Information for *TOEFL iBT®* Score Users, Teachers, and Learners

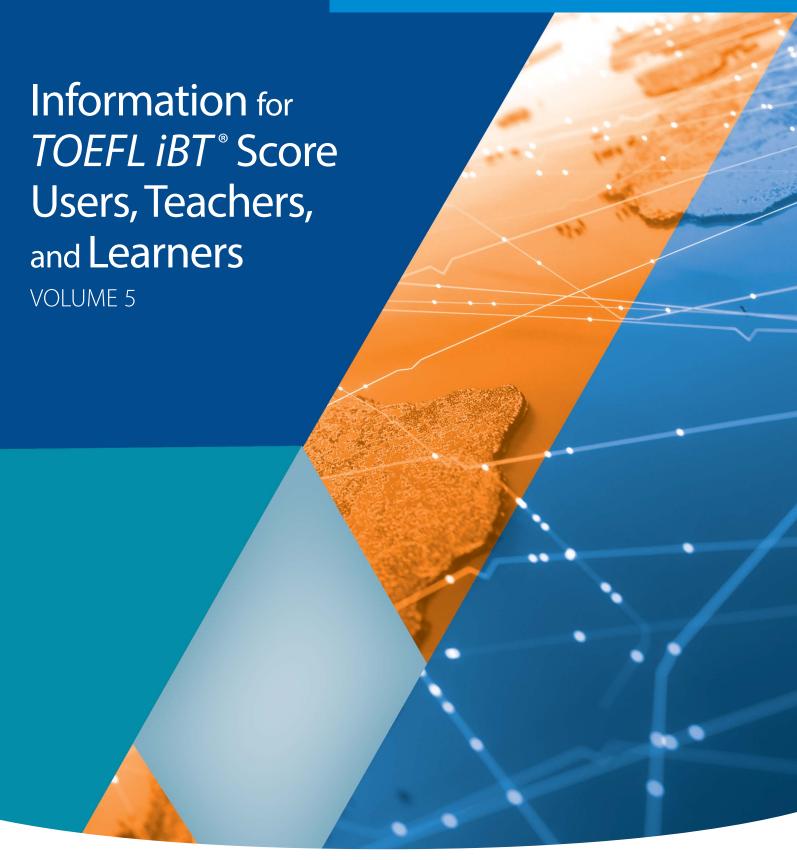VOLUME 5

TOEFL® Research Insight Series, Volume 5: Information for *TOEFL iBT*® Score Users, Teachers, and Learners

Preface

The *TOEFL iBT*® test is the world's most widely respected English language assessment and used for admissions purposes in more than 150 countries, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (see test review in Alderson, 2009). 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 was expanded to provide high-quality, English proficiency assessments for a variety of academic uses and contexts. The *TOEFL*® Young Students Series features the *TOEFL Primary*® and *TOEFL Junior*® tests, which are designed to help teachers and learners of English in school settings. In addition, the *TOEFL ITP*® Assessment Series program offers colleges, universities, and others affordable tests for placement and progress monitoring within English programs as a pathway to eventual degree 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 help 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 the TOEFL tests the strong research and development base that underlies the TOEFL Family of Assessments and demonstrate our continued commitment to research.

Since the 1970's, 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 and minimize potential negative consequences of score use. Beyond demonstrating this critical evidence of test quality, research is also important for enabling innovations in test design and addressing the needs of test takers and test score users. This is why ETS has established a strong research base as a fundamental feature underlying the evolution of the TOEFL Family of Assessments.

The portfolio 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 Family of Assessments research reports, technical reports, and monographs have been published by ETS, and many more studies on the TOEFL tests have appeared in academic journals and book volumes. In addition, over 20 TOEFL test-related research projects are conducted by ETS's Research & Development staff each year and the TOEFL Committee of Examiners — comprising language learning and testing experts from the global academic community — funds an annual program of TOEFL Family of Assessments 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 products in the TOEFL Family of Assessments. Topics covered in these volumes feature issues of core interest to test users, including how tests were designed; evidence for the reliability, validity, and fairness of test scores; and research-based recommendations for best practices.

