Learner perceptions of TOEIC test results and language skill improvements: "I don't want to study English, I want to study TOEIC"

Howard Brown
James English School

Reference data:

Brown, H. (2006). Learner perceptions of TOEIC test results and language skill improvements: "I don't want to study English, I want to study TOEIC". In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

In one language school, learners who participated in TOEIC preparation courses that relied on the traditional discreet point analysis style were thought to have four main problems: a lack of fit between classroom materials and actual TOEIC tests, a lack of focus on meaning, low tolerance for ambiguity, and insufficient reading speed. Discreet point analysis preparation appeared ineffective. A literature review shows several different alternative approaches in the past which had contradictory or inconclusive results. This study, focused on graded reading for TOEIC preparation, has found that it can be very effective if the learners are convinced of its value. In the study, learners initially discounted the value of graded reading. Even though learners felt the reading was improving their reading speed and fluency, they did not see a connection to TOEIC success. Learners' evaluations of the reading program improved significantly after a mock TOEIC test was administered.

　ある英会話スクールでは、通常のＴＯＥＩＣ準備クラスの生徒は練習問題の出題傾向や解答練習を中心に学習します。こういったクラスには、クラス中に回答練習する問題は実際のＴＯＥＩＣテストには対応していない、質問の意味についての学習に焦点をあてていない、生徒が質問の不明確さに慣れることができない、そしてすばやく回答する機会が与えられないといった主に4つの問題があります。ＴＯＥＩＣの質問の1つ1つに焦点をあてていては、こういった問題の解決にはなりません。これまでもいくつかのＴＯＥＩＣ準備クラスについての調査結果がありますが、どれも確固たるものではありません。この研究は、ＴＯＥＩＣ準備のためのグレーデッドリーディングの利用に焦点をあてています。生徒自身がグレーデッドリーディングがＴＯＥＩＣ学習に有効だと認識できればその効果はあると研究は示しています。研究では、生徒は読書が価値あることだとは評価していません。読書によって読むスピードが早くなり、会話が流暢になったと言っていても、そのこととＴＯＥＩＣスコアとの関係は見出していません。グレーデッドリーディングを評価した生徒は、彼らのはじめてのＴＯＥＩＣ練習テストよりもはっきりとわかる良い結果を出しています。

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is extremely popular among business people in Japan and is widely held to be *the* test for assessing business English skills. A business professional's TOEIC score is commonly used as a benchmark for promotion or even job retention. Also, despite being not particularly effective at assessing individual learner achievement over the short term (Childs, 1995), the TOEIC is regularly used as a pre and posttest for business English training sessions, sometimes lasting as short as 12 contact hours. Traditional TOEIC preparation programs focus on analysis and practice of discrete items. Students are generally happy with this approach because they can appreciate its *TOEIC-ness*. It is not unusual for a student in a commercial language class to ask for TOEIC preparation lessons saying "I don't want to study English, I want to study TOEIC." In a commercial environment, where the learners are both students and clients, teachers often face a conflict between giving the students what they need and giving the clients what they want. In the case of TOEIC preparation, the discrete item focused approach may be what the majority of clients want and ask for, but is it what the students need? Programs that focus on English skill building as a route to TOEIC success tend to be a tough sell, as learners may not perceive them as being effective. This paper explores one such alternative course, the learner's perceptions of the course, and the lessons learned in its development.

Background

The development process for this course grew out of the idea that traditional discrete point analysis TOEIC courses were not the most effective way to improve learners' TOEIC scores. Class observation and interviews with the learners in one such discrete point analysis TOEIC course conducted in a commercial environment identified four main problems with the approach.

- For low-level learners, the vocabulary and syntactical complexity of the sample problems used in class had to be controlled. Therefore, commercial TOEIC preparation texts designed for low-level learners were used in class. This led to a lack of fit with the actual TOEIC test. The students were unable to recognize question patterns studied in class when they encountered them in authentic TOEIC questions. Miller (2003), in an extensive survey of commercial TOEIC preparation materials, cited this lack of fit with actual test items as part of a general trend of low quality materials.

