The TOEFL and Grammar

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Taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) has long been a necessity for students who wish to study at universities in the United States. More than 2,400 colleges in the United States and Canada require the test results (Educational Testing Service 1999). But a number of foreign institutions have also begun requiring TOEFL scores. For example, two universities in Milan, Italy, Politecnico di Milano and Università Commerciale L. Bocconi, now have a TOEFL requirement for their students.

As a result, EFL teachers who may have had little experience with the TOEFL and its format may need to consider how best to prepare their students for the test. An initial challenge is for teachers to become comfortable with the test's computer-based format (the paper-based test is being phased out and is available only under certain circumstances). Of the four sections of the test—Listening, Structure, Reading, and Writing (a compulsory essay)—two, Listening and Structure, are computer adaptive. This means that the computer selects test questions for each student based on that student's answers to previous questions. In other words, if the student answers question 1 correctly, the computer will choose a more difficult item for question 2. Conversely, if the person taking the test answers question 5 incorrectly, question 6 will be somewhat easier.

A more important challenge is to adapt to the test's point of view, which can be quite different from what EFL teachers are used to. An example is the second section of the test, Structure, whose purpose is to measure "the ability to recognize language that is appropriate for standard written English" (ETS 1999). It is important to remember that the Structure section does not test production, only recognition. Students do not need to supply proper verb forms, paraphrase or rewrite sentences, or complete open clozes. There are only two types of question, both multiple choice. In the first type of question, limited cloze, students have to choose which of the four possible answers best completes the sentence. In the second type of question, sentence correction, students are given sentences with four underlined elements. They then need to decide which of the four elements is incorrect.

Tellingly, the section is not named Grammar. Indeed, teachers more familiar with traditional EFL grammar and its focus on mastery of the English tense system, correct use of the definite article, choice of appropriate modal, and so forth, may find themselves somewhat disconcerted when faced with section 2. An analysis of the questions found in a number of paper-based tests[1] and on the *TOEFL Sampler CD-ROM* offered by Educational Testing Service, the organization which prepares and administers the TOEFL, shows why. The analysis indicates that students will be asked to solve problems that are primarily syntactical in nature, rather than apply the grammatical rules they have studied in class. These problems can be grouped into three categories: syntax, combination, and vocabulary. These are to some degree categories of convenience, and they overlap a great deal.

Syntax

As they have a place of pride in most descriptions of English syntax, it is appropriate to begin with sentences. Lester (1990:71) offers the following definition of a sentence: "A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought." Of course, not everybody is satisfied with this traditional definition. Indeed, as *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (McArthur 1992:918) notes, "The sentence is notoriously difficult to define; numerous definitions have been offered and found wanting." Regardless of the difficulty of explaining just exactly what a sentence is, students taking the TOEFL need to have a well-developed sense of which combinations of words constitute well-formed English sentences.

This sense begins with recognizing the function and category of each element of a sentence. Students need to make sure that each sentence has, at minimum, a subject and a verb. At the same time, students need to recognize that each function in a sentence can be performed by only one element—one subject, one verb, one direct object, and so on. One way the TOEFL may test this recognition is by giving a sentence with both a subject and a subject pronoun.

The second component of this sense of well-formed sentences is an understanding of the order in which the elements of a sentence are presented. The unmarked order of English sentences is the old EFL standby of SVOMPT—subject, verb, object, manner, place, and time. Many times, however, one of the elements of a sentence is fronted, moved to the beginning of the sentence. Students need to recognize that this has happened and connect the fronted element with its proper function in the sentence.

Other times, a word or phrase in the sentence alters the order of the elements. Questions, for example, invert the position of the subject and verb, as do certain negative expressions when they are fronted, such as not only in the sentence *Not only did he buy some squid, he ate it.* Words and phrases can also determine which elements must or must not appear in a sentence. For example, in the sentence *Michael Jordan was so successful that the Chicago Bulls retired his number*, the *that-* clause determines the need for the degree adverb so (**Michael Jordan was successful that the Chicago Bulls retired his number*).[2]

The third component of a student's sense of well-formed sentences is a recognition that each element of the sentence has its own internal structure. While the elements of a sentence may be correct in relationship to each other, there is no well-formed English sentence when the elements themselves are ill formed.

