



TOEIC Program measures all four *communication skills*

Providing precise evaluation of holistic communicative competence in English

The TOEIC Program tests evaluate the four communication skills — listening, reading, speaking and writing— and test scores provide useful information about test takers' proficiency in each skill.

This section looks at the various reasons behind why the TOEIC Program recommends assessing all four English skills, in terms of supporting development of learners' holistic communicative competence, that is, their overall ability in all aspects of English.

The TOEIC Program and the four language skills: Listening, reading, speaking and writing skills are intertwined

In the fields of second language acquisition and language testing, researchers generally agree that second language proficiency consists of multiple components (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980). In other words, what we consider an overall, holistic communicative competence is actually a set of interrelated knowledge and skills.

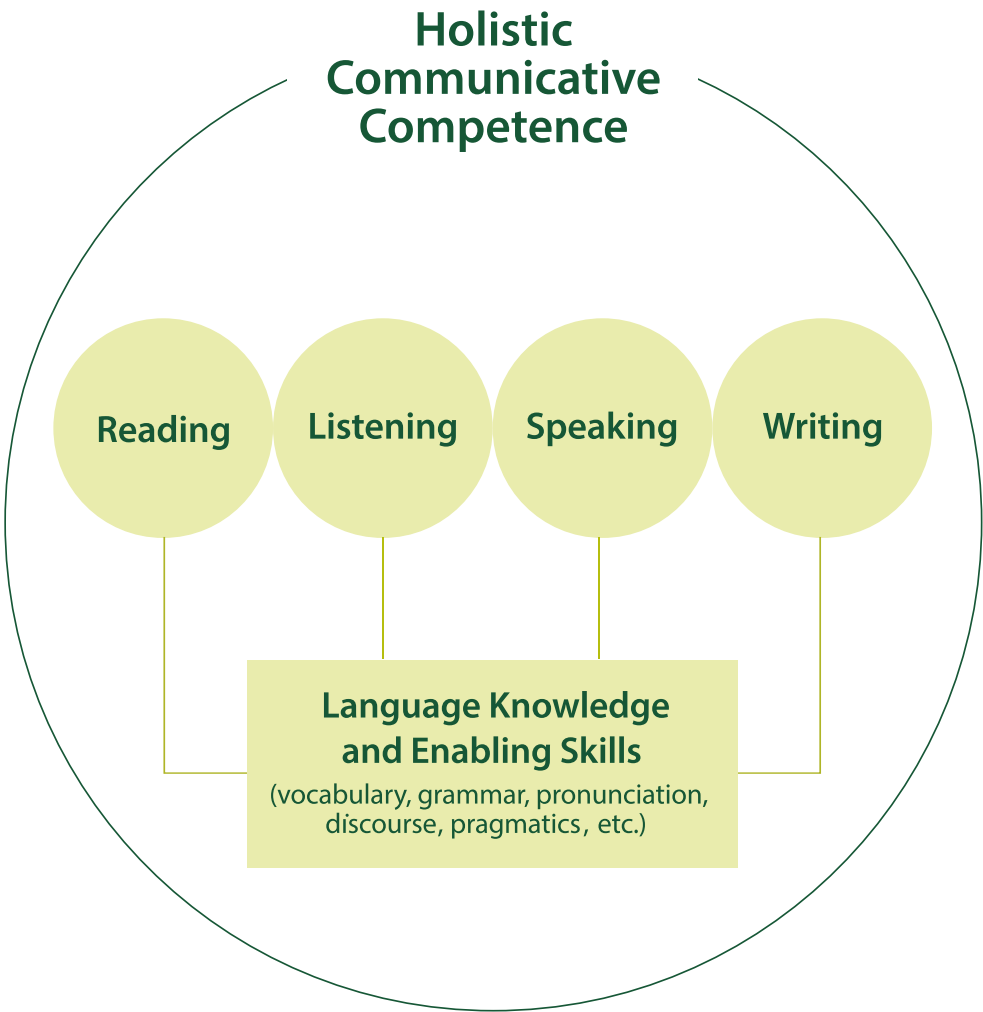
One of the most meaningful ways that researchers have found to summarize the different uses of language that constitute communicative competence is the “four-skills” approach. In this approach, reading, listening, speaking and writing are the four essential language skills that comprise one’s ability to communicate across the different modalities (i.e., modes of communication) in which language is used.

