II-4. TOEFL Listening Task Types

People around the world use English for daily life listening activities and may also need to understand orally delivered academic subjects in English. Input in such listening activities is encountered in both monologic and dialogic format. The questions in the Listening section measure the test taker's ability to understand conversations and talks set in academic and daily life contexts. The speakers in the tasks have accents from three regions of the world: North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Listening skills are measured with the following task types: *Listen and Choose a Response, Listen to a Conversation, Listen to an Announcement,* and *Listen to an Academic Talk.*

Listen and Choose a Response

The *Listen and Choose a Response* task is designed to measure the test taker's ability to understand a short, spoken question or statement and recognize an appropriate response in short

dialogues on topics related to everyday life. Selecting the appropriate response requires understanding both the literal and implied meaning of the speaker, a skill that is important for social interactions. The test taker hears a question or statement, which forms the first part of a short exchange between two speakers (see Figure 4). The question or statement is only heard, and it is not written on the screen. The test taker then reads four possible responses to the question or statement. The test taker must select the most appropriate response to the first speaker's question or statement. Test questions require test takers to

- understand common vocabulary and formulaic phrases;
- understand simple grammatical structures, including question-formation patterns;
- recognize socially appropriate responses in short spoken exchanges;
- recognize and distinguish English phonemes and the use of common intonation and stress patterns to convey meaning in carefully articulated speech; and
- infer implied meaning, speaker role, or context in short spoken exchanges.

Figure 4. Example of *Listen and Choose a Response* Task Type

Choose the best response.

○ As a matter of fact, I was returning a book.

○ Yes, you can find it in the reference section.

○ I don't think I'll have enough time to do that.

○ Actually, I think I can get there a little earlier.

Source: TOEFL iBT® test, ETS

Note. Test takers hear the following:

Didn't I just see you in the library an hour ago?

Listen to a Conversation

The *Listen to a Conversation* task (see Figure 5) is designed to measure the ability to fully comprehend a conversation in everyday situations. This ability involves more than just recognizing the spoken words; listeners must be able to make inferences, recognize speaker roles and purposes, and make predictions. The test taker listens to a short conversation between two speakers and answers questions about the conversation. The conversation may be on everyday topics, primarily in university/campus settings, that future students may encounter in the public domain such as dining, social activities, education, entertainment, services, hobbies, home, communications, and travel. The questions require test takers to

- identify the main ideas and basic context of a conversation,
- understand the important details in a conversation,
- understand the range of grammatical structures used by proficient speakers,
- understand a wide range of vocabulary including idiomatic and colloquial expressions,
- infer meaning from information that is not explicitly stated,
- recognize the purpose of a speaker's utterance,
- make simple predictions about the further actions of the speakers, and
- follow the connection between ideas across speaker turns.

Figure 5. Example of *Listen to a Conversation* Task Type
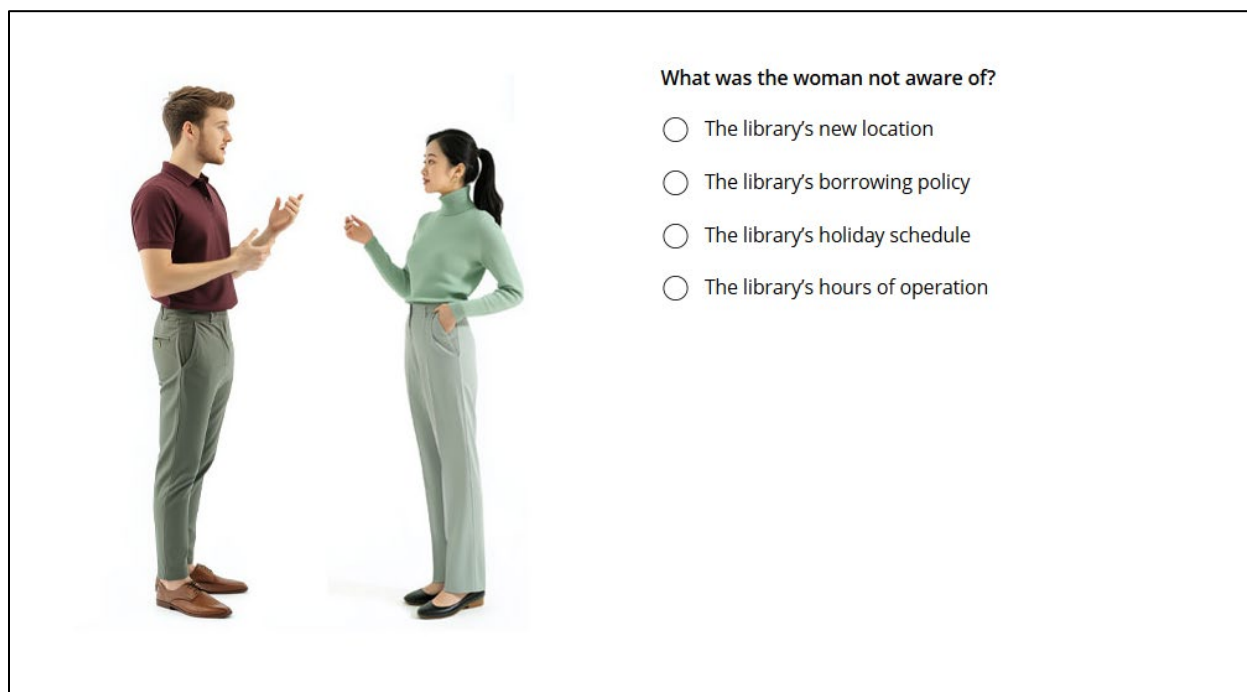
Note. Test takers hear the following:

Narrator: Listen to a conversation.

(M) Have you returned the books we borrowed from the library?

(F) Why? I thought we could keep them for six weeks.

(M) Actually, it's now four weeks. They changed the policy. I guess I forgot to tell you!

(F) That means they're due tomorrow!

(M) Exactly.

(F) In that case, I'm taking care of it right now.

Listen to an Announcement

The *Listen to an Announcement* task is designed to simulate what a listener would hear either during an in-person or a broadcasted message in an academic context, for example, in a classroom or at a school-related event (see Figure 6). The test taker listens to a short academic-related announcement and then answers questions about it. The announcement may include information about schedules, directions, rules and regulations, or student achievements. The questions require test takers to

- identify the main ideas and basic context of a short message,
- understand the important details in a short message,

- understand the range of grammatical structures used by proficient speakers,

- understand a wide range of vocabulary including idiomatic and colloquial expressions,

- infer meaning from information that is not explicitly stated,

- predict future actions based on what a speaker has said, and recognize the purpose of a speaker's message.

Figure 6. Example of *Listen to an Announcement* Task Type

Source: TOEFL iBT® test, ETS

Note. Test takers hear the following:

Narrator: Listen to an announcement in a classroom.

Good afternoon, everyone. I am excited to inform you that Dr. Cynthia Palmer, a renowned expert in environmental science, will be giving a guest lecture next Monday at 2 p.m. in Waldman Auditorium. Dr. Palmer will discuss the latest advancements in sustainable energy solutions and their impact on global climate change. Due to her popularity and the high interest in her work, I highly recommend arriving early to secure a seat.

Listen to an Academic Talk

The *Listen to an Academic Talk* task is designed to simulate academic talks given by educators or other experts (see Figure 7). The test taker listens to a short (175–250 words) academic-related talk and answers questions about it. The task is designed so that background knowledge is not required. Topics are taken from fields such as history, art and music, life science, physical science, business and economics, and social science. Test questions require test takers to

- understand the main and supporting ideas of a short academic talk,

- understand a range of grammatical structures,

- make inferences based on what is said,

- recognize the organizational features of the talk, and

- understand vocabulary that is sometimes uncommon, colloquial, or idiomatic.

Figure 7. Example of *Listen to an Academic Talk* Task Type

What does the speaker say about her walk in the park?

○ It is similar to her experience watching a good movie.

○ Her mind has space for thoughts unrelated to nature.

○ She needs to put in special effort to stay focused on flowers and trees.

○ She gets mental fatigue from her mind engaging in hard fascination.

Source: TOEFL iBT® test, ETS

Note. Test takers hear the following:

Narrator: Listen to a talk on a podcast about psychology.

Speaker: Did you see that new thriller movie that came out last week? I did and loved it. The action, the plot twists… I was totally captivated. Time just flew by. Not a single thought occurred to me that was unrelated to the movie. What I experienced is what psychologists call hard fascination. Hard fascination means intense focus and concentration. Whether it's TV programs, video games... hard fascination is all too easy to come by in this modern world.

There's another type of fascination—soft fascination. There's still effortless attention, meaning that no special effort is required for you to stay focused, but there's still room for other thoughts. When I take a walk in the park and look at the flowers and trees, for example, I might be thinking in the back of my mind about my dinner plans.

Now, one thing to know is hard fascination causes mental fatigue. The mind is so intensely focused that it gets tired fast. What follows mental fatigue? You might find yourself easily distracted, irritable, and stressed. Soft fascination, in contrast, engages a different part of the brain—the DMN, or Default Mode Network, which soothes the mind and helps combat mental fatigue. So next time you feel like your mind is on overload, turn off the TV, put down your phone. Take a walk, or simply sit and stare at the clouds.