

Tips And Techniques To Mastering How To Answer The Toefl Listening Section For Students Of Sma Negeri 3 Pematangsiantar

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ABSTRACT

This community service activity was conducted on July 17, 2025, at SMA Negeri 3 Pematangsiantar and was specifically aimed at Grade 12 students in the science stream (IPA 1). The objective was to introduce students to the format and strategies of the TOEFL test, with a particular focus on the Listening Section. As many students are still unfamiliar with the structure and techniques of answering TOEFL questions, this session was designed to help them understand the test components and improve their listening skills. The program consisted of three main parts: an explanation of the TOEFL and its importance, an in-depth discussion of tips and techniques to answer the Listening Section effectively, and a practice session using authentic TOEFL audio materials. Even though the activity was conducted in a limited time, students actively participated and demonstrated increased awareness and confidence in facing TOEFL listening questions. By the end of the session, students were able to apply basic listening strategies such as identifying main ideas, understanding passive voice, and recognizing contextual cues. Overall, this program contributed positively to enhancing students' readiness for TOEFL, especially in listening comprehension.

Keywords: TOEFL, Listening Section, Strategies, High School Students, Language Skills

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, English has become a fundamental requirement for academic advancement and professional success. As a global lingua franca, English plays a pivotal role in

education, science, and international communication (Crystal, 2012; Sinambela et al., 2023; Saragih et al., 2025). One widely accepted standard to assess English proficiency for non-native speakers is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). TOEFL evaluates the ability to understand and use English in academic contexts and is often required for admission to universities abroad and for scholarship applications (Herman et al., 2025).

Despite the increasing importance of TOEFL, many Indonesian high school students still lack familiarity with the structure, purpose, and effective strategies for answering the test, particularly in the Listening Section. According to Rost (2011), listening is one of the most challenging skills to master in language learning, as it requires real-time processing of spoken input, understanding implied meaning, and interpreting various accents and intonations (Damanik et al., 2025). Furthermore, Goh (2000) emphasizes that learners often struggle with listening due to limited exposure to authentic spoken English and cognitive overload during comprehension tasks (Simanjuntak et al., 2025).

At SMA Negeri 3 Pematangsiantar, these challenges are evident among Grade 12 science students who have had little to no exposure to TOEFL-based listening materials. Recognizing this gap, this community service activity was designed to introduce students to the TOEFL Listening Section, provide them with practical strategies to improve their listening comprehension, and build their confidence in facing standardized English assessments.

This program is grounded in the idea that effective listening instruction should include explicit strategy training, exposure to authentic input, and guided practice (Nation & Newton, 2009). During the session, students were introduced to the structure and question types in the TOEFL Listening Section, taught techniques such as identifying main ideas, recognizing distractors, and understanding passive constructions, and given the opportunity to apply these skills in a practice test using real TOEFL audio (Br Pangaribuan et al., 2025).

By integrating expert-based approaches with interactive learning, this program aims to bridge the gap between classroom English instruction and the demands of international English testing. Ultimately, the goal is to empower students with not only knowledge but also the confidence and motivation to pursue opportunities that require strong English listening skills.

2. METHOD OF IMPLEMENTATION

This community service program was carried out using a descriptive qualitative approach, emphasizing interactive learning and direct practice. The activity focused on equipping Grade 12

IPA 1 students at SMA Negeri 3 Pematangsiantar with the knowledge and strategies needed to answer questions in the TOEFL Listening Section. The implementation was divided into three main phases: preparation, implementation, and evaluation.

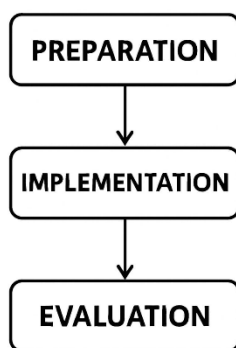


Figure 1. Stages of Method Implementation (Napitu et al., 2025)

Phase 1: Preparation

In the initial stage, the team coordinated with the school and the English teacher to determine an appropriate schedule and prepare all supporting materials. The materials prepared included:

General explanation about TOEFL and its importance,

Focus on the Listening Section: structure, question types, and timing,

The three core strategies (skills) for answering TOEFL Listening questions,

Authentic TOEFL audio (short conversations and short academic lectures),

Practice exercises and a mini-test in multiple-choice format.

