

**What is the Most Effective Approach to Improve Students' TOEIC Scores?:
Comparing and Analyzing TOEIC Scores of Students Taking Weekly Study Sessions
and Those Taking One-Day and/or One-Week Intensive TOEIC Study Sessions**

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TOEIC スコアアップに向けての集中講座型補習の学習効果検証

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Summary

In response to changes in MEXT's English education policies, many universities in Japan have started providing TOEIC preparation classes to help students raise their TOEIC scores. Here at Kobe College, the Center for English Education and Research is responsible for providing required TOEIC preparation classes as well as TOEIC study sessions for those interested in preparing themselves for TOEIC in addition to their regular classes. The author has taught 3 different types of TOEIC preparation study sessions so far, and this research explores and analyzes how these seminars influence students' score improvements, particularly focusing on which types of preparation study are most helpful for those already attaining certain ranges of TOEIC scores.

Keywords: TOEIC preparation, TOEIC score improvements, intensive study sessions, weekly study sessions

要 旨

文科省の行動指針に基づく「英語が使える日本人」育成の必要から、学生の英語運用力を上げ、TOEICスコアアップを目指す大学が増えている。本学では、共通英語教育研究センター設置に伴う英語教育充実の一環として、2015年度より TOEIC 対策の各種講座を実施している。本研究では同レベルの教材と授業内容で授業を行った場合、週 1 回90分の授業を10週に渡って行う場合と、TOEIC 形式での模試を 2 時間行い、その後昼食休憩と 4 時間の解答解説を挟む集中講座形式の TOEIC 対策の授業を 1 回行う場合と、同形式の授業を 1 週間続けて行う場合との 3 つの異なる講座を通じて、どのくらいのスコアを保持している層がどのようにスコアを伸ばす傾向があるのかを分析し、どのレベルの学習者にどのような TOEIC 対策を行うことが効率よく順調なスコアアップにつなげてゆけるかを比較、検証、分析した。

キーワード: TOEIC 指導、スコアアップ、集中講座、補習

Background

The number of TOEIC examinees in Japan has been increasing since it was first introduced in 1979, and it is possible to see a huge jump in the number of examinees in the fiscal years of 2000 (220,000 more examinees than the former year) and 2011 (490,000 more examinees than the former year) (ETS, 2015a). The continuing trend of increases in the numbers of TOEIC examinees has been accelerated further by the shift in English education policy toward “Action guidelines for educating Japanese nationals with high English competence (Eigo ga tsukaeru Nihonjin ikusei no tame no kodo shishin)” that MEXT introduced in 2003. MEXT (2003) states that the action guidelines should change Japanese education so that “university graduates should be skilled with a high level of English competence for their future professions” (p. 1). Therefore, they should be able to demonstrate a good balance of 4 English communication skills (Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing), through their learning at higher educational institutions and they should be able to attain a high enough score on the TOEIC and/or the TOEFL to prove this high level of English competence (MEXT, 2003).

As some universities in Japan started introducing TOEIC preparation classes around the year 2004 (Zushi, Takase & Matsuno, 2015), they have tended to have all new incoming students take the TOEIC and use their scores for English class placement. Furthermore, 3,400 Japanese companies also had their employees take TOEIC last year (ETS, 2015a), and many Japanese companies started setting a TOEIC score of 600 points as a minimum requirement for screening resumes (Chihara & Kato, 2008). This basically indicates that college seniors need to achieve a score of at least 600 points before they start job-hunting. Regardless of the demand for relatively higher TOEIC scores for recruitment, ETS indicates that 209,469 college freshmen took TOEIC during the year 2013, and their average score was only 424 points (ETS, 2015a). This means that college-level English classes must help students become more skilled with English, attaining improvements in competence that are equivalent to an average of an increase of 176 points on the TOEIC within a 3 year time span, so that students can attain scores higher than 600 points.

Given these current trends and situations, this research is aimed at exploring what types of TOEIC preparation classes are most helpful to achieve this end. The author conducted 3 different types of TOEIC preparation study sessions with 77 college students in the Spring 2015 semester. These students took the TOEIC exam immediately after each study session. The paper explores what type of study session proved most helpful for students in significantly improving their TOEIC scores through an analysis of these datasets.