As shown in the diagram below, the four skills are related but distinct.



*What does the
“four-skills
approach” mean?*

The TOEIC Program and the development of holistic communicative competence



Reading and Listening are receptive skills that enable one to construct meaning from language seen and heard.

Speaking and Writing are productive skills that involve creating a message for an audience.

Listening and Speaking are also related as they involve the spoken form of language (speech) and reading and writing are related as they involve the written form of language (text).

The four communicative language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) also share an underlying foundation of language knowledge and enabling skills (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, discourse¹ and pragmatics²).

¹ Discourse means the ways in which words and sentences are put together to create a coherent spoken or written text.

² Pragmatics means the ways in which language is used in a particular situation or context or with a particular audience.

Communicative tasks require the combination of language knowledge, enabling skills and communicative skills

This underlying foundation of “language knowledge and enabling skills” is utilized together with each “communicative language skill,” and it is their combination that influences how well someone performs any particular communicative task.

In the real world, most communicative tasks involve a combination of language knowledge, enabling skills and communicative skills.

When we assess a particular skill area, we are measuring the ability of the test taker to apply this combination of “knowledge and enabling skills” and “communicative language skills” in performing and accomplishing communication tasks in the particular modality.

For example, when using the TOEIC Speaking test to assess learners, test users are interested in understanding test-takers’ abilities to (a) apply their knowledge and enabling skills (e.g., knowledge of vocabulary and grammar; abilities to pronounce intelligibly or construct a pragmatically or discursively appropriate text) and to (b) utilize their communicative language skills (e.g., ability to describe something, ability to respond to questions, ability to express an opinion) simultaneously in performing speaking tasks.

As can be inferred from the diagram, each test of a given skill in the TOEIC Program tests taps into both the language knowledge and enabling skills of the test taker as well as the ability to communicate effectively using a particular skill.

The TOEIC Program tests provide evaluation(s) of four skills independently

The TOEIC Program tests assess all four English language skills independently and provide scores for each skill. Scores are reported on each skill to meet the needs of test users who may focus on particular skills.

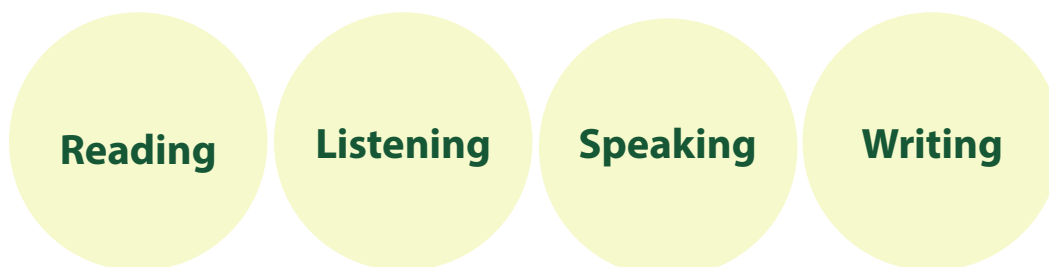
For example, some work tasks or job types may require English proficiency in only one or a subset of the four language skills, and employers may mainly use test scores of particular skills needed for the given job when they select candidates.

Testing and reporting scores on each skill also enables language learners and teachers to understand the learner's areas of strength in communicating in English as well as identify areas in need of further development.

Both the TOEIC and the TOEIC Bridge tests offer the possibility of testing the four skills independently, as you can see in the diagram below. While testing the individual skills can be important for specific workplace or English learning settings, in many cases, we believe that language test users are primarily interested in an assessment of overall communicative competence.

Four-skills assessment provides the optimal evaluation of holistic communicative competence and is more powerful than the sum of its parts.

Each skill is related but distinct, so measuring each of all four skills independently contributes to adding unique information about communicative competence, providing an evaluation of the holistic communicative competence and improving our evaluation of the underlying language knowledge and enabling skills.



The TOEIC Program and the development of holistic communicative competence



Learners with balanced profiles across four skills tend to perform better

Depending on the purpose and needs, assessing one or a subset of the four language skills of English may be practical. However, it is also important for language learners and teachers to focus on the development of overall or holistic communicative competence in English.

