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Test Scoring

In this chapter you will:

- Learn about the scoring scale used for the TSE® Test.
- Learn how the scoring scale relates to the four communicative competencies.
- See example responses at various score levels and learn why they were scored at that particular level.

Scoring Scale

The TSE® scores range from 20 to 60 in five-point increments. So possible scores include 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, and 60. You should not worry that you have to speak like a native speaker of English to receive a score of 60. Since the TSE® was designed for nonnative speakers of English, a native speaker of English would be expected to score well beyond a 60 if higher scores could be given (ETS 1996). Therefore, a high score on the TSE® is not out of reach of a nonnative speaker of English.

There is no universal passing score for the TSE®. Different institutions, whether they are universities or licensing boards, are responsible for setting their own cut-off scores (ETS 1996), so you should check with your institution to find out the minimum score you need. If you take the TSE®, ETS will rate your responses and report your scores to you and to the institutions you indicated on the mailing instruction form. If you take the SPEAK® Test, the institution that gave you the test will rate your responses and report your score. Institutions administering the SPEAK® use ETS's guidelines (ETS 1996) for scoring; this local training of raters and local rating of tests may produce some slight variability in rating between institu-

tions and ETS (Sarwark 1995). For that reason, institutions do not generally report SPEAK[®] scores to other institutions, whereas ETS will report TSE[®] scores to all institutions.

Communicative Competencies and Scoring

Each of the even-numbered score levels have general descriptions that relate to communication ability and performance of task. Furthermore, these score levels have descriptors that relate to each of the four communication competencies. A summary of the rating scale is shown.

60 Almost always adequate communication and performance of task

- Language functions addressed
- Language appropriate for the audience
- Language coherent and cohesive
- Language linguistically accurate

50 Generally adequate communication and performance of task

- Language functions generally addressed
- Language generally appropriate for the audience
- Language generally coherent and cohesive
- Language generally linguistically accurate

40 Somewhat adequate communication and performance of task

- Language functions somewhat addressed
- Language somewhat appropriate for the audience
- Language somewhat coherent and cohesive
- Language somewhat linguistically accurate

30 Generally not adequate communication and performance of task

- Language functions generally not addressed
- Language generally not appropriate for the audience
- Language generally incoherent and noncohesive
- Language with generally poor linguistic accuracy

20 Not adequate communication and performance of task

- Language functions not addressed
- Language not appropriate for the audience
- Language not coherent and not cohesive
- Language with poor linguistic accuracy

Here is another way to describe what these scores mean. Sixty means you are always understood by the rater and that the rater does not have to apply extra effort in understanding you. Fifty means that you are generally understandable, even though there are errors. Both 50 and 60 are positive scores in that communication has been successful. Forty is the middle-of-the-road score, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. At times a 40 is understandable, but at other times the rater has difficulty understanding what was said. That is, the rater must apply effort to understand a 40. Thirty means that although the examinee has responded, not much of what was said addresses the task or makes sense. Twenty means the rater doesn't really understand what the examinee is trying to communicate. Both 20 and 30 are negative scores where ideas are not communicated clearly.

It is interesting to note that the speaker's ability to communicate is rated in part on the listener's ability to understand. Someone who knows you well, like a family member, professor, or supervisor, may have an easier time understanding you than someone who has never met you. Therefore, the rating criteria is based on the *average person's ability* to understand the speaker. While raters can only assign each single test question an even score of 20, 30, 40, 50, or 60, mid scores of 25, 35, 45, and 55 occur for the final score based on the rounded average of the nine test questions (12 questions for SPEAK®).

Sample Responses

Now let's take a look at a typical question and some sample responses that represent different score levels.

Imagine that I am a college classmate of yours and would like to visit your home town. Suggest some place I should plan to see while I am visiting your town and explain why you think I would like to see it. (30 seconds)

Response scored at 60

Well, I know you have an interest in architecture. Therefore, I recommend that you visit our town's historical society. They have a special exhibit about the architecture in our city. In the exhibit you will see photographs and models of various buildings of architectural significance in our city. I know you especially like seeing old blueprints, and they have plenty of those on display. You can easily spend a couple of hours viewing those exhibits.

The language function is clearly carried out, that is, the Historical Society is *recommended* because of the special architecture exhibit. The language appropriately takes into account the audience. The friend's interest in architecture in general, and in blueprints specifically, is addressed. Expressions like *well*, *plenty of*, and *a couple of* are informal and appropriate when speaking with a friend. The response is nicely organized because it begins with acknowledging the friend's interest in architecture, goes on to relate that to the Historical Society's architecture exhibit, and concludes with an estimate of how long it will take to view the exhibit. This response demonstrates good vocabulary such as *architectural significance* and *blueprints*. If this response were spoken fluently, with natural English rhythm, stress, and intonation, then it should receive a score of 60.