Overview of the TOEIC exam

TOEIC stands for “Test of English for International Communication,” and it was developed by ETS (English Testing Service) to measure the English communicative competence among English language learners (ETS, 2015a). The TOEIC has been administered in more than 50 countries so far (Morokawa, Kanzaki & Ogino, 2000), and in Japan it was first administered in 1979 (ETS, 2015a).

The TOEIC exam includes 7 different parts, Parts 1 through 7. Part 1 (Photographs), Part 2 (Question-Response), Part 3 (Short Conversations) and Part 4 (Short Talks) are the listening parts, and the reading parts include Part 5 (Incomplete Sentences), Part 6 (Text Completion) and Part 7 (Reading Comprehension) (ETS, 2015b). The listening parts together take 45 minutes, and the combined reading parts account for 75 minutes (ETS, 2015b). In Part 1, examinees take a look at the 10 different pictures, listen and choose the best description of each picture. Part 2 asks examinees to listen to the 30 spoken statements or questions and choose the best response to each statement or question. In Part 3, examinees listen to the ten 30-second short conversations and choose the best answers to the 3 questions about each conversation. Part 4 asks examinees to listen to the ten 30-second short talks or narrations and choose the best answers to the 3 questions about each talk or narration (ETS, 2015b).

Part 5 has 40 short sentences with blanks, and the questions in this part ask examinees to choose the best verb tense, part of the speech, or vocabulary item for each blank. Part 6 has longer sentences with 3 blanks per passage and examinees choose the best verb tense, part of the speech, vocabulary item or transitional word for each blank. Part 6 has 4 passages and 12 blanks total. Part 7 has 48 questions, and examinees answer these questions after reading 7 to 8 single passages and 4 double passages. In the single passage section, examinees read passages and answer a couple of questions about each passage, while the double passage section requires them to read 2 related passages and answer 5 questions regarding these passages. The content of the reading varies from business memos or business letters, to e-mails or advertisements. Examinees answer all 200 questions of the 7 parts of the test within 120 minutes.

TOEIC preparation at college-level EFL classrooms

Some scholars indicate their concerns about preparing students for language assessment tests such as the TOEIC or the TOEFL in EFL classrooms because of “wash-back” effects (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996). Wash-back effects refer to a situation in which “teachers and learners do things they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test” (Alderson & Wall, 1993, p. 117). In short, some scholars claim that preparing for these tests may result in teaching students about the contents that are not directly linked to practical English communication, and therefore, not always be helpful for developing practical English

communication abilities. However, other scholars argue that including TOEIC into English curriculum is not harmful, asserting the following 2 points. First, they argue that the TOEIC is a reliable measure of English communication skills among non-native English speakers because of its high reliability rate of 0.916 (a value of 1 as a perfectly reliability) with a standard error of measurement (SEM) of 25.95 (Woodford, 1982). Therefore, scoring high on the test basically indicates improvement in English communication skills. Second, they also argue that most students do take these test preparation courses in order to improve their scores; therefore, these classes should be helpful for students to achieve that end (Hamps-Lyons, 1998; Miyamoto, 2007; Nishitani, 2007; Chihara & Kato, 2008).

After MEXT announced their new English education policy stating that college graduates need to attain a high level of English communication competence, many universities started including TOEIC preparation into general English classes, as it is one of the major tests frequently used to measure English communication competence among non-native English speakers. Precedent studies on the direct impacts of these classes on students' TOEIC scores have revealed the following 3 points. First, Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) found a distinction in that TOEIC preparation courses tended to be beneficial for non-English major students to improve their reading section scores; however, they tended not to be beneficial for English major students that studied English comprehensively. Second, Nishitani (2007) concluded that even for English majors, grammar-focused instruction for the TOEIC was helpful in raising their TOEIC grammar scores. Third, Chihara & Kato (2008) found that a residential TOEIC preparation seminar, where students spent 3 nights together and worked on TOEIC study materials all day long, helped their students attain from 20 to 30 points higher on their TOEIC scores, and particularly, their score increase was outstanding in the listening section.