Preparations also included designing PowerPoint slides, handouts, and answer sheets, as well as checking the audio equipment to ensure all students could hear the recordings clearly.

Phase 2: Implementation

The implementation session lasted for 120 minutes in the Grade 12 IPA 1 classroom and was divided into three core activities:

1. Introduction to TOEFL and Listening Structure

Students were introduced to TOEFL as an international standardized test and its significance in education and career. Special focus was given to the Listening Section, which consists of short conversations and short academic lectures.

2. Training in Three Key TOEFL Listening Strategies

The core of the training focused on three essential skills, which were practiced directly through sample questions and class discussion:

Skill 1: Focus on the Last Line

Students were taught that key information is often found in the last line of the dialogue. Example questions and discussions were used to help students get used to identifying main ideas at the end of the conversation.

Skill 2: Choose Answers with Synonyms

Students practiced recognizing synonyms in TOEFL questions, since correct answers often contain words with similar meanings to the key words in the audio. This practice helps enhance contextual understanding.

Skill 3: Avoid Similar Sounds

Students were made aware that incorrect answer choices often include words that sound similar but have different meanings. They were trained to recognize and avoid these common traps.

Each strategy was supported with original TOEFL sample questions, group discussions, and reflective feedback. This approach promoted active and student-centered learning.

3. Listening Practice and Class Discussion

Students listened to TOEFL audio materials (short conversations and academic lectures) and answered related practice questions. The answers were then discussed together, with students asked to explain their reasoning. This activity helped strengthen their listening logic, focus, and test-taking techniques.

Phase 3: Evaluation

To close the session, students completed a TOEFL-style mini listening test consisting of 30 multiple-choice questions. This test was designed to evaluate how well the students could apply the three strategies that had been taught.

Observations showed that most students were able to answer the questions with greater confidence and understood the listening strategies more clearly. Feedback from the students also indicated that they felt more prepared and motivated to face the TOEFL after participating in this activity.

3. RESULTS

The results of this community service activity (PkM) are described based on three stages: preparation, implementation, and evaluation. This activity focused on the introduction and training of TOEFL Listening strategies, especially targeting students of Grade 12 IPA 1 at SMA Negeri 3 Pematangsiantar. The aim was to familiarize students with the concept, structure, and answering strategies of the TOEFL Listening Section using practical techniques.

The activity consisted of presentations, practice sessions, and collaborative discussions centered around three key skills in listening comprehension. Based on observations and student participation, the activity achieved positive outcomes. Students demonstrated greater awareness of TOEFL, improved listening comprehension, and increased confidence in facing similar questions in the future.

The following table outlines the sequence and materials delivered during the TOEFL Listening socialization:

Table 1. List of the activities

No	Time	Material
1.	08.20 – 08.30	Introduction of socialization team, briefing the objective of the activity, and preparing media
2.	08.30 – 09.00	Socialization session: What is TOEFL (definition, benefits, types) - Explanation of Skill 1
3.	09.00-09.40	Explanation of Skill 2 Explanation of Skill 3
4.	09.40- 09.50	Mini-test, closing discussion, and documentation with students



Figure 2. The implementation stage involves delivering the materials, engaging with the audience, and collecting feedback for evaluation.

1. Phase 1 – Preparation

Before the program was carried out, the team conducted a series of preparatory steps to ensure that the session would run smoothly. These steps included coordinating with the English teacher and school administrators of SMA Negeri 3 Pematangsiantar to determine a suitable time and setting for the activity. The teacher was very cooperative and provided support in organizing the classroom and encouraging student participation.

