

TOEFL[®] *Research* **INSIGHT**

TOEFL[®]
Program History
VOLUME 6

TOEFL® Research Insight Series, Volume 6: TOEFL Program History

Preface

The *TOEFL iBT*® test is the world's most widely respected English language assessment and is used for admissions purposes in more than 130 countries, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Since its initial launch in 1964, the *TOEFL*® test has undergone several major revisions motivated by advances in theories of language ability and changes in English teaching practices. The most recent revision, the *TOEFL iBT* test, was launched in 2005. It contains a number of innovative design features, including integrated tasks that engage multiple skills to simulate language use in academic settings, and test materials that reflect the reading, listening, speaking, and writing demands of real-world academic environments.

In addition to the *TOEFL iBT* test, the *TOEFL* Family of Assessments has been expanded to provide high-quality English proficiency assessments for a variety of academic uses and contexts. The *TOEFL* Young Students Series (YSS) features the *TOEFL Primary*® and *TOEFL Junior*® tests, which are designed to help teachers and learners of English in school settings. The *TOEFL ITP*® Assessment Series program offers colleges, universities, and others affordable tests for placement and progress monitoring within English programs.

At ETS, we understand that scores from the *TOEFL* Family of Assessments are used to help make important decisions about students, and we would like to keep score users and test takers up-to-date about the research results that assure the quality of these scores. Through the publication of the *TOEFL*® *Research Insight Series*, we wish to communicate to the institutions and English teachers who use any/all of the *TOEFL* tests about the strong research and development base that underlies the *TOEFL* Family of Assessments and to demonstrate our continued commitment to research.

Since the 1970s, the *TOEFL* test has had a rigorous, productive, and far-ranging research program. But why should test score users care about the research base for a test? In short, it is only through a rigorous program of research that a testing company can substantiate claims about what test takers know or can do based on their test scores, as well as provide support for the intended uses of assessments. Beyond demonstrating this critical evidence of test quality, research is also important for enabling innovations in test design and for ensuring that the needs of test takers and test score users are consistently met. This is why ETS has established a strong research base as a fundamental feature underlying the evolution of the *TOEFL* Family of Assessments.

The *TOEFL* Family of Assessments is designed, produced, and supported by a world-class team of test developers, educational measurement specialists, statisticians, and researchers in applied linguistics and language testing. Our test developers have advanced degrees in fields such as English, language education, and applied linguistics. They also possess extensive international experience, having taught English on continents around the globe. Our research, measurement, and statistics teams include some of the world's most distinguished scientists and internationally recognized leaders in diverse areas such as test validity, language learning and assessment, and educational measurement.

To date, more than 300 peer-reviewed TOEFL research reports, technical reports, and monographs have been published by ETS, and many more studies on TOEFL tests have appeared in academic journals and book volumes. In addition, over 20 TOEFL related research projects are conducted by ETS's Research & Development staff each year and the TOEFL Committee of Examiners (COE), comprised of language learning and testing experts from the global academic community, funds an annual program of TOEFL research by independent external researchers from all over the world.

The purpose of the *TOEFL® Research Insight Series* is to provide a comprehensive yet user-friendly account of the essential concepts, procedures, and research results that assure the quality of scores for all members of the TOEFL Family of Assessments. Topics covered in these volumes include issues of core interest to test users, including how tests were designed, evidence for the reliability and validity of test scores, and research-based recommendations for best practices.

The close collaboration with TOEFL score users, English language learning and teaching experts, and university scholars in the design of all TOEFL tests has been a cornerstone to their success. Therefore, through this publication, we hope to foster an ever-stronger connection with our test users by sharing the rigorous measurement and research base and solid test development that continues to ensure the quality of the TOEFL Family of Assessments.

