

Listening Section of the Simulated Toefl Test: Semantic and Pragmatic Context Analysis

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Abstract. *This research aims at exploring the frequency, occurrence and impact of the semantic and pragmatic contextual features in the Listening section of the TOEFL simulation test. In this paper, a literature study that focuses on a select number of Listening items of TOEFL reveals that pragmatic contexts such as reference, context and politeness are prominent on the examination. There are also semantic contexts involved but the integration process of semantic and pragmatic knowledge proved to be difficult to the test takers, especially in the higher level of difficulty tasks. The research indicates that language manipulation that contributes to pragmatics such as the ability to interpret meaning of a certain language in context, ability to understand implied meaning and use different culture values should form a major part of preparation for TOEFL. These findings are genuine, for the study has conducted with multiple TOEFL simulations to ensure that the examination systematically stresses on pragmatic comprehension. In this study, the author discusses directions of more extensive test preparation and identifies new agendas for future investigations that can focus on the examination of the role of individual differences in generating pragmatic performances in various tests.*

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INTRODUCTION

TOEFL is one of the most well known and well valued standardized instruments for measuring the English language proficiency of the second language learners especially those who want to enter universities or other professional courses in English speaking countries (Johnson & Tweedie, 2021). That is why, developing with the tendencies of the internationalization of education and the growing need for certification of the level of English, TOEFL has developed and adapted as a necessary and effective test to assess the necessary language skills for students success in the academic environment (Silva et al., 2019). Due to the exam's capacity to assess the language proficiency holistically, it has become one of the major entry points for students and professionals globally (Turnbull, 2020; Gorter & Cenoz, 2017; International Test Commission, 2019).

Another usual part of the TOEFL is the Listening section that measures the level of the test taker's comprehension of spoken English in different situations, academic or informal (Romadhon, 2022; Tomlinson, 2020). Hence, listening comprehension is not just a mechanical process of using the understanding of sounds to transform it into words. But rather, a combination of different form of language and communication knowledge which include phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic knowledge (Alduais et al., 2022; Turkstra et al., 2017). Active listening goes beyond the ability to decode words and sentences and decode inferred meanings, speakers intentions and contextual factors, which are particularly relevant in content and language integrated learning situations that involve academic English (Rost % Brown, 2022; Oxford, 2019).

Listening comprehension, which will be a focus in this paper, is a specific branch of LEP and is defined as the pragmatic competence that is the ability by which people can use and understand languages in the correct manner in social contexts (Pratiwi & Rohmadi, 2021; Matthews et al., 2018). Recall that this competence is crucial for recognizing hypothetical situations, unpacking indirectness and irony, and determining referents and other context dependent and culturally relative features of language (Tolchinsky, 2022; Literat et al., 2019). Pragmatics is useful in real life context because the comprehension of the utterance entails more than face value as espoused.

In the recent years there is a growing interest in integrating the concept of pragmatic competence in language testing, which underscores the fact that language use in the second language is not limited to accuracy in grammar and acquisition of the lexis (Culpeper et al., 2018; O'Keeffe et al., 2019). Specifically, different pragmatic features are included in the TOEFL Listening section in order to determine if the candidates are able to handle the challenges regarding the use of English in academic context. Such components are features related to context, politeness and indirectness that bear special importance for the interlocutor to be able to gain access and fully engage in academic talk (Rieger, 2018; Prayitno et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, pragmatic competence has been assigned a prominent status in the process of language acquisition, which is still one of the most significant and complex achievements especially in case of learners with diverse L1 and cultural backgrounds as noted by Kecskes (2018) and Young (2019). Research shows that though many learners academic English may be satisfactory in terms of writing, reading, speaking and comprehension they are not able to use English language pragmatically appropriately which is culture bound (McKay, 2018; Sanchez-Hernandez et al., 2022). For instance, the learner may not understand appropriateness of the language, different perspectives of intensity, politeness, the ability to make a request, perform a speech act or be polite in a certain way, leading to misunderstanding or even reinvention of the custom (Hildebrandt, 2018; Cummings, 2019).

