

Study secrets of students who get 26+ on TOEFL SPEAKING

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Since I started teaching TOEFL lessons in 2010, there is one complaint that I have heard more than I can count: "Jaime, I can't think of anything to say at TOEFL speaking!"

Sometimes students' minds "go blank" (no ideas come into their mind). All the English they know just disappears in an instant! They don't know what to say. However they describe it, the result is always the same: Their TOEFL speaking scores are lower than they want, and they don't know what to do about it.

Fortunately, there is a solution! It's quite simple actually, if you just follow 3 easy steps.

1. Make a schedule that requires you to speak -- A LOT.

I haven't met you or listened to you speak English and obviously I don't really know you. But I do know that if you still do not have your target speaking score, then you probably do not speak enough English every day. Students who get their target scores on TOEFL speak English every chance they get (at work, with friends, or even just while shopping).

But they also create plans to speak English and make TOEFL-style responses for 10 to 15 hours for every point they lack on their score. So, let's imagine you took TOEFL before and got a speaking score of 23, but you want 26. Well, first, we should raise your goal to 27 (because it's less risky and if you miss, you can still get 26). This means you want to improve your speaking score by 4 points, so you should aim to speak TOEFL-style responses for 60 hours. Yes! 60 hours.

At first, 60 hours might seem like a crazy number, but if you make significant mistakes with grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation, it can take weeks -- sometimes 2-4 months -- to eliminate 85-95% of your errors. People who score 26 and higher sound "perfect", well, almost perfect.

2. Imitate high-quality model responses for TOEFL speaking.

The strongest and fastest way you can learn is through imitation. When you learned to speak as a child, you spent a long time quietly watching your parents and you developed a perfect accent, grammar, and a wide vocabulary.

When I first taught TOEFL speaking, I didn't realize the importance of imitation and I tried to make my students speak without giving them a great example to follow. What I discovered is that you actually improve much, much faster if your teacher, demonstrates really high-scoring TOEFL responses.

It all depends on what your speaking target score is. If you need a lower score (like 20-24 points, for example, the quality of the examples you follow is not that important). However, if you need 26 or higher, look for a teacher who got 30 on TOEFL speaking like I did. This way, you know that you can trust the examples of TOEFL speaking you'll hear. Ultimately, your own responses will reflect the speech patterns you model. Because of that, you will be more successful if you learn from high-quality responses.

3. Get corrected by an English speaker you trust.

The last really important step is to make sure that you are not making mistakes when you speak English for TOEFL.

Most TOEFL students are so stressed out, that they do not accurately or confidently identify their own mistakes when they speak English. Of course they can feel when they speak well or poorly, but they do not often accurately diagnose their own grammar or vocabulary mistakes. Usually, people need extra help identifying and fixing pronunciation mistakes.

Here is a real dialogue between me and a student whose speaking score was 23-24:

Jaime: What kinds of mistakes do you think you make in English?

Student: I have a lot of trouble with prepositions.

*Jaime: *confused* Really? I haven't noticed that... Did someone tell you that you can't use prepositions correctly?*

Student: Yes. About a year and a half ago, my previous English teacher told me that I didn't use prepositions correctly.

Jaime: Hmm... I see... And so then did you study prepositions?

Student: Yes. I studied it a lot.

Jaime: Well, that just shows us how smart you are! I've been listening to you speak English for hours in our lessons, and I can say that you really don't have significant mistakes with prepositions anymore. I do not agree with your self-assessment. You fixed that problem. Congratulations!

*Student: *happy* Ok that's great! So why is my TOEFL speaking score low now?*

... and our conversation and lessons continued. A few weeks later, she got a speaking score of 27.

However, if we had not identified her current problems, she would have continued worrying about a problem that didn't exist! Focusing energy on the wrong part of your English limits your TOEFL score.

4. So... what should you do now?

If you can read this article, it means that you are smart and have a good education. I have seen so many students succeed with TOEFL speaking when they focus their attention on the right things instead of getting old scores again and again because they keep studying the wrong things.