The close collaboration with TOEFL test 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 and worldwide acceptance. Therefore, through this publication, we hope to foster an ever-stronger connection with our test users by sharing the rigorous measurement and research base, as well as solid test development, that continues to help ensure the quality of the TOEFL Family of Assessments.

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Information for *TOEFL iBT*® Score Users, Teachers, and Learners

This volume of the *TOEFL Research Insight Series* will discuss how TOEFL iBT scores and related services can be used by institutions, organizations, and agencies to help recruit and select applicants with the English language proficiency needed to be successful. It will also discuss resources available to English language teachers who want to help students improve their English language communication skills, as well as English learners who are preparing for the TOEFL iBT test.

The primary use of TOEFL iBT scores is to evaluate the English language proficiency of applicants for graduate and undergraduate programs where English is the language of instruction.

TOEFL iBT scores are reported on a score scale of 0–30 for each of the four language skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The total score is reported on a scale of 0–120, which is the sum of the four section scores. The test taker score report includes scores and performance feedback for each skill. This allows test takers to focus on those skills that need improvement.

Because the TOEFL iBT test focuses on an individual's ability to communicate in English using all four language skills—reading, listening, speaking and writing—it can help score users identify applicants who have the English language skills necessary to be successful in their programs. More than 10,000 institutions, agencies, and organizations in more than 130 countries use TOEFL scores to evaluate English language proficiency. A searchable list of official TOEFL destinations is available on the TOEFL website at **http://www.toeflgoanywhere.org/search-who-accepts-toefl**. This frequently used list is another way students can find your institution and TOEFL score requirements. We encourage you to review the list to ensure your institution is included and provides current information.

For Score Users

A valid and reliable assessment of a person's English language proficiency in an academic setting is critical in providing higher-education institutions with the information they need to evaluate an applicant's ability to be successful in their programs. The TOEFL test is the most widely available academic English language assessment in the world, with more than 4,000 test centers in more than 165 countries. The test development, delivery, scoring, and supporting research ensure that scores are valid and reliable for all test takers, providing a means of evaluating individuals worldwide on the same scale. This allows institutions to evaluate a diverse pool of applicants.

ETS does not set passing or failing scores for the TOEFL iBT test. Instead, individual score users set score requirements that will help them recruit and select applicants whose English language proficiency meets their standards. Some score users will set a total score requirement only, while others may set requirements for one or more of the skill sections in addition to or in place of a total score.

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ETS encourages institutions to consider whether, in addition to a total score, a minimum requirement in one or more of the section scores would be appropriate for specific programs. For example, many MBA programs emphasize oral proficiency, as students are required to interact frequently in class, engage in group work, and make presentations. If speaking ability is important for success in a program, setting a minimum score requirement for that skill may be valuable. Two applicants with the same total score may have very different abilities in the four different language skills, which would make one applicant a more suitable candidate than another. Establishing section score requirements ensures that individuals have the profile of English language abilities that matches the needs of the institution or program. Therefore, even if a program does not require section scores, we encourage institutions to review them as part of the admissions process. However, keep in mind that English proficiency is only one of many factors that play a part in the success of non-native speaking students.

Guidelines for Appropriate Score Use

ETS encourages institutions to observe the following guidelines for appropriate score use:

1. TOEFL scores measure English language proficiency at a particular point in time. Proficiency may improve or decrease based on the amount of study and exposure to the language following the test date. For this reason, TOEFL scores are only valid for 2 years, and we encourage score recipients to only accept scores that are no more than 2 years old.

2. Consider all relevant information related to English proficiency when evaluating applications, not only TOEFL scores.

3. TOEFL test scores can be used in a complementary way with other standardized tests such as the SAT® and GRE® tests, as they provide different but complementary information about the applicant.

4. Whenever possible, use score ranges instead of rigid cut scores; score ranges provide more flexibility in selecting qualified applicants for admission.

