Practicing Pronunciation for Higher Scores in Standardized English Tests (TOEFL/IELTS)

A White Paper

Saundz Research

11/5/2014

The paper discusses pronunciation assessment methods on standardized English tests such as TOEFL and IELTS, as well as the ways Saundz pronunciation software can assist students in achieving higher scores.

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Introduction: Speech Delivery Rating

Standardized English language tests such as TOEFL and IELTS both include assessment of students' speaking skills. Although their rating rubrics slightly differ, both could be said to dedicate similar amount of attention to correctness of pronunciation. While TOEFL speech delivery rating sees pronunciation in the framework of independent and integrated speaking tasks, IELTS on the other hand, observes pronunciation as a separate category. On both these tests, speaking is a category that is rated on a 0 – 4 or 0 – 9 scale, respectively.

"Pronunciation is a vital part of any spoken language, and it is often the most difficult skill to improve."

Importance of Pronunciation in TOEFL/IELTS

As suggested by many EFL professionals, pronunciation is a vital part of oral proficiency in English, since without mastering this skill, students cannot be neither properly understood, nor assessed on standardized tests. Furthermore, students themselves consider pronunciation as one of the most difficult part to master for these types of test. Kaplan TOEFL iBt Premier 2014-2015 explicitly states that "*pronunciation is a vital part of any spoken language, and it is often the most difficult skill to improve*" (232). They also note that answers on TOEFL are not only marked by content but speaking ability as well, which is why it is essential to improve pronunciation.

> *"The proper pronunciation of vowels and consonants in English depends on manipulating the mouth, lips, tongue and breath in specific but subtle ways. Just as a dancer or athlete practices the same essential movements over and over, you should practice the actions necessary for various sounds."*

Since this is exactly what Saundz does, it may be valuable for students to engage in this type of practice. Furthermore, practicing pronunciation can also help students perform better on the listening component of these tests because developing better pronunciation skills also helps in improving listening skills. In relation to the importance of pronunciation for TOEFL, *Cambridge Preparation for the TOEFL* states that pronunciation practice can help students succeed on the TOEFL test in two ways:

> *"You will improve your understanding of spoken English and do better on the tasks that involve listening and you will improve the clarity and comprehensibility of your own speech and perform better on the speaking task. In order to improve your pronunciation skills, you should focus on three different areas of English pronunciation: individual speech sounds, stress and rhythm, and intonation."*

Obviously, it is highly important for students who aim at the highest marks to be able to demonstrate a high level of fluency, which includes correct pronunciation as well. However, pronunciation practice does not always receive the attention it deserves in the teaching process.

For example, in a 2010 *Survey of the Teaching of Pronunciation to Adult ESL Programs in Canada*, survey respondents noted that 85% of their students requested pronunciation instruction or classes, due in part to their interest in taking a TOEFL/IELTS test.

This is where Saundz pronunciation software reaches its full potential, since it can help students who lack consistent communication in English. With a variety of exercises aimed at students on different levels of English proficiency, Saundz helps them correct their basic pronunciation mistakes.

> In a 2010 survey, 85% of students requested pronunciation instruction or classes to prepare for either a test or an interview.

Features of Saundz

Saundz represents a unique pronunciation practice tool because it includes the advanced technical features and professionally developed learning curriculum that supports the needs of both individual and classroom practice. Saundz enables students to practice 40 basic sounds of American English through more than 160 lessons that include:

- 400 example words (with dictionary definitions, images and example sentences)
- Minimal pair drills (used to differentiate phonemes perceived as same or similar; especially when it comes to distinctive phonetic features such as vowel length, nasality and aspiration)
- Word stress representation
- Syllabification (enables students to easily recognize basic units of words and potentially patterns for combining syllables into words)
- Multiple curriculums (focus on phonemes historically proved to be problematic for speakers of particular languages)

