



All Ears English Episode 129:

TOEFL Expert Bruce Stirling on How to Get a High Score on the Exam

Gabby: This is an All Ears English Podcast, Episode 129: “TOEFL Expert Bruce Stirling on How to Get a High Score on the Exam.”

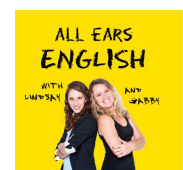
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Gabby: Welcome to the All Ears English Podcast, where you’ll finally get real, native English conversation with your hosts, Lindsay McMahon, the ‘English Adventurer’ and Gabby Wallace, the ‘Language Angel,’ from Boston, USA.

[Instrumental]

Gabby: Join us, Lindsay and Gabby for the “Key to Connecting with Americans” a three part event that helps you go deeper into real English conversation. You guys have told us that you want to feel confident and not awkward at your next professional event in English. So we’re here to help. We’re going to help you to avoid cultural mistakes you don’t know you’re making and give you practical phrases that we use every day in professional situations. So reserve your spot now at www.AllEarsEnglish.com/Key. That’s k-e-y. Join us for the live events on June 17th, 24th, and July 1st, or register before July 1st and you can still receive the recordings of each event. See you there.

[Instrumental]



Lindsay: In today's episode, Bruce Stirling, the TOEFL pro will show you the thinking techniques that separate the winners from the losers on the TOEFL.

[Instrumental]

Gabby: Hey, Lindsay. How (are) you doing?

Lindsay: Hey, Gabby.

Gabby: All right today, we have a very special guest. I'm so excited. (Uh), Bruce Stirling is here. Hey, Bruce. How are you?

Bruce: (Uh), great. (Uh), thanks. (Uh), thanks for having me.

Gabby: No problem. Bruce, Bruce is – you guys, he's an American university professor, video producer, and author. He's published four TOEFL books including the best-selling, "Speaking and Writing Strategies for the TOEFL IBT." And yes, he has taken the TOEFL test.

Bruce: That's right.

Gabby: Why would you put yourself through that, Bruce? I guess you wanna (want to) understand the test just like a test taker, right?

Bruce: Absolutely. Right. (Um), I – right. Taking the TOEFL test really (kind of), (uh), allows me to experience what the, the TOEFL test takers experience.

Gabby: Yeah.

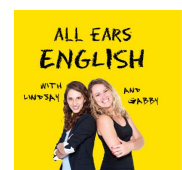
Bruce: It also gives me a better idea, (uh), how to write my books, and (uh)...

Gabby: Absolutely.

Bruce: ...give my students what they need for TOEFL success.

Gabby: Well, about that. How do student reach the success that they want. (I mean), what separates the people who get their goal score, their target score and those people who don't.

Bruce: Well, (uh), there's actually a few reasons, but I would probably say the number one reason, (uh), is, (um), (uh) preparation.



Gabby: Okay.

Bruce: (Uh), those who get, those who get high scores tend to have taken courses, (uh), have bought TOEFL books, and have prepared a lot. And by preparing, (uh), they take the TOEFL test and there are no surprises. They know exactly what to expect and they know how to manage their time because TOEFL's four hours long.

Gabby: (Uh-huh).

Lindsay: (Mm).

Bruce: So they know what to expect, there are no surprises and they're excellent time managers and, (uh), by doing that, (uh), ultimately, they should get a high TOEFL score. Also, they understand that TOEFL is not really a vocabulary test. TOEFL, TOEFL is an argument-based test.

Gabby: Right.

Bruce: So those who get high scores, know how to develop and analyze not only reading arguments in the reading section and verbal arguments, (kind of) like lectures in the listening section, they can also deliver verbal (arg-), arguments in the speaking section and they know how to write arguments, which is the writing section. So those who get high scores, those who really get high scores understand, (um), argument development and analysis and have the ability to manage their time. So it's, it's, it's quite a, it's quite a lot, but that's really what...

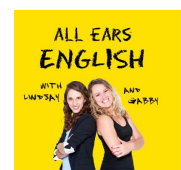
Gabby: Yeah.

Bruce: ...divides high scores from low scores.

Gabby: Those are two great points. I know the time management...

Bruce: Oh, yeah.

Gabby: ...is really difficult, (uh)...



Bruce: It's huge, it's huge. I can't, I can't emphasize that quite enough. Time – TOEFL's a time management test.

Lindsay: (Mm).

Gabby: Absolutely. Yeah, (right). To see how well you can manage your time. That's probably part of how you get that score, right? (I mean)...

Lindsay: Absolutely.

Gabby: ...you have to be ready to write a certain amount in a certain time.

Bruce: Right.

Gabby: So yeah, absolutely. And then the whole (um), (you know), just knowing the rules of the game and, and what gives you the score. What, how do you get that score? It's like playing a game. If you don't...

Bruce: Yeah, exactly. TOEFL, TOEFL...

Gabby: ...know the rules...

Bruce: TOEFL is a game and the game is, is knowing how to analyze and develop arguments. You would, you would...