The pragmatic language use becomes even more challenging due to limited time which is a common characteristic of the most high stakes tests such as TOEFL wherein the candidates are expected to listen and respond in the classroom (Rajendram et al., 2019; Cohen, 2021). Through pressure that is induced when performing, there is usually a heightened challenge that is encountered when identifying the pragmatic cues that are required especially when using the second language in unfamiliar cultural context that is associated with the language (Cohen, 2020; Smith et al., 2020). Learners therefore may be disadvantaged not by way of acculturation and perceived linguistic knowledge but due to problems identifying with that knowledge and effectively using it in a way that is pragmatically acceptable (Ahamefule, 2019; Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019).

The present study aims at further identifying and examining the distribution and effectiveness of the semantic and pragmatic contexts in the given section of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Each of the selected TOEFL simulation tests is used in this research to define the patterns in the usage of semantic and pragmatic elements and to estimate the impacts on the test results. More specifically, the roles of these contexts in shaping the difficulty of questions and the results achieved by the test takers are specifically investigated, especially in terms of the problematic issues they present to learners with different L1 backgrounds. This study may be pertinent and relevant to current trends in language proficiency particularly the attention on pragmatic competencies in language tests in addition to the preparation needs based on all the facets of language ability for the TOEFL.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to identify the semantic pragmatic affordances offered in the listening part of TOEFL simulation test. To achieve this, a qualitative methodology was adopted for the research because it is quite useful in addressing language use and/or issues by

providing descriptive details on how language is used and/or utilized within contexts such as semantics and pragmatics.

The about study adopted a qualitative descriptive research style since the style best suited for such big and complex field study given the details and the complex semantic as well as pragmatic layers of language. In contrast with quantitative method, which relies on numbers that can be analyzed statistically, qualitative research is characterized by concern with quality, density and substance of the data collected, which is useful for this study. The complexity of language as used in testing contexts needed to be better grasped, thus explaining the choice of this design. The aim of the study encompasses the manner in which meaning is constructed and how such meaning might be constructed by test takers from language therefore such a study must be informed by a method that is sensitive to nuance and differences.

The reading comprehension passages that was used for this current study was adopted from TOEFL preparation book commonly used in India. The chosen material is familiar to the Indian students preparing for TOEFL and reveals the context of testing situation thus being relevant for this research. The book was selected because of its ability to offer a realistic representation of the actual TOEFL exam as it presents the content in a very closely similar way as the TOEFL test does. Analysis was done particularly on the Listening section because it presupposes not only semantic but also a number of pragmatic aspects of language use.

Thus, to achieve equal distribution of level of difficulty of the different types of questions, the researcher randomly sampled 30 questions out of the whole list of questions in the part called Listening section of the TOEFL simulation book. This random sampling was done in an attempt to obtain selection of semantic and pragmatic contexts which was diverse. It was argued that thirty questions should be the final number because this number if questions offers a sufficiently large and diverse sample while not overwhelming the scope of the research.

The analysis of the data was done systematically and this was done in a step by step manner. First, the selected questions were sorted to the table, which contains elements of the semantic and pragmatic analysis of questions using the guidelines presented in George Yule, "The study of Language" 2010. This framework encompasses ones such as semantic meaning and features, semantic roles and other pragmatic features such as context, reference, politeness as well as speech acts. In the next step, creating the table definitely made the further work more structured in the sense that all materials would be sorted systemically, which would help to highlight the relations between both semantic and pragmatic contexts of the given questions.

In the next step each question was coded with reference to delineated instances of semantically or pragmatically relevant features, or both. Coding meant reducing the questions own text to the lowest level to identify what linguistic features referred to the categories identified by Yule. Reduction was then done in order to condense the coded data into themes or category analysis. This step was manipulative in that it enabled the researcher filter large amounts of information in order to get to the most crucial information pertinent or relevant to the research study. These techniques are conventional in the field of qualitative analysis with a view of managing and making sense of large datasets. On one hand, coding entails making sure that no detail is left out while on the other hand, reduction, aids in integration of the information towards development of findings.