Noun phrases

A noun phrase is, as Burton-Roberts (1986:54) succinctly puts it, "a phrase that contains, and is centered on, a noun." Besides that noun, a number of elements can be found within a noun phrase. There can be words like *all (of)* and *both*, which Burton-Roberts classifies as predeterminers, as well as articles, quantifiers, possessives, demonstra-tives such as *this* and *that*, and adjectives (or adjective phrases). In addition to these premodifiers, nouns can have postmodifiers. These include prepositional phrases *(the doggy in the window)*, certain adjective phrases *(the boy responsible for the carnage)*, nonfinite verb phrases *(his ability to swim)* and sentences, or clauses *(the fact that you are insane)*.

Needless to say, these elements all have their own requirements and relationships with each other. On the TOEFL, students are expected to recognize predeterminers and their proper structure, premodifying adjective phrases, and postmodifying clauses and phrases. Additionally, students need to be able to spot not only the constituents of the noun phrase but its function in the sentence—when it is the direct object, for example.

Students are also expected to know whether the form of the noun should be plural or singular. This is sometimes determined by the context of the sentence and sometimes by other elements in the noun phrase, such as quantifiers used only with countable nouns or the indefinite article. Students are also asked to recognize that single countable nouns cannot be used in English without an article and to determine whether the indefinite article should be *a* or *an*.

Additionally, students need to focus on the noun phrase's relationship with other elements in the sentence. Pronouns found elsewhere in the sentence need to agree with their referent in terms of number; they also need to represent the proper functional role in the sentence (for example, object, subject, possessive adjective). Subject and object predicates also need to agree with their referents.

Verb phrases

A basic sentence consists of a noun phrase and a verb phrase (Burton-Roberts 1986). Within that verb phrase must be a finite verb, which agrees in number with the subject, or the sentence will not be well formed. A primary task for students taking the TOEFL is to ensure that each sentence is endowed with a subject and proper verb phrase. This means that students need to distinguish between finite and nonfinite verb phrases and to identify verbs separated from the subject by other elements of the sentence. At the same time, students need to make sure that there is only one finite verb for the subject.

Just as with noun phrases, verb phrases have their own internal structure. Auxiliaries come before the verb and demand certain forms. Modal auxiliaries are followed by infinitive forms; perfect auxiliaries are followed by past participles; progressive auxiliaries are followed by present participles; and passive auxiliaries are followed by past participles. Students need to make sure that the word order of the verb phrase is correct and that no necessary elements are missing.

A well-formed verb phrase often includes elements other than just the auxiliaries and main verb. Some verbs require direct (and possibly indirect) objects; others take subject or object predicates. Subject and object predicates are complements of the verb and give information about the subject or object, respectively. For example, in *Francois is an elementary school teacher*, the subject predicate is *an elementary school teacher*, which gives us information about Francois. In *Gina made the coffee too weak*, the object predicate *too weak* tells us about the coffee. As complements, subject and object predicates are necessary components of the sentence (as opposed to modifiers, which are optional). What is important to note about subject and object predicates is that only certain elements can fulfill these functions: noun phrases and adjective phrases, for example. On the other hand, the predicate function is not a role that can be filled by relative clauses. In section 2 of the TOEFL, students must concentrate on the structure of the elements and the function they play in that particular sentence.

Another task tied to verb phrases is to use the passive voice appropriately. To do this, students need to determine whether the passive or active form is more appropriate. They also need to recognize the correct form. This means not only determining that the passive is formed correctly but whether the form should, in fact, be passive or continuous, since they both use the auxiliary verb *to be*.

Students may also be asked to determine whether it is appropriate to use a form of *there is*. The uses of *there* constructions are quite complex. In fact, Lakoff (1987) lists over 20 categories of them. The TOEFL may require students to determine whether the use of the *there* construction makes syntactic sense, or perhaps whether it is more appropriate to use a subject pronoun.

Adjective phrases

A third major category in TOEFL sentences is the adjective phrase. As with other elements, adjective phrases have internal structures that students need to be familiar with. Within the phrase, adjectives can be premodified by degree adverbs (such as *quite* in *quite happy*). Adjectives can also be postmodified with nonfinite verb phrases (*happy to be here*), prepositional phrases (*interested in sumo wrestling*), and clauses (*angry that the Rangers didn't make the playoffs*). Functionally, adjective phrases can be used as premodifiers (and occasionally postmodifiers) within noun phrases and as subject and object predicates.

