time that they can answer the questions since that’s where your score comes from. To finish within one minute, students might have to read only pieces of the first sentences (subject, verb, object only) since they can be quite big.

After they read the first sentence, students should read question number one, not the answers but the question. Establish an idea of what it’s asking about in the answer. Then, start reading the passage from the very beginning in search of the answer to that question. In this way, they will concentrate only on what’s important and what will earn them a higher score.

Once they answer question number one, go onto question number two in the same way. The TOEFL questions proceed in chronological order, so the answer to number one is in the beginning of the passage and the answer to number twelve is towards the end.

Integrated Writing
In the writing section, students are shown a short reading and given three minutes to examine it and take notes. Then, they listen to a short lecture or spoken opinion (2–3 min.) on an academic subject, while taking notes. Finally, they are shown the reading again and are given 20 minutes to compose a response on the computer in the form of a short essay, attempting to integrate content from both the lecture and the reading.

On the writing section, students will have 20 minutes to explain how an academic reading and listening passage are related. Using notes, students will summarize the two sources and explain how they are related. To achieve a high score on this section, they will need to rely on their notes as they answer the writing task.

In this section as in other sections, content is important, not mechanics. This means that poor content and great mechanics will yield a fair to low score and great content and poor mechanics will yield a fair score. In other words, strong content has more power over the score than mechanics.
Of course, students need good mechanics, but too many students study grammar instead of developing listening skill and overall writing skill in preparation for the TOEFL writing section, which is a massively ineffective way to study. Content mastery first and writing mechanics second. Notes are very important in this section. First, it’s all about your notes and understanding. Once students have all of the important content, that’s all they need.

**Integrated Listening**
First in the listening section, students must take good notes as listen actively throughout the entire listening. Many students struggle with this. They take either no notes, so they miss important information—or too many notes—so they sacrifice understanding and comprehension. Students need to practice and build the skill and improve their note-taking skills. If notes are distracting to the student, I encourage them to experiment with their notes.

Just as in the reading, the same question types will appear repeatedly in the listening section. The difference is that students don’t have a reading to refer to but only their notes and their memory. As a result, strategy for this question is not too intense but a general guide to aid in choosing the correct answers.

There are six types of questions asked in the listening section: main idea, detail, chooses two or three detail, inference, attitude, and purpose. I like to cover strategies for each question type for the students.

**Main Idea**
This question is easy to spot. It’s usually the first question that you’ll find after the listening and it has the word “mainly” in it. Here are two examples

What does the lecture mainly discuss?
What is the main topic of the lecture?

This is often the easiest for students but it can be tricky. The listening will usually start by introducing the topic in the first few sentences and then discuss it for the rest of the lecture. The main idea here is easy: it’s the topic and described in the beginning of the lecture.

**Detail**
These questions ask you for the same information as the readings: facts from the information presented. Essentially, answering these correctly relies on your notes. The better student’s notes are, the better you’ll do. They ask students to identify facts in the reading and often begin with WH- questions.

The best strategy is to identify the key word or words in the question. Find where they appear in your notes and choose an answer that contains key words in your notes that are closest to the topic. Wrong answers often come from words you heard in the lecture but appear distant from when the topic was discussed.

**Inference & Listen**
This question asks the student to make inferences based on the information that they heard, but instead of being able, to refer to the information students must remember it from their notes. As a result, these questions pose a strong challenge to students who have difficulty listening. They contain strong clue words: infer, imply, or suggest. Here are two examples.
What does the officer imply when he says this:

What does the professor imply about the importance of surface tension in water?

To improve, focus on the same strategy as with the detail question and remember that this requires a small jump in logic. Often times, it requires students to make a logical association.

Attitude & Opinion
Similar to inference questions, these ask students to look at the way that information is presented to make a judgment on the person delivering the speech. Students should be aware of adjectives, adverbs, and the overall direction of the lecture or conversation. Here are a few examples of what these questions will look like. Answers will usually fall into one of three categories: criticism, neutrality, or support. As a way to ensure that you get these question right, take notes on words that indicate where the professor stands on what he’s discussing.

Purpose & Listen again
When dealing with these questions, students must know what the statement is doing in the logical flow of the lecture or conversation. These questions ask students to identify the purpose of a specific statement or reference made.

To answer these questions well, students must understand that the key words in the question served a purpose in the development of the topic. Adverbs and surrounding content will help you identify the answer to these questions. When answering, students should remember that they couldn’t return to a question later on. Once you answer a question, you will not be allowed to return to it. When taking notes students should find what works best for them, that everyone takes notes differently, so they don't have to have the exact same words in your notes as everyone does, but they should be similar. In addition, students shouldn’t overanalyze too much. Students should be encouraged to become active listeners and good note-takers and develop their own note taking style in the listening section.

