

# Teaching beyond the Test: A Method for Designing Test-Preparation Classes

My conversations with other English teachers generally turn to assessment once they find out that I have worked as a test developer. At that point, they immediately bemoan the overwhelming presence of tests in their own lives and their students' lives, and they sigh in resignation at having to teach test-preparation classes for high-stakes standardized assessments of academic English such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). They feel these classes do not truly improve their students' ability to communicate in English, yet both students and teachers accept that spending time learning strategies or "tricks" that will lead to higher scores is a necessary evil in an environment that relies so heavily on testing.

I believe that these tricks are a waste of time in terms of language acquisition. They do not lead to real improvement of our students' Eng-

lish, and they take away time from real skills development. And we know that real gains in English proficiency will serve our students far more than a list of memorized words they will soon forget.

So why is it that, knowing what we know and believing what we believe, we are often forced to acquiesce to outside demands and teach test preparation as a series of tricks? And is there any value in teaching these tricks? I would answer yes and no. For some traditional exams, grammar-based exams, and exams that are poorly written, there are certainly any number of workable tricks that we can pass on to students. But assessment research has resulted in English exams that are more authentic, more valid, more task-based—and less "coachable." Gone are the days of "drill-and-kill" rote memorization and attempts to outsmart a multiple-choice grammar test. Many exams now assess language proficiency as consisting of a set of skills rather than as knowledge

of grammar and vocabulary. This evolution changes the nature and content of the test-prep class—or it should.

### **Teaching beyond the test: A skills-based focus**

The good news is that, as the quality of exams improves, the quality and content of test-prep classes likewise improve and develop students' English proficiency through a more skills-based focus. For most students, tests of academic English are a means to an end, and the goal is to study in an English-medium university. Success at university will require specific sets of skills (such as note-taking and summarizing) that are often measured on exams of academic English. In our test-prep classes, we have the opportunity to teach beyond the test by incorporating activities to help our students build the necessary skills that will be required of them once they complete their exams and move to the next stage.

Another advantage of teaching beyond the test is that by de-emphasizing the test and focusing on skills, we help our students gain perspective about the role of tests in their lives; that is, while tests play an important role, they are not the real reason students are studying. This realization, along with familiarity with the test itself, helps reduce test-taking anxiety by reminding students that the test is merely a stepping stone on their path to success.

### **Assessments: An overview**

It is important to understand how large-scale standardized tests fit within the larger category of assessment. Tests are tools used to assess knowledge, skills, and abilities, and different tests have different purposes, as indicated below.

1. Classroom tests allow teachers to assess students' knowledge or abilities, usually in relation to content covered in the class, and to assign grades to students. Tests and test items (questions on a test) can take many forms: multiple choice, fill in the blanks, cloze exercises, and short answers and essays, to name a few. Other types of alternative classroom assessment include portfolios, interviews, and surveys.
2. Program or institutional tests are generally given for admission to special programs, for placement within programs, for monitoring students within a program, or for exiting students from a program. These tests extend beyond the boundaries of the individual classroom but rarely have any significance or recognition beyond the program itself.
3. Finally, there are the large-scale, standardized tests, such as the TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, PTE, and the Cambridge exams (KET, PET, FCE, etc.; see the Appendix for the full test names and descriptions). These tests are considered to be *high stakes* in that the results are often used to make decisions that can significantly impact a test-taker's education, career, or life. They are all *criterion-referenced* exams, which means that the test-takers are compared against common criteria or a set of standards rather than against one another, as in *norm-referenced* exams. Scores from these tests are generally recognized by several institutions or universities. The tests themselves are all based on research that is available to the public and are informed by advances in the field of second language acquisition, by input from applied linguistics experts, and by cutting-edge methods of test development.

Most test-prep classes are designed to prepare students for the last category of tests, and this article will focus on the design of successful activities to prepare students for standardized academic English exams. However, the issues related to testing and teaching beyond the test transcend standard test-preparation classes. Teachers of many types of courses face the specter of standardized testing and can benefit from knowing how to organize an English class that builds skills and at the same time addresses students' concerns about being properly prepared for a test.

### **Test preparation: Building a better class**

How can we design a more effective test-prep class for a standardized assessment of academic English, such as the TOEFL, IELTS Academic, or PTE Academic? As with all

classes, a test-prep class should begin with clearly stated goals, and three such goals immediately suggest themselves:

1. The class should familiarize students with the test and test-item types.
2. The class should help students develop the skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) that they will have to demonstrate on the test.
3. The class should teach students the essential knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) that will support their performance. Other goals can be added depending on circumstances and needs.

