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TOEIC Booster / Goals affect choice of replies

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Abstract (Summary)

In a recent column (Aug. 28), I proposed some simple strategies to improve one's score in the speaking test. I recommended that test-takers give a direct and definitive response. For example, if the question asks, "What is one of your hobbies?" I recommended a tidy and straightforward reply, such as, "One of my hobbies is collecting model airplanes."

To exemplify this thought, let me take a moment to compare testing to a job interview. During a job interview, a person would normally want to put his best foot forward to achieve the goal of getting a job offer. For example, if an interviewer asks an applicant, "Why are you leaving your current job?" the applicant faces a choice. The applicant may answer, "I'm leaving because my current boss is demanding and aggressive and nitpicky," or the applicant may answer, "I'm leaving because I am looking for new challenges in my career."

In other words, just like a job applicant, test-takers need to be aware of their goals when entering a testing situation. Furthermore, test-takers should be aware that testing goals may be very different from their actual communication goals when using real English. Otherwise, as Prof. [Hideo Oka] reminded me, suggestions for strategic test-taking are "likely to mislead Japanese learners of English into thinking that all native speakers talk like that." He goes on to explain that real English, "which should be our long-term goal, is much more subtle than that. As a young student I used to think that when I was asked, 'Do you like English?' there was no other choice except answering either Yes or No. But I have later learned that there are different shades of Yeses and Nos."

Full Text (1083 words)

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TOEIC Booster / Goals affect choice of replies

Lynn Stafford-Yilmaz / Special to The Daily Yomiuri

Yomiuri

In the last Booster column (Oct. 9), we looked at the TOEFL test. This week, we turn to the TOEIC Speaking and Writing test. Today's column will offer one reader's thoughtful insight on a recent Booster column that examined ways that test-takers can achieve a high score in the TOEIC Speaking test.

The Speaking test contains six different tasks. Most of these tasks ask test-takers to respond to a given question or stimulus. For example, in one task, test-takers hear and read three interrelated questions, then they must respond to the questions.

In a recent column (Aug. 28), I proposed some simple strategies to improve one's score in the speaking test. I recommended that test-takers give a direct and definitive response. For example, if the question asks, "What is one of your hobbies?" I recommended a tidy and straightforward reply, such as, "One of my hobbies is collecting model airplanes."

In response to this, one of my highly regarded readers, Prof. Hideo Oka (Tokyo University) replied, saying: "...my feeling is that your advice sounds too simplistic if you think of the many cases when you cannot give definite answers, even though the scorer might expect them. For example, in response to the first question, 'What is one of your hobbies?' it is not always possible to give a straightforward answer."

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The professor went on to propose his reply to this TOEIC-type question: "Well, it's hard to say. I have tried this and that, from playing tennis to the piano, but over the years my hobbies have changed. I still enjoy playing tennis--infrequently, though--but I gradually stopped playing the piano, partly because I became too busy...Instead, my interest in music shifted to going to classical music concerts. Another interesting development in my hobbies is reading. When I was young, I did not like reading too much--for pleasure, that is--although I did read for study purposes. Now I enjoy reading literature at my leisure, from Jane Austen to Ariyoshi Sawako..."

Then, Prof. Oka asked me fairly: "How could I possibly condense all this into a single sentence? I could say, 'One of my hobbies is playing tennis,' but this would not be faithful to myself and would sound stilted." Like Prof. Oka, many of my students in the past have expressed a similar concern--that little white-washed answers seem false and stilted.

This very fair challenge puts me in a long-running quandary. On the one hand, I would not normally advise somebody to act in a way that seemed unfaithful or unnatural. On the other hand, I think that for many test-takers, too much devotion to a full and honest answer could hurt their test scores. If, for example, a test-taker cannot produce simultaneously a heartfelt and verbally accurate response to the question, then the effort to give a more faithful reply could be to their disadvantage.

So, it seems to me that test-takers' replies will hinge somewhat on their goal. If the goal is a high test score, a tidy, even gutless, response may be the most advantageous. If one's goal is faithfulness and honesty, then a bolder response may be called for.

To exemplify this thought, let me take a moment to compare testing to a job interview. During a job interview, a person would normally want to put his best foot forward to achieve the goal of getting a job offer. For example, if an interviewer asks an applicant, "Why are you leaving your current job?" the applicant faces a choice. The applicant may answer, "I'm leaving because my current boss is demanding and aggressive and nitpicky," or the applicant may answer, "I'm leaving because I am looking for new challenges in my career."

In other words, just like a job applicant, test-takers need to be aware of their goals when entering a testing situation. Furthermore, test-takers should be aware that testing goals may be very different from their actual communication goals when using real English. Otherwise, as Prof. Oka reminded me, suggestions for strategic test-taking are "likely to mislead Japanese learners of English into thinking that all native speakers talk like that." He goes on to explain that real English, "which should be our long-term goal, is much more subtle than that. As a young student I used to think that when I was asked, 'Do you like English?' there was no other choice except answering either Yes or No. But I have later learned that there are different shades of Yeses and Nos."

In all of these regards, I thank Prof. Oka for his important reminder, and I encourage learners of English to consider these points whenever they are reading this newspaper column, and, indeed, whenever they are studying English with the express purpose of preparing for a test. Such English is likely to be very goal-oriented, and it only may or may not bear semblance to the type of English that would be used in normal communication.

Our discussion, of course, leads to the reasonable question of how an honest and thorough reply to a test question, like Prof. Oka's, might be scored on the TOEIC exam. Assuming that such a response could fit into the allotted time, and that a test-taker could express these ideas verbally as smoothly as they are written here, I must assume that such a reply would surely receive a full score on this test item.

However, it is worth noting that Prof. Oka has one huge advantage over other test-takers. That is, clearly, his English looks perfect! This gives him the confidence to express himself as only confidence should.

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In other words, a test-taker whose language skills are still just developing may be in safer territory with a tidy, direct textbook response, such as "My hobby is reading classical literature." The reason for this is not because this reply is the world's most natural response, but because it may help that person in the goal of scoring high on the TOEIC Speaking test.

The next Booster column will feature the TOEFL test. If you have questions or comments about the TOEIC test or about this column, please e-mail Lynn Stafford-Yilmaz at dy-edu@yomiuri.com.

Stafford-Yilmaz is a former TOEIC test-question writer. She has authored multiple test preparation textbooks for both the TOEIC and TOEFL tests. She currently is a teacher educator for the School of Teaching English as a Second Language in Seattle, Wash.

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