In general, learners with balanced profiles across the four skills perform better in English-medium communication environments than learners with unbalanced profiles (e.g., those with higher receptive skills than productive skills) (Powers, 2013).

Thus, relying only on the TOEIC Listening and Reading test, for example, to understand learners' overall communicative competence may not be as useful as testing all four skills; that is, in some cases test takers who may have obtained high scores on the TOEIC Listening and Reading test may have less developed productive skills.

Rather, where the goal is to understand learners' holistic communicative competence, it is strongly recommended to use a comprehensive assessment of all four English language skills such as the TOEIC Program tests provide.

There are several important reasons why the TOEIC Program tests promote the evaluation of a holistic overall communicative competence by measuring all four English language skills.

Real-life communication tasks tap into multiple skills simultaneously

In general, it is the overall ability to communicate in English, not the specific individual skills per se, that is a critical competence in most workplace settings and is of most interest to many users of the TOEIC Program tests.

Communicative competence is fundamentally about the integrated use of language across modalities, and real-life communication tasks generally tap into more than one skill simultaneously.

For example, if a test user wants to select candidates who can successfully present in English in business meetings, measuring the candidates' speaking skill seems necessary and appropriate.

However, successfully performing this speaking task typically goes beyond having sufficient speaking skills and also involves having sufficient reading skills to have read and understood relevant background information and listening skills to understand questions from the audience.

Thus, measuring only one or fewer than four skills while excluding others may not provide adequate information about test takers' communicative competence.

It is important to note that this is applicable for test takers across all proficiency levels, even beginning language learners.

For example, many of the communicative tasks in the TOEIC Bridge tests are designed to effectively elicit performance from beginning language learners so that they can fully demonstrate their current skills.

Although beginning learners may have limited speaking and writing skills, it is still important to measure their abilities in these skills in addition to receptive skills (i.e., listening and reading) when test users want information about test-takers' overall communicative competence.

While the TOEIC Program tests individually focus in depth on each skill and provide useful information about test-takers' proficiency in that particular skill, using measures of all four skills will allow for a more complete assessment of test takers' ability to engage in effective communication in English, as is the purpose of using the TOEIC Program tests for many test users.

Utilizing the results of related skill areas can provide a more precise evaluation of a test taker's skills

Additionally, ETS research has shown that a more accurate estimate of test takers' skills in any specific area can be attained by testing skills not only in that area but in related areas as well (Powers & Powers, 2015).

In other words, even if a test user is interested in assessing candidates' speaking proficiency, incorporating information about related skills (e.g., listening, reading, writing) can provide a better evaluation of the candidates' speaking proficiency.

Because the four skills of language ability are intertwined and similar aspects of language knowledge and enabling skills underlie performance across the four skills, a measure of ability in a related skill (e.g., listening, reading and writing proficiency) can add depth, nuance and accuracy to the evaluation of the target ability (e.g., speaking proficiency) when used in conjunction with a measure of the target ability.

For example, a test taker who tested all four skills and found that their scores are relatively high on the reading test and writing test but lower on the listening test and speaking test would know that they should focus on improving their oral English skills.

Conversely, a test taker who scored high on the listening test and reading test but lower on the speaking test and writing test would know they should focus more on productive language use.

Furthermore, as the four skills are intertwined and depend on shared kinds of underlying language knowledge and enabling skills, focusing on a specific type of knowledge such as vocabulary when interpreting the score descriptors of each of the four skills can provide an overall picture of the use of vocabulary knowledge and detect which area to improve when learning vocabulary.

For example, as described in the case below, a test taker might find "can understand medium-level vocabulary" in the score descriptor of the TOEIC Reading section that applied to their score band, while the band score descriptor of the TOEIC Speaking test indicates "limited vocabulary."

So the test taker may think, "Okay, I have a medium level of vocabulary knowledge but need to practice using different kinds of words for speaking." Thus, multiple measures complement one another in terms of their ability to predict the degree to which test takers are able to perform everyday language tasks and what aspects of language might need additional attention and development.

