

TOEIC & TOEFL: A Partnership of Equals?

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TOEIC and TOEFL are commonly used tests of English proficiency produced by Educational Testing Service; however, TOEFL attracts significantly more research than TOEIC. For example, ETS has released 86 research reports into TOEFL but for the TOEIC there are only three. There is a similar lack of independent investigation into the TOEIC. This is despite TOEIC examinees now outnumbering TOEFL candidates by more than four to one. The extensive critical research that the TOEFL has attracted has helped the test to be continuously developed by ETS, who have announced that a new version of TOEFL will be launched in 2005. The new test will be an integrative test of all four linguistic skills. The TOEIC, in contrast, remains unchanged from its original format of 1979. This paper outlines possible reasons for the lack of research into TOEIC and suggests some areas of potential interest for language testing researchers to develop.

要約:TOEICとTOEFLは、Educational Testing Serviceによって作られた、英語能力を試すために一般的に使われるテストである。しかし、TOEFLに関する研究のほうが、TOEICに関するものよりもはるかに多く行われている。例えば、TOEFLに関する研究レポートは86通もあるのに対し、TOEICに関するものはわずか3通である。TOEICに対する独立した調査も、同じようにならなされていない。TOEICの受験者は、今やTOEFLの4倍以上を上回っているにもかかわらずである。TOEFLに対する広範囲で重要な研究があったことで、ETSは継続的にTOEFLを発展させてきており、新バージョンのTOEFLは2005年に開始されると発表した。この新テストは言語技能の4スキル全てを平等に試すものとなる。それとは対照的に、TOEICは1979年の原型のまま変化していない。ここではTOEICに関する研究の不足に関して考えられる理由の概要をのべ、言語テスト研究者が研究を展開できるような潜在的な興味分野をいくつか提案する。

TOEFL and TOEIC are both English language proficiency tests produced by Educational Testing Service (ETS) of Princeton, USA. ETS has recently announced that a new version of TOEFL will be launched in 2005 as an integrative test of all four linguistic skill areas. Scores will report the abilities of candidates in relation to the skills required for study at an English speaking university. This re-launch of the TOEFL marks a drastic change from the norm-referenced test of listening and reading that it once was to an apparently criterion referenced test of both receptive and productive skills. McNamara (2001, p. 2) claims that ETS started to consider redesigning the TOEFL in response to “ongoing critical discussion into the validity of the existing TOEFL.” This discussion is reflected in a brief internet search. In response to a search for TOEFL research Google returns 282,000 possibilities. *Language Testing* published eight separate articles about the TOEFL between 1990 and 2003. This critical discussion is extensive when compared with research into another ETS test; the TOEIC. Google returns only 13,900 possible sites for TOEIC research, less than 5% of that for TOEFL. *Language Testing*, the leading journal in its field, has no dedicated articles about the TOEIC. Perhaps the most telling figure

however, is for research into TOEIC published by ETS. ETS released 69 research reports into TOEFL, with an additional 17 technical reports, between 1977 and 2002. For the TOEIC there are only three full research reports. In addition there was an initial validity study in 1982 and one technical manual. This data begs the question why. Why has ETS produced 23 times more research reports on the TOEFL than on the TOEIC?

There are several possible answers. TOEIC and TOEFL were similar in many ways (Gilfert, 1995) before the Test of Written English was introduced to the TOEFL in 1996. The only significant difference was that TOEFL focused on academic English and TOEIC on the language of business and commerce (see Gilfert, 1995 for a fuller comparison of these two tests). ETS may have seen little benefit in pursuing the same degree of research into TOEIC that had already been conducted into TOEFL. Moreover, ETS' experience of extensively publishing research into their own test with the TOEFL may have caused them to question whether this process invites skepticism and further critical investigation. Shohamy (2001, p. 148) reports that "there is low trust on the part of the public with regard to research conducted by companies that also develop and market tests, in a similar way that there is research conducted by profit-making drugs companies on the drugs they produce." Whether or not this was a factor which prompted ETS to avoid publishing extensive in-house research on the TOEIC is, of course, a matter of speculation.