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The following individuals contributed to the second edition (2018) and the third edition (2020) by providing careful reviews and revisions as well as editorial suggestions (in alphabetical order): Terry Axe, Michelle Hampton, John Norris, Spiros Papageorgiou, Eileen Tyson, Jennifer Wain, and Yuan Wang. The primary author of the first edition was Mary Enright. Terry Axe, Cristiane Breining, Brent Bridgeman, Don Powers, Rosalie Szabo, Mikyung Kim Wolf, and Xiaoming Xi also contributed to the first edition.

History of the TOEFL Program

Origins and Governance of the TOEFL Program

The TOEFL test was developed in the early 1960s to assess the English proficiency of second language speakers of English who intend to study in institutions where English is the language of instruction. The TOEFL test was commissioned under the auspices of the National Council on the Testing of English as a Foreign Language, a temporary working group formed through the cooperative effort of more than thirty public and private institutions concerned with the English proficiency of second language speakers, especially those applying to English-medium academic institutions. The TOEFL testing program was initially financed by grants from the Ford and Danforth Foundations and was attached administratively to the Modern Language Association. In 1965, the College Board® and ETS assumed joint responsibility for the testing program.

In recognition of the fact that many who take the TOEFL test are potential undergraduate and graduate students, a cooperative arrangement for the operation of the testing program was entered into by ETS, the College Board, and the *Graduate Record Examinations*® (GRE®) Board. In 1973, the TOEFL Board was created to advise ETS on policies under which the TOEFL program is administered. In accordance with its bylaws, the TOEFL Board consists of sixteen individuals, including three members appointed by the College Board and three appointed by the GRE Board, to represent the interests of both undergraduate and graduate education. Nine at-large members are also appointed to provide broad representation for the various constituent groups that have an interest in the program. The chair of the COE also serves on the TOEFL Board.

The COE is a standing committee of the TOEFL Board. The COE consists of 12 individuals from around the world, all experts in the fields of English language teaching, testing, and research, who provide guidance and oversight for research and development related to the TOEFL iBT test as well as other assessments in the TOEFL Family of Assessments, including the TOEFL ITP Assessment Series program the revised TOEFL Paper-delivered Test (rPdT), the TOEFL Junior test, and the TOEFL Primary test. On other matters, such as major test redesign and policy changes, the COE has power of recommendation to the TOEFL Board. In addition, the COE has two research subcommittees responsible for commissioning and overseeing research focusing on the adult-oriented TOEFL iBT and TOEFL ITP assessments, as well as research on the TOEFL Young Students Series assessments.

The Evolution of the TOEFL Test

Since its inception in 1964, the TOEFL test has evolved from a paper-based test to a computer-based test and, in 2005, to an internet-based test. More importantly, beyond changes in the medium of test delivery, innovations in theories of language proficiency have motivated the redesign of the test's construct (what it measures), content, and item types. Table 1 describes the evolving construct underlying the test during three stages of its development, as well as how these changes were reflected in test content and item types.

For further information, Taylor and Angelis (2008) provided a detailed description of how thinking in the fields of applied linguistics and educational psychology and measurement influenced the development of the TOEFL test at each of these stages.

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Table 1. The Evolution of the TOEFL Test Construct and Content Over Three Stages of Development

Stages	Construct	Content
1. The First TOEFL Test 1964–1979	Discrete components of language skills and knowledge	Multiple-choice items assessing vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, knowledge of correct English structure and grammar
2. A Suite of TOEFL Tests 1979–2005	Original constructs (listening, reading, structure, and grammar) retained but two additional constructs added — writing and speaking ability	In addition to multiple-choice items assessing the original constructs, separate constructed-response tests of writing and speaking were developed — <i>TWE</i> [®] test and the <i>TSE</i> [®] test.
3. The TOEFL iBT Test 2005–present	Communicative competence — the ability to put language knowledge to use in relevant academic contexts	Academic tasks were developed that require the integration of receptive and productive skills such as listening, reading, and writing or speaking, as well as multiple-choice items for listening and reading.

