

***Power-up Trainer for the TOEFL ITP.* Mark D. Stafford and Chizuko Tsumatori. Cengage Learning, 2010. 95 pp.**

Reviewed by John B. Collins¹ Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

For an increasing number of Japanese college students, success in the TOEFL test is a high priority and a necessity for job and study abroad applications. At the institution where the textbook described below was reviewed, the achievement of a score of 500+ on the TOEFL (ITP) has become a central goal of university policy. Regardless of the merits and demerits of this policy, it is vital that teachers and students are equipped with the teaching and study tools they need to achieve this goal. The following is a review of a textbook that claims to help Japanese college students achieve a TOEFL (ITP) score of 500+. The textbook was trialed with a group of approximately 20 Japanese students at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) with a view towards recommending it for wider adoption across the English program.

The book was trialed during a 15-class extracurricular TOEFL preparation course, during which 10 of the 12 units were completed. Each unit was taught over a 95 minute class, although the grammar practice questions, which come at the end of each unit, were sometimes assigned as homework. Considering that there are 12 units, in addition to the pre- and post-tests, the book could be completed in as little as 14 classes. If each unit were supplemented with lead-in tasks and additional grammar instruction and practice, as was the case during the current trial (as described in further detail below), it could potentially take longer to complete. Just how much longer would depend on the students' proficiency level and therefore the degree to which supplementary tasks are required. Given that the book aims to help students reach a score of 500+ on the TOEFL (ITP), it is the reviewer's opinion that the book would be suitable for students within reasonable striking range of this score. In other words, students approximately within a 450-480 score band, rather than the low 400's or lower.

Given the comprehensive nature of the 119-page-long teacher's manual, the textbook itself is clearly intended to be used as a course-book to be taught by a teacher, rather than for self-study. The stated goals of the textbook, which are described in the preface, are two-fold: first, to provide opportunities for learners to encounter academic and specialist vocabulary, and second, to develop the ability to speedily and accurately read (or listen to) long passages of text that are characteristic of the TOEFL. The textbook is divided into 12 units and bookended with a pre- and post-test. Each unit is based on a theme that commonly appears in the TOEFL, including Native American issues, the American Civil War, and college campus conversations. Hilke and Wadden (1997) identified the five most frequent themes in the TOEFL reading comprehension section as *natural science*, *history*, *biography*, *social science* and *general interest*. Biography is not sufficiently covered in the textbook and students would require supplementary materials in order to become acquainted with the unique

¹Lecturer, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), Beppu City, Oita, Japan

e-mail:crm11427@apu.ac.jp

structure of such texts. Listening topics fit closely with what students would expect to encounter in the TOEFL, namely, on-campus conversations between students, university staff, and faculty, in addition to lecture-style texts including the American Civil War and the natural sciences. With the exception of biographies, the textbook provides a range of topics and themes that serve as a suitable starting point in preparing for the TOEFL.

The real strength of this book lies in how each unit is arranged. Unlike the ubiquitous “all-in-one” self-study TOEFL preparation textbooks that are often nothing more than a collection of mock tests, the authors appear to have made a concerted effort to present reading, vocabulary, listening and grammar tasks in an integrated format. Importantly, grammar tasks attempt to build on an excerpt or grammatical feature from the preceding reading or listening passage. The book's authors, therefore, have endeavored to place grammar instruction within a textual context from which to understand the meaning and function of the target form. While this is to be commended and is a welcome break from the frequently disjointed nature of typical TOEFL preparation textbooks, the links between each unit's target grammar point and its listening or reading text are not always clearly identifiable across all units. Vocabulary exercises also build and expand upon the academic or specialized language introduced in the preceding text. Reading, listening, vocabulary, and grammar stages of each unit therefore follow a central theme. The adherence to a central theme is, regrettably, not consistently maintained in all the units.