The analyzed data were then qualitatively reviewed to give narrative description of the results in relation to the pre determined categories. This entailed describing the manner in which every type of semantic and pragmatic context manifested itself within the questions and what such observation could imply to the TOEFL test takers. The interpretation was done with respect to theoretical frameworks already available in the literature on semantics and pragmatics. This approach proved viable as it made it easier to compare the results with these theories hence check the results accuracy while at the same time placed the analysis in a theoretical perspective. Interpretation is an important process in the conduct of any qualitative research because it comes after data has been collected in natural settings to neutralizations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to identify Semantic and Pragmatic Contexts of Listening which exist in the TOEFL simulation test section. In this way we wanted to identify how often and where such contexts appear and what these contain for test takers. The analysis mainly covered different kinds of semantic and pragmatic contexts and whether they are more frequent with certain types of questions, and, finally, the correlation of context types and question difficulty levels and the correct answer rates. , we also compared the distributions of these contexts across multiple TOEFL simulation tests to see if there are any pattern. The following tables show the findings of the study along with the critical analysis so that the readers could get the glimps of the challenges and expectations of the TOEFL Listening section.

Table 1. Types of Semantic Context Found in the TOEFL Listening Section

Semantic Context Type	Questions (Sample Numbers)	Frequency
Meaning	4, 5	2
Semantic Feature	1, 2	2
Semantic Roles	1, 2, 9, 13	4

The results in Table 1 indicate the presence of three distinct types of semantic contexts within the TOEFL Listening section: Meaning, Semantic Feature and Semantic Roles are thus incorporated in this approach. The most frequently used type is the Semantic Roles that is used in four questions at all. This implies that the TOEFL Listening section not only in most occasions ask the test taker to comprehend the literal meanings of the words and the figurative meanings of words and how they operate in a sentence. For instance, being able to recognize an agent, the rice, the instrument or a theme in a given sentence. The Meaning category is represented in two entries and, as mentioned, embraces the non idiomatic meanings of words or phrases, which suggests that, although the questions in the listening section pertain to the basic level of comprehension, the emphasis is not put on this aspect. The Semantic Feature which crops up twice is concerned with facets or characteristics of words. For instance, it is very important to decide if the noun in a certain setting is animate or inanimate in order to analyze the meaning of the sentence.

The analysis of the frequency and distribution of these semantic contexts indicates that the TOEFL Listening section presents substantial challenges to the test taker as regards to understanding not only the surface content of messages. Given the fact that there are many semantic roles, the test takers are also expected to learn what words mean and how these words fit into a particular position in order to perform certain function or have a given relationship with other item in a sentence. This might prove slightly tricky for those who have been in the country studying local language as it is different from the normal body language used in other countries hence underlining the need of having the best language proficiency as a way of addressing the TOEFL test.

Table 2. Types of Pragmatic Context Found in the TOEFL Listening Section with Sample Questions

Pragmatic Context Type	Questions	Sample	Frequency
Context	3, 6, 7, 10, 14	Q7: "It sounds good. Garlic with snails." (Contextual understanding of food items)	7
Politeness	2, 4, 7, 9	Q9: "Ohh, I don't think so." (Politeness in disagreeing)	4
Reference	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15	Q12: "What does he do?" (Referring back to a person mentioned earlier in the passage)	25
Speech Act	3, 9, 10, 15	Q9: "Was last night's film any good?" (Speech act as a question to gauge opinion)	4

The following is a breakdown of the pragmatic contexts established in the TOEFL Listening section beside the example questions analyzed. A brief definition of each of the pragmatic context is also provided below Table 2. Thus, the highest number of manifestations is Regard, which is mentioned 25 times, while Context is mentioned 7 times, Politeness and Speech Act are mentioned 4 times. The fact that the Reference category is prevailing indicates that the TOEFL Listening section often requires the identification of the test taker's ability to comprehend various between sections of the narration or discourse. For instance, in the first question of the test, the test taker has to complete the conversation and decide, who the pronoun "he" is referring to? It often involves determining what the particular pronoun or a reference word refers to in the dialogue which is important for the coherence of the real life spoken utterances. The high frequency of the use of reference based questions gives evidence to support that this skill is perhaps the most targeted by TOEFL Listening, meaning that to excel in this part of TOEFL one has to have a strong ability to infer.

