

# A guide to planning and executing a TOEIC preparation course

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In response to the increasing reliance on the TOEIC as a measure of English proficiency in the private sector, many Japanese universities have begun offering courses designed specifically to raise TOEIC scores. This paper examines some of the relevant research on meta-cognitive TOEIC strategies as well as offers some practical tips for designing and teaching a TOEIC course.

日本の企業が英語能力の測定にTOEICを重要視する傾向があることに応じて、日本の大学でもTOEICのスコアを上げるための対策コースを設置するようになってきている。本論では、TOEICを受けるためのメタ認知的方略について分析しながら、TOEICコースの指導法やレッスンを組み立てるコツを紹介する。

It is perhaps an unfortunate reality that following high school, the most commonly used measure of English proficiency in Japan is the TOEIC, a standardized language test that provides no direct measure of writing or speaking. This has far reaching implications, not only on how English is taught in classrooms, but on curriculum development as well. Primarily, the need to raise student scores on this high stakes test is often far more immediate than the need to improve communicative language proficiency. At present, Japanese companies are increasingly using the TOEIC as a measure of English ability in the consideration of hiring and advancement. In response, many Japanese universities have introduced TOEIC preparation courses into their English curricula.

Designing a TOEIC course that satisfies everyone involved can be challenging. Most teachers would likely want to teach a course that raises all of the skills that contribute to English proficiency, not just those that are measured by the TOEIC. However, institutional considerations, such as recommended grading criterion or textbook selection, can also influence curriculum development. An awareness of student expectations should also play a role in designing the course. Some students might only be interested in raising test scores to improve their future employment prospects, preferring to focus on the familiar practice of going through mock test questions and memorizing vocabulary (Nishitani, 2003). All of these factors must be carefully reflected on before designing the TOEIC course. With the aim of taking into consideration the interests of all concerned parties, this paper will review relevant research and offer some practical advice on planning and executing a balanced and effective TOEIC preparation course.

## Vocabulary, vocabulary, vocabulary

Classroom focus on vocabulary acquisition has been shown to significantly improve test scores (Nishigaki & Chujo, 2005). In order to establish a firm routine for memorization, a vocabulary list should be provided, preferably one that is written in both English and Japanese. While some native English-speaking teachers prefer to focus on L2 vocabulary definitions, this can be time consuming, and research has shown that

use of L1 associative vocabulary meanings is more efficient, especially for lower level learners (Koda, 1997). Ideally, the vocabulary lists should be based on words that are likely to occur on the TOEIC, but as most former TOEIC tests are not made available to the general public, it may be difficult to obtain a corpus-based vocabulary list. Context based instruction is also thought to be helpful, and retention should be improved when unit vocabulary is organized around an overarching theme (Hunt & Beglar, 2005).

It is important for students to understand that there is no magic bullet for remembering vocabulary and that it will probably take up the bulk of their study in the course. For most, this process tends to take time and is one that favors a short, daily routine over sudden bursts of cramming. Short weekly tests can offer an incentive for students to prepare in this way. However, weekly tests must be supplemented by longer review tests, as the process of transferring vocabulary from short-term to long-term memory may require successive attempts at memorization.

Memorization tends to be an intensely personal process, and students need to develop a method that they feel comfortable with. The traditional way involves making lists or flashcards, and there are now several free or low cost online flashcard programs available for PCs and tablet devices on the market. Whatever method students use to remember vocabulary, classroom time can be spent not only testing it, but reinforcing it as well. Having students verbally test each other for a few minutes in class can help them approach the task from a different angle. Another method that has proven successful is to have students answer questions that contain their learned vocabulary, which shows how the words are used in context. One way to help in remembering difficult vocabulary is by using mnemonic devices. Students should compile a special vocabulary list for words they fail to answer correctly on their weekly tests, so that they can apply an alternate strategy for memorization that can help the vocabulary stick. Learning word derivations, rhyming the difficult vocabulary with a similar sounding L1 word or phrase, or even using vivid associative imagery can help make the process of remembering difficult vocabulary go faster (Hulstijn, 1997). Overall, slow and methodical practice, approaching the memorization process from several angles, and a repeated and a varied system of evaluating whether the vocabulary has been transferred into

long term memory should help produce strong results.

