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Features

Top

[Home](#) [National](#) [Sports](#) [Business](#) [World](#) [Careers](#) [Features](#) [Photos](#) [Columns](#) [Editorial](#)
[Culture](#)[DY Weekend](#)[The Language Connection](#)[Science & Nature](#)[Home](#) > [Features](#) > [The Language Connection](#)[Weather](#)

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Top

Topics

[Photos](#)[DY Weekend](#)[Sports](#)

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[THE DAILY YOMIURI](#)

Info

[WHO WAS RESPONSI](#)
[Archives](#)
[New dictionary on sale](#)

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TOEFL(R) BOOSTER / State topic up front in iBT speaking responses

Lawrence J. Zwier / Special to The Daily Yomiuri

Last month we examined some of the speaking tasks on the Internet-based TOEFL (iBT). We saw independent tasks (which require no listening or reading to complete) and integrated tasks (which require information from a listening passage and perhaps a reading passage). In today's article, let's go one step further. Instead of thinking only about the tasks, let's consider some possible answers. We'll focus on the independent tasks.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS) is the company that makes the iBT. ETS hires people to rate each spoken response according to a rubric, which is a set of descriptions of responses at each score level. The highest score level is 4 and the lowest is 1. (Actually, a score of zero is possible, but only if you don't say anything related to the topic.)

ETS has two speaking rubrics, one for independent responses and another for integrated responses. Both rubrics are online at www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEFL/

[pdf/Speaking_Rubrics.pdf](#). There, you can read all the descriptions for all levels. In this article, I want to concentrate on the description of responses at the highest level, getting a score of 4.

The independent speaking rubric has four general categories of descriptors. (A descriptor is a statement that describes some aspect of the response.) Here is a summary of the descriptors for a top-of-the-line (Level 4) independent response:

GENERAL:

-- Totally (or almost totally) does what the task asks for.

-- Is easy to understand.

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-- Has content that flows smoothly and in a well-connected way.

DELIVERY

-- Flows easily and naturally.

-- Is easily understood despite any small problems with pronunciation or intonation.

LANGUAGE USE

-- Uses grammar and vocabulary effectively.

-- Shows "automaticity"--smoothness in which the right grammar and vocabulary come to mind without a lot of searching and hesitation.

-- Has not only correct simple structures but also many correct complex structures.

TOPIC DEVELOPMENT

-- Stays with the proper topic throughout the answer, without drifting to another topic.

-- Gives a substantial amount of information about the topic.

-- Has good connections among ideas.

Here's an independent prompt similar to those on the iBT, followed by the transcript of a possible answer. Remember that on the test this answer would be spoken, not written:

SAMPLE QUESTION 1

Describe a book you have read and explain why you liked it. Include details and examples to support your explanation. (preparation 15 seconds; speaking 45 seconds)

SAMPLE RESPONSE 1: A Very Good Response

I really liked reading *The Fatal Shore* by a guy named Robert Hughes. It's about the fascinating early days of Australian history, mostly when the English first started ruling it. The British wanted to get rid of criminals in England and Scotland and other places, and they had a great idea--sending these criminals to Australia. The book gives great descriptions of the prison camps in places like Sydney and Hobart, Tasmania, and places like that. It's especially interesting because many Australians now are descended from these criminals. Well, I say "criminals" but many of those old settlers were not actually bad people. The book shows that their crimes were little things like stealing a loaf of bread or not

paying back some money they borrowed.

You can easily see why this response would get a score of 4. For one thing--and most importantly--it does exactly what the question demanded. In the very first sentence, the speaker named a book and then, in the second sentence, began describing its good points. This is enormously important: Answer directly, right away. People who rate speaking responses do dozens and dozens of responses one after another. They are tired, and they don't like struggling to find a relevant answer. If the basics of your answer are clear in the first two sentences, the raters will have a better opinion of your response.

This answer also develops the topic. The speaker moves from one relevant fact to another. Of course, the grammar and the vocabulary are exactly right for an answer like this. No need for big, fancy words. No need for complicated sentences. Keep your response simple, direct, and accurate. We will just assume that this speaker had good pronunciation and intonation.

SAMPLE RESPONSE 2: A Weak Response--Probably a Score of 2

People read many books in their lives. Some are good and some are not so good. Most people like reading the good books really interesting. I want to describe a book that you have read and why you liked it. I want to provide detail and example to support your explanation. I usually like mystery books because they are mysterious. There are many kinds mystery book...uh...and...yeah, many kinds, So what about this book, The Secret School? Why not read that one? Would you like it so much? Yes, I think so. Being very mysterious, you go from one page to another. So I described a book that you have read. Thank you.

We could spend a lot of time listing the problems in this answer. There are a lot of grammar mistakes, including some confusion between "you" and "I." Some words are missing (many kinds mystery book), and word order is sometimes wrong (good books really interesting). The biggest problems, though, are with content and development.

The answer is very indirect. The speaker does not even name a book until the seventh sentence in this answer, which is about 25 seconds into the response. By this time, the rater will be very frustrated. He or she will be wondering whether the speaker will truly answer the question. It is extremely important to understand this problem.

DO NOT start your response with general statements like "People read many books in their lives." The question is not about that. It's about what you read. Development is weak because the speaker never explains any good points about the book. Also, the answer drifts away from the main idea toward what YOU (the listener) would like.

Next month we will work more with rubrics and examine integrated speaking responses.

Zwier teaches in the English Language Center at Michigan State University. He has written numerous books about the iBT.

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[TOEFL\(R\) BOOSTER / State topic up front in iBT speaking responses](#) (Aug.17)

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[Page Top](#)

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