The team also designed a comprehensive presentation using PowerPoint to introduce the basics of the TOEFL, with a specific focus on the Listening Section. We selected and prepared original TOEFL audio materials (both short conversations and academic monologues), along with printed worksheets, mini-tests, and strategy handouts. In addition, we ensured that all necessary technical tools such as speakers, laptops, and visual aids were functioning properly and ready for use in the classroom.

Overall, the preparation phase went smoothly. All materials and equipment were available on time, and the classroom environment was supportive and conducive to learning.

2. Phase 2 – Implementation

In the implementation stage, the socialization team organized the activities into three structured sessions, each tailored to the students' level of understanding and to ensure effective delivery of the material. A total of 35 students from Class XII IPA 1 of SMA Negeri 3 Pematangsiantar

participated in the activity on July 17, 2025. The entire session lasted for 120 minutes and was carried out in an interactive and student-centered manner.

The first session introduced students to the definition, purpose, and types of the TOEFL test. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is an international test designed to evaluate the English proficiency of non-native speakers in academic settings. According to ETS (2023), TOEFL measures how well students can integrate listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills for academic tasks. The benefits of TOEFL include university admissions, scholarship eligibility, and employment opportunities (Brown, 2004; Sharpe, 2020). Students were also introduced to various TOEFL formats: TOEFL iBT, TOEFL ITP, and TOEFL Prediction Test (ETS, 2022; Widodo, 2016).

The second session focused on three essential listening strategies, which were delivered along with detailed explanations and real examples, simulating the actual TOEFL format. The goal was to help students understand not only what the strategy is, but also how to apply it during the test.



Figure 3. Explanation of the meaning, benefits and types of TOEFL.

Skill 1: Focus on the Second Line

In short conversations (Line 2), students will hear a brief exchange between two speakers, followed by a question. The key strategy here is to focus on the second line—usually spoken by the second speaker—because it often contains the direct or implied answer to the question.

How to Apply:

Listen carefully to the second line of the conversation.

Identify key information or actions described by the second speaker.

Match this information to the most accurate answer choice.

Example:

Man: Billy really made a big mistake this time.

Woman: Yes, he forgot to turn in his research paper.

Narrator: What does the woman say about Billy?

Correct answer:

(D) He didn't remember to submit his assignment.

Explanation:

The second line, "he forgot to turn in his research paper," clearly means Billy didn't remember to submit it. Therefore, option D is the best paraphrase of the woman's statement.



Figure 4. Explain about strategy 1 (focus on second line)

Skill 2: Choose Answers with Synonyms

Often, the correct answer will use synonyms (words with similar meanings) instead of repeating exact words from the conversation. Recognizing these synonymous expressions is key to selecting the correct option.

How to Apply:

1. Focus on keywords in the second line of the conversation.
2. Look for answer choices that restate those keywords using different (but similar in meaning) vocabulary.
3. Eliminate choices that are unrelated or use different ideas.

Example:

Woman: Why is Barbara feeling so happy?

Man: She just started working in a real estate agency.

Narrator: What does the man say about Barbara?

Correct answer:

(B) She began a new job.

Explanation:

“Started working” and “began a job” are synonymous. The key to this question is recognizing that started = began and working = job.



Figure 5. Explain about strategy 2 (Choose Answers with Synonyms)

Skill 3: Avoid Similar Sounds

Many incorrect answer choices in the TOEFL Listening section are designed to distract students with similar-sounding words, which may sound like the keywords in the audio but carry entirely different meanings.

How to Apply:

1. Identify the true keywords in the conversation.
2. Be cautious of answer choices that contain words with similar pronunciation but different meanings.
3. Trust your comprehension, not just what “sounds right.”

Example:

Man: Why couldn't Mark come with us?

Woman: He was searching for a new apartment.

Narrator: What does the woman say about Mark?

Correct answer:

(B) He was looking for a place to live.

Explanation:

“Searching for a new apartment” means he was looking for a place to live.