1. *The First TOEFL Test.* When the first TOEFL test was developed, linguistic theories envisioned language competence as a set of separate components such as grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension (Carroll, 1961; Lado, 1961). This focus on discrete language components or skills was compatible with multiple-choice item types, paper-and-pencil testing, and measurement practices that were current at the time. At this early stage, the need to assess other important skills was recognized, although methods to do so on a large scale were not yet available. These other important skills included speaking, writing, and “integrative” skills (Carroll, 1961) that required test takers to combine discrete language components in order to communicate — the construction and production of meaning. While the first TOEFL test did not assess these integrative skills, research and development continued over the following years with the goal of incorporating them in future assessments.

2. *A Suite of TOEFL Tests.* In the 1970s, attention turned to the expansion of the TOEFL construct to include speaking and writing. A multiple-choice TOEFL test that assessed reading, listening, and structure and written expression continued to be administered to all candidates. Additionally, in recognition of the need to assess an actual ability to communicate in English, ETS developed separate tests of speaking and writing. Initially, these tests were taken by smaller numbers of applicants to fulfill the requirements of specific institutions. The TSE Test, originally known as the Test of Spoken English, was developed primarily to assess the oral skills of international graduate students who were being considered for positions as teaching assistants. On the TSE test, examinees tape-recorded oral responses to prerecorded questions that targeted specific language functions, and their responses were later scored by trained raters using the TSE rating rubric. The TWE test, originally known as the Test of Written English, was introduced in 1986 and consisted of a single essay written in response to a brief question or topic. The TWE test required test takers to develop and organize ideas and express these ideas using appropriate English vocabulary and grammar. Initially, the TWE test was administered as a required component of the TOEFL test but only offered at five select administrations per year.

During this second stage of TOEFL test development, the technology used to administer tests was also changing. Toward the end of this stage, in 1998, a computer-based version of the TOEFL test (TOEFL CBT), which included a mandatory essay component for all test takers, was introduced. Furthermore, language experts continued to elaborate on Carroll’s (1961) ideas about integrative language skills, and theories of communicative competence emerged that stressed the fundamentally communicative nature of language use (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972). Throughout this period, ETS sponsored studies to explore the relationship between theories of communicative competence and the TOEFL test (Duran, Canale, Penfield, Stansfield, & Liskin-Gasparro, 1985; Henning & Cascallar, 1992). The development of the TOEFL CBT test and the continued interest in communicative competence signaled a transition to the next stage in the evolution of the TOEFL test.

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3. *The TOEFL iBT Test*. In the 1990s, the TOEFL program, in consultation with the COE, considered how to design a new TOEFL test that was more reflective of communicative competence and that could be delivered efficiently to an expanding variety of test takers worldwide while maintaining key aspects of standardized test administration, scoring, and security. The optimal delivery medium for the test was determined to be via the internet at official, authorized test centers, as the time between taking a test and receiving a score could be reduced considerably. Hence, the original name of the test was the *internet-based test*, later abbreviated to iBT.

The construct of communicative competence that would guide the design of the new test was elaborated further as communicative language use in academic contexts (Chapelle, Grabe, & Berns, 1997). In academic contexts, language use engages both receptive (listening, reading) and productive (speaking, writing) abilities, and many academic tasks require the use of these abilities in a complementary or integrated manner.

Beginning in 1996, teams of experts were formed and charged with the responsibility of designing a new TOEFL test that embodied this construct of communicative language use in academic contexts. These teams were composed of ETS staff and external advisers with expertise in test development, applied linguistics, research methods, and psychometrics. The test design process began with the development of a general framework founded on the notion that the new test would measure “examinees’ English language proficiency in situations and tasks reflective of university life” (Jamieson, Jones, Kirsch, Mosenthal, & Taylor, 2000, p. 11). Subsequently, working papers were written that extended this conceptual framework to four language domains — listening (Bejar, Douglas, Jamieson, Nissan, & Turner, 2000), reading (Enright et al., 2000), speaking (Butler, Eignor, Jones, McNamara, & Suomi, 2000), and writing (Cumming, Kantor, Powers, Santos & Taylor, 2000). Each of these working papers defined processes for designing test items that would reflect academic tasks and assess test takers’ proficiency within the relevant language domain. They also established a research agenda that laid out plans to develop and evaluate new tasks and to gather the kinds of evidence that would support the valid interpretation and use of the new test scores. The associated program of research carried out to support the full design of the TOEFL iBT test is documented in a series of 35 monographs (https://www.ets.org/toefl/research/archives/monograph_series) and a book (Chapelle, Enright, & Jamieson, 2008).