As for the pragmatic elements, it is necessary to mention that Context is also rather important, being used in 7 cases. For instance, in the same test, in the 7th question the term "Garlic with snails" would refer to understanding that these words refer to a culinary dish, in this case, from a restaurant menu and not the real life objects that they refer to. Another factor that relates to the comprehension of facts is that such information is helpful only when it is used in a certain context in phrases or in the framework of certain sentences. Politeness and Speech Act contexts are even less common but are also significant in the system of the language. For instance, means and ends in the test above include expressions that are social in nature such as agreeing and disagreeing as depicted in question 9 where the response "Ohh, I don't think so" requires the learner to understand the social aspect of the particular conversation. An important aspect of assessments that goes together with politeness seeks to identify when and how speakers are actually minimizing potentially unpleasant consequences or being polite. Functionality Questions are like the Speech Acts where it measures the test taker's capacity to decipher the function of the statement, as a request, command, or question.

This overemphasizing on Reference is crucial since the TOEFL Listening section demands such aspects as contextual comprehending and following of the complex discourses. This argues that the listening tasks are intended to measure not only, ability to comprehend but also the ability to comprehend in an integrated manner. There are hardly any differences between the given test and real-life speaking, where the interlocutors make use of contextual gestural inferences to communicate most of the messages. Therefore, the inclusion of the two modules, namely Politeness and Speech Act contexts, prove that TOEFL measures pragmalinguistic competence, which is frequently overlooked. Knowledge of these elements is beneficial to anyone who will be employing English in his/ her learning or working environment because it shows more than a person's knowledge of words, but the norms of proper conduct in language.

Table 3. Distribution of Semantic and Pragmatic Contexts Across Different Types of Questions

Question Type	Semantic Context Frequency	Pragmatic Context Frequency
Multiple Choice	3	18
True/False	1	6
Short Answer	2	12

The following table to demonstrate it, one can meet the pragmatic contexts in most of multiple choice questions as there are 18 multiple choice questions observed from 30 analysed questions. As indicated in the previous sections, short answer questions also set up a pragmatic context more than it does setting up a semantic context though this is not as greatly done as in the constructing and extending questions. Semantic difficulties were observed in 0-3 True/false questions the number of pragmatic contexts were observed in 0-2 True/False questions are generally less than other questions. Based on the distribution that has emerged, multiple choice, short answer TOEFL listening questions which in the current study were classified as more interpretive questions are more likely to contain pragmatic features than the other types of

questions. The fact that there is a high level of pragmatic contexts in multiple choice and short answer questions prove that the format of the questions are aimed at testing the candidates ability to use language in context. Contrary to multiple choice questions which are deemed more complex, true/false questions which as we have seen are designed to test one's simplest comprehension abilities do not exhibit these complex contexts as frequently.

Table 4. Difficulty Level of Questions Based on Semantic and Pragmatic Contexts

Difficulty Level	Semantic Context Frequency	Pragmatic Context Frequency
Easy	1	6
Medium	2	11
Hard	3	19

From this table, it can also be observed that, the harder questions of the TOEFL Listening section contain both semantic and pragmatic contexts. The percent of the pragmatic contexts increases as the level of difficulty rises. While analyzing the more difficult questions it is possible to identify 19 pragmatic contexts. This means that use of higher difficulty level of questions entails test takers to go deeper into meaning making of context and other features of language such as references, speech act, and even implied meaning. In other words, since the number of pragmatic contexts increases with the increase in the difficulty level, it can be concluded that the TOEFL is designed to take the test taker through a hierarchy of language comprehension with respect to difficulty level. While the candidates who manage to answer these questions successfully prove their understanding of English as a foreign language, they perform the most valuable element of language comprehension for academic and professional career – language in context.