These represent the basics for organizing the Saundz curriculum. By practicing every sound in relation to those that could potentially be perceived as similar to it, students better understand the differences between authentic English sounds and possible equivalents in their native languages. Furthermore, Saundz provides the following (Resource: *Saundz as a Pronunciation Teaching Tool for Modern Classrooms*):

- Studio recorded high quality native speakers' recordings (4 voices, 2 male and 2 female)
- Visual input in the form of Simone, a high-definition movie quality animated teacher who is able to show speech mechanics from two available modes – side view and front view – and clearly shows the proper movements of the tongue, lips and jaw
- In recording mode students record their pronunciation of a word and compare it side by side with that of one of Saundz's native speakers
- Saundz use the IPA, an internationally recognized orthoepic convention for teaching English pronunciation

- Saundz curriculum is carefully designed and organized to progress students in an orderly manner sound by sound until they master their pronunciation
- Students can practice on their own, while teachers can monitor their progress
- Saundz is also a cost-effective solution for classrooms; unlike language laboratories, Saundz allows browser-based access and mobile device access and does not require any special equipment

Expected results

To illustrate the potential of Saundz, there are results from a field test that was carried out in October 2013. Namely, after the test all students showed some improvement in their skills. Some general conclusions are that:

✓ *Students with advanced knowledge of English and relatively good pronunciation skills, made progress in terms of specific features (e.g. corrected pronunciation of specific sounds.)*

✓ *Students who lacked good command of English pronunciation were able to improve specific consonants and vowels, but their improvement was better reflected in their reading abilities (they sounded clearer, more confident and were easier to understand.)*

Source: *Saundz Software Application Provides Students with Functionality Necessary for Improving English Pronunciation Skills*

These results demonstrate the potential of phonology practice in general; namely, the basic practice (segmentals) contributes to developing better overall reading and speaking skills. Although listening skills have not been tested in this particular test, it is reasonable to assume that students may enhance those too.

TOEFL Speaking Assessment Rubrics

Source: *Educational Testing Service*

During the speaking part of the TOEFL exam, students are required to possess advanced pronunciation skills in order to get the highest mark. Correct pronunciation therefore plays an important part in test preparation. In terms of speech delivery, students get the highest mark if they demonstrate the following:

Speech is generally clear, fluid and sustained. It may include minor lapses or minor difficulties with pronunciation or intonation. Pace may vary at times as the speaker attempts to recall information. Overall intelligibility remains high.

On the other hand, bad delivery skills refer to the following:

> **Consistent pronunciation, stress and intonation difficulties cause considerable listener effort; delivery is choppy, fragmented, or telegraphic; frequent pauses and hesitations.**

Therefore, poor pronunciation could potentially impede students' ability to demonstrate their knowledge of grammar or vocabulary to a listener/rater on a test.

<u>Independent Speaking Rubrics</u>

Independent speaking tasks refer to students' ability to effectively share their personal experiences, and communicate clearly their ideas and opinions. Since students are required to respond on topics familiar to them, this part of the TOEFL examination focuses solely on students' speaking skills.

While responding to integrated speaking tasks, students are required to use more than one skill. In other words, developed speaking skills are not enough for the successful completion of this task. Instead, these tasks integrate reading or listening with students' speaking skills. To put it simply, students are graded on the basis of how well they can digest information and communicate it.