Given that the aforementioned research explored the direct influences of contents of TOEIC preparation courses on students' TOEIC scores and did not refer to how the different types of study sessions/courses result in differences in TOEIC scores, this paper sheds new light from a different angle by exploring correlations between students' score increase and the types of TOEIC preparation study sessions they undertook. The research is aimed at identifying which specific type of TOEIC preparation study sessions is most helpful for students to improve their scores by comparing students' TOEIC scores after they take 3 different types of TOEIC preparation study sessions respectively.

TOEIC preparation at Kobe College

The English Education and Research Center at Kobe College started offering mandatory TOEIC preparation courses for non-English major freshmen and sophomores in Spring 2014. These classes are offered in the second and third semesters. As of 2015, however, no mandatory TOEIC preparation courses are offered to juniors and seniors, and there are a few elective TOEIC

preparation courses open to students from any grade or any department.

In the Spring 2015 semester, in addition to these mandatory/elective TOEIC preparation courses, the author taught 3 different types of TOEIC study sessions. One was a weekly-based TOEIC study session that covered the reading section (Parts 5 through 7). Another was a pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session in which students took a 2-hour TOEIC style exam and went through a subsequent 4-hour lecture on the exam questions they worked on. The final one was a weeklong summer intensive TOEIC study session, which followed the same general format as the pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session, but for a week's duration.

Among all these 3 different types of study sessions, the summer intensive study session required students to have already attained 450 points minimum score to enroll. Given this score limitation, this paper exclusively compares the scores of those with a minimum of 450 points and attending any of these study sessions. It is mandatory for all students to initially take the TOEIC when they enter Kobe College, and again at the end of their second and third semesters. If students choose to take the weeklong summer intensive TOEIC study session, they can take the required TOEIC on the last day of instruction.

Research method

Participants of the study were 77 female college students, taking extra study sessions besides the mandatory TOEIC preparation courses required in freshmen and sophomore years. The author taught 3 different types of study sessions: 1) weekly-based study sessions, 2) a pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session, and 3) a weeklong summer intensive study session, exclusive to those at initial TOEIC scores of 450 points or above.

The weekly-based study sessions (available only to non-English major sophomore students) met once a week for 10 weeks and each session lasted 90 minutes. In each session, students exclusively worked on Parts 5 through 7. Because of the time limitation of 90-minute classes, it was impossible for students to take an entire 2-hour TOEIC practice test. In contrast, the Saturday intensive study session (available only to non-English major sophomore students) was conducted a week before the IP-TOEIC test, and designed to allow students to take a 2-hour TOEIC practice test at the beginning. After the lunch break, they had a 4-hour lecture on the questions they worked on in the morning. The weeklong summer intensive TOEIC study session (available to all majors, all grades) included the 5 days of study sessions, with students taking the IP-TOEIC test on the 6th day. The 5 days of study sessions followed the exact same structure as the pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session, with students taking a 2-hour practice test in the mornings, and having a 4-hour lecture in the afternoons on the questions they worked on in the morning.

Based on their written agreements from the students, the author collected the TOEIC score data of all the students taking these 3 different types of study sessions, compared and contrasted these datasets to analyze which groups of students taking specific study sessions improved their

scores most.

Results

Table 1: Score increase of the students taking each study session.
(Samples are limited to those who already attain TOEIC 450 points)

	Score increase in listening (Parts 1-4)	Score increase in reading (Parts 5-7)	Score increase in total score
Pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive (non-English major sophomores)	+33.9	+40.6	+74.4
Weekly-based (non-English major sophomores)	+7.5	+21.3	+28.8
Weeklong summer intensive (ALL)	+34.2	+16.6	+45.5
Weeklong summer intensive (non-English majors)	+37.2	+19.3	+56.4
Weeklong summer intensive (English majors)	+32.5	+15	+39.2
Both weekly-based and pre- TOEIC Saturday intensive (non-English major sophomores)	+33.3	+21.7	+55

