

Tips and Tricks for Answering the TOEFL Test in Listening Skills for Students of SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar

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Article Info

Article history:

Received May 23, 2025

Revised June 17, 2025

Accepted July 6, 2025

Keywords:

TOEFL, Listening Skill,
Socialization

ABSTRACT

This community service program (PkM) was conducted on May 3, 2025, at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar. The activity targeted Grade 11 students in the science program (IPA 1). The main goal was to introduce the students to the concept of TOEFL, explain its importance, and especially focus on the Listening Section. Many students in high schools are still unfamiliar with TOEFL, even though this test is important for those who want to study abroad or apply for scholarships. We designed this program as a three-hour session with a focus on listening skills. We did not use pre-tests or post-tests, but instead we gave one test at the end to check the students' understanding. The activity had three parts: first, a presentation about what TOEFL is, why it is important, and what the Listening Section looks like. Second, we explained the strategies and tips to answer listening questions correctly. Third, we played audio recordings, discussed the questions with the students, and gave them practical advice on how to answer the questions. The result of this activity was very positive. The students became more aware of TOEFL and felt more confident about facing the Listening Section. Even though the activity was only for one day, the students actively participated and understood the basic techniques for listening comprehension. In conclusion, this program was effective in helping students understand and practice TOEFL listening strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

This community service program successfully introduced TOEFL and the Listening section to grade XI IPA 1 students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar. The main objective of this activity was to improve students' understanding of what TOEFL is, why this test is important for their academic and professional future, and how to face the Listening section effectively.

English is now globally recognized as a lingua franca, playing an important role in education, international business, and the fields of science and technology (Crystal, 2012, p. 4). Therefore, mastery of English is an urgent need for the young generation of Indonesia to be able to compete and access opportunities at the global level.

Through a one and a half hour socialization session, students gained an understanding of:

- The basic format of TOEFL and its function as an internationally recognized standardized test in measuring the academic English skills of non-native speakers (ETS, 2023).
- Practical listening strategies, such as focusing on keywords, predicting the content of conversations, and how to answer questions based on audio cues.
- Time management and concentration during listening, which are important aspects of the TOEFL test.

Direct experience listening to authentic TOEFL audio, as well as answering practice questions that reflect the actual test format.

The results of the mini-test given at the end of the session showed that most students were able to absorb important information and began to apply listening strategies effectively. This activity also helped students become more confident and motivated to improve their listening skills independently.

Although English is a compulsory subject in Indonesian schools, many students still have difficulty in practical skills, especially listening and speaking. This is due to minimal exposure to authentic English contexts and a less communicative teaching approach (Nunan, 2019). This difficulty is also seen in the context of TOEFL Listening, which requires the ability to listen at a natural pace, with complex question types and formats that are unfamiliar to most students (Izzah et al, 2019, p. 102).

In this activity, the strategic approach and practical experience proved effective. The use of authentic listening materials and targeted teaching strategies helped students better understand the audio content and reduced their test anxiety (Brown, 2014, p. 213).

Although no pre- and post-tests were conducted to measure progress quantitatively, qualitative feedback from students and teachers indicated that the activity was useful and relevant. Local English teachers also noted increased student motivation and participation after participating in the activity.

METHOD OF IMPLEMENTATION

This program is designed with practical techniques and methods to easily achieve all students when deepening their understanding in the form of definitions, types and examples of TOEFL tests. In this program service, researchers prepare some tips and tricks when working on some TOEFL tests. Researchers focus on materials according to the skills they designed. Hearing skills that contain several points or parts. Researchers implement three phases: preparation, implementation and evaluation. This method used in this PKM is a qualitative descriptive approach focusing on interactive learning and practical applications, particularly when teaching TOEFL hearing strategies and through direct observation in this region.