TOEIC came about as a result of a request by the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry to ETS (Chapman, 2004). ETS may have felt that in fulfilling the request there was

no necessity to further substantiate the test created. The most likely answer, I would suggest, lies with the nature of the end user of both tests. TOEFL scores are intended to provide a reliable measure of the linguistic competence of candidates for English speaking universities. TOEIC scores indicate the proficiency of non-English speaking employees of corporations. Many universities have the resources and expertise to investigate the claims made for the TOEFL by ETS, whereas, in my opinion, companies are far less able to challenge the validity of TOEIC. I would suggest that corporations are far less likely to have teams of linguistic and assessment specialists ready to validate the claims made about TOEIC. Many overseas students who enter a university in an English speaking country on the strength of a TOEFL score are likely to be initially enrolled in a language program. The purpose of such programs is specifically to prepare the learners for the linguistic skills required for their studies. Instructors in these programs have a clear view of the skills students come equipped with and the level they need to attain. Hence, I feel the shortcomings of TOEFL scores as a predictor of the competence required to study at an English-language medium university are more readily apparent than the problems with TOEIC. This has been acknowledged by ETS (Jamieson et al, 2000, p. 3) with the admission that "those who use TOEFL test scores in selecting students for undergraduate and postgraduate programs increasingly express concern that many international students who are admitted with high TOEFL test scores (i.e., above 550) arrive on campus with insufficient writing and oral communications skills to participate fully in academic programs." The feedback mechanism between test maker, test taker, and end user is

reasonably effective in the case of the TOEFL. This has eventually resulted in the test being redesigned to better meet the requirements of the end user; in this case, English-language medium universities.

Despite the TOEIC now having been in use for almost 25 years it has not changed at all. I would describe the test as still based on the structuralist, behaviorist model of language learning and testing that informed discrete-point testing. If ETS has accepted this model is no longer suitable as a basis for the TOEFL, why has TOEIC not been treated similarly? I suspect the lack of critical research is a major factor, along with the lack of an effective feedback mechanism from end user (corporations) to test maker. TOEIC can not have been ignored by ETS due to its minority status. More people take the TOEIC every year now than do TOEFL. In 2003 more than 3.4 million individuals registered to take the TOEIC in more than 60 countries worldwide (Chapman, 2004). This is more than four times the number that took TOEFL in the same time period. Given this importance in business terms of the TOEIC to ETS, it is perhaps even more surprising that there is no indication of TOEIC receiving the same degree of researcher attention devoted to the TOEFL.

The small quantity of existing research into TOEIC provides conflicting evidence and can be grouped into three general categories. Firstly, there are the previously mentioned research reports and technical manual published by the test producer. Secondly, there are three independent reviews of the TOEIC by Kyle Perkins (1987), Dan Douglas (1992) and Gary Buck (2001), which are mainly based on data supplied by ETS. Finally, there are a small number of studies into the TOEIC conducted with independent data

(data not generated by ETS). As may be expected, the reports financed and published by ETS (Woodford, 1982; Wilson, 1989; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1996; Boldt & Ross, 1998) provide broad support for the reliability of the TOEIC and its valid use as a direct measure of listening and reading and an indirect measure of speaking and writing.

The independent reviews by Perkins and Douglas both support the claims made for the reliability of the TOEIC by ETS. Perkins is largely supportive of all claims made for the TOEIC by ETS; however, the references he quotes in his review indicate that he only used literature published by ETS in forming his opinion. Douglas is somewhat more critical, but only in the sense of questioning the relevance of TOEIC items to the skills actually required in the world of international business and commerce. Again, Douglas does not appear to have investigated beyond the test items and the ETS reports. Gary Buck provides a balanced review of the listening section of TOEIC, being critical of the breadth of items tested but supportive of the quality brought to a relatively narrow construct. Buck claims that TOEIC does not attempt to assess inferences, “such as indirect speech acts, pragmatic implications or other aspects of interactive language use” (p. 214). TOEIC does not test discourse or sociolinguistic processing according to Buck. Given the requirements of employees functioning internationally, there are further limitations raised (p. 216), “the test is not assessing many of the oral characteristics that make spoken language unique; there is very little fast speech, no phonological modification, no hesitation and no negotiation of meaning between the interlocutors.” These are aspects of spoken language that employees working overseas are likely

to experience on a regular basis. While Buck is critical of the narrow construct employed by TOEIC, he does praise the listening items as effective for the construct measured.

