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Newbury House TOEFL Preparation Kit: Preparing for the TOEFL by Daniel B, Kennedy, Dorry Mann Kenyon, and Steven J. Matthiesen and Newbury House TOEFL Preparation Kit: Preparing for the Test of Written English by Liz Hamp-Lyons

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Author
Cushing, Sara T

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Newbury House TOEFL Preparation Kit: Preparing for the TOEFL by Daniel B. Kennedy, Dorry Mann Kenyon, and Steven J. Matthiesen. New York: Newbury House, 1989. 262 pp.

Newbury House TOEFL Preparation Kit: Preparing for the Test of Written English by Liz Hamp-Lyons. New York: Newbury House, 1989. 134 pp.

Reviewed by
Sara T. Cushing
University of California, Los Angeles

Recent research on the Educational Testing Service's Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) suggests that, while the TOEFL is a valid test of language proficiency, it tests only a limited range of communication skills and ignores many skills required by students in American university settings (Duran et al., 1985). There is also no clear evidence of any relationship between high TOEFL scores and academic achievement (Graham, 1987). Such findings raise questions about the appropriacy of using TOEFL preparation books in courses for university-bound ESL students, especially given the current orientation in academic-purpose language teaching to promote communicative competence rather than the sort of discrete language knowledge which is tested in many sections of the TOEFL. Indeed, conscientious teachers may wonder whether they are doing their students a disservice by spending class time on exercises specifically designed to raise TOEFL scores, at the expense of activities which promote the general academic skills needed at the university. At the same time, those language testing researchers concerned with the TOEFL's limitations might ask whether TOEFL preparation books do more harm than good since they perpetuate the status quo rather than encourage improvement of the TOEFL along the lines that some experts have suggested (Savignon, 1986; Larsen-Freeman, 1986) so as to increase its ability to measure communicative skills.

The *Newbury House TOEFL Preparation Kit* is by no means radical in its attitude towards the TOEFL, but it does attempt to provide a partial answer to the first of these dilemmas. While the authors take a pragmatic approach toward the discrete-point sections of the TOEFL, they also emphasize those areas of the TOEFL which

are more relevant to the future needs of university students. The result is a well-written, easy to read manual that provides practical suggestions for doing well on the discrete-point grammar, listening, and vocabulary items of the TOEFL. Additionally, the Kit promotes the acquisition of academic skills, especially in reading and writing, to help students deal with the TOEFL as it exists today and with the academic requirements of the American universities they hope to attend.

The Kit contains two volumes--*Preparing for the TOEFL* (*PFT*) and *Preparing for the Test of Written English* (*PTWE*)--as well as two audio cassettes which simulate the listening sections of the practice tests, and a separate tapescript and answer key, all neatly packaged together in a plastic binder. *PFT* has many features typical of TOEFL preparation books now on the market: answers to commonly asked questions about the TOEFL, descriptions of the various parts of the test, sample exercises for each section, and practice tests. However, a few crucial differences make the Newbury House Kit notable. First is the authors' attention to the strict specifications of item types and formats which TOEFL item writers follow. The authors have clearly spent considerable time studying numerous forms of the TOEFL and, in essence, have recreated the test specifications so as to characterize the kinds of questions found on the TOEFL in terms of content, format, and difficulty. The result is that they are able to give detailed information for each test section about the language skill being tested (e.g., listening for specific information, making inferences), about the question formats, and about the strategies needed to answer a given question type.

In discussing these strategies, the authors implicitly distinguish between those sections which test discrete language items and those which test integrated skills. The practical and concrete suggestions for dealing with the former are meant to help students perform as well as possible whatever their level of language proficiency. These hints are not unlike those found in other TOEFL books (e.g., King & Stanley, 1983; Pyle & Muñoz, 1986); however, being based on empirical study of several thousand TOEFL items rather than on mere intuition gives them more credibility and accuracy. One example comes from the answer strategies for the vocabulary section. Pyle & Muñoz's advice to students to read the entire sentence in which a vocabulary item occurs is the advice most ESL teachers would give for dealing with unfamiliar words. However, as *PFT* points out, since vocabulary items on the TOEFL

are specifically designed so that any of the four alternatives would fit logically into the test sentence, the context is of little or no use in determining the meaning of the word. Students are therefore advised to save time by reading only the underlined vocabulary item and the four alternative answers, rather than trying to understand the sentence in which the item is embedded. Strategies such as this, based on an accurate description of TOEFL items, are found throughout all the chapters on the less communicatively oriented sections of the TOEFL and are intended more to provide students with test-wiseness than to improve their command of the language.

A different approach is taken towards the TOEFL reading comprehension section in *PFT*. Usually given short shrift in TOEFL manuals such as Jenkins-Murphy (1981) and Sharpe (1986), this section deservedly receives a great deal of attention in *PFT*. The authors recognize that, of all the tasks on the TOEFL, the reading comprehension section most closely approximates a real-world language task that students will face at American universities (Duran et al., 1985). Thus, instead of merely providing test-taking strategies, as in other sections, the authors stress the importance of becoming an active reader: one who interacts with the written text by asking questions, by relating the ideas in the text to one's own experience, and by forming opinions about the ideas as one reads. Students are taken through these active reading strategies step by step before being introduced to the actual question types found in this section of the TOEFL. Unlike many of the other chapters, therefore, this chapter provides students with useful advice which they can benefit from for other academic tasks besides the TOEFL.