The researcher conducted this socialization with a strong aim to support and improve students' skills in studying the TOEFL test. This socialization activity will provide a little knowledge about TOEFL that has been carried out by several students of SMA Negeri 1 Pematoangsiantar on May 3, 2025. Several socialization teams (researchers) are Ester Sitorus, Yemima Pangaribuan, Chintya Sinambela, and Silvia Pangaribuan. The number of participants in this socialization activity is 36 students.



Figure 1. Phase in Socialization

Phase 1. Preparation

In the preparation phase, we conducted several main activities:

1. Contacting the school, namely the principal and English teacher to obtain permission and arrange the best time to conduct a socialization session.

2. Preparing a presentation using PowerPoint which explained the material referring to TOEFL, especially focusing on listening tips and tricks. The researcher also selecting authentic TOEFL audio materials and create a mini-test of the topics prepared.
3. Collecting several different examples of tips and tricks points with several TOEFL listening questions (e.g., short conversations, and sentences), and designing strategies to be given to students.
4. Preparing time management, audio equipment (such as speaker and laptop), handouts, and attendance sheets.

Phase 2. Implementation

This stage is the stage of delivering or socializing TOEFL materials to 36 students of class XI-1 of SMA NEGERI 1 Pematangsiantar. This session focuses on what TOEFL is and the importance of TOEFL along with tips and tricks to pass the listening test in particular. The material presented is to increase students' insight in facing academic challenges and other needs.

Phase 3. Evaluation

The third session or phase in this activity is to provide an opportunity for students to practice working on several examples of TOEFL questions from the Listening section. This session provides students with an overview or picture of the TOEFL question format and the systematics of working on it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this community service activity (PkM) are explained according to three stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation. This activity refers to the socialization of TOEFL material, namely the first by introducing what TOEFL is, types, benefits and tips and tricks for answering TOEFL questions. This activity is aimed at students of class XI-1 SMA 1 PEMATANGSIANTAR, as a form of their concern in preparing themselves for higher school levels and even career levels. Overall, this program produced positive results and showed that students' understanding of TOEFL and listening strategies increased.

Table 1. The List of the TOEFL socialization activities

No	TIME	MATERIAL
1.	08:20-08:30	Introducing the socialization team
2.	08:30-09:00	Socialization session : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explain what the TOEFL is, types, and benefits - TOEFL structure (number of questions, duration per question, type and final score points) - Explain the tips and tricks of the first point (draw conclusion about who, what and where) - Explain of the second point (listen for who and what in passive) - Explain of the third point(listen who and what with multiple nouns).
3.	09:00-09:40	
4.	09.40- 09.50	Administering TOEFL test to students Closing, conclusion and documentation with students

Phase 1 – Preparation

Before the event was held, all the event needs were met properly during the preparation stage. To ensure that the event ran smoothly, our team took a number of important actions.

As a first step, we communicated and worked closely with SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar to obtain permission to hold the event. After obtaining approval, we worked closely with the school's

English teacher to obtain permission to use her time in class. She was very helpful in organizing the classroom, scheduling activities, and encouraging student involvement.

We also created an informative and easy-to-understand PowerPoint presentation that included an introduction to the TOEFL. We also selected original audio clips of TOEFL questions, both lectures and conversations, so that students could see firsthand the types of questions they would face.

As practice, we created a mini-test consisting of ten multiple-choice questions formatted according to the TOEFL Listening Section. We also prepared various supporting materials, including listening prompts, answer sheets, handouts, and strategy cards that students could use during the practice.

All preparations went smoothly, all equipment was available on time, and the classroom was quiet and supportive of learning activities.

Phase 2 – Implementation

In the implementation stage, the socialization team divided the activities into three main sessions that were systematically designed to align with the needs and level of understanding of the students. A total of 36 students from class XI IPA 1 of SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar participated in the activity on May 3, 2025. The entire series of activities lasted for one and a half hours and ran smoothly.