Two important frameworks have guided test design and validation efforts for the TOEFL iBT test. Evidence-centered design (ECD), a test design methodology developed at ETS, was used to finalize the test specifications for each of the four main skills assessed in the TOEFL iBT test and all of the relevant subskills (Pearlman, 2008). An important contribution of these test specifications was to ensure that the associated test questions were comparable across tasks and that they could be developed in sufficient numbers to sustain ongoing test development. ECD provides the essential basis for delivering a standardized test that is reliable and fair across numerous test forms and administrations.

Validity research for the TOEFL iBT test has been guided by an argument-based approach (Kane, 2001) that helps to lay out the different assumptions or claims explaining how the test is supposed to work to provide meaningful information about a test taker’s academic communicative competence in English. It also establishes the types of evidence needed to support these claims. Initial validity evidence for the TOEFL iBT test is compiled according to the argument-based approach in the book edited by Chapelle, Jamieson, and Enright (2008).

The Expanding TOEFL Family of Assessments

While most people worldwide associate the TOEFL name with the TOEFL iBT assessment specifically, the TOEFL brand name actually represents a family of assessments designed to meet the needs of different test users. In addition to the TOEFL iBT test, several versions of the TOEFL test are offered for distinct purposes:

- TOEFL PBT/rPdT test: In some regions of the world, access to internet-connected, secure test administration sites remains a challenge. In order to provide all learners with the opportunity to take a TOEFL test, ETS maintains a paper-based version of the TOEFL test. The most recent iteration of this test is the rPdT (revised Paper-delivered Test), which utilizes items from the TOEFL iBT test to assess listening, reading, and writing skills.
- TOEFL ITP Assessment Series program: Many educational programs at universities and other institutions desire an assessment of students' English language proficiency for making placement decisions, for monitoring progress, and for exiting students from second language instruction. For these purposes, the TOEFL ITP test was created as a flexible, low-cost, and relatively low-stakes test that does not require the same kinds of security measures, fixed administration schedule, or administration time demands as the TOEFL iBT test. The TOEFL ITP test is administered locally and scores are reported to and used within the administering institution.

Beyond these assessments that are focused on adult learners and university-level academic communication, several additional assessments have been developed more recently for use with younger learners of English:

- In 2010, ETS launched the TOEFL Junior assessment as an age-appropriate test of academic English for learners ages 11 and up. The TOEFL Junior test is available in a variety of formats and tests students' abilities to use English for communication in school environments. The test is used by schools and teachers for placement in language programs, monitoring learner progress, and making related decisions.
- In 2013, the TOEFL Primary assessment was launched as a classroom-oriented assessment for English learners ages 8 and up. The main purpose of the TOEFL Primary test is the provision of feedback to teachers and learners as a basis for guiding their educational efforts.

Summary

For more than 40 years, the TOEFL program has pioneered innovations in language assessment that are consistent with advances in understanding about language competence and with developments in technology. The TOEFL program has also sought to respond to the needs of test users by continuing to develop alternative administration formats for its assessments and by developing new assessments for English learners at different ages. Accompanying these

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innovations has been a persistent commitment to the highest standards of educational measurement practice (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 2014), continuous audits of test programs following the *ETS Standards for Quality and Fairness* (Educational Testing Service, 2014), and, in particular, a sustained program of validation research.

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