- The discrete point teaching led to inappropriate test taking strategies. The learners were focusing on questions as linguistic puzzles rather than looking at the meaning of the questions. This led to a great deal of test time being used to search for the answer in the words – trying to find matching key words, rather than trying to understand what the questions were asking. While this strategy may have some value on sections of the test which focus on grammar points (sections 5 and 6), it is not generally very helpful for the majority of questions on the test.

- The learners displayed a generally low tolerance for ambiguity, common among Japanese learners (Anderson, 1993). The feeling that it was necessary

to understand each and every word in a problem was common among the learners. Having a general understanding was insufficient. Strategies such as process of elimination or narrowing the field to two choices before guessing were taught but were not being used by the students. This led to inappropriate guessing strategies such as immediately answering "B" for every question that was not fully and confidently understood or, in one extreme case, simply skipping an entire section of the test because it was "too hard".

- A recurring problem for low-level learners on the listening sections of the test was not being able to read the questions fast enough to understand and answer them before the test audio had moved on. These same students reported not being able to finish the test in the time allowed because they could not read the questions fast enough. The course was doing nothing to address this issue.

To address these problems it was decided to operate on the assumption that skills-focused general English or business English classes could be as effective at improving TOEIC scores as specific test preparation classes (or perhaps even more effective). Research into this assumption in the Japanese context appears to be somewhat contradictory. Robb and Ercanbrack (1999), for example, concluded that TOEIC focused study is in fact more effective at improving TOEIC scores, but only for low-level students. Also, Cunningham (2002) found that improvements in TOEIC scores do not correlate with improvements in communicative skills, suggesting that skills-based work may not be effective for improving TOEIC scores. On the other hand, Narron,

Hirase, Minami, Takekata and Adachi (2003) found, in their work with TOEFL preparation, an "absence of any marked practical benefit in coursework specifically tailored to test preparation" (p.12). In all three cases, these studies were conducted in a university environment. No previous work was found in a commercial context.

The course

The development process started with the idea that reading was a critical skill for TOEIC success. As well as the actual reading comprehension items (20% of the test), students are required to read the grammar and vocabulary questions (30% of the test). Also, half of the listening items are based on written questions (25% of the test). In total, 75% of the test items are wholly or partly based on reading.

Three goals were set for the course. The first was to increase the learners' reading speed in order to help them keep up with the test audio and finish the test. The second was to improve their ability to focus on overall meaning in reading. The third was to improve their confidence in reading English. To achieve these goals the use of graded readers was introduced. Graded readers are known to have "four linguistic benefits: building reading speed, lexical speed access, reading fluency, and the ability when reading to move from working with words to working with ideas" (Waring, 1997, p. 4). These four benefits seem to be directly relevant to the four problems identified with the earlier test-focused approach. Thus graded reading was assumed to have the potential to benefit TOEIC students. It was also assumed that skills developed in pleasure reading would transfer to intensive, tested reading.

Because the course was conducted in a commercial environment, it was impossible to move completely away from the traditional TOEIC-focused approach. Program stakeholders on both the course provider side and the client side insisted that the program contain some TOEIC-specific elements. The graded reading program was instituted as a supplement to the existing TOEIC course. Also, at the request of the client, the original self-access extensive reading program was modified to a more controlled homework and in-class review model using class readers.

The participants

The course had a total of 25 participants divided into 3 roughly equally sized classes based on their achievement levels. The group was overwhelmingly male (23 male 2 female) and composed of university-educated technical professionals - engineers for the most part. Students ranged in age from 22 to 45. None of the participants had majored in English, though several had had experience studying English abroad for varying lengths of time. None reported previous experiences with graded reading.

The study

This study focused on students' reactions to the program. It was assumed that reading the graded readers could help the learners' improve their TOEIC score. The question being studied was whether the participants could be *sold* on the idea of reading novels as a TOEIC study tool. The rationale for this decision was two-fold. Firstly, investigating the actual effectiveness of graded reading or the transfer of skill from graded reading to intensive reading was beyond the scope of what could be accomplished in a commercial context. Secondly, and more importantly, learner affect is known to be a key factor in the success or failure of a program since it is directly connected to the learner's allocation of effort (Tudor, 2001). This is especially important in a commercial context where the learners are both students and clients. Data was collected in surveys of program participants, reading reports submitted when the students had completed each novel, and follow-up interviews based on the reading reports.