It mainly requires processing sentences on a literal semantic level, and might be best described as a test of general grammatical competence through the oral mode. (p. 216)

These reviews need to be considered in the light of evidence provided by research conducted with independent data. Three reports have provided data that conflict with ETS research. Childs (1995) is very critical of the TOEIC. His independent data suggests that the reliability estimates provided by ETS are overstated. He also concluded that the standard error of TOEIC scores is greater than the published ETS figure, making TOEIC scores less reliable as a measure of individual progress as score gains tend to be within the test's SEM. Hirai (2002) also expressed doubts about the ability of TOEIC to predict individual oral and written English proficiency. In a study conducted with employees of a major Japanese company, he suggested that the TOEIC was especially unreliable as a predictor of spoken English for individuals with intermediate range TOEIC scores (approximately 450 – 650). He found that TOEIC scores had a low correlation (around 0.5) with BULATS scores; a test of writing in a business context. Finally, an unpublished MA dissertation (Cunningham, 2002) reported that the TOEIC was a very poor predictor of communicative competence and was not at all suitable for measuring gains in communicative performance. This final paper used a test battery designed by the author, and while the research should not be discounted, the fact that the TOEIC was not compared to an established

test needs to be borne in mind. Other authors (Gilfert, 1996; Eggy et al, 1997; Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999) have also used TOEIC in research projects but the conclusions they draw are either unsubstantiated (Gilfert) or not directly related to the reliability or validity of the TOEIC.

The shortcomings of both the original version of TOEFL and the current TOEIC were highlighted in the following quote:

Preoccupation with the psychometric qualities of TOEFL helps ensure good testing practices. Nevertheless, it has made the TOEFL somewhat resistant to and slow in incorporating changes that might jeopardize its high reliability standards. Also, the continued commercial success of TOEFL has contributed to its adherence to the status quo. Whereas the validity of test scores is undermined when reliability standards are not upheld, reliability documentation alone cannot make up for inadequate validity evidence. In other words, a strong reliability agenda is not sufficient to ensure meaningful inferences made from TOEFL scores. TOEFL's emphasis on scientific accuracy through its stringent reliability analyses has been done with a hazardous disregard for some aspects of validity. (Chalhoub-Deville. M. & Turner. C., 2000, p. 536)

This is now far less applicable to the TOEFL, due to its redesign, but these comments are still all too applicable to the TOEIC.

The lack of research into TOEIC is troubling in two ways. Firstly, the great popularity of TOEIC (almost 3 million

registered candidates per year) means that it is one of the most taken language proficiency tests in the world. This fact alone should attract independent researchers' attempts to verify the claims made by the test maker. Secondly, the little independent research that has been carried out has been largely critical of the TOEIC. Doubts have been voiced over several claims made for the test by ETS. This combination should be enough to spur further critical discussion into this increasingly important test. Some areas that would be of interest include:

- 1) Correlations between TOEIC scores and direct, established tests of speaking and writing to establish whether TOEIC is a reliable predictor of these skills. It would be especially useful to investigate subjects with scores around the mean TOEIC score in Japan (approximately 450).
- 2) The linguistic skills required by the end users of TOEIC. It would be helpful to know what both employees and employers require in terms of linguistic proficiency. Research could help to establish the skills required, which would act as the construct for the TOEIC. If the precise construct is unknown, it is difficult to criticize the validity of the test.
- 3) The washback effect of the TOEIC. How does TOEIC influence learner motivation and study? Does TOEIC encourage learners to develop skills that are useful to their employers? Does TOEIC affect how teachers run classes for corporations utilizing the TOEIC?

These three areas would help to guarantee the best possible test was being produced for both test takers and the corporations that are frequently paying for the TOEIC. The example of TOEFL shows that extensive critical discussion of a test can lead to consistent development and improvement of the test. The users of the TOEIC would benefit from such a discussion and the time for this to begin is surely imminent.

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