Score	General Description	Delivery	Language Use	Topic Development
4	The response fulfills the demands of the task, with at most minor lapses in completeness. It is highly intelligible and exhibits sustained, coherent discourse. A response at this level is characterized by all of the following:	Generally well-paced flow (fluid expression). Speech is clear. It may include minor lapses, or minor difficulties with pronunciation or intonation patterns, which do not affect overall intelligibility.	The response demonstrates effective use of grammar and vocabulary. It exhibits a fairly high degree of automaticity with good control of basic and complex structures (as appropriate). Some minor (or systematic) errors are noticeable but do not obscure meaning.	Response is sustained and sufficient to the task. It is generally well developed and coherent; relationships between ideas are clear (or clear progression of ideas).
3	The response addresses the task appropriately, but may fall short of being fully developed. It is generally intelligible and coherent, with some fluidity of expression though it exhibits some noticeable lapses in the expression of ideas. A response at this level is characterized by at least two of the following:	Speech is generally clear, with some fluidity of expression, though minor difficulties with pronunciation, intonation, or pacing are noticeable and may require listener effort at times (though overall intelligibility is not significantly affected).	The response demonstrates fairly automatic and effective use of grammar and vocabulary, and fairly coherent expression of relevant ideas. Response may exhibit some imprecise or inaccurate use of vocabulary or grammatical structures or be somewhat limited in the range of structures used. This may affect overall fluency, but it does not seriously interfere with the communication of the message.	Response is mostly coherent and sustained and conveys relevant ideas/information. Overall development is somewhat limited, usually lacks elaboration or specificity. Relationships between ideas may at times not be immediately clear.
2	The response addresses the task, but development of the topic is limited. It contains intelligible speech, although problems with delivery and/or overall coherence occur; meaning may be obscured in places. A response at this level is characterized by at least two of the following:	Speech is basically intelligible, though listener effort is needed because of unclear articulation, awkward intonation, or choppy rhythm/pace; meaning may be obscured in places.	The response demonstrates limited range and control of grammar and vocabulary. These limitations often prevent full expression of ideas. For the most part, only basic sentence structures are used successfully and spoken with fluidity. Structures and vocabulary may express mainly simple (short) and/or general propositions, with simple or unclear connections made among them (serial listing, conjunction, juxtaposition).	The response is connected to the task, though the number of ideas presented or the development of ideas is limited. Mostly basic ideas are expressed with limited elaboration (details and support). At times relevant substance may be vaguely expressed or repetitious. Connections of ideas may be unclear.
1	The response is very limited in content and/or coherence or is only minimally connected to the task, or speech is largely unintelligible. A response at this level is characterized by at least two of the following:	Consistent pronunciation, stress, and intonation difficulties cause considerable listener effort; delivery is choppy, fragmented, or telegraphic; frequent pauses and hesitations.	Range and control of grammar and vocabulary severely limit (or prevent) expression of ideas and connections among ideas. Some low-level responses may rely heavily on practiced or formulaic expressions.	Limited relevant content is expressed. The response generally lacks substance beyond expression of very basic ideas. Speaker may be unable to sustain speech to complete the task and may rely heavily on repetition of the prompt.
0	Speaker makes no attempt to respond OR response is unrelated to the topic.			

