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Fiona Hu, instructor, American Language Studies, Rutgers University ”

TOEFL ITP® Assessment Series performance data help Rutgers University programme in American Language Studies diagnose students' learning needs

For instructor Fiona Hu, performance data from the TOEFL ITP® Assessment Series have become an indispensable diagnostic tool for teaching English in the Programme in American Language Studies (PALS) at Rutgers University. Analysing the data in conjunction with students' classroom performance has helped advance her understanding of pedagogy from the theoretical to the practical. "It has transformed my way of thinking," she said.

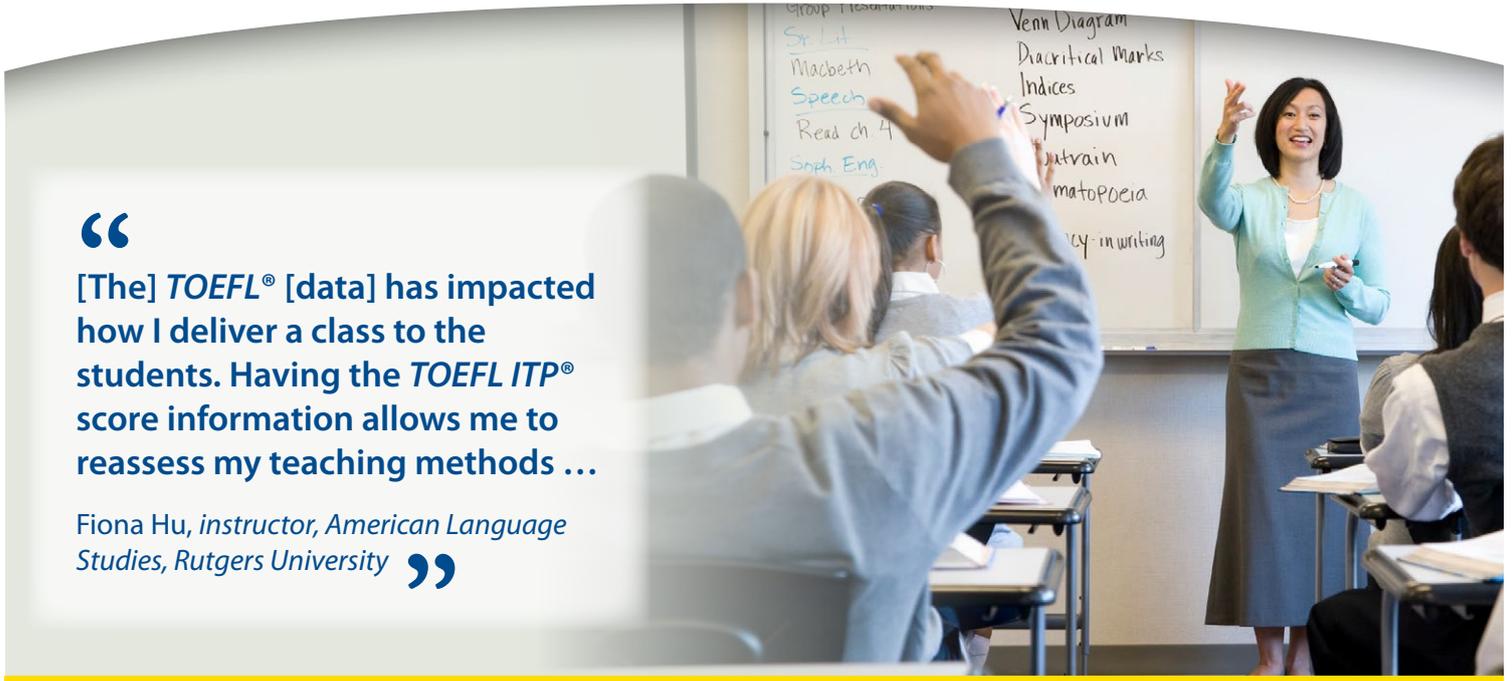
Among the TOEFL ITP® test's strengths is its objective assessment of students' receptive skills (reading and listening), which are harder to assess and remediate than their productive skills (writing and speaking) because they involve processes that occur inside students' minds.

"We, as teachers, have more struggles with teaching reading and listening. When I'm teaching speaking and writing, I can very easily say your grammar is not good or your structure is not good. We can fix that," she said. "Whereas with reading and listening, if something's going on in the brain — the connection is not being made — it's challenging. The data from the TOEFL ITP tests help us to narrow the range of what we need to be looking at."

Consequently, when she sees a student in class who appears to perform well but whose TOEFL ITP scores are at odds with that performance, she can be confident about the accuracy of the scores. "I take a step back and think, there must be a reason why he or she is getting this score," she said. Then Hu takes the quandary to her colleagues. "Can we look at this?" she asks them. "How can we use this information to pinpoint what they need to work on?"

Together, the teachers "take a look at everything and try to figure out what's missing," Hu said. "Sometimes it's something as simple as time management, but it's usually not." They also discuss the disparity with the student. "It helps us start a dialogue," Hu continued. "We have them think about [their classroom performance]: In class, you're fine. Why isn't it working when you're taking the test?"