The choice of elements within the adjective phrase and the function of the adjective phrase within the sentence combine in complex ways. Students need to know, for example, that the degree adverb *so* cannot be used when the adjective phrase is being used as a premodifier (**a so happy man*). In this case, the word *such* must be used (*such a happy man*). Students need to keep the lexical content of the degree adverbs in mind as well. *Too*, for example, has a negative connotation, while *so* does not. This connotation sometimes interacts with the syntax to limit possible postmodifiers. So, for example, *too tired to go* is perfectly acceptable while **so tired to go* is not.

Adjectives also have comparative and superlative forms, and students need to navigate the rules governing them. Should a certain adjective take *-est* or *most*? Which preposition needs to be used with which form? Students might need to know that the possessive has the same function as the definite article. The possessive therefore triggers the superlative form without the addition of *the*, for example, *the most interesting* and *John's most interesting*, but not **the John's most interesting*.

The same focus on proper form is needed for nonadjectival comparisons. In *Lacrosse is not unlike hockey*, the comparison is being made with a preposition, which requires a noun phrase to be complete. In *The more I see Bob, the more I like him*, the comparison is between two clauses. The sentence is also an example of another special construction, the double comparative, which requires the use of two definite articles.

Finally, the TOEFL may ask students to distinguish between words functioning as adjectives and words functioning as adverbs.

Combination

At its most basic, an English sentence consists of simply a subject and a verb. Of course, most English sentences include more than these two elements. But regardless of how many other elements are added to the sentence (and theoretically the number is infinite), as long as there is only one verb and its subject, the sentence is considered to be simple according to the traditional definition. As we begin combining elements and sentences, the complexity of the final product increases. So does the amount of syntactic competence needed to produce and recognize well-formed sentences.

Coordination

The simplest way to combine elements of a sentence is through the use of coordinating conjunctions. These are words such as *and* and *or*, which join the elements together as equals. An important aspect of coordination is parallelism. Any element of a sentence, or entire sentences, can be joined, but these elements must be of the same category. In other words, sentences are joined to other sentences, noun phrases are joined to other noun phrases, prepositional phrases are joined to other prepositional phrases, and so on. The TOEFL asks students to understand this condition of coordination and recognize incidences of faulty parallelism. This exercise in turn requires students to recognize the type of element being coordinated.

A subset of the coordinating conjunctions are the correlative conjunctions. These are two-part co-ordinators such as *both…and*, *either…or*, and *not only…but (also)*. In section 2 of the TOEFL, students may be expected to recognize these pairs.

Subordinating conjunctions

As previously noted, sentences themselves are sometimes used as one of the elements in another sentence. These sentences are known as clauses. Students taking the TOEFL need to be familiar with the uses of clauses within sentences. At the same time, they need to remember that clauses are sentences in their own right and are thus governed by the same structural and functional rules governing independent sentences.

There are a number of subordinating conjunctions, conveying a wide range of meaning. Lester (1990:164) lists six categories: time, place, manner, cause, condition, and concession. It is important to remember that conjunctions combine sentences within the framework of a single sentence. Conjunctive adverbs, on the other hand, similarly link two sentences, but without combining them into one. In *Bob ate the squid even though he doesn't like it*, *even though* is a conjunction. This contrasts with *however* in *Bob doesn't like squid. However, he ate it*, which is a conjunctive adverb linking two separate sentences. For the TOEFL, students need to distinguish between conjunctions and conjunctives.

Relative clauses

The formation of relative clauses is indicative of the complexity underlying most grammatical functions. First, the clause necessarily contains a duplicate of the noun being modified. This duplicate is replaced by the relative pronoun—the choice of which is influenced by the function of the noun in the clause and how the noun in the main sentence is being modified. Then the relative pronoun is fronted, if necessary.