TOEIC Reading Score Descriptor Scale Score 350

Test takers who score around 350 typically have the following strengths:

- They can infer the central idea and purpose of a written text, and they can make inferences about details.
- They can read for meaning. They can understand factual information, even when it is paraphrased.
- They can connect information across a small area within a text, even when the vocabulary and grammar of the text are difficult.
- **They can understand medium-level vocabulary. They can sometimes understand difficult vocabulary in context, unusual meanings of common words, and idiomatic usage.**
- They can understand rule-based grammatical structures. They can also understand difficult, complex, and uncommon grammatical constructions.

TOEIC Speaking Score Descriptor Scale Score 110-120

Typically, test takers at level 5 have limited success at expressing an opinion or responding to a complicated request. Responses include problems such as:

- language that is inaccurate, vague, or repetitive
- minimal or no awareness of audience
- long pauses and frequent hesitations
- limited expression of ideas and connections between ideas
- **limited vocabulary**

Most of the time, test takers at level 5 can answer questions and give basic information. However, sometimes their responses are difficult to understand or interpret.

When reading aloud, test takers at level 5 are generally intelligible. However, when creating language, their pronunciation, intonation, and stress may be inconsistent.

Four skills need to be measured separately as the correlations among them are not “perfect”

Although the four skills of communicative competence are related and the measurement of one skill may at least provide indirect evidence of test takers’ ability in other skills, they are still distinct and need to be measured separately.

As already described in this section, researchers are generally in agreement that there are multiple components to language ability and that specific abilities are unique to each of the four skills.

By analyzing data from more than 12,000 TOEIC test takers, of whom about 7,500 took all four measures of the TOEIC tests, researchers at ETS found that there is a moderate relationship among the four measures of listening, reading, speaking and writing, but not a perfect relationship (Liao et al., 2010). Thus, this suggests that each test adds important information about communicative competence.

Correlation among the TOEIC Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing Scores

	Listening Score	Reading Score	Speaking Score	Writing Score
Listening Score	1.00			
Reading Score	.76	1.00		
Speaking Score	.66	.57	1.00	
Writing Score	.59	.61	.62	1.00

Testing conveys an important message about **what** is taught and learned and **how** it is taught and learned

There are also potential societal and educational consequences to consider in the message being sent about English learning to students and the workforce of today and the future.

The language skills evaluated in high-stakes testing (e.g., testing for hiring, certification, admission, or graduation purposes), may become the focus of teaching and learning. Students and teachers may increasingly focus on the language knowledge and skills that matter most in high-stakes tests, neglecting important aspects of language learning and failing to develop overall communicative competence.

This phenomenon, known as the “washback” of testing on teaching and learning, can be positive if testing reinforces an appropriate model for teaching and learning (e.g., developing all four skills of communicative competence) and when teachers know how to make appropriate use of the information provided by a test.

Washback can be negative when testing influences teachers and students to focus on a narrower subset of language knowledge and skills which does not enable learners to develop their holistic communicative competence.

Selective testing can result in greater attention to some language skills than others, resulting in uneven profiles of proficiency in the four communication skills. For example, testing only listening and reading at the cost of other language skills may lead to less emphasis on speaking and writing, which may eventually result in lower skill levels in these areas.

Effective teaching and learning through emphasizing the complementary nature of four skills

Furthermore, in the long run, learners who test fewer than four skills may not enjoy the benefits they might have experienced if they tested all four skills. That is, the rate of language learning can be accelerated in a four-skills approach, as it is driven by the complementary nature of the skills which share the same underlying language knowledge and enabling skills (Powers, 2013).

For example, a test taker who practiced pronunciation for a speaking test may find this activity has also contributed to improvement in their listening skill. As another example, a test-taker who takes a four-skills approach while learning new vocabulary may notice that they need to learn the broad aspects of a word (e.g., part of speech, sound, pronunciation, spelling, pragmatic and discourse features) to go beyond understanding a definition of a word to using it effectively in communication.

By taking a four-skills approach a test taker can see developments in one skill reinforce developments in other communicative skills as well as developments in their underlying language knowledge and enabling skills.

Ultimately, it's beneficial to learners to develop and test all four skills with the TOEIC Program tests as they will likely experience more positive washback than those who prepare to test less than four skills.

By doing so, teachers and learners can fully utilize the information the TOEIC and TOEIC Bridge tests provide about learners' overall, holistic communicative competence and skill-specific development when making decisions for selection, monitoring learners, providing feedback and instructional guidance and making improvements in programs.

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