Renegotiating the TOEIC: A self-directed learning approach

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The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is currently the main examination used in Japan as an employment requirement and has also been used in educational settings to streamline students. For students who are non-English majors, it can be especially difficult to reach the required target set by each organization. TOEIC takers, at the institution in which this research took place, typically employed strategies of learning from TOEIC practice textbooks or from organized TOEIC lessons or workshops. Few, however, had considered how to incorporate their TOEIC studies into their daily routines or considered the effect of other types of learning on their TOEIC outcomes. A self-directed learning (SDL) model for TOEIC study was thus designed that encouraged students to renegotiate their learning goals and try a new style of learning in order to achieve their TOEIC target in a more focused manner.

The effects of SDL on students’ academic achievements have been widely investigated in research literature over several disciplines over the past three decades (see for example Savoie, 1980; Long, 1991; Darmayanti, 1994; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1999; Zimmerman & Riseberg, 1997; Hsu & Shiue, 2005; Stewart, 2007). Due to the benefits to learning outcomes described in studies such as these, there has been an emphasis in various institutions in Japan to increase access to SDL practices. SDL has been defined as “any...
increase in knowledge, skill, accomplishment, or personal development that an individual selects and brings about by his or her own efforts” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 2). In this form of study, learners are given increasingly more responsibility over the learning process, which may include working independently or interdependently with peers, using any number of resources. It is the learner’s ability or motivation to take control that determines his or her potential for SDL. In essence, then, SDL gives learners primary responsibility for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating their efforts.

At Osaka Institute of Technology (OIT), the institution in which this research took place, SDL practices have been incorporated into mainstream curriculum and learners are exposed to self-regulatory processes both through classroom lessons and advisory services in the Language Learning Center (LLC). Skills such as goal-setting, strategic planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluating learning are introduced to learners in stages in order to guide them through the process. It is expected that after being introduced to these skills, learners will eventually become more active participants in their own learning process. Test-preparation for the TOEIC examination is the main area of focus faced by learning advisors as learners try to achieve targets required by the institution and future employers.

This research is a case study documenting the SDL practices of a learner through an eight-week SDL program in which he re-negotiated study patterns and tried a new style of learning. The acronym FITE (Focus – Input – Training – Evaluation) was introduced to the learner as a SDL model for TOEIC to help him focus on specific areas of his learning, find a good balance of SDL activities and to self-monitor development as he prepared for the test. It first describes the working context, presents the model in practice, and then discusses the learning outcomes at the end of the program. The research finally concludes that whereas a program of daily study of TOEIC-specific practice exercises from textbooks was the main component in learner success, it was also essential for the student to be cognizant of strengths and weaknesses; to focus on a particular area of improvement; to expose himself to other forms of learning for enjoyment; and to self-evaluate the learning progress in order to increase overall abilities.

Working context
Students at OIT major in fields such as Engineering, Information Science and Technology, and Intellectual Property. While English is part of the curriculum, many students tend to place a high focus on English learning only when preparing for the TOEIC test. The LLC at OIT is a center built in 2011 to help encourage students to increase out-of-class learning. Three part-time learning advisors work in the center, providing advice on various language learning problems, and guiding learners through the step-by-step process of making an individualized learning plan to meet specific learning goals.

Method
In order to evaluate the SDL program in a real-life context, and obtain an in-depth understanding of how students would cope with this new approach to TOEIC learning, a multiple case study approach was considered. Three male students who expressed interest in the TOEIC SDL program were approached and asked to report on their progress over an eight-week period during the spring break. Consent to use the results of their study progress for research purposes was granted by the students, as long as pseudonyms were employed. After one week, one student did not return to the advisor and a second student failed to report in during the spring break. Thus, this study became a single-case design of a TOEIC self-directed learner over a period of eight weeks of self-directed instruction.

The student
The student in this study, Jun (pseudonym employed), was a first year student in the Mechanical Engineering Department. Previously, he had scored in the 300’s in his TOEIC, but he had never been able to achieve a higher score. Jun’s target, when he approached the learning advisor for help, was to get over 400 points. His motivation was quite low as he felt this target was unattainable, based on prior experiences. Constructivist theory (see Kelly, 1995) proposes that building meaning occurs by examining and reconstructing concepts and theories that are unsatisfactory. Thus, the learner was first asked by the advisor to examine present learning strategies, decide on an achievable target, and then renegotiate a new method of learning through the SDL program in order to achieve a higher level of satisfaction.
The SDL program

The major principles underlying the SDL program were that it was congruent with long-term self-directed practices; it was flexible in its ability to conform to different learners’ needs; and that it was involved with all aspects of the learner’s life. It was important that the learner understood from the outset that it was not homework to be decided by the advisor or a set of tasks to be completed each week by a set deadline. It was explained that the learner would control as much of the learning experience as possible; improvement would depend on how active the learner was in self-managing the learning process; and that he should try to find a greater desire for learning through his interests.

