

A Note to Instructors Regarding This Book and Test Preparation

This book is intended to encourage learners to practice speaking English and analyze their own speaking with a critical ear. While learners may use this book as a self-study tool, it is not intended to replace ESL classes; this book is designed as a tool for both learners and ESL instructors. While the material is directed toward the TSE® Test and SPEAK® Test, the communication strategies shared here should be useful for learners preparing for other types of oral exams, interviews, and performance tests as well. Practice over time will help learners develop skills to be able to respond appropriately to a variety of situations. Learners should practice responding to a variety of tasks, not just those in this book. If learners spend more time speaking English because of this book and think about what and how they communicate more than they have in the past, then this book's purpose will be achieved.

Test preparation has often been misunderstood. Can students benefit from test preparation? Does test preparation falsely inflate skill levels? Should ESL instructors dissuade learners from any type of test preparation? Four common misconceptions in preparing for oral tests that I discussed in *TESOL Matters* (Oct/Nov 2000, vol. 10, no. 4) are summarized here.

- **Misconception 1: Test preparation focuses on tricks, not skills, and therefore inflates scores.**

Some test preparation may indeed lack substance, but solid communication strategies can be taught and are useful for responding to tests, and more important, for real-life communication. Communication strategies can include organized responses, organizational markers, audience awareness, and the importance of stress and tone. Inflated scores occur when examinees score better than would be reflected in their actual skills. If test questions and the scoring rubric of a test accurately focus on important aspects of communication, there is no reason to think that an examinee will sound organized, cohesive, and fluent on a test, but not in other real-life settings. Improving communication skills so that learners improve their scores is an appropriate goal for test preparation.

- **Misconception 2: Test preparation destroys spontaneous speech.**

Spontaneity refers to responding based on a natural feeling from within. Native speakers have access to conscious and subconscious templates for a variety of communication, from letters and memos to introductions and speeches. Knowledge of these templates should not be assumed to exist for a person communicating in a second language and culture. However, there is no reason to keep these templates hidden from nonnative speakers. Communicative strategies and spontaneity are not mutually exclusive. When communication strategies are learned well, they can be applied spontaneously, in a way similar to native speakers. While memorized answers interfere with testing, knowledge of cultural and linguistic conventions aids communication and should be a part of learning and testing.

- **Misconception 3: Teaching specific organizational markers limits the range of responses.**

Exposing students to specific organizational markers and how they are used in context does not limit them to those words and phrases studied. The goal is to broaden learners' understanding of the importance of organizational markers in such a way that they will recognize them more frequently and will apply them appropriately. Memorizing words and inserting them without proper understanding will not make communication sound more fluent, whether on a test or in another communication context.

- **Misconception 4: Structured language samples are not as effective as impromptu language samples for learning oral communication.**

Structured language is more common in written form, so some may argue against its use in teaching oral skills. However, impromptu speech is filled with incomplete sentences, hesitations, and informal structure. Therefore, impromptu speech can sometimes prove frustrating and confusing to learners. If the ultimate goal is clear communication rather than imitation of native speakers, structured language can be an effective teaching tool. In this book, model responses, authentic responses, and modified authentic responses have been used.

These and other misconceptions about test preparation continue to circulate for a couple of reasons. The first reason is the existence of test preparation that is poorly conceived and that aims to improve scores without improving skills. This is usually associated with cramming. Cramming does not involve long-term learning, nor does it encourage extrapolating learning to new contexts. The second reason is based on the instruments used in oral assessment. Common complaints about oral testing are: the lack of interactivity (especially in semi-direct recorded exams); the fact that scoring rubrics may not account for certain qualities (such as spontaneity or nuanced responses); the generalizability of certain language functions (such as complaining and apologizing); and the level of skill needed to score well (based on score levels and cut-off scores). While the ESL profession works toward improving testing instruments, we can harness the motivation that test preparation offers to help students learn sound communication strategies.

A Note to Learners

In addition to communication strategies, this book contains many sample responses to all the question types on the TSE® Test. These are not intended to be followed as a script, but to highlight what makes communication effective in various situations. You are encouraged to record your own responses and listen to and analyze yourself. You may find it helpful to work with a friend or colleague who is also interested in improving his or her English communication skills. Ideally, you will have an experienced ESL instructor who can give you feedback as well. When you record yourself, don't try to sound like someone else. Develop your own communication style. Practice the strategies you learn from this book, and draw on your own personality and strengths to become an effective communicator. Language is a tool for you to use, and it is my desire that this book will help you gain confidence and mastery of that tool in all of your communications.