

TOEIC : The 100-hour recommendation and its implications

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Abstract

The TOEIC test is an increasingly important English test for university students and business people in Japan. Educational Testing Service (ETS), the organization that administers it, recommends that test-takers have received at least 100 hours of English training and/or practice before taking a test. This has implications for students and for instructors teaching any TOEIC or TOEIC-related course. This paper discusses those implications and offers some suggestions for TOEIC courses in universities.

Introduction : The TOEIC Test

The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) test is a proficiency test and was originally designed at the request of the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry, now renamed the Ministry of the Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), in 1979, as a test to evaluate English ability for the business world. The original purpose of the TOEIC test was to "get Japanese people speaking English." (McCrostie, 2009), and to help improve the English language level of the Japanese, especially those involved in business. TOEIC is administered by Chauncey-Peterson, part of the English Testing Service (ETS) group,

which is also responsible for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and the American SAT (Scholastic Aptitude) tests. It is designed to evaluate a test-taker's general English proficiency level in the context of business, work and office environments. According to the ETS TOEIC Official Test-Preparation Guide (2001:6):

"TOEIC test scores indicate how well people can communicate in English with others in the global workplace."

This claim is central to the whole ethos of the TOEIC test. Test-takers with a high TOEIC score are expected to be able to communicate in an English-speaking workplace or situation. It is, in a sense, closely related to Bachman and Turner's (1996) influential language testing concepts of language knowledge and strategic competence. A large part of strategic competence, or the ability to use or draw upon language knowledge, is the ability to communicate, and therefore, TOEIC scores should reflect how well test-takers can draw on their knowledge and communicate in English.

Although the TOEIC test was originally developed for Japan, where it is one of the "most recognized exams" (McCrostie, 2009), it is now taken in many more countries, including South Korea and China. The total number of tests taken (including repeat candidates) in 2008 was more than 5 million (ETS, 2009). In Japan, people took the TOEIC Institutional Program (IP) 940,000 times, at their school, college or workplace, and test-takers sat the test 778,000 times privately, as part of the TOEIC Secure Program. (ETS, 2009). Worldwide, the number of organizations using the TOEIC test reached 10,000 in 2010 (Wall Street Journal, 2010).

Test Format

The TOEIC Test is divided into two sections ; listening and reading.

Listening Section

The listening section is 100 multiple-choice questions divided into four parts and usually takes around 45 minutes.

Part 1: Photographs (Q 1-10):

There are four statements about a black and white photograph, which is printed in the test booklet, and test-takers have to choose which statement best describes the photograph.

Part 2: Question-Response (Q 11-40):

In this part of the test, test-takers listen to a question or statement and listen to choose the best answer to that question from the three that immediately follow.

Part 3 Short Conversations (Q 41-70):

Test-takers have to listen to a short conversation between two people and answer three questions printed in the test booklet.

Part 4 Short Talks (Q 71-100):

The short talks are delivered by one person and are usually between 70 and 100 words long. Test-takers must answer three questions per talk. Quite a large variety of texts are used, such as announcements,

advertisements, speeches, telephone messages and instructions are used.

Reading Section

The reading section is also 100 multiple-choice questions, but is divided into three parts :

Part 5 Incomplete Sentences (Q 101-140) :

Test-takers have to choose the best way to complete a sentence from a choice of four. These test knowledge of English vocabulary and structures.

Part 6 Error Correction (Q 141-152) :

Test-takers have to locate the error from four underlined parts of a sentence. One purpose of this section is to indirectly test writing skills, especially editing. The texts in this section are often formal, written business communication, such as letters, memos and e-mails.

Part 7 Reading Comprehension (Q 153-200)

This is the longest part of the test (48 questions), and the one that can cause test-takers the most problems, particularly with time. There are 28 single-text questions and 20 double-text questions, i.e. questions based on two related reading texts. Usually there are between 3 and 5 questions per text or double text.

TOEIC Scores : What do they Mean?

