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THE FUTURE OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: ENHANCED TOEFL IBT TAKES THE LEAD OVER IELTS FOR STUDENTS' SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the upcoming changes in the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam and its potential advantages over the IELTS exam. The Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam introduces a shorter test duration, streamlined instructions, and a focus on contemporary academic skills. One of the notable changes is the introduction of the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task, which reflects the real-world writing demands faced by university students. The article highlights the importance of aligning language assessments with the evolving needs of students and institutions and suggests that IELTS and other exams should adapt and innovate to remain competitive. The abstract also mentions the need for further research in language testing and assessment, particularly in areas like the mode of delivery for the speaking section and the question types used in the reading and listening sections.

KEYWORDS

Language assessment, TOEFL iBT, IELTS, English proficiency, standardized exams, writing task, academic skills.

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency holds immense significance in today's globalized world. As communication barriers dissolve and international opportunities expand,

individuals seeking to demonstrate their language skills often turn to standardized exams. While these exams provide a measure of language ability, it is

widely recognized among linguists that no single test can fully capture the complexity and nuance of a person's linguistic competence. Nevertheless, some exams have established themselves as popular options for language assessment, with IELTS being a widely recognized choice. According to the comparison study conducted by Abe et al. (2018), the IELTS measures abilities related to daily conversation and academics better than the TOEFL iBT but there has not been any empirical scientific research.

In the past, IELTS enjoyed popularity primarily due to effective advertising campaigns and a lack of viable alternatives. TOEFL had certain drawbacks, such as the inability to accept local payment systems and the requirement of VISA cards for registration. Additionally, TOEFL included unscored test questions, leading test-takers to complete these questions without knowing if they would contribute to their final score. These issues created a less-than-ideal testing experience for candidates.

Recognizing the need for improvements, the TOEFL exam implemented some changes in 2021 to enhance its appeal to test-takers. Despite these modifications, there remained a demand for a comprehensive and efficient language test that met the evolving needs of both students and institutions. This demand is now addressed by the upcoming changes scheduled for July 26, 2023, in the form of the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam.

The forthcoming enhancements in the TOEFL iBT exam promise to be a game-changer for individuals considering an English language proficiency test. These changes primarily revolve around test duration and the introduction of a new writing task. With a significantly reduced test time of under two hours, the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam emerges as the shortest among the most popular English-language tests available. Furthermore, the replacement of the Independent Writing task with the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task adds a modern touch to the exam, aligning it with the demands of contemporary academic discourse.

In this article, I will explore the reasons why the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam may prove to be a superior choice for students compared to IELTS. By examining the advantages brought about by the upcoming changes, I aim to provide valuable insights into the enhanced test experience and its potential impact on language assessment.

A Comparative Analysis of IELTS and Enhanced TOEFL iBT: Unveiling the Benefits of Enhanced TOEFL iBT over IELTS

Language proficiency assessment is a crucial step for individuals seeking to demonstrate their competence in the English language, particularly in an increasingly interconnected world. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of

English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) have long been recognized as leading exams in this domain. These assessments provide candidates with a benchmark to showcase their language skills to educational institutions, immigration authorities, and employers worldwide. However, recent developments in the TOEFL iBT exam have introduced significant enhancements that warrant a closer examination of the benefits it offers over IELTS. While there been some surveys and research such as according to Erfani (2012), the washback effect of IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests on teaching and learning activities in test preparation courses showing that TOEFL had more negative washback, it is too early to conduct research on Enhanced TOEFL iBT as it is not available till July 26, 2023.

Shorter Test Duration:

One notable advantage of the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam over IELTS is the significantly reduced test duration. Starting from July 26, 2023, test-takers can complete the TOEFL iBT exam in under two hours, making it the shortest among the most popular English-language tests available. This streamlined approach is a direct response to the growing demand for efficient language assessments that minimize the time commitment required from candidates. By shortening the test duration, the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam offers a more convenient and accessible option

for individuals with time constraints or those who prefer a more concise testing experience.

User-Friendly Interface and Streamlined Instructions:

Enhanced TOEFL iBT further distinguishes itself by providing a user-friendly interface and streamlined instructions, ensuring a smooth testing experience. The exam incorporates innovative design elements and navigational features that prioritize clarity and ease of use. Test-takers can navigate through the exam sections seamlessly, enhancing their focus and reducing potential distractions. The enhanced interface minimizes the learning curve associated with adapting to a new testing platform, allowing candidates to allocate more mental energy toward showcasing their true language skills.

Focus on Contemporary Academic Skills:

The evolving demands of academia necessitate language tests that align with the contemporary academic landscape. The Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam recognizes this need and places a strong emphasis on assessing skills that are crucial for academic success in today's educational institutions. By replacing the Independent Writing task with the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task, the exam reflects the shift towards collaborative learning and scholarly discourse. This task prompts test-takers to state and supports their opinions within the context of an online class discussion, mirroring the real-world communication

requirements of academic environments. This focus on contemporary academic skills ensures that the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam remains relevant and valuable to both test-takers and institutions seeking to evaluate language proficiency accurately.