The first session began with the delivery of introductory material about TOEFL. The team provided information about the definition of TOEFL, the types of tests available (such as TOEFL iBT and TOEFL ITP), as well as the functions and benefits of this test in the world of education and work, both at home and abroad. In addition, students were introduced to the structure of the TOEFL test which consists of four main skills—Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing. The purpose of this explanation is for students to understand TOEFL as a test that not only functions as an exam, but also as a tool that can help them achieve education and careers around the world.

The second session focused on providing tips and strategies for working on TOEFL questions, especially the listening section. The team delivered important strategies such as recognizing main ideas, detailed information, and understanding the speaker's attitude or intent. The delivery was done interactively, where students were asked to respond and discuss the material presented. To support understanding, several team members provided additional explanations directly to small groups, so that the material could be more easily accepted.

The third session was a TOEFL test practice session. Students were given question sheets designed to resemble the Listening Section format in the original TOEFL test. The audio used was an example of recorded conversations and lectures that had been selectively selected by the team. The goal was for students to be able to experience the test atmosphere firsthand and practice their ability to understand spoken English academically. After the practice took place, a short discussion was held regarding the answers and strategies for working on the questions, as a form of informal evaluation.

Throughout the implementation, this activity was not only one-way, but also encouraged active interaction and reflection from students. Support from the school was very helpful, especially with the availability of projectors and speakers that allowed clear audio delivery to all participants. This activity is an important first step in introducing TOEFL to students while motivating them to develop English language competence as a provision for the future.

A. TOEFL Introduction (definition, function, and types of TOEFL)



Figure 2. The team explains the definition, uses, and types of TOEFL

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is an international English language proficiency test, developed specifically for non-native speakers who wish to continue their studies at English-speaking educational institutions. According to ETS, "The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test to measure the English language ability of non-native speakers wishing to enroll in English-speaking universities" (ETS, 2023).

In the socialization activities carried out, students were introduced to the important role of TOEFL in the world of education, scholarships, and global careers. TOEFL scores are not only the main requirement for entering universities in more than 150 countries, but also a benchmark for English language proficiency recognized by more than 11,000 educational institutions and scholarship providers worldwide.

The explanation also includes the types of TOEFL that have been and are still in use:

1. TOEFL iBT (Internet-Based Test)

This is the most common and current form of TOEFL. It is administered online at an authorized test center and measures four core academic skills:

- Reading
- Listening
- Speaking
- Writing

The TOEFL iBT total score ranges from 0 to 120 points, with each section ranging from 0–30 points. (Sharpe, 2020)

2. TOEFL PBT (Paper-Based Test)

Although now almost completely discontinued, this version was previously administered manually on paper. TOEFL PBT measures ability in:

- Listening Comprehension
- Structure and Written Expression
- Reading Comprehension
- Added with TWE (Test of Written English) as the writing section.

The maximum TOEFL PBT score is 677 points. (Sharpe, 2020)

The team emphasized that English language skills are not just additional competencies, but are a primary need in facing the era of globalization of education and work. Students are invited to understand that TOEFL is an official instrument that can support:

- Access to higher education abroad
- International scholarship requirements
- Preparation for a career in a multinational institution

- Assessment of academic competence and professional communication

Students not only receive material in the form of presentations, but are also involved in direct practice with example questions and mini-test simulations. This aims to provide them with a real picture of the form of questions and strategies for working on the TOEFL.



Figure 3. Explain the first trick, namely drawing conclusions about who, what and where

B. Strategy Explanation

1. Draw Conclusions: Drawing Conclusions about Who, What, and Where

Questions often ask participants to conclude:

- Who is the speaker in the conversation?
- What is being talked about?
- Where is the conversation taking place?

Example:

Dialogue:

(Woman) Can you tell me what assignments I missed when I was absent?

(Man) You missed one homework assignment and a quiz.

(Narrator) Who is the man?

Answer: (C) A teacher.

