

## Overview of the Major Researches on TOEIC Tests in University English Curricula

SHIMOMURA Fuyu

大学の共通英語科目における TOEIC の軌跡、現状と今後

下 村 冬 彦

## Summary

Recent trends of including TOEIC preparation into general English curriculum at higher educational institutions in Japan have further accelerated as most college graduates need to have certain TOEIC scores to launch their career paths after graduation. To better understand the current situation surrounding TOEIC test in Japanese universities and identify its future directions, this paper explores: 1) how TOEIC was introduced to university English curricula, 2) the criticisms against teaching TOEIC preparation classes in general English curricula, 3) what has been researched about the effective pedagogies for university TOEIC preparation classes and 4) the areas that require further researches.

**Keywords:** TOEIC pedagogy, general English curriculum, high English competence

## 要 旨

2003年の文科省の「英語が使える日本人育成のための行動指針」の発表以来、大学の共通英語科目において TOEIC を扱う大学が増えている。就職においても TOEIC スコアの要求が加熱傾向にあることから、今後も大学での TOEIC への取り組みは増加するものと思われる。本論文では、1) 現在の大学の共通英語教育における TOEIC を取り巻く状況と経緯、2) TOEIC を共通英語科目で扱う事への批判、3) どのような TOEIC 対策クラスの教授法の有用性がこれまでに検証されてきたか、の3点を先行論文を繙いて検証し、今後のより良い TOEIC クラスの指導に向けどのような研究が有用かを検証した。

**キーワード:** TOEIC 教授法、共通英語教育カリキュラム、英語運用力向上

## **Introduction: TOEIC, Japanese universities, and students' future career paths**

Recent trends of including TOEIC preparation in general English curriculum at higher educational institutions in Japan have further accelerated as most college graduates need to have certain TOEIC scores to start their career paths. For instance, ETS (2015a) identifies that most of the Japanese corporates require college graduates to have at least 600 points or higher on the TOEIC test and expect 750 points or higher for those expatriated in the future or working in the departments that involve communication in English. In addition, the corporates such as Rakuten Co. Ltd. or Fast Retailing Co. Ltd.—the company that runs UNIQLO—embedded all English policy for all the communication among their employees to develop high English competence for global business (Neeley, 2011; Mason, 2011).

These trends of “globalization” and “Englishnization” have put further pressures on having high scores on TOEIC for college graduates. Given these trends, many universities have adopted TOEIC preparation in their general English curriculum—many of them are the required English classes for non-English majors. Some scholars have already researched on effective pedagogies for TOEIC preparation classes at the college level (Robb and Ercanbrack, 1999; Morokawa et. al., 2000; Nishitani, 2007; Small, 2006; Miyamoto, 2007; Mizumoto and Takeuchi, 2008; Chihara and Kato, 2008; Otake and Futagami, 2013). While some other scholars indicate their concerns in adopting TOEIC preparation to general English curriculum at universities (Cunningham, 2002; Newfields, 2005; Apichatrojanakul, 2011; Takahashi, 2012).

To better understand the current situations surrounding TOEIC tests and Japanese universities, this paper is aimed at providing a brief overview of major researches on TOEIC in general English curriculum, particularly focusing on: 1) how TOEIC was introduced to university English curriculums, 2) criticisms against teaching TOEIC preparation classes in general English curriculums, 3) what has been found about the effective pedagogies for university TOEIC preparation classes and 4) the areas that require further researches.

## **How TOEIC was introduced to general English curricula at universities**

Teaching TOEIC preparation contents in the university level general English classes, as a response to the education policy reform that Japanese universities should educate global citizens with high English competence, is not a recent phenomenon. Morokawa et. al (2000) identify that the national needs to educate global citizens with high English competence—which tends to be measured by exams such as IELTS, TOEIC or TOEFL—is already referred in “*21-seiki-no daigaku-zo to kongo-no-kaikaku housaku ni tsuite*” (How the universities in Japan in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be and the necessary higher education policy reform) in 1998. Some universities started

introducing TOEIC into their general English education curriculum at this point, around the year 1998 (Morokawa, et al., 2000).

