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Preparing for the TSE[®] Test and Other Speaking Tests

In this chapter you will:

- Consider what makes communication effective.
- Learn how this book is organized.
- Learn the four competencies that define communicative competence for the TSE[®] test.
- Learn general TSE[®] test-preparation strategies.

What Makes Communication Effective?

As we begin, consider a situation where you had trouble communicating with someone else in English. Describe your experience, including where you were, who you were speaking with, what you were talking about, and why you think you had trouble communicating.

Now review your incident alone or with a partner and identify communication skills you could have employed to better get your meaning across.

Even native speakers of English run into miscommunications, so having strategies to overcome these inevitable communication problems is important. An effective communicator has a storehouse of strategies to communicate different things in different ways, as the situation calls for. Throughout this book you will learn how to effectively communicate in many situations you will face in real life and on the TSE® Test or SPEAK® Test. Language learning strategies and communication strategies will be marked throughout the book with this symbol ●→.

How This Book Is Organized

The new TSE® test consists of three warm-up questions and nine rated questions. This book will take you through a practice test question by question. The sample questions used in this book are similar to those published by ETS (ETS 2003) in their 2003–04 *TSE Bulletin* and on the ETS website. ETS released these questions to show examinees samples of typical TSE® questions so examinees could “become familiar with the TSE” before actually taking the test. Information on how to register for the TSE® is provided in Chapter 15.


In Chapter 2 the TSE® score levels and scoring criteria are explained, and sample responses at different score levels are presented and discussed. Chapter 3 provides an overview of pronunciation. Clear pronunciation is essential for responding to all TSE® questions and for effective communication in general. A sample test is presented in Chapter 4 to introduce the test

format and typical questions. Each type of TSE® Test question is discussed in detail in Chapters 5–14. You will see sample test questions shown in **bold lettering** surrounded by a single-lined box. The time allotted for the response is given in seconds inside the parentheses following the question. Sample questions look like this:

Sample question. (60 seconds)

A sample answer in ***bold, italic lettering*** in a double-lined box follows each question. Sample answers look like this:

Sample answer.

In this second edition of *Toward Speaking Excellence*, actual student responses have been used or modified to highlight specific characteristics of effective communication. Actual responses may include disfluencies like excessive pausing or filler sounds, yet it is hoped that the realistic speech samples will lead to solid communication advice. We have tried to make the text match, as closely as possible, the spoken response. Language is complex so not all errors or all strengths of each response will be discussed. Rather, particular communication features will be emphasized to help cover a variety of skills and concepts for effective communication. Practice exercises are intended to help you focus on specific communication skills and strategies and are marked throughout the book with this symbol . In addition to the practice exercises, practice questions at the end of Chapters 5–14 provide you with the opportunity to apply the oral language skills discussed throughout this book. Chapter 15 provides practical test-taking tips for before, during, and after the TSE®. Chapter 16 contains two complete sample TSE-like tests for further practice. (These questions are not actual TSE® questions.)

Since some institutions may still be using the Retired TSE® or SPEAK®

Test, Chapters 17–20 provide background for the types of questions that are found on that test.

Four Rating Criteria

Raters of the TSE® Test focus on four areas of communicative competence. These areas are language function, appropriateness, coherence/cohesion, and accuracy.

- **Language functions** *include narrating, comparing, giving and defending an opinion, responding to a hypothetical situation, describing and analyzing a graph, extending a greeting, responding to a phone message, giving a progress report, etc.*

Each question focuses on one or more language functions. While you may include other language functions in your response, the focus of your response should address the language functions stated in the question.

- **Appropriateness** *refers to responding with language appropriate for the intended audience or situation.*

In some questions you are asked to respond to the narrator without any specifics given. In this situation, respond with a polite, friendly tone, as if you were talking with a respected colleague. Other questions may ask you to imagine you are talking to a friend, supervisor, business associate, customer, classmate, professor, medical professional, or patient. Sometimes the test specifies that you are talking with someone who works at the same company or institution as you. At other times you are asked to pretend to talk to someone without background on the topic you are addressing. Use language appropriate for whatever situation and audience that are specified.