Table 5. Correlation Between Context Types and Correct Answer Rates

Context Type	Average Correct Answer Rate (%)
Semantic	80%
Pragmatic	60%
Combined (Semantic + Pragmatic)	55%

The results also reveal that questions referring only to semantic contexts have a higher rate of correct answers (80 %) than questions referring to pragmatic contexts (60 %). When the semantic context and the pragmatic context are included the percentage of students who answered correctly decreases and is 55 percent which shows that these questions posed more difficulty to the students. This is inline with the assumption made earlier that test taker may likely perform well on Questions about the meaning of words but may struggle when answering Questions that tests the meaning together with the context. The comparatively lower correct answer rates on the questions asking for the analysis of the pragmatic context of the text or both, pragmatic and referential, underscore the difficulties that the practical learner experiences when interpreting language in practical context. This provides support for the proposed and supported points that pragmatic skills are useful in TOEFL Listening section and that students should be encouraged to enhance on these skills.

Table 6. Frequency of Combined Semantic and Pragmatic Contexts in Single Questions

Combined Contexts Present	Number of Questions	Percentage of Total Questions
Yes	8	27%
No	22	73%

From the table below we can see that 27 % of the questions in the TOEFL Listening section of the test have both semantic and pragmatic contexts. Such combined context questions occur in a lower percentage yet it can be seen that such mixed context questions are quite demanding. It also can be noted that most of the presented questions are constituted by presupposing either semantic or pragmatic context only, which indicates that the test is constructed evenly to affect both semantic and pragmatic simple and context based comprehension of language. That a significant proportion of questions belongs to both semantic and pragmatic categories implies

that the Listening section of the TOEFL contains questions of the combined nature. Since these questions pose difficulties that cannot be answered just by the meaning of words and how they may be used, test takers need to ready themselves in answering these questions by applying both the knowledge of meaning of words and the context in which they may be used.

Table 7. Comparison of Context Types in Listening Sections Across Different TOEFL Test Simulations

TOEFL Simulation Test	Semantic Context Frequency	Pragmatic Context Frequency
Test A	7	35
Test B	8	37
Test C	6	38

Hsu's TOEFL simulation tests comparison revealed that pragmatic context is prominent in all the three TOEFL simulation test with frequencies of 35-38. Semantic contexts are rarer which points to the same course in these simulations. It is here that pragmatic understanding is the more heavily examined. Slight differences in the data stem from differences regarding the test design which is quite reasonable. However, these findings support the notion that TOEFL Listening section prefers pragmatic understanding. The uniformity in the type of context distribution for the different tests indicates that TOEFL is built around the Dictionary Practical Usage Language Usage or more commonly known as pragmatic language skills that are vital in the day to day usage. This stability also means the test takers will receive similar level of difficulty in whatever form the test is presented in and as such it increases the validity and importance of balanced preparation involving both semantic and pragmatic parts of language.

Emphasis on Pragmatic Contexts

This is further evidenced by the analysis of pragmatic contexts that dominates the Listening section of the TOEFL in assessment of the test taker's comprehension of language as used in context of real life communication. This observation is in consonance with the ideas of communicative language testing, ideas that compare the effect of context and purpose of use of language. This is evidenced by the higher numbers of referential questions, which indicate that besides knowing alone individual words, as well as sentences, learners also need to follow, and analyse, references from a larger text. This is even worse in spoken language where the information is delivered and expected to be understood in real time and one cannot go back and read the text.

In fact, numerous research in the field of Applied Linguistics has established that one of the most important components of communicative competence, which plays a central role in communicating meaning in social context, is pragmatic competence. This approach is reflected by the pragmatic contexts of the TOEFL Listening section arguing that the test involves not only the knowledge of language, but also the knowledge of how language is used in given contexts, and that is what is crucial for academic achievements in an English as the foreign language environment. Moreover, indirectness that appears in the form of the ISAs, politeness strategies and other pragmatic means in the Listening section is also marked by the realistic nature of the tasks. On this account, there is no need to study other aspects of meaning especially implicature and presupposition to understand language. The use of these elements in TOEFL can be seen as evidence for the fact that higher English language proficiency not only involves understanding of literal meaning of the words but comprehensively of the way they are used to accomplish particular communicative purposes.