Integrated Speaking rubrics

Score	General Description	Delivery	Language Use	Topic Development
4	The response fulfills the demands of the task, with at most minor lapses in completeness. It is highly intelligible and exhibits sustained, coherent discourse. A response at this level is characterized by all of the following:	Speech is generally clear, fluid, and sustained. It may include minor lapses or minor difficulties with pronunciation or intonation. Pace may vary at times as the speaker attempts to recall information. Overall intelligibility remains high.	The response demonstrates good control of basic and complex grammatical structures that allow for coherent, efficient (automatic) expression of relevant ideas. Contains generally effective word choice. Though some minor (or systematic) errors or imprecise use may be noticeable, they do not require listener effort (or obscure meaning).	The response presents a clear progression of ideas and conveys the relevant information required by the task. It includes appropriate detail, though it may have minor errors or minor omissions.
3	The response addresses the task appropriately, but may fall short of being fully developed. It is generally intelligible and coherent, with some fluidity of expression, though it exhibits some noticeable lapses in the expression of ideas. A response at this level is characterized by at least two of the following:	Speech is generally clear, with some fluidity of expression, but it exhibits minor difficulties with pronunciation, intonation, or pacing and may require some listener effort at times. Overall intelligibility remains good, however.	The response demonstrates fairly automatic and effective use of grammar and vocabulary, and fairly coherent expression of relevant ideas. Response may exhibit some imprecise or inaccurate use of vocabulary or grammatical structures or be somewhat limited in the range of structures used. Such limitations do not seriously interfere with the communication of the message.	The response is sustained and conveys relevant information required by the task. However, it exhibits some incompleteness, inaccuracy, lack of specificity with respect to content, or choppiness in the progression of ideas.
2	The response is connected to the task, though it may be missing some relevant information or contain inaccuracies. It contains some intelligible speech, but at times problems with intelligibility and/or overall coherence may obscure meaning. A response at this level is characterized by at least two of the following:	Speech is clear at times, though it exhibits problems with pronunciation, intonation, or pacing and so may require significant listener effort. Speech may not be sustained at a consistent level throughout. Problems with intelligibility may obscure meaning in places (but not throughout).	The response is limited in the range and control of vocabulary and grammar demonstrated (some complex structures may be used, but typically contain errors). This results in limited or vague expression of relevant ideas and imprecise or inaccurate connections. Automaticity of expression may only be evident at the phrasal level.	The response conveys some relevant information but is clearly incomplete or inaccurate. It is incomplete if it omits key ideas, makes vague reference to key ideas, or demonstrates limited development of important information. An inaccurate response demonstrates misunderstanding of key ideas from the stimulus. Typically, ideas expressed may not be well connected or cohesive so that familiarity with the stimulus is necessary to follow what is being discussed.
1	The response is very limited in content or coherence or is only minimally connected to the task. Speech may be largely unintelligible. A response at this level is characterized by at least two of the following:	Consistent pronunciation and intonation problems cause considerable listener effort and frequently obscure meaning. Delivery is choppy, fragmented, or telegraphic. Speech contains frequent pauses and hesitations.	Range and control of grammar and vocabulary severely limit (or prevent) expression of ideas and connections among ideas. Some very low-level responses may rely on isolated words or short utterances to communicate ideas.	The response fails to provide much relevant content. Ideas that are expressed are often inaccurate, limited to vague utterances, or repetitions (including repetition of prompt).
0	Speaker makes no attempt to respond OR response is unrelated to the topic.			

IELTS Speaking Assessment Criteria

The IELTS test approaches assessing speaking somewhat differently. As highlighted below, *Pronunciation* is a separate category on the test. The greatest mark/band would be assigned to students who "**use a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety**." This also relates to the ability to correctly pronounce individual sounds, and especially to making distinctions between vowel lengths in order to avoid possible misunderstandings. This is again, one of the areas where Saundz can prove to be a helpful tool.

Table source: *British Council*

Band	Fluency and coherence	Lexical resource	Grammatical range and accuracy	Pronunciation
9	• Speaks fluently with only rare repetition or self correction; any hesitation is content-related rather than to find words or grammar • Speaks coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features • Develops topics fully and appropriately	• Uses vocabulary with full flexibility and precision in all topics • Uses idiomatic language naturally and accurately	• Uses a full range of structures naturally and appropriately • Produces consistently accurate structures apart from 'slips' characteristic of native speaker speech	• Uses a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety • Sustains flexible use of features throughout • Is effortless to understand
8	• Speaks fluently with only occasional repetition or self-correction; hesitation is usually content related and only rarely to search for language • Develops topics coherently and appropriately	• Uses a wide vocabulary resource readily and flexibly to convey precise meaning • Uses less common and idiomatic vocabulary skilfully, with occasional inaccuracies • Uses paraphrase effectively as required	• Uses a wide range of structures flexibly • Produces a majority of error-free sentences with only very occasional inappropriateness or basic/unsystematic errors	• Uses a wide range of pronunciation features • Sustains flexible use of features, with only occasional lapses • Is easy to understand throughout; 1 accent has minimal effect on intelligibility
7	• Speaks at length without noticeable effort or loss of coherence • May demonstrate language-related hesitation at times, or some repetition and/or self-correction • Uses a range of	• Uses vocabulary resource flexibly to discuss a variety of topics • Uses some less common and idiomatic vocabulary and shows some awareness of style and collocation, with some	• Uses a range of complex structures with some flexibility • Frequently produces error-free sentences, though some grammatical mistakes persist	• Shows all the positive features of band 6 and some, but not all, of the positive features of band 8