Goals are general, so the next step is to determine measurable objectives (Nunan 2001). Here it is useful to propose a shift in the way we tend to think about test-prep classes. Because of improvements in large-scale tests, we can use the tests themselves to help us define our objectives. Consider the TOEFL, which is intended for admission to English-language universities. The TOEFL was created based on research into the English language skills university students need in order to complete the work required of them, and the test items reflect this research (Educational Testing Service 2013b). Each item type is associated with a specific university task, and the item types measure different skills, allowing the test to present a picture of the test-taker as a potential student and to make claims about the test-taker's ability to use and interact with academic English.

For example, one of the tasks in the writing section requires test-takers to read a short academic passage, listen to a short lecture, and then write a response (Educational Testing Service 2013a). This task—or variations of it—is immediately familiar to anyone who has attended a university, and a test-taker's performance on this item provides insight into his or her potential to complete this task in a university setting.

Thus, the first step in defining objectives is to look at the claims about test-takers in order to receive a clear picture of what skills are considered necessary for success at an English-language university. These are the skills that we should be helping our students develop—not only to do well on the test itself, but also to prepare for university. We need to look at the item types, determine what skills or abili-

ties they are seeking to measure, and use this information to write our class objectives.

### **The PTE Academic: Listening section**

As an example of how to proceed, consider an item on the listening section of the newest of the three major academic exams, the PTE Academic. The PTE has speaking, writing, reading, and listening sections. These sections contain item types that seek to measure skills that test developers have determined to be necessary for students in an academic setting. The listening section contains eight item types. We will focus on one: the *Highlight Correct Summary* item. For this item type, test-takers hear a short academic talk and must choose the correct summary of the talk from four written options. Both the talk and summaries contain academic language and structures. Each option is generally two to four sentences long. (For more information on the PTE, see Pearson Education 2012.)

The first step is to determine what claim or claims can be made about test-takers based on their performance on this item. We could say that successful completion of this item means that a test-taker has the skills necessary to comprehend a short academic talk, to comprehend written academic language, and to select the most appropriate written summary of the talk. The sub-skills required of the test-taker include the abilities to do the following:

- listen for the main idea, main points, and connections between the two
- understand a wide range of language varieties (not just American, Australian, or British)
- comprehend academic vocabulary and sentence structure through both listening and reading
- compare spoken and written texts
- recognize antonyms and synonyms

At this point, there are two options on how to proceed. One is to go through all the eight listening-item types and determine what sub-skills are necessary for each type. The advantage to this approach is that we can see which item types require the same or similar sub-skills across the entire listening section, and we can organize our class activities accordingly; the disadvantage is that this process can be time-consuming and requires a lot of work up front. The other, quicker option is to write

class objectives for this item type and design activities to support the objectives; the disadvantage of this option is that we are unable to take advantage of overlap in sub-skills among eight listening-item types to organize our activities.

For the sake of brevity, this article will follow the second option. The list of objectives, then, might look something like this:

- Objective 1.* Students will be able to identify the main idea of a short academic talk after one listening.
- Objective 2.* Students will be able to identify the main points of a short academic talk after one listening.
- Objective 3.* Students will be able to express the connection between the main points and the main idea of a short academic talk after one listening.
- Objective 4.* Students will be able to decipher meaning in a short academic talk delivered by a non-native British, North American, or Australian English speaker after one listening.
- Objective 5.* Students will be able to identify the main idea of a short, written summary.
- Objective 6.* Students will be able to identify the main points in a short, written summary.
- Objective 7.* Students will be able to compare and contrast a short academic talk and a short written summary, including being able to identify synonyms and antonyms across both texts.

This certainly seems like a long list, but if we were to examine other listening and reading items, we would start to see overlap in the sub-skills—and objectives—for each.

Now we can begin designing activities that meet these objectives and also match students' levels. For lower-level students, we may wish to focus on one objective at a time (or even break objectives down further to focus on aspects of each objective) to help them build their abilities and confidence. For higher-level students, we can incorporate several objectives into one activity. While at some point we will want to do actual practice items with our students to familiarize them with the test itself,

we are not always constrained to do so. We can use other types of written texts—perhaps newspaper articles or advice columns. We can use listening texts that are not based on academic topics as a way to break the monotony and engage our students' interest. We should, however, be careful to return to academic topics to expose our students to vocabulary and structures that they do not encounter when working with social or general English.

We should also be sure to include adequate practice of the test items for our students so that they become familiar with the types of items they will encounter. There are several reasons for this: (1) such familiarity tends to lead to improved performance (Peña and Quinn 1997); (2) familiarity with test items can also lead to decreased test anxiety (Educational Testing Service 2005); (3) practice tests help students develop an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and learn how to pace themselves; and (4) our students will come to class expecting a certain amount of test-item practice and will be concerned if they do not receive it. The challenge is to find and maintain a balance between the time spent practicing test items and the time spent developing the skills that help students do well on their tests. But once this balance is struck, students will put the test into perspective and begin to see a link between direct test preparation and skills development, and they will value the class even more.