Gabby: Yeah.

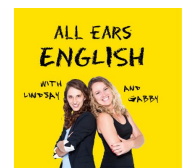
Bruce: ...be surprised – let me just tell you this. At the beginning of each new semester when I teach TOEFL, I will ask my students, (uh), "Okay, so who's taken the TOEFL test?" That's one of my first questions and, (you know), maybe four or five hands will go up. And most of those hands, most of those people have already taken the TOEFL test...

Gabby: (Uh-huh).

Bruce: ...and I go, "Aha, so if you've taken TOEFL test, what are you doing in my classroom?"

Gabby: (Un).

Bruce: And they say, "Well..."



Lindsay: (Mm).

Bruce: "...(uh), we did not prepare."

Gabby: Oh.

Lindsay: Oh, no.

Bruce: I have heard this so many times. "We did not prepare. We just thought we'd take the TOEFL test because I can speak English fluently. I'm very good speaking English conversationally."

Gabby: (Uh-huh).

Bruce: "(Uh), so that means I did not prepare, well prepare." So (um), this is really -- (uh), I really advise against this. If you're going to take the TOEFL test, (uh), even if you speak English fluently, it's not really a conversation test.

Gabby: That's right.

Bruce: It's an academic-based test based on argument development. So, that's another reason why you should prepare.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: Well, go ahead.

Lindsay: I was gonna (going to) say, I think some students, when they're trying to improve their general fluency, they make that mistake and they just go and take the TOEFL, just to have a benchmark. But, as you're saying, it's not a benchmark to measure your general fluency at all. That's a big mistake and they could get quite...

Gabby: Discouraged.

Lindsay: Disappointed.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: And discouraged.



Bruce: But, (you know), but, but, but it's important. It's, it's -- fluency is important, especially for the speaking part, but it's only really one component, just like...

Gabby: Right.

Bruce: ...(you know), to be able to speak fluently and proficiently plus good vocabulary...

Gabby: Right.

Bruce: ...equals a higher score, right?

Lindsay: (Mm).

Gabby: But it's not just the vocabulary...

Bruce: It's not just...

Gabby: ...as you said, it's not a vocabulary test.

Bruce: Exactly.

Gabby: I really like that point about learning how to, how to analyze an argument and how to put forth your own argument. That's...

Bruce: Right.

Gabby: ...so key.

Bruce: Yep. That's what we do at universities, right?

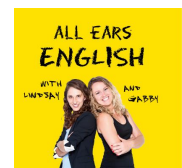
Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: Yeah, absolutely. Those academic skills about critical thinking...

Lindsay: (Mm-hm).

Gabby: ...supporting your argument.

Lindsay: (Mm-hm).



Gabby: (I mean), this is what I think as university instructors, (you know), this is what we're constantly telling our students and, and trying to help them with that, so.

Bruce: That, and that's so critical...

Gabby: Yeah.

Bruce: ...to be and we, we read a book and you, you read, you, you read essays at, at university. An essay's an argument, right?

Gabby: That's right.

Bruce: And that's what you do on the TOEFL test. It's, it's literally all arguments...

Gabby: That's right.

Lindsay: (Mm).

Bruce: And that's, that's, that's key.

Gabby: Well, one of my students just told me, "Well, I'm reading the news in English every day, so I'm ready for the TOEFL." I said, "Well, that's great, but that's not an argument, (you know)."

Bruce: No questions about [crosstalk].

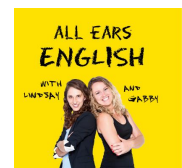
Gabby: Yeah, (I mean), just that you're understanding the daily news, that's one thing, (you know). But, as you said, having that, that ability to identify an argument, to think critically about it, to respond, that's not just reading the news.

Bruce: Exactly. And not only, not only that, but to be able to do that within a time limit. That's a good (tech-) -- those are skills.

Gabby: Yeah.

Bruce: Those are skills above just conversational English.

Gabby: Yeah, absolutely.



Bruce: Being able to argue verbally and in writing within a prescribed time period is really, that's really something you cannot learn on your own. If you're studying at home, nothing will prepare you for that. That's why I really suggest taking classes because you'll learn time management. Yeah, and you can see other people doing it and it's fun, too.

Gabby: Absolutely.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Gabby: Great tips.

Lindsay: Fun to be prepared.

Gabby: Yeah.

Lindsay: It's fun to go into a test feeling like you're ready for it.

Gabby: Yeah. Are there any other tips that you'd want to share with the listeners?

Bruce: (Um), right. Well, I would (um), I would like to say that, (um), yeah, I would say that (um), many people ask me -- (um), I get this question a lot, "What is the secret to TOEFL success?"

Gabby: Yeah.

Bruce: "(You know), so I'm taking TOEFL, I wanna (want to) get an MA or BA, what do I do? What's the secret? What's the magic bullet?"

Gabby: Yeah.

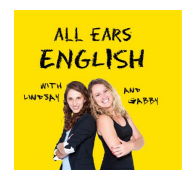
Bruce: "What's the secret formula?"