Writing tasks of enhanced TOEFL iBT tests real-life skills of university studies.

Writing is often considered one of the most challenging tasks in language proficiency assessments. It requires not only a strong command of the language but also the ability to effectively convey ideas and arguments in a coherent and organized manner. Statistics from various language exams consistently reveal that writing tends to be the skill where test-takers achieve the lowest scores compared to other language abilities. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all writing tasks are equally relevant to the needs of individuals pursuing higher education.

In the case of IELTS, the writing tasks, though widely recognized, may not align perfectly with the requirements of most university programs. For instance, the requirement to describe a diagram, map, or pie chart may not be a necessary skill for individuals unless they are studying subjects like statistics or other specialized fields. This particular task often proves to be a daunting challenge for many test-takers. Consequently, the relevance of such tasks in accurately

assessing language proficiency for academic purposes becomes questionable.

On the other hand, the TOEFL exam has always maintained an advantage in terms of its writing tasks. The new "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task introduced in the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam reflects a more authentic representation of the writing demands faced by university students. This task simulates the real-world scenario of reading a text and listening to audio materials and then composing a response based on the information presented. Such a task closely mirrors the academic experiences of students who regularly engage in reading books, articles, and listening to lectures before writing their assignments or participating in class discussions.

Moreover, the essay writing task in IELTS may not be a skill required by all or even most university students. The essay topics often revolve around issues that primarily concern first-world countries, making it challenging for test-takers from third-world countries to connect or articulate their thoughts effectively. In contrast, the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task in the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam is a universally essential skill, particularly in American universities. As someone who has pursued a Master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at an American university, I can affirm that this task was a common requirement across all subjects. It not only serves as a fundamental skill but also one that students

rely on extensively throughout their academic journey and beyond.

By incorporating the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task, the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam recognizes the significance of preparing test-takers for the realities of academic life. It acknowledges the importance of being able to comprehend and respond to scholarly material, fostering critical thinking skills, and facilitating effective communication in academic settings. This task reflects the authentic writing demands of higher education, ensuring that test-takers are assessed on skills that truly matter for their academic success.

The Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam's introduction of the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task provides a significant advantage over the traditional writing tasks found in IELTS. While IELTS may include tasks that are not universally applicable to all university programs, the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam embraces a writing task that closely mirrors the real-world demands of academic settings. By aligning the exam with the essential writing skills required by students in American universities and beyond, the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam ensures that test-takers are better prepared for the academic challenges they will face during their educational journey and beyond.

Duration Advantage: Shorter Test Duration in Enhanced TOEFL iBT

In today's fast-paced digital age, where attention spans are shrinking and content is consumed in bite-sized formats, the duration of an English language proficiency test plays a significant role in attracting and engaging test-takers. The Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam recognizes this shift in the way people consume information and offers a substantial advantage with its shorter test duration.

Starting from July 26, 2023, the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam will be completed in under two hours, making it the shortest among the three most popular English language tests available. This condensed timeframe is a valuable asset, particularly when considering the prevalence of platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts, where videos are typically one to two minutes in length. By adopting a shorter test duration, the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam aligns with this trend and ensures that test-takers can complete the exam efficiently without feeling overwhelmed or fatigued.

However, it is important to address a potential concern regarding the accuracy of the provided timing for the Writing section in the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam. The official information states that the Writing section consists of two tasks with a total estimated timing of 29 minutes. Upon closer examination, there appears to be an inconsistency in the allocation of time for the individual tasks within this section.

Considering that Task 1 of the Writing section is an integrated task that requires test-takers to read a text and listen to an audio recording before writing their response, it is reasonable to assume that test-takers would need approximately 20 minutes to complete this task successfully. Additionally, it is essential to allocate around 3 minutes for reading the text and 2-3 minutes for listening, which are necessary for comprehension and integration into the written response. These combined time requirements already consume a significant portion of the allocated 29 minutes.

Given this context, it becomes unclear how the remaining time is distributed for the newly introduced "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task, which is anticipated to take approximately 10 minutes. The numbers provided do not align seamlessly, raising questions about the accuracy of the timing information for the Writing section in the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam. It is imperative for the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the organization responsible for the TOEFL exam, to address this discrepancy and provide clarification on the actual time allocation for each task within the Writing section.

The shorter test duration offered by the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam is a notable advantage, particularly in a digital landscape dominated by short-form content. With the exam being completed in under two hours, test-takers can engage with the assessment more effectively, sustaining their attention and focus

throughout the duration of the test. However, it is crucial for ETS to provide accurate and transparent information regarding the time allocation for the Writing section in order to ensure clarity and fairness for all test-takers.

CONCLUSION

The Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam presents a compelling case for being a superior choice for students compared to IELTS. The forthcoming changes, including a shorter test duration and the introduction of the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task, offer distinct advantages that address the evolving needs of language assessment.