Integrated Speaking
There is two question types on the speaking section of the test: independent speaking and integrated speaking. In the independent speaking section, students are shown a question on the screen, which is also read to them by a native speaker. They have 15 seconds to plan their answer and 45 seconds to speak their answer into the computer microphone, which records their response. An evaluator scores the response according to a 4-point scale.

In the integrated speaking section, students are shown a short written announce mention the screen, (approximately 80 words) which is followed by a 1–2 min. spoken response from a native speaker, generally agreeing or disagreeing with the announcement. Students are then given 30 seconds to plan their response and 60 seconds to deliver it into the microphone. An evaluator scores the response on a 4-point scale, taking into account how successful the student was in integrating content from both the reading and listening.

Here are two general key points I try to emphasize to students to ensure that you're going to do the best that they can on these questions. First, in general, they should
provide enough content to show that they are fluent. Second, they can be asked about anything. Sometimes, they’ll have to adjust or modify the format to fit the question well. Their success on this question depends on how they stayed on topic and demonstrated their fluency with an intelligent development of their idea. When giving their answer, I encourage students to be exact, not to paraphrase. Students are being asked to report what they heard, not paraphrase it. Also, remember that they’re not just repeating your notes but using them to explain exactly why the student did or did not agree with the announcement.

Students in this section have to be selective in their answer in this section. Saying too much won’t demonstrate fluency to the graders, and students won’t finish on time. Student answers should explain how the lecture connects to the definition. For example, if the definition is "light makes people happy" and your notes from the lecture are: "boy went outside; boy saw sun; boy felt light on face; boy felt happy." You should underline: "felt light on face" and "felt happy."

In the student answer, students should say everything about the problem. Many students summarize this and don’t express the problem completely. Finally, I on the speaking section I emphasize to keep it simple. There is so much to explain in this question that students don’t need to focus on everything. Students are always surprised at how little time they have to give their answer.

In the speaking tasks, students will have 15 to 30 seconds to prepare your responses on the integrated speaking tasks: read, listen and speak (campus-related); read, listen, speak (academic); listen and speak (campus-related); and listen and speak (academic). To succeed, they will rely on their notes as they answer the speaking tasks.

Since the test only gives them 45-60 seconds to respond for each question, they have to time each part of their response carefully so that they don’t talk too much about one thing and not enough about another. That is why I use response scripts are also broken down into how many seconds it should take them to say each section of their answer. The test does not give them much time to prepare their answer, only 15-30 seconds. Therefore, in class I use standard templates for their notes. This way, they do not have to think about how they are going to organize their answer. Students only have to fill in the empty spaces on the template.

Once students have their notes clearly organized on templates, then they have to speak their answer clearly and with confidence. The response scripts train students to speak smoothly, with perfect grammar, and without hesitation.

Student Feedback
On the final day of the semester, I administered a survey in an attempt to gather feedback on the students’ experience. The survey was anonymous and students were assured that the survey responses would not in any way affect their grades in the class. In addition to the survey, I also conducted short face-to-face interviews in English with small groups of students. After reviewing the survey results and listening to the recordings, I identified emergent issues worthy of further discussion.

Another emergent issue from our inquiry was the overwhelmingly positive response given toward tips and strategies used in the class. Some students have not taken the test beforehand didn’t know what to expect. Other students, who had taken the test
before had good language skills, but didn’t have a strategies toward the test. They found the tips and strategies helpful. Many of the students expressed that they felt that the exercises and drill work through the scripts and note taking strategies were helpful. Expressing that they were able to see their strong points and weak points in each section and each question. They were better able to organize their notes and express their answer with a script.

**Conclusion**

As with any first-time implementation of a particular approach to a learning task, my TOEFL iBT class was not without its unexpected adjustments. It did, however, shed some light on the use of note taking strategies and answer strategies using scripts. Furthermore, my follow up with students at the end of their experience revealed some of their attitudes toward the process. Further research into this issue could generate valuable findings. It would also be worth investigating to what extent students’ self-reflection and self-evaluation of their work improves their ability to answer the TOEFL iBT speaking exercises, and whether they experience a sense of accomplishment over the course of the semester. Finally, further research could be done to find out whether or not the act of repeated reflection by students on their own portfolio of spoken recordings fosters greater learner autonomy over time.

**References**


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