### Textbook selection

Teachers need to be aware that the TOEIC is as much a test of perseverance and concentration as it is a test of language proficiency. This being the case, students need to develop their test stamina by spending time in class reviewing practice questions. The textbook should be chosen carefully, as the practice questions available in most of them tend to be quite different from those that appear on the actual TOEIC. In an attempt to be challenging, these practice questions often include choices that are overly vague, which can end up being confusing rather than instructive. Other textbooks target a certain score and restrict questions to a correspondingly narrow range of difficulty. This does not prepare students for the varying difficulty of the test questions on the actual TOEIC. Of all textbooks, the Shin Koushiki series is the only one that contains actual questions that have appeared in former TOEIC tests.

Plodding through practice test questions can be tedious and may negatively affect student motivation. It is believed that many TOEIC textbooks do not provide enough situational context or productive activities for students (Shibata & Inoue, 2005). Moreover, there exists a legitimate concern that competition to raise TOEIC scores among institutions can cause classroom pedagogy to lose focus on the development of productive skills that are not directly measured on the TOEIC (Knapman, 2008). One strategy to help mitigate these issues is to have students discuss contexts and answers with each other before the actual answers are revealed. Students often welcome the opportunity to do this, not only because it can offer a distraction from the teacher-centered instruction that reviewing practice questions often employs, but because it also gives them the chance to explain things to each other in a way that they may find easier to understand.

Some teachers provide their students with L1 translations or explanations of listening scripts and reading questions. While this may prove comforting, the value of this practice is questionable. An important aspect of test preparation, and indeed of learning a language, is helping students learn to navigate through uncertainty, piecing together understanding by using context to guess at what they are unsure of.

## Listening section

The listening questions are undertaken based on a set audio script, so timing is not a particular issue. However, as the modalities change quickly, the greater challenge for the student is to maintain focus and to minimize question bleeding, where they get so caught up trying to determine a correct answer that it interferes with their understanding of the next question. This can prove both confusing and frustrating. It is often helpful for students to consider that trying to get every question right is unrealistic. As the average score on the TOEIC IP test (mostly university students) is 460, most test takers do not get even half of the questions correct (ETS, 2010). Those who do well on the TOEIC recognize that some difficult questions have to be guessed at and let go, and this is a skill that needs to be developed in the classroom.

More specific listening strategies require the student to be active, using any free time to look at pictures or questions beforehand. For lower level learners, the fast pace and changing modalities can lead to cognitive overload, and a common response to this is sleepiness. The best way to fight against test lethargy is to remain active, eliminating unlikely choices, and trying to estimate situational contexts of the modalities in order to activate affective schemata. Some students close their eyes when concentrating on listening questions, a practice which should be discouraged because it can lead to students falling asleep during the test.

The listening section of the TOEIC is comprised of four sections. The first section requires test takers to answer questions based on ten different pictures. During this section, students should be encouraged to use any free time they have trying to activate their situation-specific knowledge. One popular classroom activity that I have used is to have students describe the pictures to each other in English and guess at questions that they are likely to be asked. This activity not only breaks the monotony of going through test questions, but also helps students develop their speaking skills.

The second section is comprised of 30 question-response questions. An excellent strategy for this section is to have students listen carefully for *who*, *where* and *when* in the questions, as the answers can be determined more easily. If there is a *who* question, the answer often contains a person's name or a pronoun. *Where* questions often contain a place, such as the name of a city, in the answer. *When* questions often contain a

time or a date. Short dialogues usually end in questions, but not always. If the introductory statement is a comment rather than a question, then the response will often be an exclamatory sentence. While going through this part of the listening, it is often helpful to have students to write down when they hear *who*, *where*, or *when*, to help keep them active.