This policy reform was also reflected in “*Eigo ga tsukaeru Nihon-jin ikusei no tame no kodo keikaku*” (Action plan for educating Japanese citizens with high English competence) that MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) announced in 2003. According to the action plan, regarding English education, it mentions that it is important to educate global citizens with high English competence by promoting studying abroad, helping students learn about global issues and developing good enough English skills for presentation or discussion (MEXT, 2003). This basically means that universities should educate students with output-based language education to help them acquire the high English communication competence along with logical thinking skills to clearly express themselves in English. The action plan also mentions that MEXT uses TOEFL, IELTS, and TOEIC as measurement tools of English competence (MEXT, 2003).

Given this action plan, some other universities started introducing TOEIC preparation into general English education curriculum. For instance, Zushi et al. (2015) refer to an example of a prefectural university introducing TOEIC as a placement test, making it mandatory for all new coming freshmen to take the exam at the beginning of their first semester, and also take the subsequent mandatory TOEIC preparation classes. Some other colleges or universities also started introducing TOEIC preparation camps or intensive seminars besides the mandatory TOEIC classes to help students increase their scores (Chihara & Kato, 2008; Shimomura, 2015).

These two major trends are also reflected in the number of TOEIC test takers. The following chart by ETS (2015a) indicates the number of TOEIC test takers in Japan.

Year	Number of TOEIC test takers in Japan (Total of TOEIC test and TOEIC IP test)
1996	603000
1997	712000
1998 (emphasis added: policy reform was announced)	831000
1999	870000
2000	<u>1092000</u> (emphasis added: sharp increase)
2001	<u>1280000</u> (emphasis added: sharp increase)
2002	1326000
2003 (emphasis added: Action Plan was announced)	1423000
2004	1433000
2005	1499000
2006	1526000
2007	1635000
2008	1718000
2009	1680000
2010	1780000
2011	<u>2270000</u> (emphasis added: sharp increase)

(ETS, 2015a)

It is possible to observe drastic increases in the number of test takers in the year 2000 and 2001, around the time when English education policy reform was announced. Given the major increase around the time corresponding with when the policy reform was announced, it is possible to assume that more college students started taking the TOEIC test either individually or at the universities.

It is also possible to observe a sharp increase in the number of TOEIC test takers in Japan in the year 2011. Time wise, this corresponds with when the “Englishnization” of some Japanese companies was announced (Mason, 2011; Neeley, 2011). Englishnization refers to the switch of the official language for intra-corporate communication from Japanese to English, aimed at developing necessary business English skills and global competence. In 2010, two companies announced that they will “Englishnize” the companies from April, 2012. One of these companies also requires its employees to attain TOEIC 700 points, and if the employees show no progress in TOEIC scores in the two-year timespan, they will have to leave the company (Mason, 2011). These corporate situations may also push up the number of the TOEIC test takers. ETS (2015a) reports that these days many corporates tend to require their employees to have at least TOEIC

600 points even if they do not work for international/global divisions. This corporate requirement to have at least 600 points started influencing not only the general TOEIC test takers, but also general English curriculum at universities in Japan.

Score wise, Japanese test takers are still struggling on TOEIC. The average score among all the TOEIC test takers in Japan is 512, ranked 40<sup>th</sup> out of the 48 countries (Yoshigaki, 2014). Regarding the college students, 401494 college students took the test during the year 2013 (ETS, 2015a). The breakdown of the grade of these test takers are 209469 freshmen, 101562 sophomores, 66856 juniors, 23607 seniors, and their average scores are 424, 437, 473 and 503 respectively (ETS, 2015a). This number indicates that as if students were making smooth progress to increase scores along their academic paths; however, it also should be noted that the higher their grades are, the fewer the number of the TOEIC test takers are. This indicates that if the same number of seniors were taking the TOEIC test, their average score would not be very different from that of freshmen or might be lower in the worst case.