The program rested on four main components presented as an acronym which was a familiar word that students associated with TOEIC preparation – FITE:

- **Focus:** Understand your strengths and weaknesses by completing a TOEIC diagnostic test. Decide on the area(s) that you need to focus on to help you to achieve your target.

- **Input:** Find opportunities to listen to and read English for fun. Try to surround yourself with English as part of your daily life, so you can get accustomed to the speed, sound and rhythm of English.

- **Training:** It is very important to test all sections of the TOEIC. If you practice only one area, the other areas may get weaker. So, practice, practice, practice TOEIC tests as much as possible and do many exercises.

- **Evaluation:** Do a TOEIC test now and then (about 6 to 8 weeks later) to evaluate your learning plan and progress. Renegotiate your plan (if necessary).

Each component was essential to finding a good balance of study and each student’s balance was unique to his or her learning. It was explained to students that if they were going to take the test in a short time, then training was the best approach. If they had a longer time to prepare, they should find a focus area and try to improve it through strategy-training along with doing practice TOEIC exercises. If students had a significantly longer time to prepare, they were encouraged to expose themselves to English in their daily life along with TOEIC training and focusing on one particular area. By evaluating their learning plan from time to time, they would be able to check their progress.

Results

The FITE Model in action

Jun’s highest TOEIC score to date was 355. As his target was 400, he needed to improve his score by about 50 points. Although for many students, this might have seemed an easy target, for Jun, this was an insurmountable task. Although he was willing to work hard, he still showed a somewhat high level of anxiety when approaching his English learning. He initially planned to study 4 hours a week, but later changed it to 6-7 hours upon being shown learning plans of several other students who were studying between 7-20 hours a week. Jun’s initial plan for each component was:

- **Focus:** I want to improve part 7. I cannot read long sentences.

- **Input:** I will listen movies. I want to read comics in English. I will challenge difficult books later.

- **Training:** I want to get full points for Section 1. I have a vocabulary textbook for TOEIC 600 points. I will review vocabulary every day. I don’t know which TOEIC exercises to do or when to do it.

- **Evaluate:** I want to improve listening from 200 to 220 and reading from 155 to 180.

After talking with the advisor, Jun renegotiated his plan, improved his balance of study between parts 1-7, selected appropriate resources, which more closely matched his TOEIC level and started on his action plan. During the eight weeks in which Jun was involved with SDL, the institution was on spring break. Therefore, the only contact the advisor had with him was through an online group (at www.edmodo.com) in which he reported in each week about his study progress. It is interesting to note that although TOEIC studying is largely an individual activity, there appeared to be a social aspect to it, in which contact with others helped to sustain motivation. This was noted and incorporated into later advising sessions to encourage students to work together more.

Table 1 illustrates the breakdown of Jun’s eight-week SDL program.
Table 1 showcases changes Jun made week by week as he continued through the learning process. As is evident from the table, as Jun got closer to taking the self-evaluation test, he spent more time focusing on his weak points while at the same time increasing the time spent on studying for all parts of the test. For input, he decided to read his favorite manga (comic) in English in order to become more accustomed to recognizing English words in context. In weeks 2 and 3 he realized his balance of input was too high, and decreased the time spent on this. In the final week of SDL, Jun’s attention changed to solely TOEIC preparation. Thus by renegotiating the balance, he was able to manage his TOEIC study effectively.

Results of his SDL program

After eight weeks, Jun took the TOEIC test again and found that he had achieved his target of hitting 400 points (see Table 2) and gained 55 points.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>TOEIC Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0 hours</td>
<td>2.5 hours</td>
<td></td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5 hours</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
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<td>1 hour</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>0 hours</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2. Jun’s current score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test 1</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test 2</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

He posted online:

I feel like this score is good. I don’t believe this score! I want to get this score in TOEIC test. I will borrow many books and I will practice reading quickly. Long sentence question is very difficult. I review TOEIC trial test. I read long sentence again. And I write word that I don’t know. I learn word in my notebook.

The key points Jun attributed to his success were as follows:
- Find a good balance of FIT (Focus-Input-Training) to match TOEIC study schedule
- Do many TOEIC practice exercises and tests!
- Write vocabulary in a notebook and review often
- Find weak points and focus on them
- Do fun English too! (e.g. English Central or reading comics)
- Use English in daily life (e.g. edmodo.com)
- Do trial examinations to check progress
- Re-negotiate learning plan and make changes if necessary
- Find as much time as possible for TOEIC study in schedule!