Results

Initial results were consistent with expectations regarding the learner's reactions. At the outset of the course, an information session was conducted and the course was greeted with a great deal of skepticism. As expected, the students could not see the *TOEIC-ness* of the course. Reading reports collected when the students finished their first book confirmed the problem. The average score given by students, when asked to rate the statement "Reading this book helped my TOEIC score" on a 1-5 Likert scale, was 2.1. Fully half of the students responded, "Disagree", and only one participant agreed with the statement. Interestingly, 3 statements focusing on improvements in language skills (overall improvement, reading speed, reading comprehension) were rated higher (see Table 1). An unpaired 2-tailed t-test was calculated, and the differences were found to be significant (t<0.0001, t=0.0006, and t=0.0002 respectively). This indicates a lack of connection, in the learners' minds, between improvements in English skills and

improvements in TOEIC scores. This indication was borne out by comments collected in follow up interviews with students.

Table 1. Student's reactions to graded reading

Survey Statement	Average Likert Scale Response	
	Initial	6 Month
Reading this book helped my TOEIC score.	2.1	4.1
Reading this book helped my English.	3.6	4.3
I read faster now than I did when I started this book.	3.3	4.1
I understand more of what I read now than I did when I started this book.	3.4	4.3

This lack of connection was seen to lessen as the course continued. Subsequent administrations of the same survey questions showed a much clearer understanding of the value of reading for TOEIC. Surveys conducted at the 6-month mark in the course showed slight improvements in the students' opinions of the value of reading for their overall English, reading speed, and reading comprehension. However, the connection between the use of graded readers and TOEIC score was significantly higher. The differences between the four items ceased to be significant. ($t>0.1$ in all cases). This change of attitude appears to have come about as the result of several factors.

- Bilingual course outlines detailing the rationale for using graded reading
- Mock TOEIC tests timed to coincide with the end of reading cycles
- Regular counseling and feedback sessions conducted in the learners' first language
- Reading speed self-checks using TOEIC style materials
- Brief self evaluation reading reports at the end of every book

It seems that the students were able to see improvements in their test taking abilities and their confidence in the program improved as well.

This pattern was seen to continue throughout the 2 years of the course. Incoming students consistently underrated the contribution of graded reading to their TOEIC score. Then, following their first mock TOEIC, the rating improved. Outgoing students' comments were consistently positive in their evaluation of graded reading. In fact, the reading program was seen by the stakeholders (both the course providers and the learners' employer) to be such a success that it was modified. The controlled reading and homework model has been replaced by a self-access extensive reading model in the current version of the TOEIC course. The reading element is optional but has an 80% participation rate.

Limitations

The question of the actual effectiveness of grading reading for TOEIC improvements is beyond the scope of this study. There are simply too many variables to make such a study feasible in a commercial environment. Further research is required to ascribe the improvements in TOEIC score directly to the use of graded readers. It would be interesting to track learners reading speed in both graded readers

and TOEIC materials to establish a correlation between improvements in reading for pleasure and intensive, tested reading. This could establish that a transfer of skill was in fact taking place.

Conclusions

Graded reading can be an effective tool for TOEIC study but it may not be readily accepted by many learners. Other stakeholders, such as learners' employers and school administrators, may also question the investment of time needed to make graded reading work. This study confirms that learners looking for TOEIC score improvements often do not see a connection between test scores and actual language skills. However, detailed first language course descriptions, guided self monitoring of progress, and a mock TOEIC administered soon after the beginning of a graded or extensive reading program may help learners see the connection.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to extend appreciation to the teaching and management staff of James Eikaiwa, Joetsu Branch, who made this report possible. Also, though the course participants in this study have requested anonymity for themselves and their company, they deserve thanks for allowing their learning experiences to be shared.

Howard Brown worked in commercial ESL schools for 15 years. He is currently teaching at Niigata University of International and Information Studies.

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