Test-takers receive a raw score of between 0 and 100, and these are then turned into a converted core of between 5 and 495 at intervals of 5 for each section. The two converted scores are then added to give the final score of between 10 and 990. TOEIC is therefore a norm-referenced test because it gives a candidate's score relative to others. This means that a TOEIC score does not show "directly what a student is capable of doing in the language." (Hughes, 2000, p.17). ETS has published a detailed set of specifications of language functions, which shows what a person with a certain score can do in its Can-Do Guide this relates scores to specific communicative functions in English and also some more general abilities. For example, ETS state that a score of 700-750 indicates a test-taker can actively take part in a meeting conducted in English (ETS TOEIC from A to Z, 2003, p.13)

TOEIC is used by a large variety of educational institutions and companies, and a TOEIC score means something different to different organizations and companies. In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) established the target for the "expected English-language abilities of English teachers" as a TOEIC score of 730 (MEXT, 2002). This corresponds with a score of 550 in the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test, and a pass of the EIKEN STEP test at the pre-one level. Companies in different countries also have different TOEIC-score requirements for their employees. Sony and Samsung, rival electronics companies, require their executives to have minimum TOEIC scores of 650 and 920 respectively. *Samsung's higher

TOEIC requirement is one of the factors allowing it to compete with Sony (Whan-yung, 2010).

Validity and Reliability

The concepts of validity and reliability are important in language testing. A number of authors, such as Bachman and Palmer (1996), Hughes (2000) and Weir (1990), identified two main areas within which language tests have limitations: validity and reliability. In order to understand the usefulness of a TOEIC score to test-takers, it is important to know if the test is reliable and has high validity. However, it should be noted that there is a lack of research specific to the TOEIC test compared to other tests, such as TOEFL (Chapman, 2003).

There are two ways in which TOEIC can be thought of as reliable. Firstly, it is a long test of two hundred questions, and a longer test is more reliable. This is because a large number of questions can test the same skill a number of times, and thereby reduce the chance of being able to guess answers correctly. Another way in which TOEIC is reliable is that it does not use any criterion-based testing, and so there is no subjectivity in the scores a candidate receives.

Validity is another important quality of any test, and indeed Weir (1993, p 19) calls it the "starting point in test design.". It refers to whether a test actually measures what it is supposed to (Hughes 1989).

In reality, the validity of a test actually refers to the judgments or inferences made about scores and is directly related to the stated purpose of a test (Shohamy 1985). This can be seen in the TOEIC Can-Do guide,

and in the definitive way that scores are interpreted by different organizations. TOEIC validity suffers mainly because it does not test productive skills directly. ETS have tried to rectify this by introducing a speaking and writing section for the test. However, the vast majority of test-takers do not take these sections at present. It remains to be seen whether the speaking and writing test will become widely accepted and used in the future.

Overall, the TOEIC test can be thought of as a reliable test, which is a good test of listening and reading. However, the fundamental contradiction of the test still remains. A test that only contains listening and reading surely cannot show how well people can "communicate in English with others in the global workplace."

100 Hours of Instruction

ETS recommend that test-takers should not retake the TOEIC test unless they have received over 60 hours (learners whose native language is of western European origin) or 100 hours (native speakers of languages from other origins) (ETS 2003, p12) of English instruction. It should be noted that ETS do not say direct TOEIC instruction. However, the recommendation still has implications on how TOEIC courses should be taught, regardless of their place in a university curriculum. In Japan, a standard university semester is 15 weeks, and a class 90 minutes; therefore, in a single university semester a student receives 22.5 hours of instruction, well below the minimum 100 hours recommended by ETS. There are a number of steps that instructors of TOEIC courses should take because of this 100-hour guidance :

1. Students must be made fully aware of the 100-hour guidance. Doing so helps them understand the importance of the large amount of study time they need to invest to improve their TOEIC scores.
2. TOEIC instructors must emphasize the need for students to study independently to improve their scores. This can be TOEIC itself, or other study material outside of the TOEIC sphere. It must also be emphasized that students' English classes in college can also help with their TOEIC scores.
3. The content and way that TOEIC courses are taught must also take into account the 100-hour guidance.

How is TOEIC Offered in Universities?

TOEIC courses are offered in many, but not all, colleges in Japan, and there is large variation in how many direct test preparation classes are offered, and also in how universities use test scores. Sapporo, the fifth largest city in Japan, offers interesting examples of these differences. It should be noted that these examples refer to English-major students.

