



Interpreting Language Test Scores and Understanding Oral English Proficiency *A Resource for Departments*

The [Professional Communication Program for International Teachers and Scholars](#) supports the administration of the [Harvard Kenneth C. Griffin GSAS English Language Proficiency policy](#). Oral proficiency is a measure of how successfully a speaker can accomplish authentic tasks like explaining a concept in detail, telling a story, or being an active conversation partner. It is **not** a measure of content expertise or of surface-level features like accent; it is possible to be an effective communicator while still making occasional grammatical errors, for example. We support and advise students on the best ways to meet the requirement and have prepared these notes to help departments and admissions committees understand how they might interpret English language test scores (TOEFL and IELTS) and oral English proficiency in general. We conduct oral proficiency interviews to assess students' ability with the English language, as well as their readiness to teach, which may not always be apparent from the language score they submit with their application.

What is the TOEFL?

The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a mediated test. In the speaking portion, the student is recorded speaking to the computer and does not interact with a person. Test speaking prompts are static; speakers respond to a set of randomly-selected prompts. Test takers can opt to take the TOEFL pBT (Paper-based Test), iBT (internet-based test at a testing center), or Home Edition.

What is the IELTS?

The IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is a hybrid test, with reading, listening, and writing as standardized tests and the speaking portion conducted as a live, face-to-face interview. The examiner follows a 3-part format and is able to respond adaptively. The IELTS Academic is available at a testing center or online as a home edition.

Both the IELTS and TOEFL tests produce a total score as well as subscores for each skill. We focus on the **speaking subscore, as the Harvard Griffin GSAS policy focuses on oral proficiency**. From our research and experience assessing incoming graduate students, we have developed general guidance for understanding TOEFL and IELTS speaking scores.

What do TOEFL/IELTS speaking scores mean?

TOEFL 26 and above or IELTS 8 and above Speakers are able to navigate situations typically encountered by graduate students. Some may lack confidence and want to develop their oral proficiency if they are in verbally demanding, discussion-based fields (often in the humanities or social sciences); they may want to refine their intercultural communication, public speaking, or teaching skills.

TOEFL 23-25* or IELTS 7-7.5 Speakers may need to develop their oral proficiency or build skills in intercultural communication, public speaking, or teaching. They may have difficulty navigating some situations typically encountered by graduate students, such as participating actively in academic interactions (e.g. contributing to discussions, explaining concepts clearly), or being

*This range of scores is the most variable.

understood by students or colleagues unaccustomed to speakers of other languages. **Students with these speaking scores may need to work on their oral proficiency for one semester.**

TOEFL 20-22 or IELTS 6.5 Speakers will likely struggle in the areas described above. They may also have listening comprehension issues. **Students with these speaking scores should be prepared to work on their oral proficiency for one to three semesters.** Generally, the lower their score, the more time it will take to meet the Harvard Griffin GSAS English Language Proficiency Policy. Students who receive department support and are able to put in consistent effort in an English communication skills course tend to make progress faster than students who are unable to commit to language development as one of their priorities.

TOEFL 19 and below and IELTS 6.0 and below Speakers at this level are likely to struggle to communicate beyond familiar topics and may find it difficult to engage in a variety of communicative situations without preparing in advance. Listening comprehension, vocabulary, and negotiating misunderstandings are key areas to develop. Students at this level may be too low for the current resources provided by the Bok Center. After their assessment interview, we may recommend seeking alternative language development support. Departments may need to provide support to students at these levels by encouraging them to do language work, funding them to take external classes, or delaying their teaching appointments.

Other Considerations Relating to Language Scores

While test scores indicate a general oral proficiency level, there may be discrepancies between test scores and how long it takes the student to meet the Harvard Griffin GSAS English Language Proficiency Policy. Two students may receive the same speaking score, but one may need support and the other may not.

Reasons discrepancies exist between test scores and actual oral proficiency include:

- Students with limited proficiency can practice and learn how to “outperform” on the test, taking it repeatedly until they get a higher score.
- Some speakers do well in the structured environment of a test, but may not do well in unpredictable situations; others are better at impromptu speaking, but freeze up when taking a structured test.
- Students with lower listening scores tend to take longer to develop oral proficiency.
- Students who feel comfortable with their language may not prepare specifically for the language test they are taking and earn a lower score due to unfamiliarity with the test’s structure.

Even students living in an immersive English environment may not necessarily improve unless they actively pursue opportunities to communicate in English and practice their proficiency. They may feel more confident as communicators over time, but improvements in oral proficiency typically do not occur without focused practice.

For more information:

Pamela Pollock, Director of Professional Development, pamelapollock@fas.harvard.edu
Sarah Emory, Assistant Director, International Teachers & Scholars, semory@fas.harvard.edu

Updated Jan 2024