Response scored at 50

Our city is famous for its museums. The best one . . . One of my favorite ones are the Historical Society. I like the architecture exhibit. I think you would like it. The admission price . . . It only costs about \$3.00 for admission. They gave you a free map of an architectural walking tour. So after learning about the buildings you can take a tour. I mean follow the map and see these great buildings for yourself.

Again the language function is clearly carried out, that is, the Historical Society is *recommended* because of the architecture exhibit. In fact, a second recommendation is made, and that is to take the walking tour. Making two recommendations does not in itself earn the speaker a higher score, but it does indicate that the speaker can communicate his ideas in a reasonable amount of time. Although the friend's interests are not taken into account as directly as in the level 60 response, the speaker does suggest that the friend will enjoy it because he himself enjoys it. The response is simply organized. It begins with museums in general, narrows to the Historical Society, and focuses on the architecture exhibit. Concrete examples like the \$3.00 admission price and the walking tour map help to communicate the speaker's ideas. This response contains simple, but appropriate sentence structure and vocabulary such as *I like . . .* instead of *I have always been fascinated by . . .*. Notice that the speaker begins sentences and then starts over with an alternative phrasing. While this reduces fluency, it is not a major error that interferes with the communication. Also, the speaker mentions a tour, and then to clear up confusion, clarifies that it is a self-directed tour. There are a couple of grammar errors in verb tense as well, such as *one of my favorite ones are* instead of *is*, and *They gave you* instead of *give*. Imagine that the speaker pronounced some of his vowels incorrectly on words like *famous*, *cost*, *tour*, and *follow*, yet was generally understandable. If this response were otherwise spoken fluently, with natural English rhythm, stress, and intonation, then it should receive a score of 50.

Response scored at 40

Yes, there are a building . . . a museum building. uh. This building is, uh, the Historic Societ. At this building, uh, there are the architecture exhibit. You will be interesting to see. There are pictures, uh, photos, uh, drawing, uh you know, of all the interesting buildings in my, uh city. OK? It is open until 5 p.m. You will be interesting to see.

This type of response represents the middle-of-the-road answer, sometimes communicative, sometimes unclear. The language function of recommending with reasons is accomplished, but only after some effort. The speaker tries to consider his audience by suggesting that the friend will find the exhibit interesting, but the audience appropriacy is weakened by the awkward grammar and wording. There is little cohesion between sentences; along with the pausing and *uh* sounds, this makes for a choppy response. Simple grammar errors exist like *there is/are a building . . .* and *interested/ing*. Pronunciation is difficult to understand with the chopping off of word endings such as *Historical*, *Society*, and *drawings*. This response should be rated 40.

Response scored at 30

OK, you would, uh, like, uh, to visit, uh, my home town. OK, OK, uh, my hometown is, uh, a big city. There is, uh, uh, a lot to do . . . in my , my city. Like museums.

In this response the language function is only minimally carried out. While the speaker says her hometown is a big city and that there is a lot to do, she does not recommend visiting a specific place for specific reasons. Only at the end is the vague expression *Like museums* hastily mentioned. Because the speaker does not say much, the raters are not able to clearly assess whether the speaker is able to address the specific audience of a college classmate appropriately. The response is short, which also makes it difficult

to rate coherence and cohesion. Content and details are lacking in this response. Sentences are short and of simple construction; the last phrase is not even a complete sentence. The unnecessary repetition of *OK* and the sound *uh* interfere with fluency and rhythm. Even if this response were spoken with good stress and intonation, it would be scored at 30.

Response scored at 20

Suggest some place I should plan to see . . .

This response is only the repetition of part of the question. The speaker does not create any language to be rated and therefore should be scored 20.

Response scored at 20

When you visit . . . I think you would like to see . . . In my hometown . . . Many places you visit.

This response does not address the language function of recommending with reasons; it does not address audience appropriateness; the incomplete sentences make it highly incoherent; and the fluency, rhythm, and vocabulary are weak. Therefore, a score of 20 would be assigned to this response as well.

It is important always to give some kind of response to each question. If you do not say anything at all or say something like, “Sorry, I don’t know,” then the raters will have no choice but to assign a score of 20 to that response. No matter what, it is important to respond to all of the questions. On the other hand, don’t get upset if you don’t give your best response to every question. There are nine questions that will be averaged into your final score. So concentrate on each question as it comes. The following chapters will provide you with advice and practice on how to maximize your communication abilities throughout the test.