Tips:

- Listen for indirect clues that provide context.
- Use logical reasoning based on the content of the conversation.

2. Passive vs. Active Sentences: Listen for Who Did and What Was Done

Students need to understand the difference between active and passive sentences, because different sentence forms can have the same meaning.

Example:

Passive: "The documents were sent yesterday."

Active: "She sent the documents yesterday."

If we can identify who is doing the action and what the object is, then we can answer correctly even though the sentence structure changes.

Tips:

- Focus on the actor (subject/agent) and object.
- Don't get caught up in the sentence form—prioritize the core meaning.

3. Multiple Nouns: Distinguishing Actors and Receivers of Actions

If there is more than one noun in a sentence, participants are often confused in determining who is doing the action.

Example:

Dialogue:

(Man): Why is Bill not at work this week?

(Woman): His doctor made him take a week off.

Correct answer: Bill took a vacation because his doctor advised him to (D).

Tips:

- Listen to the main verb in the sentence.
- Identify the actor and recipient of the action.
- Use logic to determine the actual context.



Figure 4. Explanation second skill is Listen for who and what in passive

C. Listening Practice

At the end of the session, we played authentic TOEFL Listening audio—one conversation and one lecture. Students listened carefully and answered multiple-choice questions based on the information they learned from the audio.



Figure 5. Explain third skill is listen for who and what with multiple nouns

After each audio, we discussed the answers together. Each student was asked to provide a reason for their choice, and we helped guide them through critical analysis:

- What makes this choice the most appropriate?
- What words or phrases in the audio helped you determine the answer?
- Were there any traps in the questions that almost fooled you?

Through this process, students learned the thinking patterns required to tackle TOEFL questions. They also became more attentive to listening for important details. Many of them said that this session was the most enjoyable because they were able to practice the strategies they had just learned, while also recognizing and correcting their own mistakes.



Figure 6. Students are given test questions to answer with tips and tricks that have explained

Phase 3 – Evaluation

To close the session, students took a TOEFL-style mini-listening test consisting of 10 questions. This test was designed as an informal evaluation to measure their understanding after the session.

Summary of Mini-Test Results:

- A total of 6 students scored between 15–23, indicating very good understanding.
- 14 students scored 10–13, which is quite good for beginners in TOEFL.
- 16 students were in the range of 6–9, indicating basic understanding but still need additional practice.

Overall, these results can be categorized as quite good, especially considering that most students had never been exposed to TOEFL materials before, and this was their first time listening to the original audio of the TOEFL test.

DISCUSSION

During the implementation of the TOEFL Listening socialization activity, a number of challenges were found. However, various efforts have also been made to overcome them effectively. Discussion of these challenges and solutions is an important reflection to improve the implementation of similar programs in the future.

Challenges in Implementing Activities

1. Limited Implementation Time

The total duration of the socialization activity was only one and a half hours. This time was enough to introduce TOEFL and the Listening section and to conduct a short test at the end of the session. However, this time did not allow for discussion of other sections such as Reading, Speaking, and Writing. In addition, time constraints also hampered the implementation of pre-tests and post-

tests, which are actually important to measure the improvement of students' understanding objectively.

2. Students' Initial Ignorance of TOEFL

Most students have never heard of TOEFL before. They do not understand the form of the test or its purpose. Some students even feel anxious about facing listening exercises because they are worried that they will not be able to understand English with various accents and speeds of native speakers.

3. Difficulty in Listening to TOEFL Listening Material

The TOEFL Listening section includes various forms of academic conversations and lectures that contain vocabulary and idiomatic expressions that are not common to students. Many students have difficulty grasping the information fully during the first listen, mainly due to the speaker's speed of speech and the complexity of the audio content.

4. Insufficient Classroom Conditions

The activity was carried out in a regular classroom that was quite large and not soundproof, so there was noise interference. The audio was only played using one speaker, which made it difficult for students sitting far away to hear clearly. This disrupted their concentration in following the listening exercises.