In one case, Hu recalled, the discussion process led PALS teachers to a surprising discovery: A student whose receptive skills tested lower than his productive skills was held back by small words — the prepositions and conjunctions that help us make sense of seemingly unconnected ideas. "We were able to pinpoint that and



provide more examples to help him understand those areas.”

“TOEFL ITP scores help us start the conversation, which leads us toward analysing and trying to decipher what we need to do for each student,” Hu said. “It’s especially useful for that.”

Here’s a closer look at how teachers use the TOEFL ITP test and other performance data to drive English-language instruction in this pre-college programme:

TOEFL ITP performance data, in combination with other assessment information, create a robust initial portrait of students’ English proficiency for instruction

PALS instructors begin the process of using the TOEFL tests and other assessment data to diagnose students’ learning needs as early as initial course placement, when they work as a team to analyse information gathered during admissions (TOEFL ITP scores, recorded interviews, written essays) to glean what it says about incoming students’ current English proficiency. After students are placed in classes, teachers mine the information to plan instruction. Sometimes, the assessment data point to the needs of individual students, Hu said. “Other times, it is the entire class. It really depends on the situation.”

The TOEFL data may also suggest *how* to approach teaching a group of students. “[The] TOEFL [data] has impacted how I deliver a class to the students. Having the TOEFL ITP score information allows me to reassess my teaching methods, to think of a different approach to looking at the reading or listening, to see how I can make it more digestible for the students,” Hu said. “Everything that we do with the TOEFL test guides us in how we need to change or adapt our curriculum.”

TOEFL ITP performance data gathered throughout the programme provide additional opportunities to reflect on instruction

According to Hu, many students retake the TOEFL ITP test throughout the programme. For example, “Some students are interested, halfway through the programme, in seeing what their improvement is and take the TOEFL ITP test again,” she said. A second administration is also used “to help us determine whether or not students are ready for the intensive work in our *TOEFL iBT*[®] preparation course.”

PALS uses a minimum TOEFL ITP score of 480 for admission to that course. “Sometimes, if it is a student that can work

hard, we’ll accept something that’s a little bit lower,” she noted, “but we’ve found that students who enter our TOEFL iBT class with the minimum of 480 are better suited to handle the heavy academic workload that’s given in the course.” Still other students retake the TOEFL ITP test to gain conditional admission into the Rutgers undergraduate programmes.

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These later TOEFL ITP administrations provide staff with additional data to reflect on as they analyse instruction, student learning and the PALS curriculum. Teachers even use TOEFL ITP data to support learning in the TOEFL iBT prep course. In addition to helping them diagnose individual needs, “it helps us to look at how we can better prepare our students in the future,” she said.

TOEFL ITP tests help prepare students for college-level reading and critical analysis

Because the goal of most PALS students is higher education, the PALS curriculum is strongly focused on the development of college-level critical reading and writing skills. In PALS courses — even the programme’s TOEFL iBT^{*} preparation course — “we don’t want them to simply be able to take a test,” Hu said. Rather, PALS teachers work on developing comprehension and writing skills in students “that will be easily translatable when they move into more academic work.

“We do have our discussion courses or speaking courses, where students have more opportunity to use those skills,” she added. However, depending on students’ personalities and levels of self-confidence, their speaking skills may not indicate whether they can “hold their ground in a more formal, academic type of situation.”

Likewise, some students have learned to respond to prompts in ways that are too formulaic. “Their essays all look the same or they choose all the answers for the same reason,” Hu said. “We try to move them away from that. We’re looking for more authentic writing and speaking.”

*The TOEFL iBT test is the most widely respected English-language test for higher education admissions worldwide.

Hu believes the TOEFL ITP test is ideally suited to PALS' academic focus. For example, the listening section is based on "everyday conversations, but students have to use their understanding of implication and the overall idea to answer those questions, and then they move toward longer conversations and lectures.

"From the academic standpoint, from being their teacher, I like that TOEFL ITP readings are academic, so students who need to prepare for the TOEFL iBT test or for academic studies have this foundation," she said. "I also like that it's a challenging test for students to work on and work toward. It is quite well-rounded."

Programme Snapshot

- Website: <http://pals.rutgers.edu/>
- One- to three-year, pre-college programme at the Rutgers Livingston campus (average: one year)
- Serves 150–200 students per year; most students have been in the United States 10 years or less
- Primarily provides English-language instruction to nonmatriculated international (95%) and domestic (5%) students working toward admission to undergraduate or graduate school
- Teaching focus is academic English-language skills
- Provides some language support to conditionally admitted Rutgers students
- International students hail largely from Asia (75%) and South America (25%)
- Conducts a Skype™ interview to assess conversational skill prior to admission
- Administers TOEFL ITP tests onsite for admission (minimum score: 400–450)
- Uses TOEFL ITP performance data, a brief recorded onsite interview and an essay written onsite for placement

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