Teachers will be pleased to see that listening materials are supplemented with a number of classroom-friendly gap-fill and pair-work tasks which, if set up as group activities, could go some way to making TOEFL listening classes more interactive and enjoyable. One such task, as described in the book, involves students practicing a TOEFL (part B) listening section style extended conversation by listening to the text while reading the English transcript, before attempting to role-play the conversation with a partner using only the Japanese translation as a scaffold. Reading skills, unfortunately, are not dealt with in a similar way, that is to say, pre-reading tasks are limited to pre-teaching a number of vocabulary items, which, to the book's credit, are provided in the pages following each reading text. However, in order to give weaker students a greater chance of fully grasping the central ideas of the texts, teachers would need to provide lead-in tasks, such as dictogloss or reading prediction and brainstorm exercises.

In terms of fulfilling its stated aims, the textbook does provide opportunities, albeit limited, for students to encounter specialized and academic vocabulary through reading and listening texts, and therefore fulfills its first aim. The book's second aim, to help develop the ability to speedily and accurately read (or listen to) long passages of text, is understandably more difficult to fulfill. Indeed in the case of the TOEFL reading section, with its emphasis on efficient time usage, accuracy will always come at the expense of speed, and vice-versa. A compromise may have been found in the way in which grammar is introduced via an excerpt from the preceding text – an excerpt which students are encouraged to understand in detail in order to grasp the target grammar point. The authors of this and future language proficiency test preparation textbooks, and indeed language teachers, could benefit from exploring this integrated approach further.

The textbook offers a refreshing break from the “beat-the-test” orientation which has been identified in the popular Longman TOEFL preparation series (Thonus, 1990); indeed references to specific test-taking “strategies” are kept to a minimum. While a number of test-taking strategies are described in the teacher's manual, such information is introduced simply as “tips” which also include general study skills such as using a dictionary and reading new items of vocabulary aloud. The textbook is not without its shortcomings. As described above, some units are more successful than others in terms of skills integration and the adherence to a continuous central theme. Furthermore, the grammar exercises might not provide enough structured practice for weaker students. This could be dealt with by supplementing materials from other sources, including the Longman series. Perhaps the greatest drawback, however, is also one of the textbook's greatest strengths: the teacher's manual. At 119 pages in length, it is longer than the textbook itself. It provides extensive supplementary grammar explanations, comprehensive answer keys, and also teaching tips. However, the manual is, unfortunately, only available in Japanese. A high degree of Japanese proficiency would be required of teachers, not only to get full use of the teacher's manual, but also to understand the bulk of the task instructions in the textbook itself. In the case of such teachers being unavailable, other options could include translating important sections of the teacher's manual into English, or providing excerpts for students to use as self-study, particularly answers and explanations to structure/written expression questions, which are dense in grammatical metalanguage.

Overall, this book served its purpose well and proved popular with the students with whom it was trialed. In terms of TOEFL score improvement, the pre- and post-tests were both administered and showed an average score improvement of 11.4% - although how this translates into actual TOEFL performance is quite another matter. As Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) have indeed pointed out, there is very little empirical evidence to support claims that such preparation courses are actually beneficial (p.294). Depending on how it were adopted, and also on the availability of Japanese-proficient instructors, this textbook could make a positive addition to TOEFL instruction by allowing for a more integrated teaching approach and providing a break from the monotonous “beat-the-test” style of drills and exercises which students, and teachers, have so often encountered.

References

- Alderson, J. C., & Hamp-Lyons, L. (1996). TOEFL preparation courses: a study of washback. *Language Testing* 13(3), pp. 280-297.
- Thonus, T. (1990). Review of Longman preparation course for the TOEFL, by Deborah Phillips, *TESOL Quarterly* 24(3), pp. 516-518.
- Hilke, R., & Wadden, P. (1997). The TOEFL and its imitators: analyzing the TOEFL and evaluating TOEFL-prep texts, *RELC Journal* 28, pp. 28-53.