- **Coherence/Cohesion** *reflects the ways language is organized (coherence) and how ideas relate to each other (cohesion).*

It is important that your responses are not ambiguous. Opinions and recommendations should be stated clearly. Supporting rea-

sons should clearly connect to the main idea. Steps in a process or events in a story should be ordered logically, described clearly, and connect smoothly. Be specific enough in your responses so that listeners do not have to interpret or supplement what you are saying in order to understand your meaning.

- **Accuracy** *includes pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and vocabulary.*

Although there are a number of dialects of English, the standard for the TSE® and SPEAK® is the English of a university-educated person in the United States.

Sometimes when a speaker focuses on vocabulary or grammar or pronunciation, fluency suffers. Focused practice on oral English over a long period of time will help develop fluency with accurate vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Tips on how to excel in each of these four areas are provided throughout this book. It is helpful to obtain feedback on your communication ability from knowledgeable ESL instructors. It is also important to develop skills to analyze your own speaking ability.

General Test-Preparation Strategies

In order to maximize your performance on the TSE® Test, you can prepare in the following ways.

1. Become familiar with the standard directions for the test.
2. Become familiar with typical sample questions for the test.
3. Become familiar with the rating criteria of *language functions*, *appropriateness*, *coherence/cohesion*, and *accuracy* and how they relate to good answers for test questions.
4. Practice answering sample questions on your own and in the specific time allotted.

When you take the TSE®, the questions are not only given orally, but the full questions are generally shown printed in the test book. As the question is being given orally, you should follow along in the test book. Listen carefully to the question because you may get clues on how to pronounce certain words or phrases that will be useful to you in your answer. Make sure

you understand exactly what the question is asking. If your answer does not match the question asked, you may not succeed in the language function or appropriateness of response. The last two questions have oral components to the questions that are not written in the test booklet. You may find it helpful to jot down key words or phrases related to the listening portion so you can easily recall the main points. Pencil and paper are available in the new TSE® Test. However, pencil and paper are generally not allowed in the SPEAK® Test.

It is best to concentrate on one question at a time. Try not to focus on the clock. If you complete the practice exercises in this book you should have a good idea in your mind of how long you have to respond to each type of question. It is more important to focus on speaking than to focus on time remaining. When the response time is completed for a particular question, you will hear the test narrator say the number of the next test question, or begin directions for a new section of the test. If by chance you do poorly on one question, do not let it hinder the remainder of your performance. Instead, put that question behind you and concentrate on the question at hand. If you do not finish your response but are clearly on task and accomplishing the language function appropriately, coherently, and accurately, then your score will not be penalized for not finishing the task. However, responses that are incomplete due to disfluencies, such as lack of organization or lack of vocabulary, will not be given maximum scores.

Some speakers believe they will sound more fluent if they memorize some standard phrases, such as *historically speaking* or *such and such is a controversial issue*. In most cases these memorized phrases sound forced and unnatural and should be avoided. For example, if you are asked to give your opinion, it may sound too formal to start out by referring to history or saying the issue is controversial. Studying sample responses can help you see what makes effective and ineffective communication, but samples should not be memorized and forced into other contexts. Practice creating your own language when answering questions. Listen to your answers, think about ways to improve your response, and answer again. With practice you should be able to respond in your own words to any question.

As much as you can, put the testing environment out of your mind. If your test is given in a language laboratory with a lot of other people, be prepared to hear a buzz of noise when everyone is responding. Always take

a few seconds to think about your answer before responding, even if other people jump right into responding. Likewise, if you finish a few seconds before the allotted time is up, don't worry if other people are still speaking. To help you put the testing environment out of your mind, try to answer the questions as if you were talking to someone in person and really desired to communicate that specific information. If you are thinking in the back of your mind how dreadful it is to be taking this test, it is liable to show up negatively in the way you respond. On the other hand, if you put enthusiasm into your voice, your intonation will reflect it and you will be seeking ways to effectively communicate your thoughts. Remember, the actual TSE® Test time is only about 20 minutes, so it is important to maximize your speaking performance during that time. The sample questions and answers that follow will help you to do your best when you take the TSE® Test.