In addition to these mandatory changes, a number of optional changes can take place. If the relative pronoun is the direct object of the clause, then use of the relative pronoun is optional. When the relative pronoun is the complement of a preposition, we have the choice of fronting not just the relative pronoun but the whole prepositional phrase. Additionally, in certain circumstances we can replace the prepositional phrase with a relative adverb, such as *where* in *the place where we first met* instead of *the place that we first met in* or *the place in which we first met.*

When *to be* is used as either auxiliary or main verb and the duplicated element is the subject of the clause, the relative clause can be reduced. This is accomplished by deleting the relative pronoun and the verb *to be*, leaving not a clause but a phrase. Thus *the book which was given to Bob* can be reduced to *the book given to Bob*. A special function of these reduced relative clauses, apposition, is discussed below. It is sometimes possible to reduce clauses after subordinating conjunct-ions using a reduction rule similar to the one used with relative clauses, that is, by deleting the pronoun and *to be*. For example, *I will go to the bank if it is necessary* can be reduced to *I will go to the bank if necessary*, and *The truck will leave when it is painted* can be reduced to *The truck will leave when painted.*

Students taking the TOEFL need to be familiar with all the syntactic movement taking place. They are asked to recognize the appropriate relative pronoun, recognize when that pronoun can be deleted and when it is necessary, and also recognize when there is a redundant pronoun or noun phrase. Students need to ascertain that the clause is itself a well-formed sentence, something which may entail recognizing fronted prepositional phrases. They also need to recognize proper and appropriate reduction of clauses. Additionally, students need to recognize the function of relative clauses, namely to postmodify nouns within noun phrases.

Apposition

Lester (1990) offers the following traditional definition of appositive phrases: a noun or pronoun that follows another noun or pronoun to identify or explain it. Apposition offers a number of challenges to TOEFL takers. First, students need to distinguish between subject and appositive. This effort is complicated by the fact that when the noun phrase being identified or explained is "(1) a proper noun or pronoun and (2) the subject of the sentence" the appositive phrase can be fronted (Lester 1990:114). Thus, the appositive can come before the subject in the sentence.

Students also need to keep in mind the fact that appositives are the product of reduced relative clauses and hence subject to the rules governing sentences. For example, elements within the appositive can be fronted, as in *Michael Jordan, today the spokesman for Nike shoes.* While this structure is not common in spoken English, it does occur in the standard written English being tested in section 2.

Complementiser clauses

Students need to understand that the complementiser *that,* unlike relative pronouns and subordinating conjunctions, has no lexical meaning or function in the clause itself; it is used only to introduce. As a result, *that* can often be deleted from the sentence, as in this example: *Bob said that he was going to the store.* Students need to recognize that it has been deleted and treat the string of words that follows as a clausal element.

Functionally, *that-* complementiser clauses have different distributions than relative clauses. A *that*-clause can function as a noun phrase, sometimes called a noun clause. Indeed, *that*-clauses can be used in many of the same functions as noun phrases, such as subject (*That you are insane is not in doubt*) and subject predicate (*The consensus is that you are insane*). Relative clauses cannot function as subject or object predicates. Since *that* is also used as a relative pronoun, students need to determine carefully the function of *that* in the sentence and to distinguish between relative clauses and *that*-clauses.

Not all complementiser clauses are introduced with *that*; in *He told me where he was going* and *Let's visit what was once the Ottoman Empire*, question words are being used to introduce the clause. The biggest difference between *that*-clauses and *wh*-clauses is that the question words are also an element of the embedded sentence. Because question words can introduce both questions and *wh*-clauses, and questions and *wh*-clauses often have different structures, students need to be able to determine what role the complementiser has in the sentence and whether the structure is appropriate.

Participle phrases

Phrases centered on the present or past participle form of a verb are common elements in English sentences. Fundamentally, past participle phrases (*taken last month* in *The test taken last month was a disaster*) are reduced relative clauses formed from underlying passive sentences (*the test that was taken last month…*). For present participle phrases to be is not a necessary element. For example, *The teacher who was giving the test was struck by an ineffable sadness* can be reduced to *The teacher, giving the test, was struck by an ineffable sadness* by reducing the relative clause *who was giving the test*. However, in the sentence *Sal, renouncing the throne, opened a pet shop*, the phrase *renouncing the throne* is formed from the underlying past simple verb form *Sal renounced the throne* and not from a reduced relative clause.

For the TOEFL, students need to distinguish between past and present participle phrases and determine which is more appropriate in context. They also need to recognize that participle phrases can be fronted when they are modifying the subject of the sentence; for example, *Renouncing the throne, Sal opened a pet shop*.

Vocabulary

The grammar of a language does not operate independently of its lexicon; words have functions as well as meanings. Section 2 of TOEFL does not cover vocabulary per se, but it does evaluate students' ability to navigate the complex interaction between grammar and word.