Distractors:

(A) Department office → sounds like apartment

(C) Research project → sounds like searching

(D) Appointment at church → sounds like apartment and search

These options use similar sounds but convey incorrect meanings. Hence, answer (B) is the correct one.



Figure 6. Explain about strategy 3 (Avoid Similar Sounds)

D. Simulation of Listening Questions

After delivering the three core strategies for answering TOEFL Listening Section questions, the program continued with a simulation activity designed to give students the opportunity to apply the techniques they had just learned. This session was crucial in helping students bridge the gap between theory and real test-taking conditions.

According to Gilakjani & Ahmadi (2011), successful listening comprehension involves both bottom-up processing (understanding words and sounds) and top-down processing (interpreting meaning based on context), which together help reduce anxiety and improve focus during testing situations.

In this simulation session, students were presented with a complete set of listening questions that resembled the actual TOEFL Listening Section format. The activity was organized into four key components:

1. Listening Playback

Students listened to a series of audio recordings consisting of short dialogues and brief academic monologues, which were played through speakers or laptop devices. Each recording was played only once to simulate the actual conditions of the TOEFL test, where test takers are not given the opportunity to listen to the audio more than once.

2. Answering Questions

After listening to the audio, students were instructed to answer multiple-choice questions that tested their understanding of the following aspects:

- The main idea of the conversation,
- Specific information or supporting details mentioned by the speaker(s),
- The speaker's attitude or implied meaning,
- Vocabulary usage within context.

All questions were printed on individual worksheets that had been prepared by the team in advance. This format allowed students to work independently and experience a testing atmosphere similar to the real TOEFL environment.

3. Strategy Reinforcement

Throughout the session, the team encouraged students to apply the strategies previously introduced, such as:

- Focusing on the second line in short conversations to identify the most relevant information,
- Looking for synonyms or paraphrased expressions in the answer choices instead of matching exact words,

- Being alert to similar-sounding words that may appear in incorrect options and cause confusion.

This part of the session emphasized the importance of strategic listening, encouraging students to not rely solely on sound recognition but also to consider context and meaning carefully.

4. Discussion and Review

After the simulation activity was completed, a group review session was conducted. The team guided the students through each question, discussed the correct answers, and explained the reasoning behind each one, including why the other choices were considered incorrect. This session also served as a reflective opportunity for students to ask questions and clarify any confusion they had during the practice.



Figure 7. Simulation of listening questions

3. Phase 3 – Evaluation

The final stage of the activity was the evaluation phase, which aimed to assess how well the students had understood and applied the listening strategies presented during the session. This evaluation was conducted informally through a mini TOEFL-style listening test consisting of 30 multiple-choice questions modeled after the actual Listening Section of the TOEFL test.

The questions were based on short audio clips, including brief conversations and academic monologues, similar in format and difficulty to authentic TOEFL materials. Students were asked to listen carefully, apply the three strategies they had just learned, and select the most appropriate

answers. The test was designed not only to measure comprehension but also to encourage students to reflect on how the strategies helped them in processing spoken information.

The results of the mini-test showed a varied range of listening proficiency among the student

- 24 students scored between 15 and 23, reflecting a high level of understanding and strong grasp of the listening strategies taught.
- 10 students achieved scores ranging from 10 to 13, which indicates a solid performance, especially for learners newly exposed to the TOEFL format.
- 1 student scored in the range of 6 to 9, suggesting a developing level of understanding and the need for further practice and guided support.

While the evaluation was not designed as a formal assessment, it served as a valuable indicator of student progress and engagement. The facilitators also conducted a brief discussion after the test to review the answers, clarify difficult points, and address student questions. This reflective approach not only helped consolidate the students' learning but also provided immediate feedback to reinforce the strategies taught earlier.

Overall, the evaluation phase highlighted the effectiveness of the session in introducing key TOEFL Listening techniques and building students' confidence in applying them. The students responded positively, with many expressing interest in continuing to practice and improve their listening skills. The results suggest that even a short, well-structured intervention can have a meaningful impact on student readiness for academic English assessments.