The third section is comprised of 30 questions based on several short conversations. The questions are written down on the test, and it is recommended that students spend any free time they have reading the questions before the audio begins. A good strategy for practicing this section is to get students to imagine where and what is happening in the situation, as this can help them make educated guesses at answers they are uncertain of. As stated earlier, it is highly recommended to have students compare their responses in pairs before revealing the actual answer.

The final section consists of 30 questions based on several short monologues. This is by far the most difficult section as these talks are often information heavy. Again, students can benefit from trying to imagine the situation in which the monologue is being presented. However, it is also important for them to try to pick out and remember any facts or dates that are presented, as this is the information that the answers will most likely be based on. Although memo taking during this section can help students develop their ability to hone in on relevant data, it should be noted that the TOEIC is the only major standardized language test that does not allow memo taking during its test. Such a practice is thought to be unfair because it offers an advantage to those with a better working memory, a construct that should not be included in the assessment of language proficiency (Sarich, 2011).

## Reading

There are 3 sections in the reading part of the TOEIC. Section 1 consists of 40 incomplete sentence questions and section 2 consists of 12 sentence completion questions. A thorough understanding of syntax can significantly help speed up the process of finding answers. Classroom time spent reviewing common word collocations, word suffixes and their relation to parts of speech, proper preposition use, and common verb forms can really help students improve their speed and understanding. Once again, there may be some tricky questions in this

section that students get stuck on, and timed practice in class can help students develop a pace that is measured without being harried. Ideally, the first two sections should be completed within 20-25 minutes, taking between 20 and 30 seconds per question.

The final section is on reading comprehension, where students are required to read one or two articles and answer questions on them. The general rule of thumb for how much time to spend is one minute per question, so an article that has three questions should be completed in 3 minutes, where an article with five questions needs to be completed in 5 minutes. A common issue among low scoring students is that they progress through the reading section too slowly and end up having to guess at several answers at the end because they ran out of time. This problem can be addressed by giving students short, timed practice sessions. It is also a good idea to advise students to bring a watch with them so that during the reading section they have a good idea of the pace at which they are progressing. Another way to mitigate the issue of timing is by helping students learn which answers should be guessed. A strategy of reducing the most unlikely answers and guessing from the remaining ones is effective, not only because it helps raise the chances of answering correctly but, because it helps reduce anxiety when students do not know the answer. Questions that require the test taker to determine what information is not present in the article can take an especially long time. As these questions require the test taker to eliminate several possibilities instead of search for just one, they are prime candidates for students with timing problems to just guess at and move on. One other difficult question type requires the test taker to supply the meaning of a certain word in the article. These questions almost always focus on a lesser known lexical meaning, one which is supplied by context. If the test taker does not immediately recognize the correct answer, it might be a good idea to have them eliminate the obvious choice and guess at the remaining ones. Remember, if the goal is to get a few more than half of the questions right, not wasting time on difficult or time-consuming questions is a better alternative than students not completing the test and having to guess at the questions that they were unable to get to.

## Conclusion

The TOEIC is a test that exerts a monumental effect on English education in Japan, and scores

on this test can significantly affect the lives of the test takers. As such, teachers can do much by helping their students understand how this test might be best prepared for. It goes without saying that motivated students are better able to retain and apply the information that they learn in the classroom. In designing a TOEIC course, a great way to motivate students is to supply them with material that they find relevant and present it in an engaging way. All of the suggested activities outlined in this article were undertaken in class and students responded very positively to them.

It may also be helpful to remind students that as a diagnostic tool, the only certain thing that can be derived from a TOEIC score is how well one performs compared with others who take the same test. There are aspects of language proficiency that are not accurately assessed by the TOEIC, and doing well on it requires several skills that are completely unrelated to language proficiency, such as the ability to concentrate and perform under severe time pressure. Overall, students should constantly be reminded that while doing well on this test may be important for their futures, achievement of a desired TOEIC score is not the end goal, but rather one short step in the long journey toward becoming proficient in English.

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