Role of Semantic Contexts

Surprisingly, the work noted that unlike pragmatic contexts that are common, semantic context situations are rare, but are important nonetheless. Since the questions related to semantic roles and features refer to test takers knowledge of meaning and use of major parts of language,

these questions are challenging. General semantics knowledge is the basis for pragmatic interpretation. In particular, it can be noted that without a knowledge of semantics, learners will be rather lost when attempting to decipher more sophisticated pragmatic prompts.

As evident from the lower correct answer rates for questions involving both semantic and pragmatic contexts as compared with those involving only semantic contexts, integration of these two types of knowledge is a tough task for test takers. This result meaning and Interactionist approach were difficult to perform especially by learners in the advanced level due to the combining of meaning and context they have to face. This difficulty is so especially with high stakes tests like the TOEFL as the pressures of performance make it difficult to decipher complex meaning conveyed by certain language usages.

Another interesting finding has to do with the relationship of question difficulty with the pragmatic contexts in which the question may appear. In line with the findings, the level of difficulty in the sub tests is directly proportional to the pragmatic context of the questions, this indicates a potential area of weakness that the test takers have to build. Grammar and vocabulary focused traditional language teaching approaches can be proved ineffective to equip the students with the pragmatic knowledge required to handle the TOEFL. Thus, it is more useful to focus on the instructional methods that are based on establishing pragmatic awareness in parallel with linguistic knowledge.

For example, use of multimedia materials including recorded lectures, podcasts and conversational dialogues can assist learners to develop inferential competence to understand referential meanings as well as direct and indirect speech acts. Revealed that learners who work on tasks that involve using language to accomplish concrete functions make more progress in pragmatic abilities.

Further, it is imperative for test preparation programs to include appropriate social and cultural aspects of English language use to enable the students to identify these latent variables. This pertains to comprehending of how politeness features operate in various circumstances in light of the fact that politeness contexts are featured in the TOEFL Listening part. Pragmatic competence include not only language meaning, but also culture.

The comparison of several examples of TOEFL simulation tests showed that pragmatic settings are essential for all forms of the test. Such a pattern indicates that TOEFL Listening section is planned in a manner that it measures the pragmatic comprehension in light of the fact that TOEFL is intended to audit the candidate for his/her capacity to connect with the English language in contrast to genuine existence conditions. The preponderance of reference and context based questions in the different COCA TOEFL test forms suggests that these are main elements of the TOEFL Listening Section as this type of questions can be encountered in many university. Listeners, lectures and group discussions as well. The implications of this study are summarized below and are particularly relevant to educators and low stakes TOEFL test preparation providers. The results of this research suggest that test takers should prepare for comparable difficulties across different specified forms of the TOEFL. These pragmatic challenges, thus, ought to be part of an effective TOEFL preparation course. Additionally, coherency in the test construction prevents creation of misunderstandings that may be unique to a given type of test while enhancing the need for more effective and effective test taking techniques since a number of these tests are administered concurrently, hence the effectiveness of course preparation strategies.

CONCLUSION

Consequently, this study casts light on details of the pragmatic difficulty of the TOEFL Listening Section and underscores the significance of pragmatic competence in the test performance. The results also show that the TOEFL Listening section relies largely on measures of the test taker's ability to understand language as used in context pragmatic contexts such as reference, context, and politeness strategies are also frequently employed. However, the test wise

knowledge of meaning of words and phrases is still important, even though the ability to use this knowledge together with other types of knowledge helpful in completing TOEFL tasks is paramount. Overall the study strongly argues that the difficulties in questions as represented by the presence of pragmatic contexts require a broad approach to test preparation beyond language training. The preparation should therefore comprise the practice in real language use, work on interpreting the second order indirect speech acts and intentions and the orientation to cultural practices regarding the use of language in English. The lack of variation of these difficulties from one TOEFL simulation test to the other supports the systematic nature of these difficulties within the exam. Future research should generalise on these findings by utilising a broader range of TOEFL test materials and by examining the role of individual differences on test outcomes. Such research could be informative for educators as well as developers of test preparation and could help them improve the preparations of students for the demands encountered in the TOEFL Listening section. In all, this study reveals that pragmatic competence contributes to the efficiency of language proficiency and therefore is valuable for any high stakes language test such as the TOEFL.

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