5. Establishing requirements for one or more TOEFL section scores, not just the total score, can help you differentiate between applicants and better meet your program's needs. Even if specific section scores are not required, we encourage institutions to review them during the admissions process.

6. Think about the kinds and levels of English language proficiency required in various fields and levels of study, and what level of proficiency your program may need.

7. Evaluate the validity of your admissions criteria by performing a validity study. Gather validity evidence for your use(s) of total or section scores.

8. Make your score requirements work for you. Review them on a regular basis and make adjustments as needed.

9. Avoid setting score requirements so high that you eliminate qualified applicants, or so low that your applicants will not be successful.

10. Institutions offering English as a second language (ESL) support may have more flexibility in accepting applicants with lower proficiency.

Using TOEFL iBT Scores to Select International Teaching Assistants

In some countries, TOEFL iBT test scores are used to screen and select international teaching assistants (ITAs). ETS researchers conducted a study about the use of TOEFL iBT Speaking section scores for initial screening of ITAs. The study concluded that scores from the TOEFL iBT Speaking section can be used successfully as an initial screening to determine whether ITAs have the necessary English language proficiency to assist in teaching students at the university level. A copy of the study is available in the Research section of the TOEFL website at **https://www.ets.org/toefl/research08-02**.

Receiving TOEFL Scores

The TOEFL program makes it easy to receive official score reports directly from ETS. All institutions or organizations that have a four-digit TOEFL code can receive scores via these methods:

Scores Online through the *ETS*® Data Manager

TOEFL test taker scores, photos, and a 1-minute speech sample (described below) are available through a secure online portal. Score recipients can use the ETS Data Manager for easy, on-demand, secure access to score information and test taker data free of charge. New scores, photos, and speech samples are made available approximately twice per week.

Scores via Automated Server-to-Server Feeds

This service provides users with the ability to automatically download test taker scores from the ETS server to a client server. It requires a 1-time setup by the institution's IT or technology staff. Data files containing TOEFL scores are made available approximately twice a week via the internet.

Paper Score Reports

Featuring the ETS Security Guard, a special heat-sensitive ink that, when activated, verifies the report's authenticity, paper score reports are mailed to institutions twice a week. Scores for the TOEFL paper-delivered test are mailed approximately 5 weeks after the test date. Allow 7–10 days for mail delivery within the United States and 4–6 weeks for other locations.

For more information on receiving TOEFL scores, visit **https://www.ets.org/toefl/institutions/scores/reporting/**.

Resources

ETS provides a variety of resources to help score users set and review their TOEFL score requirements: TOEFL iBT score comparison tools, TOEFL test and score data summaries, the Online Speech Sample Service, and *TOEFL*® Destination Search.

TOEFL iBT Score Comparison Tool

The TOEFL iBT score comparison tool provides score comparisons that aim to give you the information you need to make the best admissions decisions for your institution. ETS has conducted research to develop helpful tools that make it easier for you to compare TOEFL iBT scores to the IELTS® academic module.

The score comparison tables and online interactive widget were based on research conducted comparing the TOEFL test and the IELTS academic test. For this research, ETS obtained a sample of 1,153 students who had both IELTS and TOEFL scores. Under this approach, TOEFL iBT score ranges were identified for test takers meeting a particular score level on the equivalent IELTS score band. The score comparison results for each section (Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing) and the total test scores showed that most of the students in the sample scored in the middle to mid-high score ranges on both tests. The full report *Linking TOEFL iBT® Scores to IELTS® Scores—A Research Report* is available on our website at **https://www.ets.org/toefl/comparescores**. The website also contains the score comparison tables and interactive widget.

TOEFL iBT Score Mapping to the Common European Framework of Reference

TOEFL iBT score mapping to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) has been conducted by ETS researchers. Scores are mapped at both the total and section levels and can be found on the TOEFL website at **https://www.ets.org/toefl/institutions/scores/compare/**. The research publication *The Association Between TOEFL iBT Test Scores and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) Levels* can be found at **https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RM-15-06.pdf**.

