Setting Realistic Expectations for the ITA Test

Anticipating what scores your students will get on the ITA test.
Standardized language exams such as TOEFL or IELTS provide very useful information about a student’s speaking ability. Students who enter graduate programs with the minimum recommended total scores (84 TOEFL or 7 IELTS) and weak speaking scores (TOEFL < 21 or IELTS ≤ 6.5) are not likely to be able to develop the level of language needed to place into PASS or Restricted I during their tenure as graduate students. For many of these students, attaining Restricted II is a great achievement and should be treated as such. Restricted II indicates the level of oral fluency needed to give prepared presentations, interact one-on-one with students and be successful as graduate students.

### Rough correlation of TOEFL / IELTS speaking scores to likely success on ITA test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOEFL</th>
<th>IELTS</th>
<th>Likely ITA testing rating: automatic score if using TOEFL speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≥ 28</td>
<td>≥ 8.5</td>
<td>✔ PASSED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 27</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>✔ Restricted I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 – 25</td>
<td>7 – 7.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 – 21</td>
<td>6 – 6.5</td>
<td>Cannot predict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some caveats: 1) the above correlations are less robust for students who retook TOEFL / IELTS multiple times within a few months, 2) speakers of other varieties of English sometimes underperform on the speaking section, and 3) students who took an intensive prep course show a tendency to raise scores several points without a corresponding increase in actual speaking ability.

Can every student get the top score (PASS) on the ITA test?
We try to help students and faculty develop realistic expectations about each individual student’s ability to achieve a particular level of proficiency in English. Many factors impact an individual’s ability to master a second language, including:

- Age when the second language was learned,
- Number of years spent speaking the language (note that some students have spent years using oral English before coming to the US; students who have not had this experience may need years of practice here before they are at the same level),
- Level of fluency when entering CMU (and note that lower level students typically need to spend more time mastering academic material, and so have less time to also work on English),
- Whether English is a second rather than third or fourth language (bilingual speakers can learn additional languages more easily),
- Style of ESL training used in their country/ESL program (e.g., did the classes focus on only on TOEFL prep, did classes include academic speaking activities?),
- Individual learning styles correlated with successful language learning,
- Individual personality factors correlated with successful language learning.

When we say that it is unrealistic to expect a particular student to reach PASS or Restricted I, we are indicating that the investment of time needed to master that level is not realistic given the demands of graduate work, nor perhaps even necessary given that the language needed to be a successful graduate student is less than
that required to teach undergraduates. Of course we think that individuals can always continue to improve their language skills. Given the limited amount of time available to graduate students and the differences in individual learning styles and previous experience with English, it is not surprising that a number of people who begin work at CMU with low oral proficiency cannot make the investment of time and effort required to achieve the high level of proficiency necessary to teach undergraduates.

Can the ITA test be used to assess incremental progress in language?
No. The ITA Test was not designed to be used as a test of general English fluency or to measure incremental progress in language, and should not be used as such. The ITA Test was designed to measure proficiency in the language used for teaching, which by definition is a higher level of language than needed for general fluency.

How are the ITA test results and feedback used to help students improve?
After taking the test, students are asked to return for an individual feedback/advising appointment to better understand their own strengths and weakness, and, if more work is needed, to get a customized plan of training that will best help them improve. However, attending the work is no guarantee that the student will then achieve a higher score on the ITA Test since we cannot predict individual effort, motivation or talent. Also, students may have to spread the work out over several semesters depending on academic workload. It is important to remember that language learning takes time, practice and continuous effort so the more time that a student invests in language training, the more likely they are to improve.