Given that freshmen's average score is 424, general English curriculum at universities in Japan is responsible to make sure that students increase their scores by 60 points every year to make sure that students attain at least 600 points before they start job-hunting in April in their senior year. Consequently, it makes sense that 70% of the universities that TOEIC Steering Committee surveyed responded that they use TOEIC score for acknowledging course credits (ETS, 2015a) to motivate students to attain the higher scores by the end of their junior year, when they start job-hunting.

### **Criticisms against teaching TOEIC preparation classes in general English curricula**

There are some criticisms against introducing TOEIC into general English curriculum at universities, and the major criticisms tend to fall into the following two categories: concerns for 1) the washback effects, and 2) the validity of the TOEIC test. This section explores these concerns raised against introducing TOEIC into general English curriculums.

Some scholars indicate their concerns for washback effects by introducing TOEIC tests into general English curriculum. Washback refers to the situations in which “tests are... perceived to influence classroom practices, and syllabus and curriculum planning” (Alderson and Wall, 1993, p. 117), and consequently the contents of the class could be “diverted from the mainstream, well-designed language classes...into unproductive, test-mimicking exercises” (Hamps-Lyons, 1998, p. 335). As a result, teachers require students to do things they would not necessarily do. In short, the concept of washback refers to the situation in which tests result in distorting the learning contents to prepare students for the tests, and students would end up learning something that is not relevant to developing English communication skills because of the tests or any other form of assessment tools. Newfields (2005) indicates his concerns that some students that are not highly motivated to study English could be further demotivated as TOEIC is too difficult for them, and therefore, they

tend to score lower than average and start regarding themselves as bad English learners. In sum, there is a concern that introducing TOEIC into general English curriculum may result in shifting general English curriculum into the overly TOEIC test preparation oriented learning contents, and consequently, has a potential risk to further demotivate students that are struggling in English classes because the contents would be too challenging.

Whereas some other scholars identify that 1) TOEIC preparation curriculum helps motivating those already with high TOEIC scores and/or those highly motivated to learn English to further brush up their English, and 2) in terms of washback effects on teaching, one third of the research respondents claimed that TOEIC had had no impact on their teaching styles (Newfields, 2005). This study result indicates that when coordinating general English curriculums that include TOEIC preparation, washback effects of TOEIC should be considered more for those less motivated in learning English to avoid negatively influencing their learning motivation.

Some other scholars also raise their concerns about the validity of the TOEIC tests. In terms of the quality of the test questions, ETS scientifically claims the validity and reliability of TOEIC as a testing instrument (ETS, 2015a). However, in terms of the limited test structure that TOEIC has historically solely measured the receptive abilities of test takers and not measured productive abilities, some scholars indicate their concerns about TOEIC as a testing instrument for English communication competence. For instance, Takahashi (2012) indicates the following three criticisms regarding the validity of the TOEIC test to measure English competence because 1) “a pencil and paper multiple choice test cannot measure communicative proficiency” in real life contexts, 2) “what is measured is only the degree of receptive skills since the test paper consists of listening and reading sections” and 3) the TOEIC test is designed based on the cognitive theories “as contrasted with more ‘communicative and contemporary theories of language’” (p. 128). Particularly, her first two points address the concerns regarding the structure of the TOEIC test that what it measures tends to deviate from the communication patterns in the actual social contexts in which test takers are expected to output in English rather than just listening and reading English conversations and/or passages.