Figure 8. Documentation with students after socialization

4. DISCUSSION

The implementation of this community service activity provided valuable insight into how targeted strategy training and simulation-based practice can enhance students' comprehension in TOEFL Listening. Throughout the program, the combination of direct instruction, active engagement, and guided reflection contributed significantly to students' ability to internalize and apply new listening techniques.

One of the key observations was that most students responded positively to the step-by-step explanation of strategies, particularly the three core techniques: focusing on the second line of dialogue, recognizing synonyms in answer options, and avoiding similar-sounding distractors. These strategies helped simplify the listening process, making the TOEFL Listening section appear

less intimidating. Students showed improved confidence and clarity when responding to listening questions, especially during the simulation phase.

The use of authentic materials—including original TOEFL-style audio and realistic test items—was another strong point of the program. These materials not only introduced students to the actual structure of the TOEFL Listening section but also familiarized them with the audio tempo, speaker accents, and academic vocabulary commonly encountered in the test. This alignment between training and real test conditions supported a smoother learning curve for the students.

Moreover, the interactive format of the activity, which included group discussion, guided analysis of questions, and one-on-one clarification, allowed students to be more actively involved in the learning process. Many students asked thoughtful questions during the review phase, indicating their genuine interest and growing understanding. The atmosphere was collaborative, with peers helping each other interpret questions and refine strategies, fostering a supportive learning environment.

However, the activity was not without its challenges. One limitation was the time constraint—given the richness of the material, some students expressed that they needed more time to fully grasp each strategy and wanted additional practice beyond the 120-minute session. Furthermore, although the speakers used for audio playback were sufficient, a few students seated farther from the source mentioned difficulty hearing clearly at times. This highlights the need for better sound distribution or individual headsets in future sessions.

Despite these minor challenges, the overall impact of the activity was positive. Students demonstrated greater awareness of the TOEFL test format and an improved ability to analyze and respond to listening questions strategically. The results of the mini-test, combined with direct observation and student feedback, suggest that even a short-term intervention—when well-structured and interactive—can significantly enhance test readiness.

This program has not only introduced students to TOEFL Listening strategies but has also planted motivation for further self-practice. Many participants expressed interest in exploring more sections of the TOEFL test, such as Reading and Speaking, in the future. As such, this activity can serve as a foundation for more comprehensive TOEFL preparation programs, whether integrated into the classroom or offered as extracurricular support.

5. CONCLUSION

This community service activity was designed to introduce TOEFL Listening strategies to students of Class XII IPA 1 at SMA Negeri 3 Pematangsiantar through structured training and guided simulation. The program successfully achieved its objectives by equipping students with practical skills and techniques to approach the TOEFL Listening Section more confidently and effectively.

Through the explanation of three key strategies—focusing on the second line, choosing answers with synonyms, and avoiding similar sounds—students were able to understand the logic behind TOEFL listening questions and apply these methods during the simulation. The use of authentic materials and real-time discussion further enhanced their learning experience and helped reduce anxiety toward the test.

Despite limitations such as time constraints and minor technical challenges, the students showed significant engagement, improvement in comprehension, and increased motivation to continue preparing for TOEFL independently. The mini-test results also indicated that the majority of students were able to apply the strategies accurately.

In conclusion, this activity not only served as a foundation for TOEFL listening preparation but also encouraged students to pursue broader English language development. Future programs may expand on this initiative by including other TOEFL sections and providing more intensive training sessions. With the right support and continued practice, students can further develop the language proficiency needed to achieve academic and career success in global contexts.

6. THANK YOU NOTE(ACKNOWLEDGMENT)

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This activity would not have been possible without the teamwork and dedication of every individual involved. We hope that the knowledge and strategies shared during this session will be beneficial for the students as they prepare for further academic challenges, especially in facing English proficiency tests such as TOEFL.

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