#### **Activities for PTE's *Highlight Correct Summary* listening item**

It is worth noting that the following activities are not limited to preparing students for the PTE *Highlight Correct Summary* listening item, as they include practice of skills that students will need for several types of listening items, for general listening in English, and for listening in academic settings.

#### **Low-level and close-ended activities**

These activities are effective for introducing the test item, but they are also appropriate for lower-level students who need to focus on the basic skills required for global and local listening. The activities focus on the first two objectives listed above—identifying the main idea and points of a short academic talk after one listening. The second and third activities here can be done with either listening or

reading texts, and if reading texts are used, the applicable objectives are Objectives 5 and 6—identifying the main idea and points of a short, written summary.

#### **Activity 1: Identifying the topic**

To help students practice global listening skills, the teacher plays a short listening text and students identify the topic. This activity can be expanded by giving students paragraphs from different academic texts (with different topics) and playing the first few seconds of a lecture. Students then choose which text is on the same topic as the lecture. Because the focus of this activity is on understanding the topic or main idea rather than details, texts can be beyond the students' current language level. This activity also gives students practice in juggling two tasks (reading and listening) at the same time—a skill they will need to develop for tests and for universities.

#### **Activity 2: Matching illustrations**

Another way to practice global listening skills is to present students with a series of drawings or photos that illustrate different procedures, from baking cakes to changing tires to performing a science experiment. Students then listen to a short talk describing one procedure, and they must choose the series that illustrates the procedure described. Google Images is a good source for finding illustrations of different procedures.

#### **Activity 3: Matching subtopics**

To practice local listening or listening for details, the teacher tells students that they will listen to a short lecture on a particular topic (e.g., pollution, minimum wage) and gives them a list of related subtopics. Students listen to the lecture and circle the subtopics they hear being discussed. A variation of this activity that develops note-taking skills or memory is to have students listen to the recording first, then give them the list of subtopics.

#### **Activity 4: Providing missing details**

To practice their local listening skills, students receive a text where key details are either missing or presented with two or three options for certain words. The students listen to a recording of the text and either fill in the missing information or circle the word they

hear. While on the surface this is a standard listening activity, it becomes especially valuable when the speakers are non-native English speakers or have accents that students might not have received much exposure to previously. The activity then helps refine students' ability to distinguish between similar-sounding words that often cause problems (e.g., *can* and *can't*, or *nineteen* and *ninety*). Listening texts such as weather reports, traffic reports, horoscopes, or even advertisements are appropriate for this activity, and they are easy to find on the Internet with a variety of accents.

#### **Taking it to the next level**

The following activities, while not completely open-ended, require higher-order skills such as organizing and rephrasing. They require students to do more with the information they are given, and there is more interaction between the student and the task.

#### **Activity 1: Rewriting sentences**

This activity improves students' ability to understand the original text and see how the wording can be changed to mean the same thing. Test-prep material for the FCE's *Rewriting Sentence* item lets students practice transforming sentence vocabulary and structure while retaining the meaning of the sentence. This is a particularly effective exercise for giving students practice with modals and the passive voice.

Example sentence: "I tried to ask him, but he couldn't speak English."

Use *able* to rewrite the sentence.

"I tried to ask him, but he \_\_\_\_\_ speak English."

A variation of this would be to give students two sentences and ask if they mean the same thing. This is an excellent way to target commonly confused structures and vocabulary, such as "I am used to" and "I used to," or "actually" and "right now." Both variations target Objectives 5, 6, and 7 listed above.

#### **Activity 2: Using graphic organizers**

This activity utilizes graphic organizers to help students understand the structure of a text as they listen to an academic talk. Each student uses a graphic organizer to summarize the talk and then compares it with the

summaries produced by others to see whose is the closest to the original. As a variation, students form groups, and each one listens to a talk that is on the same topic but that varies from the others in slight details. Students then work together to write a summary of the talk. When they are finished, the teacher collects the summaries and, on another day, gives students copies of them, plays one of the talks for the class, and has the students choose which summary goes with the talk. This activity targets all objectives except the fourth one, and teachers can use talks from speakers with different accents to work toward that objective.

### **Activity 3: Identifying differences**

An activity that focuses on meeting the first three objectives (and possibly the fourth) is to divide students into pairs, then have one student from each pair leave the room while the remaining students listen to a short recorded text. The students outside the classroom return to their partners, who recount the text they heard while the students who had been outside take notes. The entire class then listens to the text again, and the students note any differences or omissions between what their partners told them and what they hear on the recording.