Consequently, it is considered important to measure four skills in balance rather than measuring merely receptive skills. Takahashi identifies that “[t]esting has shifted its approach from discrete-item paper tests toward performance-based tests which focus not on what test-takers know but on what they can do” (Takahashi, 2012, p. 136). Takahashi (2012) suggests using traditional TOEIC exam, currently called TOEIC L&R—Listening and Reading—, in combination with the output-based TOEIC S&W (Speaking and Writing) exam to measure four skills in balance, which is more likely to accurately measure the English communication competence, as communication in actual social contexts tend to require communicants to use both productive and receptive skills in English. Although TOEIC S&W has a major drawback that it takes much longer to receive the score report compared with TOEIC L&R (ETS 2015b), and

therefore, it is less likely to be used as a placement test. Introducing both TOEIC L&R and TOEIC S&W, however, might be one way to make the assessment of English communication competence more effective.

### **What has been researched about how to teach TOEIC preparation classes**

Not so many researches on effective TOEIC preparation pedagogies have been conducted so far. What, however, has been found so far about how to teach TOEIC preparation classes or the impacts of these classes on student performance on TOEIC are: 1) TOEIC preparation classes are more likely to help non-English majors to score better on the TOEIC reading part than they do to English majors, 2) these preparation classes could be helpful to English majors if the instructions are grammar-focused, 3) TOEIC study camp is helpful for students to increase their listening scores, and 4) if students are non-English majors and score higher than 450, the preparation classes that let them practice taking the actual 2-hour TOEIC tests is more effective in helping them score higher than the class focused on TOEIC grammar.

Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) concluded the first point that TOEIC class tends to be helpful for improving their reading scores for non-English majors and less likely to be helpful for English majors to increase their scores, after they conducted researches with English majors and non-English majors taking TOEIC preparation classes with the same teaching contents. As a result, Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) found that “[w]ith the [English] majors, the improvement in the listening scores and reading scores was almost equal, whereas with the Non-[English]majors, there was little gain in the listening component...and a greater rate of improvement in the reading section” (p. 21). For this research, the sample were the students that took classes taught in English; however, it is reported that there was not significant gain observed in the listening section and students scored better on the reading section. Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) conclude that even if the language of instruction is English, it does not always help students to increase their listening scores as TOEIC is more focused on business communication, very different in nature from classroom English. It is also reported that these TOEIC preparation classes are likely to be helpful for non-English majors to score better compared with English majors (Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999).

Nishitani (2007) challenges what Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) concluded by pointing out that if these TOEIC preparation classes provide the grammar-focused instructions and raise consciousness about forms, they could be beneficial for English majors to score better on TOEIC grammar sections. Nishitani (2007)’s research samples are English majors, and one group taking a TOEIC preparation grammar class, while the other group taking a communicative grammar class. Nishitani (2007) concludes that in her study, TOEIC preparation classes helped even English majors to significantly improve their ability to score better on TOEIC-formatted grammar exam than English majors taking the communicative grammar class. Nishitani (2007), however, also alerts that the limitations of the study should be taken into consideration that: 1) TOEIC



preparation group has more sophomore students that are motivated to improve their TOEIC scores and concurrently enrolled in the required English grammar class, and 2) how these TOEIC preparation groups perform on actual TOEIC test is not validated by this study because of the differences in the difficulty level between the TOEIC-formatted exams used in the study and the actual TOEIC tests.

Chihara and Kato (2008) identify the effectiveness of the TOEIC study camp they planned. The camp is not mandatory, offered in Spring semester and Summer recess for the freshmen and sophomore students with TOEIC 500 or higher that are motivated to increase their scores, and the duration of the study camp is three nights four days. During the camp, the native English speaking full-time faculty members teach listening and reading sections, and the full-time Japanese faculty members are in charge of teaching the grammar sections. The classes are offered from morning hours to 9 p. m., and students have two-hour self-study time after dinner. Throughout this camp, Chihara and Kato (2008) report that students increased their scores both in the listening and reading sections; however, the score increase in the listening was greater than that of reading sections. Chihara and Kato (2008) also emphasize that the camp was aimed at boosting students' motivation by focusing on improving students' overall English competence rather than aimed merely at improving their TOEIC scores.