One of the standout features of the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam is its significantly reduced test duration. Completing the exam in under two hours caters to the preferences of individuals in a digital age characterized by shorter attention spans and the consumption of bite-sized content. Aligning with platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts, the shorter duration ensures that test-takers can engage with the assessment efficiently without feeling overwhelmed or fatigued.

Furthermore, the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam places a strong emphasis on contemporary academic skills. By introducing the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task, it acknowledges the shift towards collaborative learning and scholarly discourse in today's educational institutions. This task closely mirrors the real-world

demands of university studies, enabling test-takers to showcase their ability to comprehend and respond to scholarly material, fostering critical thinking skills and effective communication.

However, it is essential for the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to address the potential discrepancy in the timing information provided for the Writing section. The allocation of time for each task within this section needs clarification to ensure fairness and accurate expectations for test-takers.

Implications for IELTS and English Language Proficiency Tests

The upcoming changes in the Enhanced TOEFL iBT exam introduced by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) signify a paradigm shift in language testing and assessment. These changes, particularly the shorter test duration and the introduction of the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task, highlight the need for other English language proficiency tests, such as IELTS, to adapt and update their tasks to remain competitive in the evolving landscape of language assessment.

The writing section of language proficiency exams, including IELTS, has long been a topic of discussion and criticism. The tasks in these exams often fail to align perfectly with the requirements of contemporary academia, leading to concerns about their relevance and accuracy in evaluating language proficiency for higher education. The Enhanced TOEFL iBT's inclusion

of the "Writing for an Academic Discussion" task reflects the recognition of the importance of assessing skills that are essential for academic success in today's educational institutions.

Furthermore, the demand for shorter test durations has become increasingly evident, considering the shrinking attention spans and the prevalence of short-form content consumption in the digital age. The Enhanced TOEFL iBT's under two-hour test duration caters to this need for efficiency and accessibility, offering a more convenient testing experience for candidates.

Unless IELTS or any other English language proficiency tests respond quickly and effectively to the updates introduced by the Enhanced TOEFL iBT, there is a high possibility of these tests losing their competitive edge and relevance in the market. The fate of Kodak, a giant in its field that disappeared due to being overtaken by innovative competitors, serves as a cautionary tale. To avoid such a fate, it is crucial for IELTS and other language proficiency tests to actively assess their current tasks, particularly in the writing section, and consider updating them to better align with the demands of contemporary academia and the preferences of test-takers.

The Enhanced TOEFL iBT's advancements underscore the need for IELTS and other English language proficiency tests to adapt and innovate. Updating the

tasks, particularly in the writing section, and considering the reduction of test duration without compromising exam accuracy are essential steps in remaining competitive and relevant in the field of language assessment. Failure to respond effectively to these developments may result in losing their position as market leaders, as competitors seize the opportunity to offer more innovative and tailored testing experiences.

Further Research Directions in Language Testing and Assessment

While the IELTS and TOEFL exams have long been recognized as leading English language proficiency tests, there are still several areas within these exams that warrant further research. Specifically, future studies could focus on the speaking section's mode of delivery, the question types used in reading and listening sections, and the effect of different listening task formats in IELTS and TOEFL.

One area of interest for future research is the mode of delivery for the speaking section of popular exams, such as IELTS and TOEFL. With advancements in technology, the feasibility of recording voice over a microphone as opposed to conducting face-to-face or Zoom meetings should be explored. Investigating the potential impact of these different modes of delivery on test-takers' performance, their level of engagement, and the authenticity of the speaking

tasks could provide valuable insights for exam developers and administrators.

Another aspect to consider is the question types used in the reading and listening sections of popular English language exams, particularly the prevalence of multiple-choice questions in the TOEFL exam. While multiple-choice questions offer a standardized format for assessing comprehension, there is a need to explore the effectiveness and appropriateness of alternative question types. Research could investigate the inclusion of tasks that require test-takers to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills, such as open-ended questions, short-answer questions, or tasks that assess inference and critical analysis. Exploring the impact of different question types on test-takers' performance and their ability to showcase language proficiency accurately could contribute to the ongoing refinement of language assessment practices.

Additionally, the effect of different listening task formats in IELTS and TOEFL exams deserves further attention. In the IELTS listening section, questions are answered simultaneously with the listening, while in the TOEFL listening section, questions are answered after the listening stops. Research could examine the impact of these different timing approaches on test-takers' comprehension, memory recall, and overall performance. Understanding the implications of these variations in listening task formats could inform the design and administration of listening sections in

language proficiency tests, ensuring that they effectively assess candidates' listening skills and accurately reflect real-world listening scenarios.

Further research in language testing and assessment, particularly in the context of popular exams like IELTS and TOEFL, should investigate the mode of delivery for the speaking section, explore alternative question types in the reading and listening sections, and examine the effect of different listening task formats. By addressing these areas, we can enhance the validity, authenticity, and reliability of language assessments, providing valuable insights for exam developers, administrators, and test-takers alike.

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