Not quite an innocent proficiency test: Aspects of the worldview underlying TOEFL content

Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini, Shima Asadi

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It may hardly require any argument that high-stakes language proficiency tests enormously influence language education processes and learners’ perceptions of language learning. This influence is centrally practiced and increasingly fostered through the adoption of certificates of such tests as part of the admission requirements in universities throughout the English speaking and even non-English speaking countries. A crucial but rarely addressed issue in the process of preparing for these proficiency tests, centrally including TOEFL, is the concern over being exposed to certain “contents”. This study is an attempt to investigate the content of TOEFL as specifically reflected in the reading texts and major lexical items appearing in various sections of the test. Aimed at illustrating the semantic and discursive landscape of TOEFL content, we focused on the texts and main vocabulary items specially introduced through this test and the teaching/learning materials related to it. The data comprises about 170 reading passages as well as more than 2000 “major content words” extracted from widely used TOEFL preparation books. Through meticulous thematic categorization of these texts and words based on their semantic content, some conceptual patterns emerged in the form of a semantic map that may illustrate a subtle underlying discursive structure and probably a certain worldview incorporated in TOEFL. We depict aspects of this semantic-discursive landscape and discuss conceptual and socio-cultural orientations embedded and reproduced through this high-stakes testing mechanism.