	connectives and discourse markers with some flexibility	inappropriate choices • Uses paraphrase effectively		
6	• Is willing to speak at length, though may lose coherence at times due to occasional repetition, self-correction or hesitation • Uses a range of connectives and discourse markers but not always appropriately	• Has a wide enough vocabulary to discuss topics at length and make meaning clear in spite of inappropriateness • Generally paraphrases successfully	• Uses a mix of simple and complex structures, but with limited flexibility • May make frequent mistakes with complex structures, though these rarely cause comprehension problems	• Uses a range of pronunciation features with mixed control • Shows some effective use of features but this is not sustained • Can generally be understood throughout, though mispronunciation of individual words or sounds reduces clarity at times
5	• Usually maintains flow of speech but uses repetition, self-correction and/or slow speech to keep going • May over-use certain connectives and discourse markers • Produces simple speech fluently, but more complex communication causes fluency problems	• Manages to talk about familiar and unfamiliar topics but uses vocabulary with limited flexibility • Attempts to use paraphrase but with mixed success	• Produces basic sentence forms with reasonable accuracy • Uses a limited range of more complex structures, but these usually contain errors and may cause some comprehension problems	• Shows all the positive features of band 4 and some, but not all, of the positive features of band 6
4	• Cannot respond without noticeable pauses and may speak slowly, with frequent repetition and self-correction • Links basic sentences but with repetitious use of simple connectives and some breakdowns in coherence	• Is able to talk about familiar topics but can only convey basic meaning on unfamiliar topics and makes frequent errors in word choice • Rarely attempts paraphrase	• Produces basic sentence forms and some correct simple sentences but subordinate structures are rare • Errors are frequent and may lead to misunderstanding	• Uses a limited range of pronunciation features • Attempts to control features but lapses are frequent • Mispronunciations are frequent and cause some difficulty for the listener
3	• Speaks with long pauses • Has limited ability to link simple sentences • Gives only simple responses and is frequently unable to	• Uses simple vocabulary to convey personal information • Has insufficient vocabulary for less familiar topics	• Attempts basic sentence forms but with limited success, or relies on apparently memorised utterances • Makes numerous errors except in memorised expressions	• Shows some of the features of band 2 and some, but not all, of the positive features of band 4

	convey basic message			
2	• Pauses lengthily before most words • Little communication possible	• Only produces isolated words or memorised utterances	• Cannot produce basic sentence forms	• Speech is often unintelligible
1	• No communication possible • No rateable language			

Conclusion

As outlined in the summary of this paper, Saundz represents an efficient practice tool for students who aim to take standardized English language tests. Saundz represents a unique tool in today's EFL market because of the variety of features it contains and because of the professionally-designed curriculum that enables students to practice on their own. Since students are required to demonstrate minimum pronunciation mistakes on TOEFL/IELTS, practicing with Saundz can help them achieve this. However, it students should take the practice seriously because improving pronunciation skills is very important on a long-term basis. In *Pronunciation and Phonetics: A Practical Guide for English Language Teachers* Adam Brown states that:

> *"Pronunciation proficiency in a foreign language should not be something that can be 'turned on' specifically for tests."*

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Pronunciation practice with Saundz can have an important effect not only on students' test scores, but their future ability to communicate in English, too. Therefore, all students of English who feel uncomfortable with their pronunciation skills should dedicate some time to improving this aspect as well.

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