Table 1 above shows the TOEIC score differences between the pre- and post-study session of the students attending each of the 3 types of study sessions. Given the numbers in Table 1, it is clear that those attending the pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session (non-English major sophomore students) increased their scores most among the students attending the study sessions. Their listening score increased an average of +33.9 points, their reading score increased +40.6 points on average, and their average total score increase is +74.4 points. If considering a score increase of 40 points to be significant as Andrade (2014) claims, the increase of reading scores and total scores of this group are considered a significant score increase. Based on this standard of 40 point score increase being significant, the score increase of those attending the pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session, those attending the weeklong summer intensive TOEIC study session, and those attending both the weekly-based study sessions and the pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session cleared the bar.

Comparing the reading part score increase across these 3 groups, the score increase of those attending the pre-TOEIC intensive Saturday study session are particularly outstanding and far greater than that of those attending weekly-based study sessions. These results indicate that if the class average score is higher than 450 points, it would be helpful to conduct study sessions in which students actually work on a 2-hour TOEIC practice test immediately before the TOEIC exam, rather than studying for each part of TOEIC separately for a short time on a weekly basis.

These results back up the Robb and Ercanbrack (1999)'s finding that TOEIC preparation courses are helpful for non-English major students in significantly improving their scores on the reading part. However, what deserves attention is that the score increase on the listening part is also outstanding (+37.2 points) among the non-English major students taking the summer intensive study sessions. Given these scores in the Table 1, it is possible to claim that the study sessions in which students can work on a 2-hour practice test tend to help non-English major students to improve their scores both in listening and reading parts of the TOEIC if they already have TOEIC 450 points.

Conclusion

According to the data collected, it became clear that for non-English majors who already have TOEIC 450 points or above, their TOEIC scores improve far more if they are given the opportunities to work on the 2-hour practice test immediately before taking the real TOEIC test, rather than working on some parts of grammar and reading sections on a weekly basis. The gap of average total scores between the Saturday intensive study session and a weekly-based study session is more than 45 points. This indicates that when holding study sessions for students with relatively high score ranges, the impact of letting them work on the 2-hour TOEIC practice tests should be considered.

Given that if the effective intensive study sessions last 5 consecutive days, some students are not able to attend every session, because of medical or other reasons—the average participation for the weeklong summer intensive study session was 78%, identifying the need for a balance between an effective but still manageable frequency of the intensive study session is a further avenue for investigation.

Comparing English majors attending the weeklong summer intensive study session with non-English majors attending the same study session illuminates the fact that non-English majors improved their scores by 17.2 points more than English majors. Given that the research result is in line with the findings by Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) that TOEIC preparation courses tend to be less helpful for English majors, more research is needed to identify what content is the most helpful TOEIC preparation for English majors.

Overall, the situation that Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) identify—a lack of literature on TOEIC preparation at the college level—has not significantly changed in the years since they published their work. Accordingly, it could be challenging for instructors to find adequate information on the proper pedagogies for teaching college-level TOEIC preparation courses. In order to help teachers become better able to help students to improve their TOEIC scores, it is necessary for scholars to conduct research and compile results to generate helpful literature on how to teach TOEIC preparation courses, particularly considering the most effective pedagogies and course/study session types.

It also should be noted that this research has limitations in that it does not refer to the influence of 1) students' self-study, 2) their motivations to improve their TOEIC scores, and 3) the influence of their learning from other English classes. Exploring how, in addition to different types of TOEIC preparation study sessions they attend, how these factors directly influence students' achievements on TOEIC test is another further avenue for investigation.

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Appendix 1

Table 2: Academic year distribution of the students taking each study session

	Weekly-based	Pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive	Weeklong summer intensive
Freshmen	0	0	18
Sophomores	29	25	3
Juniors	0	0	2
Seniors	0	0	0

Appendix 2

Table 3: Department distribution of the students taking each session

	Weekly-based	Pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive	Weeklong summer intensive
English majors	0	0	12
non-English majors	29	25	13

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