5. Limited Technology and Resources

Because there were no computers or individual hearing aids available, all students had to listen to the audio simultaneously from one source. This method was less than ideal for developing listening skills because not all students had the same needs and learning speeds.

Steps to Overcome Challenges

1. Careful and Targeted Preparation

Before the activity began, the material was selectively selected to suit the students' English proficiency level. The explanations were simplified and supplemented with clear examples regarding TOEFL and its urgency, to increase student motivation.

2. Active and Interactive Teaching Methods

We avoided a one-way approach. Instead, students were invited to discuss, ask questions, and work in groups to discuss the audio content. This approach helps reduce anxiety and increases student engagement and understanding.

3. Replay and In-depth Explanation

The audio is played more than once if necessary. After each playback, we pause to discuss the questions and explain the answers in detail. This repetition helps students grasp previously missed information and reinforces their understanding.

4. Audio Device Optimization

The volume and position of the speakers are adjusted so that the sound is clearly audible throughout the room. We ensure that each student can hear the audio well enough to follow the activity optimally.

5. Support from the School English Teacher

The English teacher plays an active role in maintaining order during the activity, motivating students to stay focused, and helping to explain instructions or questions that students do not understand.

6. Psychological Support and Positive Motivation

We continue to provide encouragement to students to see this activity as a first step in understanding TOEFL. It is also emphasized that listening skills will improve with practice, and mistakes are a natural part of the learning process.

Despite the challenges, the students' responses were generally very positive. They actively participated, asked good questions, and showed interest in learning more about TOEFL and improving their listening skills. Interactions during activities with students and the results of the mini-test also reflect that some students are able to understand and apply the listening strategies that have been learned, but still need to do TOEFL and English practice questions more often.

CONCLUSION

This community service program successfully introduced TOEFL and the Listening section to grade XI IPA 1 students at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar. The main objective of this activity was to improve students' understanding of what TOEFL is, the importance of this test for their academic and career futures, and how to face the Listening section effectively.

Through a one and a half hour socialization session, students gained an understanding of:

- The basic format of TOEFL and its relevance to further study and international career opportunities.
- Practical listening strategies, such as recognizing keywords, predicting audio content, and answering questions based on instructions from the recording.
- Careful listening techniques and time management when working on the Listening section.
- Direct practice using authentic TOEFL audio and answering example questions that resemble real test conditions.

The results of the mini-test given at the end of the session showed that half students were able to absorb important information and began to apply the listening strategies that had been taught. Students also said that they felt more confident and motivated to continue improving their English listening skills.

Although this activity did not use pre-tests and post-tests to measure quantitative improvement in skills, qualitative feedback from students and English teachers indicated that the program was useful and effective.

Overall, this activity is an important first step in preparing students for the TOEFL. This program bridges the gap between English lessons in class and the demands of international standardized tests, while helping students feel more familiar and comfortable with the TOEFL format.

For future implementation of the program, it is recommended that the activity be carried out with a longer duration and include other TOEFL sections, such as Reading, Speaking, and Writing. Adequate technological support and dividing students into small groups will also increase the effectiveness of learning. Nevertheless, this initial socialization has made a significant contribution to strengthening English education at SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar.

Thank You Note

We would like to sincerely thank SMA Negeri 1 Pematangsiantar for their kind support and cooperation during the implementation of this socialization activity. Special thanks go to the school principal and the English teacher for their assistance in organizing the session and encouraging students' participation.

We appreciate the enthusiasm and engagement shown by the Grade 11 IPA 1 students. Their active involvement and positive attitudes contributed greatly to the success of this program.

We are also grateful to our institution for providing the opportunity and resources to conduct this community service program. The teamwork, dedication, and preparation by all team members made this activity possible.

Lastly, we hope this program can be a foundation for continued efforts in improving English proficiency and TOEFL readiness among high school students in our region.

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