In one major university in Sapporo, TOEIC is used as a placement test to stream students into different classes for the year. Students take a compulsory TOEIC course consisting of a 90-minute class per week and a test at the end of the academic year. The result of this test is used for

the streaming of students for the next year's classes. Any student who does not take a TOEIC test, either in-house or externally, cannot continue to the next year. In another university, two TOEIC classes are offered as optional courses open for students of any year. Thus, TOEIC represents only a small part of the curriculum. In a third college, TOEIC is not offered at all, and English majors are required to score a minimum of 450 on the TOEFL test to progress to the next year without remedial classes.

This paper does not intend to criticize the colleges involved because each has its own curriculum and targets for their students. It must be noted, however, that the colleges do not offer anything more than 90 minutes per week of direct TOEIC instruction. They, of course, have good reasons for this, mainly because they have other priorities. An instructor has the choice of focusing on a number of different themes in a TOEIC course, and they must decide which combination to use and how much class time should be devoted to each.

TOEIC Classes : What can be done?

1. Test Tactics :

Japanese students are very experienced when it comes to taking multiple-choice tests, having experienced them a great deal during their school years. However, there are a number of test-taking strategies which can be taught, some general, and some specific to TOEIC, and these can help increase scores. In part two of the listening section, for example, teachers can focus on helping students to eliminate responses that do not grammatically agree with the question. As there are only three responses to each question, any answer eliminated can dramatically improve the

chances of answering correctly. Multiple-choice tests like TOEIC only require test-takers to recognise a correct answer, not produce one (Brindley, 1998).

The great advantage of focusing on test-taking tactics specific to each section is that it can produce a quick improvement in test scores. This can have a knock-on effect on students' motivation, as they can see themselves improving. Therefore, teaching test-taking tactics can act as a very effective initial boost to students and are something that a teacher should cover in a TOEIC course.

2. Test Practice

Any test-based course, be it TOEIC, TOEFL or the EIKEN STEP test, must include practice of the test itself. Obviously, due to time constraints, it is not possible to do a whole test in one class, but it is very useful for students to take sections of the test in realistic test conditions during classes. One good way of ensuring that test practice is useful is to employ a two-score system. Students take the relevant section in test conditions, and then are allowed time to go over the questions again at their own pace with a dictionary to check and revise their answers. This can work well for both the listening and reading sections.

3. Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge plays a large part in the TOEIC test. This is especially true for university students who have never participated in a workplace, let alone the "global workplace" referred to by ETS. Students may not be aware of the social situations involved in some of the listening passages, for example. The teaching of vocabulary can have a positive

effect on students' TOEIC scores, but improvement is a long process, meaning a large amount of time is necessary to significantly increase vocabulary levels. There is also the issue of recycling of vocabulary. It can be argued that it is necessary to be exposed to a lexical item more a number of times before it can be really learned.

4. Independent Study

Due to the time restraints of a curriculum and the short length of many TOEIC courses, it is essential that students do a large amount of independent self-study. Students can be guided in TOEIC-specific self-study by teachers and introduced to a number of ideas and techniques that can be used. Examples of this include the idea of a vocabulary portfolio, in which students can place all their newly acquired vocabulary, and use dictionaries or other resources to broaden their lexical knowledge by finding related words. Another example is the two-score system, in which students can practice the test or part of the test in as realistic conditions as possible, including timing themselves. Then, they can spend time going over the questions at their own pace and with dictionaries to try to improve their answers. The Internet also provides a number of resources for test-takers.

5. Non-TOEIC Input

Students must be made aware that general English study will help TOEIC scores. Indeed, some research suggests that TOEIC-specific courses are not very effective in improving students' scores (Robb and Ercanbrack, 1999). More research on this is needed, but there is no doubt that non-TOEIC-specific English instruction can have a positive effect on TOEIC scores.

The paucity of time available to prepare directly for taking the TOEIC test in a college curriculum should have an effect on what and how such courses are taught. Students need to be made aware of this lack of time, and guided by teachers in realizing the amount of time needed to increase TOEIC scores, how they can self-study and the appropriate resources available to them to do so.

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