

Book Review: TOEFL Preparation Textbooks

Building Skills for the TOEFL Test, Carol King and Nancy Stanley, Longman 1966. 469pp.

Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL Test, Jolene Gear and Robert Gear, Cambridge University Press 1966. 555pp.

Longman Preparation Course for the TOEFL Test: Skills and Strategies, Deborah Phillips, Longman 1996. 412pp.

The Heinemann TOEFL Preparation Course, M. Kathleen Mahnke and Carol B. Duffy, Heinemann 1996. 600 pp.

*M. Martha Lengeling, Universidad del Guanajuato*¹

Imagine this scenario: You have just received your schedule for next semester and you find to your delight or horror that you have a TOEFL (*Test of English as a Foreign Language*) preparation course. What do you do? Even if you are an experienced instructor, the responsibility of teaching this class may seem overwhelming. One consolation: the number of books on the market is small. Hopefully the following review of four TOEFL preparation books will assist the veteran teacher or the new teacher who is in the above situation.

The above four books were specifically written to help students who are thinking of taking the TOEFL test from the ETS (*Educational Testing Service*). The majority of people who want to study at a university in the United States are required to take this test and receive a score of 500 to 600, depending on the requirements of the university.

At first glance these four texts seem overwhelming due to size, number of pages and lack of drawing or pictures. A closer examination reveals they vary only slightly in set up and organization. All four texts follow a consistent four-part structure: "Listening Comprehension", "Structure and Written Expression", "Reading Comprehension", and the "TWE" (*Test of Written English*). Cassettes accompany each book to accustom the learner's ear to the vocal style used on this test. The books include several tests which are useful for diagnostic purposes or just for practice.

All of these texts offer strategies or tactics which are helpful for teacher or student. They are intended either for the classroom or for home study. What then are the deciding factors in choosing a TOEFL book? I will cover several student considerations first.

Classroom students frequently want more practice tests; the Phillip's and the Heinemann books offer extra material with practice exams, cassettes, answers, and tapescripts. Both of these books have appendices with extensive exercises and explanations for the four sections.

¹ The reviewer can be reached at the Universidad del Guanajuato, Lascrain de Retana 5, Guanajuato, Guanajuato. 36000. Fax: (473) 27253. E-mail: lengelin@redes.int.com.mx.

The home-study student faces unique problems in a preparation course outside the classroom environment. Both the Cambridge and Heinemann texts offer answer keys at the back of the book, and cassettes which are a must for the independent learner.

A conversion scale is useful for students to monitor their progress and gain an understanding of where they stand. *Building Skills for the TOEFL Test* does not include a conversion scale or explanation on how to score a practice text. The conversion scale is excellent for promoting the home study for the classroom student.

A deciding factor in choosing a TOEFL book for the teacher is the answer key to the exercises and practice tests. The answers for whatever book the teacher decides to use is absolutely essential, whether in the back of the book or in a stand-alone volume. If a book gives an explanation or even a reference to what the question is related to, this aids the teacher in explaining and understanding the principles of TOEFL. Several times I began a course without the answers, and I experienced problems. Sometimes even colleagues or native speakers could not provide clarification.

I have used both the Cambridge and the Heinemann texts, answers included in the back, in a classroom situation. I see no problem in using books that provide questions and answers in the same volume. Having answers included at the back has actually helped students. I believe this encourages learner autonomy and self-confidence.

The Heinemann and the Cambridge books include valuable explanations to help the teacher better understand the answers, and explain to the students why one option is chosen. The Phillip's book gives explanations for the section of 'Structure, and Written Expression'.

These four books do not offer much recommendation for the teacher. Answers and explanations are provided, but little is said on how to actually teach a class on a day-to-day basis. Deborah Phillip's book has a so-called 'teacher's manual'; a misleading term for the perspective teacher. In my own opinion, this teacher's manual is an answer key with a few general recommendations for the TOEFL teacher. It is lacking information to be called a teacher's manual; in fact, all four books lack this valuable information.

I have used all four books for one semester each. Of the four books my class did not finish Carol King and Nancy Stanley's book. This book is filled with an ample number of exercises, especially in the section of "Listening Comprehension". These exercises are extensive and encourage in-depth preparation in the four sections.

Most of the four books use traditional methods including: correct/incorrect, multiple choice, error correction, and identification of the grammatical parts of a sentence. *Building Skills for the TOEFL Test* contains several activities with non-traditional classification tables. These activities are a welcome relief to the TOEFL teacher because they are not available in most TOEFL preparation books.

I recommend any one of these four texts but I would suggest that whatever book you use that it not be the sole source of material. Changing a text every semester offers a way for the TOEFL teacher to find the strengths and weaknesses of each book. A variety of exercises found from other books, authentic readings, speaking-listening activities and vocabulary building methods are a few ideas that can be incorporated when using these books. These books are academic and often seem dry; however, pre-activities and follow-up activities can be used to stimulate the student's use of English. As always, the text chosen should not dictate what the teacher must do everyday. The instructor should make a wise decision on what book to use by considering the teacher's goals, the needs of students and the institute's expectations. In conclusion, the success of a learner in preparing for the TOEFL test relies heavily on the learners themselves. If they are highly motivated, they can systematically go through any one of these four books and succeed.