Word forms

Being able to recognize and determine the appropriate form of a word is a primary task for TOEFL takers. They need to decide whether a verb should be active or passive, whether an adjective should be superlative or comparative, or whether elements being coordinated are nouns or infinitives. Of the test questions sampled from the paper-based test and the sampler CD-ROM, questions involving word forms were by far the largest category.

As might be expected, students need to determine which nonfinite verb form is appropriate. These forms can occur after verbs, auxiliaries, or prepositions, and as infinitives of purpose,

adjectives, and even predicate complements. Students also need to determine whether the verb should in fact be nonfinite or whether a tensed verb is needed, and to distinguish between the passive voice and continuous aspect.

For adjectives, students need to recognize the proper form. Is the word being used as an adjective or adverb? Should the base form of the adjective be used, or is a comparative or superlative suffix needed?

Testing lexical skills, the TOEFL sometimes asks students to decide which of two noun forms is more appropriate, something that requires knowing the meaning of the forms. For example, students may need to decide whether *tourist* or *tourism* is the more appropriate choice in a sentence. Pronouns, as noted, need to agree with their referents; they also need to be in the correct form for their function in the sentence. Students may also be asked to determine whether a quantifier should be a cardinal or ordinal number.

It needs to be stressed that the combination of choices is not limited. On the test itself, students may need to choose between adjective and adverb. They may also need to choose between adjective and preposition (*likely* and *like*, for example), or noun and past tense form.

Wrong words

Nor does TOEFL limit itself to testing students' knowledge of word forms. At times, students need to determine whether the right word is being used. Given the focus on syntax in section 2, the majority of these words are function words, though students must understand their meaning also. Function words—prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, and the like—are, in Pinker's words, "bits of crystallized grammar"(1994:118), which explains their presence in section 2. For example, students taking the TOEFL may need to determine which preposition needs to follow a verb, or perhaps they may need to recognize that a correlative conjunction is ill-formed (*both…but*) or that the wrong quantifier is being used (*many* instead of *any*).

Unnecessary or missing words

Occasionally, an extra word will be added to an element or a necessary word deleted, such as *19 years of old* or *time my life*. Often, a question such as this can be alternatively analyzed as a wrong word question (it could be *19 years of age*). The analysis should not affect performance on the question, however, because the element is ill formed in any interpretation.

Conclusion

The TOEFL is a timed test, with the time for each student determined by the number of questions. The 20 to 25 questions in the Structure section are to be completed in 15 to 20 minutes. Since students have little time for each question (less than one minute on average), quick analysis of the problems is essential. The task is complicated by the fact that multiple challenges may occur in a single question. A question may ask students to consider not only which form of a word should be used, but also what the proper structure of the verb phrase should be and if a relative clause is appropriate. The reason for this is that students need to consider three wrong answers in addition to determining the one correct answer. In other words, the correct answer may involve a word form while the three distractors offer other types of errors.

Another reason for the complication is the fact that the TOEFL does not always respect phrasal and clausal boundaries. The heart of the problem in a test item might lie in the verb phrase, but students may also need to consider a part of the direct object. This extra piece can be found either in the question itself or the possible answers. The effect of this is to create a jigsaw puzzle approach. A third complication is that the distractors in the limited cloze questions might be ill formed. Fortunately, the sentence-correction questions have one, and only one, ill-formed answer.

Students therefore have to consider a large number of factors. Native speakers would probably answer many of the Structure questions by ear rather than by analysis. So the question arises: can students actually prepare for section 2? Indeed, the effectiveness of preparing for the TOEFL in general is open to debate. Educational Testing Service raises the question itself, stating "No single school, textbook, or teaching material is best to help prepare someone for the TOEFL, because the test is not based on specific courses of study" (1994:4). However, the fact that ETS offers TOEFL study materials in a two-page advertisement in the same information bulletin indicates that they believe the test can be prepared for.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the question of the effectiveness of any TOEFL preparation courses. At a minimum, EFL students need experience with the types of questions posed in section 2 of the TOEFL. These questions can be quite different from the ones found in most EFL grammar texts. Students also need to become familiar with the standardized, multiple-choice format of the TOEFL and with the time management techniques needed for a computer-adaptive test. How best to provide this experience and familiarity for their students is a question more and more EFL teachers will be asking in coming years.

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[1.] The computer-based test uses many of the same question types found on the paper-based test (ETS 1999).

[2.] Following the conventions of linguistics, an asterisk is used to indicate an ungrammatical construction.