### **Higher-order skills: Making judgments and supporting opinions**

Although the *Highlight Correct Summary* test section requires students to respond in basic ways, it can be used as a starting point for activities that push students to develop higher-order skills. These higher-order skills include the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information (King, Goodson, and Rohani 1998). By using test items as springboards, teachers help students develop a greater sense of control over their performance in addition to preparing them for university classes.

### **Activity 1: Selecting and defending options**

One way to do this is to have students first complete one or more test items before looking at a transcript and the related summaries. Students then deliberate about whether each option is an accurate summary. Students must pay attention to language, make judgments, and present and support an opinion.

### **Activity 2: Composing written arguments and staging debates**

Students can also respond to the topics in the talks by composing written responses or counterarguments or by staging debates. These types of activities are best organized as part of a unit rather than a response to an individual item. For example, a unit on impressionist art teaches students academic-level vocabulary related to art and includes many item types to give students the opportunity to practice their new terms and respond to actual test items. The unit might also contain activities that culminate in an activity that is not based on a test item but on a task that students might encounter in an academic setting, such as writing a paper, responding to a painting, or giving a presentation. By structuring a class in this way, teachers provide test-preparation work that supports actual learning and not the other way around. Both the *NorthStar* and *Academic Connections* series are structured to allow students to learn the English necessary for academic English exams while at the same time developing study skills and critical thinking.

### **Additional test-preparation activity: Self-assessment**

Inviting students to assess their performance helps them develop a sense of where they are in terms of test preparation, where they want to go, and what they need to do to improve. Students discuss or write about their strengths and weaknesses, which aspects of an item tend to give them problems, and what they can do to address their problems and improve their performance. This type of self-assessment helps students see the value in developing their language skills by linking their skills and abilities to their performance. It also contributes to their growth as independent learners and shows them how they can take initiative and guide their own learning.

### **Conclusion**

Like it or not, we must acknowledge the role and presence of tests in our lives and our students' lives. By focusing on "tricks," we give the impression to our students that tests control us and that we must adapt our

learning and thinking to them. But by putting the tests to work for us while at the same time reducing their central role in our teaching, we and our students can regain a sense of control. And this is something that all teachers can do. Well-written tests measure skills that students will need, and we as teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that our students have the skills they need to travel beyond the test. Fortunately, the TOEFL, IELTS, PTE, and other tests are based on solid research, and all we need to do is look at the test, extrapolate the skills the test measures, and use this information to design our test-prep courses.

That is the beauty of teaching beyond the test: by focusing on skills rather than the test itself, we blur the formerly distinct boundary between test-preparation classes and regular English classes. The shift in thinking comes when we realize that we can use tests to our advantage rather than allowing their presence to control us and our teaching.

By teaching beyond the test, we develop our students' skills, help them make real and meaningful gains in proficiency, prepare them for life after the exam, and reduce their anxiety—all while helping them prepare to take their test.

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## Appendix Common Standardized Tests of English

*Teaching beyond the Test: A Method for Designing Test-Preparation Classes • Deirdre Derrick*

Test Acronym	Full Name of Test	Description of Test	Website
TOEFL iBT	Test of English as a Foreign Language internet-Based Test	The TOEFL is a test of academic English generally used for admission to North American universities.	<a href="http://www.ets.org/toefl">www.ets.org/toefl</a>
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication	The TOEIC measures a person's ability to use English in a variety of work-related situations.	<a href="http://www.ets.org/toeic">www.ets.org/toeic</a>
IELTS	International English Language Testing System	IELTS has two exams: general and academic. The academic exam is generally used for admission to European universities.	<a href="http://www.ielts.org">www.ielts.org</a>
PTE	Pearson Test of English	PTE has two exams: general and academic. The academic exam is generally used for admission to universities around the world.	<a href="http://pearsonpte.com/pteacademic/Pages/home.aspx">http://pearsonpte.com/pteacademic/Pages/home.aspx</a>
KET	Key English Test	Part of the Cambridge English Language Assessment, used for work and study: A1–A2 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).	<a href="http://www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html">www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html</a>
PET	Preliminary English Test	Part of the Cambridge English Language Assessment, used for work and study: B1 on the CEFR.	<a href="http://www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html">www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html</a>
FCE	First Certificate in English	Part of the Cambridge English Language Assessment, used for work and study: B2 on the CEFR.	<a href="http://www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html">www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html</a>
CAE	Certificate in Advanced English	Part of the Cambridge English Language Assessment, used for work and study: C1 on the CEFR.	<a href="http://www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html">www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html</a>
CPE	Certificate of Proficiency in English	Part of the Cambridge English Language Assessment, used for work and study: C2 on the CEFR.	<a href="http://www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html">www.cambridgeesol.org/index.html</a>