Another difference between *PFT* and other TOEFL preparation books is apparent in the sample tests. Although the Kit has fewer tests than are found in books such as Pyle & Muñoz (1986) or Sharpe (1986), the tests are written with the same careful attention to TOEFL specifications as are the practice exercises, right down to the instructions and sample questions, which are identical to those on the actual test. An especially useful feature of the *PFT* practice TOEFL tests is that they come with score conversion tables. A student can thus quite accurately calculate his or her actual TOEFL scores since the tables are based on correlations between scores obtained by people who have taken both the practice tests and actual TOEFL tests. The practice tests can thus enable students and teachers using this book to gauge probable performance on actual TOEFL tests.

Despite these advantages over other TOEFL books, however, the same strict attention that *PTW* pays to characteristics of actual forms of the TOEFL can be seen as the book's main flaw, not only as its strength. Students expecting a thorough grammar review such as is typically found in other TOEFL books may be disappointed by the practice exercises in the rather lengthy chapter devoted to the Structure and Written Expression portions of the TOEFL. The authors' meticulous efforts to categorize and describe items from this section, including such questionably relevant details as how many questions deal with Canadian topics on a typical test form, might be quite valuable for students unfamiliar with the TOEFL. However, the authors have little to say about how to answer these questions apart from the vague exhortation to "choose the [noun, verb, conjunction, and so on] that has the correct meaning" (e.g., p. 126). Given the authors' concern elsewhere in the text for promoting academic skills, it is a bit disappointing that they could not think of a more useful way to approach this section. Still, in all fairness, the authors' purpose in this chapter is not to improve test-takers' command of English grammar, but rather to sensitize them to the kinds of questions found in this section of the test.

A more fundamental question regarding this chapter is why the grammar portion of the TOEFL is singled out for extra attention. One suspects this was done to please readers whose experience has led them to equate language learning with grammar instruction and test preparation with grammar review. Although one can hardly blame the authors for catering to this large market of potential buyers, the question again arises as to whether an emphasis on a discrete-point section of the TOEFL, typical though this may be of most TOEFL preparation books, will ultimately serve learners poorly by inhibiting rather than promoting worthwhile changes in the TOEFL.

The second volume in the Kit, *Preparing for the Test of Written English* (*PTWE*), manages to avoid these controversies. While close attention in this book has also been paid to the actual tasks demanded by the TOEFL--in this case, the Test of Written English (TWE)--more emphasis has been placed on current notions regarding the process of writing. Indeed, *PTWE*, written as a self-study guide, could easily be used in a writing class as well. The book is divided into five parts, the first of which is a short introduction to the TWE. Part 2, "Skills for Success on Academic Writing Tests," takes the student systematically through the process of writing, from a brief discussion of the features of academic writing, through the presentation of pre-writing techniques (e.g.,

analyzing the writing prompt and brainstorming for idea generation) and selection and organization of ideas, to inspection of one's own work for clarity and accuracy. Throughout this chapter, not only are writing prompts similar in topic and structure to those found on the actual TWE, but sample student essays are included which illustrate more successful and less successful responses to these prompts. Students are also given several useful pre-writing and writing assignments which are then exploited in later tasks in the book.

The next two chapters of *PTWE* discuss in greater detail the two main types of writing prompts found in the TWE and provide several prompts that students can use to practice writing their own responses. An interesting feature of these sections is that students are often asked to rewrite the essays that they attempted earlier on, thus reinforcing the current notion that even the best writers can improve their writing by revising and rewriting their earlier work.

Perhaps the most interesting and innovative section of *PTWE*, however, is Part 5, "Self-Scoring Practice," for in this section the actual TWE scoring guide is reproduced and discussed in detail. Students are then guided through the scoring process and given several sample essays to rate. By viewing writing samples from a rater's point of view, students can develop their own internal criteria for essay evaluation, which in turn should help them improve their own writing.

Another kind of consciousness-raising suggestion is the author's frequent advice that students obtain feedback on their essays by showing their writing to other people as often as possible. However, even students who are unable or unwilling to share their writing, but who have the initiative and perseverance to work through *PTWE* on their own, can learn a great deal about academic writing from the book. Yet, to some degree, it is a shame that so many valuable hints for improving essay writing and techniques are hidden away in a TOEFL preparation book. Given the work that has obviously gone into the volume, the suggestions and sample essays could usefully serve any ESL teacher or student interested in improving academic writing skills.

In sum, the *Newbury House TOEFL Preparation Kit* is a valuable new entry in the field of test preparation. Though many might argue that TOEFL books are more destructive than beneficial to ESL students because they tend to endorse and perpetuate questionable testing formats, Newbury House has at least taken a step in the right direction. The authors of the Kit have approached the TOEFL not as the last word in language testing but as a set of

highly specified tasks which can be more easily managed once they are understood, and they have combined this pragmatic attitude with help and sound advice for the real work of academic-purpose language learning and use. Used with discretion, the Kit will no doubt be appreciated by English learners before as well as beyond the TOEFL.

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Sara T. Cushing is a doctoral student in applied linguistics at UCLA. She has taught ESL/EFL in Austria, Hungary and the United States. Her interests include language acquisition, language testing and curriculum development.