Conclusions and implications

Although Jun’s success did not seem remarkable when compared to other students’ results, his achievement was significant considering that when he first entered the LLC, he was not able to speak any English as his anxiety level was so high. This research does not try to claim that the FITE model is a new or innovative method of preparing for TOEIC (see Noguchi & McCarthy, 2010; Morrison, 2011). Further, the findings cannot be generalized to larger populations; however, for a non-English major student with low motivation and high anxiety, it provided an understandable and structured model for TOEIC study.

On a personal level, Jun felt a sense of accomplishment that he was unable to achieve previously. By adding self-reflection, self-monitoring and self-evaluation practices into his learning, he was able to see progress. After the program, Jun continued his TOEIC practice by himself and in his tenth week of SDL booked another appointment with the advisor. Jun reflected on his results and noticed that although he saw improvement in his weak area (Part 7), he did not improve at all in Parts 5 and 6. In this meeting, he explained that his new focus area was increasing vocabulary.
This was a good example of his development as a self-directed learner, as Jun was able to recognize his strengths and weaknesses by himself and renegotiate his plan on his own. It also connected back to the underlying principles of the SDL program in which learning was congruent with long-term practices; it conformed to the student’s needs and interests; and English became part of daily life.

According to the research literature, highly self-regulated learners who have an intrinsic interest in tasks reported better academic results and higher self-efficacy (Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989). This has great implications for teachers preparing students for TOIEC (or any other examination ), as by helping students to restructure their learning and develop a repertoire of SDL strategies to self-regulate their learning, they will be able to manage their learning process more effectively. In particular, the following areas should be highlighted:

• Self-monitoring activities to check learning plan and learning progress
• Social activities to sustain motivation (through an advisor, teacher or peers)
• Non-traditional TOEIC resources to increase intrinsic interest in English

It should also be noted that a system such as FITE is not and should not be used as a measurement of English proficiency. Rather, it should be presented as a model in which a student can learn how to plan, reflect on and assess SDL practices. As SDL continues to be employed in institutions as a means of improving learning skills, programs such as this, which can enhance SDL skills, will help to increase learning outcomes and more importantly, assist the learner in becoming more proactive in his or her learning endeavors.

References


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1. Picture Dictionary

What is behind the flower shop?
What is beside the museum?
What is in front of the department store?
What is behind the school?
What is beside the movie theater?
What is in front of the bank?
Where is the gas station?
Where is the library?
Where is the convenience store?
Where is the police car?

2. Look at the picture above. Answer the questions below.

In the town

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

3. Appendix

ACROSS
5. a hobby using a brush and paper
6. a sport with a black and white ball
8. a fighting sport that you use your legs and arms
9. a kind of classical dance

1. a type of music that Mozart is famous for
2. a sport you do on the ice
3. like a bicycle but with one wheel
4. a sport that you use a bat and ball to play
7. a type of music famous in Jamaica
10. a sport that you use a racket and a yellow ball to play

4. Part 1: Complete the crossword.

Part 2: 1. Find the above ten words in the puzzle below.

N K I C K B O X I N G
B L Z A F T Q A O B P
A R C L A S S I C
S E W L D F O G T L H
E U N I C Y C L E L N
B H J G R S C F N E V
A F Q R F D E R N T G
L R G A I L R Z I A B
L H T P K M S U S P E
G G B H I S K A T E R
O A J Y R E G G A E E

2. How many vowel sounds does each word have? Put them into groups.

5. Unit 6: I play soccer on the weekend

6. Unit 7

When's your birthday?

January
February
March
April
May
June
July
August
September
October
November
December

T..........................
W..........................T..........................
S..................................E..........................
J..................................A..........................
M..................................F..........................
A..................................E..........................
J..................................A..........................
S..................................E..........................

7. What days are weekdays?
What days are on the weekend?
What month is your birthday?
What month is New Year's Day?
What day is it today?
What day was it yesterday?
What day is it tomorrow?

October 1st
September 22nd
May 3rd
April 12th
December 25th
February 14th
March 28th
December 31st
November 11th
September 1st
June 2nd
July 16th
December 23rd
August 12th

8. Warming-Up

Look at the list of months. Look at the list of days. Write in the missing months and days.

Look at the dates. Look at the examples, number 1 to 4. Complete the dates using st, nd, rd, or th.

1. ............................................
2. ............................................
3. ............................................
4. ............................................
5. ............................................
6. ............................................
7. ............................................
8. ............................................

9. What days are weekdays?
What days are on the weekend?

10. What month is your birthday?
What month is New Year's Day?
What day is it today?
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