TOEFL Test and Score Data Summary

The TOEFL Test and Score Data Summary is an annual report published by ETS that provides score means and percentile data on the performance of TOEFL iBT test takers during the previous calendar year. Data are available for a variety of criteria, including total and section scores, reason for taking the test, gender, native language, and native country. The most recent version can be found at **https://www.ets.org/toefl/research/**.

The Online Speech Sample Service

The Online Speech Sample Service allows score users with a four-digit TOEFL code to listen to a 60-second portion of an applicant's scored speaking response to one of the TOEFL iBT integrated speaking tasks. Integrated tasks require test takers to combine their English language skills, as is typically done when communicating in an academic setting. They may listen to a short lecture and respond orally to a prompt based on what they have heard, or they may read a passage, listen to a short lecture, and then give a spoken response based on what they have read and heard.

It is important to note that the speech sample represents the typical performance of the test taker. An item that represents the test taker's median score as closely as possible is selected. When more than one item has received the median score, one of these is selected randomly. When no item has received the median score, the item with the score closest to the median is selected. Therefore, some of the test taker's spoken responses may have been stronger than the sample, while others may have been weaker. In addition, it is important to understand that the sample represents extemporaneous speaking and is not a prepared speech.

The speech sample service is offered at no charge to any official TOEFL institution through the ETS Data Manager (described above). Samples are available for 2 years after the test date. Combined with test scores and other evidence of English language proficiency, the speech sample provides additional information on an applicant's ability to communicate effectively in English. For more information, please visit **https://www.ets.org/institution-portal/data-manager**.

TOEFL® Destination Search

The TOEFL Destination Search (**https://www.toeflgoanywhere.org**) lists an institution's name, TOEFL code number, score requirements, and a link to the institution's website. The directory allows students to use advanced criteria, such as score requirements, to search for institutions accepting TOEFL scores. Score users may wish to consider using the TOEFL Advanced Search tool to review score requirements set by peer institutions when considering their own requirements.

For English Language Teachers and Learners

The goal of English language instruction is to help learners use English to perform tasks and to communicate effectively. For university study or for other educational or professional endeavors, the ability to communicate in English is a key element of success. English language teachers are a primary resource to help students build a foundation and learn to perform tasks and communicate in English.

There is no specific length of time or English language course that will ensure an improvement in a person's English proficiency. To help students improve their English language skills, it is important for them to use English as much as possible. This can include such activities as listening to English language programs on the radio, TV, or internet; reading newspapers, magazine articles, and books written in English and writing summaries of what has been read; and reading aloud in class and discussing topics in English. The more students practice their communication skills under the guidance of an English language teacher, the more likely their English language skills will improve.

Resources for Teachers

ETS has developed a number of resources to supplement the curriculum for teachers of English as a second or a foreign language. While some are aimed specifically at preparation for the TOEFL test, other products are available to help teachers develop an effective English language curriculum.

To help students prepare for the TOEFL iBT test, we recommend that teachers become familiar with the test. There are sample questions from the TOEFL iBT test on the TOEFL website at **https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/quick_prep/**. Teachers may also want to take *TOEFL®* Practice Online (*TPO*™ practice tests) to get a feel for the actual testing experience. In addition to looking at the sample questions, it can be helpful for teachers to become familiar with the scoring guidelines (rubrics) that are used by TOEFL raters to score the Speaking and Writing sections. The rubrics for the Speaking and Writing tasks can be viewed at the ETS website (**https://www.ets.org/toefl/teachers_advisors/scores/guides/**).

English language teachers should also encourage students to share their TOEFL score reports with them, so they can review the section scores and performance feedback on the test taker's TOEFL score report. It is important for teachers to look not only at the total score, but also at the four section scores, to help identify areas of strength and weakness for each particular student. This is helpful in directing students to exercises that focus on the particular skills that need improvement.

