



Understanding Your Language Test Scores and the Harvard Griffin GSAS English Language Proficiency Policy

A Resource for PhD Students

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 you on the best ways to meet the English language requirement, which has been put into place to help ensure that you can be successful in all the communicative roles you may find yourself in as a graduate student, including when you start teaching.

We conduct interviews to assess your English language proficiency with a specific focus on your readiness to teach, which may not always be apparent from the scores you received on the TOEFL or IELTS tests. The oral proficiency interview allows us to advise you on your strengths as a communicator, on where you might need more practice or support, and on strategies that you can use to improve your proficiency. After the interview, we will discuss your level. From our research and experience working with incoming Harvard PhD students, we have developed general guidance for understanding speaking test scores.

As of January 21, 2026, the TOEFL iBT has been revised. If students are using the new scores, these are our current guidelines. These may be updated as more data becomes available.

What do TOEFL (both old and new) and IELTS speaking scores mean?
<p><u>TOEFL iBT old 26 and above, TOEFL iBT new 5.5 and above, or IELTS 8 and above</u> 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.</p>
<p><u>TOEFL iBT old 23-25, TOEFL iBT new 4.5-5.0, or IELTS 7-7.5</u> 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 understood by students or colleagues unaccustomed to speakers of other languages. Students with these speaking scores may need to work on their oral proficiency by taking a communication skills class.</p>
<p><u>TOEFL iBT old 20 - 22, TOEFL iBT new 4.0, or IELTS 6.5</u> 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. 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. Generally, the lower your score, the more time it will take to meet the requirement.</p>

TOEFL iBT old 19 and below, TOEFL iBT new 3.5, 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 your assessment interview, we may recommend seeking alternative language development support.

Should you need support in building your proficiency, our program offerings are designed to allow you to practice the specific tasks and functions you need as graduate students and teaching fellows. Regardless of your level, focused practice is essential to improving your oral proficiency. Even when you are living in an immersive English environment, you need to be intentional in seeking out opportunities to practice and reflect on the development of your speaking skills. We are happy to consult with you on effective strategies you can use and refer you to appropriate programs and resources.

For more information:

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