Shimomura (2015) compares three different types of non-mandatory TOEIC preparation study sessions he taught mostly for non-English majors and analyzes which type of study session was most effective in helping students score better on TOEIC. One study session is the weekly-based study session to work solely on grammar and reading sections, another study session is the pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session that allows students to take a two-hour TOEIC exam from the past and then take lectures on all the questions they answered, and the weeklong study session where students repeat the process of the pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session for the five consecutive days before they take TOEIC IP test. Among these three study sessions, the weeklong study sessions are open to all majors all grades, and the other two study sessions are only available for the freshmen and sophomore non-English majors. Shimomura (2015) concludes that pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study session for non-English majors was most helpful for students to score better and the average score increase among the participants was 74.4 points.

The study also found that for those who score higher than 450 points, it was helpful to attend the pre-TOEIC Saturday intensive study sessions, whereas weekly-based (only dealing with TOEIC grammar and reading sections) was helpful for those who score below 450 to increase their TOEIC scores. Similar to the Robb and Ercanbrack (1999)'s research result that TOEIC preparation classes tend to benefit non-English majors more than English majors, Shimomura (2015) identifies the similar inclination among the weeklong intensive study session participants that when taking the exact same TOEIC preparation classes, non-English majors scored approximately 17 points higher than English majors. This result suggests that for making TOEIC

preparation classes effective for all majors, the specific pedagogies that are effective for English majors require further researches.

### **Discussion and conclusion : What areas require further researches**

This paper has explored 1) how TOEIC was introduced to general English curriculums in universities, 2) major criticisms and concerns against introducing TOEIC into general English curricula and 3) researches on effective pedagogies for TOEIC preparation classes. As some scholars indicate their criticisms or concerns against introducing TOEIC to general English curricula (Newfields, 2005; Takahashi, 2012), whether too much focus on TOEIC in general English curricula is the right direction to proceed or not seems to have a room for discussion. By reviewing the literature on how TOEIC was introduced to general English curriculums in universities; nevertheless, it at least implies that the expectation for English education at higher educational institutions has very much shifted from learning English as a subject matter to mastering English as a communication tool (MEXT, 2003). To that end, although some scholars are concerned about washback effects (Newfield, 2005), studying for TOEIC does not completely deviate from the objective as TOEIC is a test to measure business English communication skills and tests some practical expressions that native speakers use in business communication (ETS, 2015b). This indicates that studying for TOEIC has a potential to help students learn vocabularies or expressions that are useful in the actual business English communication, and improve their business English competence.

Given the precedent research findings on teaching TOEIC preparation classes in general English education curricula at universities, it is possible to conclude that 1) if they take exactly the same TOEIC study session, it tends to benefit non-English majors more than English majors unless the instruction is solely grammar-focused (Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999; Nishitani, 2007; Shimomura, 2015), 2) TOEIC study camp is helpful to increase TOEIC listening scores (Chihara & Kato, 2008), and 3) if students already score 450 points or higher, a one-day intensive study session, which allows students to practice taking 2-hour TOEIC exam from the past, immediately before taking the actual TOEIC test was helpful to increase overall scores (Shimomura, 2015).

These conclusions shed light on the following areas that require further researches: 1) the kind of scaffolding or alterations of the curriculum for TOEIC preparation classes that could benefit English majors, and 2) the type of study camp that is effective for increasing the TOEIC reading part score. Further investigations of these two points would help university English faculty to develop general English curriculums or intensive study camps that are helpful for ALL majors. Given the recent intensified TOEIC requirements for students to launch their career paths after graduation, how to effectively coordinate TOEIC curriculums for all majors seems an urgent matter for the general English education curriculums to address. To that end, inquiring about what aspects of the effective pedagogies for non-English majors are not very effective for English majors

is the further avenue for investigation.

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