The *Propell®* workshop for the TOEFL iBT test is a 1-day professional development program designed to help English language teachers meet the challenges of teaching English to students. The workshop uses examples from the Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing sections of the TOEFL iBT test. It also provides instructional techniques and strategies for using the integrated-skills approach to teaching language and for preparing students for success.

ETS has also created tools to measure student progress and identify areas for improvement:

- **TOEFL ITP Assessment Series Program:** These tests provide a flexible and reliable way to assess student proficiency, to conduct student placement, or to evaluate the effectiveness of your English language learning program. The TOEFL ITP tests contain reading, listening, and structure and written expression items. Institutions can choose who they want to test and when for an affordable price. Note that TOEFL ITP scores should not be used for university admissions purposes.

- ***Criterion®* Online Writing Evaluation Service:** This is a web-based instructional tool that helps students plan, write, and revise essays and provides instant scoring and annotated diagnostic feedback.

Resources for Learners

ETS has products that provide hands-on, targeted instruction to familiarize students with the format and types of questions on the TOEFL iBT test.

The following free materials are available to learners online:

- **TOEFL Test Preparation: The Insider's Guide**, the *TOEFL*® MOOC massive open online course (MOOC), is a free 6-week course developed by the experts who create, administer, and score the TOEFL test to help English learners improve their skills. Register at **https://www.edx.org/course/toeflr-test-preparation-insiders-guide-etsx-toeflx-4**.

- **TOEFL iBT Free Practice Test** can help students become familiar with the types of questions and content on the actual test and understand how the TOEFL iBT test is structured and formatted. The free test can be accessed at **https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/free_practice_test**.

- **TOEFL iBT Tips** is a free guide created to help students as they prepare for test day with practical tips for each of the four skills. Visit TOEFL iBT Tips at **https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/tips/**.

- **The TOEFL Test Prep Planner** is a free 8-week planner that helps students set weekly practice goals and stay on track with tips and tasks for the weeks leading up to test day. The planner helps students understand how to prepare for the test effectively and build the English skills needed for success. The planner can be downloaded at **https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/test_prep_planner/**.

- **TOEFL TV Channel on YouTube**® is the official YouTube channel of the TOEFL test and offers videos containing advice from English teachers, TOEFL test experts, and students to help learners improve their English skills and prepare for the test. Visit the TOEFL TV channel at **https://www.youtube.com/toefltv**.

- Students can also find the TOEFL test on a wide range of social media, including WeChat®, Instagram®, Facebook®, youku®, Snapchat®, and LinkedIn®, among others, to play games, prepare for the test, and interact with other English learners.

The following materials can be purchased from the ETS online store at **https://www.ets.org/store**. TOEFL Practice Online can be purchased at **https://toeflpractice.ets.org/**.

- ***TOEFL Practice Online*** provides the only official practice tests that give students the experience of taking the real TOEFL iBT test from their home computer. Students can review and answer previously administered TOEFL iBT test questions and get scores and feedback on all four skills measured on the test (Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing) within 24 hours.

- ***TOEFL Practice Online Speaking Series*** is exclusively dedicated to helping students practice their English speaking skills. The series uses previously administered test questions and simulates the real TOEFL iBT testing experience.

- ***The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test*** is a best-selling guide developed by ETS with real test questions, practice exercises, and hundreds of valuable test preparation tips. The guide is available for purchase in either a paper or an eBook format.

- ***The Official TOEFL iBT Tests, Volumes 1 and 2***, offer a total of ten additional TOEFL tests for practice with real reading, listening, speaking, and writing questions.

- ***TOEFL Online Preparation Course*** is an online tutorial to help students develop the skills they need to succeed on the test. A personalized learning path is created based on the result of diagnostic pretests taken at the beginning of each skill section to help students focus on the areas where improvement is most needed.

References

Alderson, J. C. Test review: Test of English as a Foreign Language™: Internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT®). *Language Testing*, 26(4), 621-631. doi:10.1177/0265532209346371