Gabby: Yep.

Bruce: And if I – I say, "If I knew that, I'd be a rich man."

Gabby: That's right.

Bruce: (Um), but unfortunately, there's no secret formula, there's no magic bullet and it's really basically what we've been talking about. The secret to TOEFL



success, the secret to getting a high score is being able to write, (uh), in this case an independent essay. And my experience as a TOEFL teacher, if the TOEFL test taker can write a good, independent essay, that will give them a foundation for argument development and analysis, which they can apply to all other sections of the TOEFL test.

Gabby: That's right.

Bruce: So my – I strongly recommend that, instead of learning, instead of making huge vocabulary lists, (right). I had one student who said, "I'm gonna (going to) learn 500 words a day." Well, (you know), you're never...

Gabby: Wow.

Bruce: ... gonna (going to) use (tho-), use those.

Gabby: Yeah.

Bruce: What I, I emphasize is learn how to write an independent, opinion essay and that will give you a foundation for argument development and analysis, which you can recycle...

Gabby: (Uh-huh).

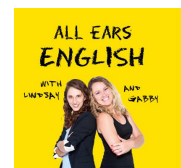
Bruce: ...into the speaking section, you can recycle those ideas, those strategies in the reading section and the listening section. So that's really, as, as a, a, a writer, a TOEFL instructor, the independent essay is really the key to getting a – the, the first step to getting a high TOEFL score.

Gabby: Right.

Bruce: Not just a, an independent essay, but a proficient one. Okay.

Gabby: Right.

Bruce: I've, I've found, and, and I found that, (um), a person who writes and gets a three out of five on an independent essay, will get an 80 out of 120, so your writing score really is indicative of everything else you do on the TOEFL test. If you get a high independent essay score, you'll get high in



every other section as well. So for me, it all starts with the independent essay.

Gabby: Okay. That's, that's a great point. The, the, the writing is so important to really prepare for that. And, and like you said, there's no, there's no secret magic bullet, secret to winning on the TOEFL, (you know), but...

Bruce: Yeah, exactly. If there was, we'd all, (you know), we'd all be out of business, (right).

Gabby: Right. Well, (I mean), it sounds like the secret...

Bruce: It's a lot of hard work, too. Like everything, it's just hard work.

Gabby: It is. The secret to success is that it's your daily habits of...

Bruce: Yep.

Gabby: ...studying and (prep-), (uh), preparation, maybe taking a course, (you know), buying a preparation book. These are all what are gonna (going to) add up, (you know), after lots of preparation. That's, (you know), the magic, (uh)...

Bruce: Right.

Gabby: ...key to success.

Lindsay: The formula.

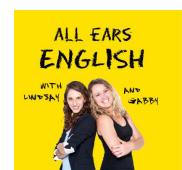
Gabby: Yeah, yeah.

Bruce: And like you're, what you're – and by doing that – just let me add to that. By doing that you're creating, you're creating a feeling of confidence. (You know)...

Gabby: Absolutely.

Bruce: ...confidence is another really point I'd like to emphasize.

Gabby: Okay.



Lindsay: (Mm).

Bruce: (Um), you buy the books, you take the courses, you meet other people who've taken the, the TOEFL test, you meet instructors, you really become part of the TOEFL experience and that really...

Gabby: (Uh-huh).

Bruce: ...the result is, you get more confidence and really going into the test center is – (I mean), you can be as prepared as you, as possible. You can have all the strategies, and all the books, but if you're not confident...

Gabby: (Un).

Bruce: ...you're, you're just gonna (going to) crash. And I've had a lot of students who just walked out of the test because the pressure was just, it's, (you know), nothing in a book or in a TOEFL class can, can replicate the pressure of actually going into the test center and, and being prepared and knowing argument strategies creates a, a higher degree of confidence which is really another key to TOEFL success, just being confident.

Gabby: Those are fantastic tips. Bruce thank you so much for your, for your fantastic tips today.

Bruce: Okay.

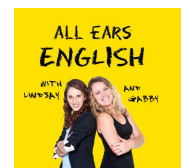
Gabby: Yeah, it was great having you on this episode.

Lindsay: And where...

Bruce: Thank you very much.

Lindsay: ...where can our listeners find you online or where should they go to, to see your work a bit more?

Bruce: Well, you can visit me, (uh), Bruce Stirling, (uh), TOEFL Pro on Facebook and I'm also on LinkedIn, Bruce Stirling LinkedIn and I have a (uh) TOEFL site, called (uh) TOEFL Pro. (Um), I think if you just Google any of those names, I'm sure to come up.



Gabby: Great.

Lindsay: Very cool.

Gabby: Well, thanks so much for joining us.

Lindsay: Thank you so much.

Bruce: Great. My pleasure.

Lindsay: Have a good day.

Bruce: Okay. Bye-bye.

[Instrumental]

Lindsay: If you wanna (want to) put your ears into English more often, be sure to subscribe to our podcast in iTunes on your computer or on your smartphone. Thanks so much for listening and see you next time.

