

TOEIC materials and preparation questions: Interview with an ETS representative

Keywords

TOEIC®, ELP, ETS, TOEIC® preparation, TOEIC® materials

サバティカルリープの2009年にTOEICの様々な側面を研究していたが、タイのAsian Universityでthe Center for Professional Assessmentの試験作成者の一人であるRobert Woodheadに連絡をする機会を得た。彼は、TOEICとTOEFL両方の試験作成団体であるEducational Testing Services (ETS)についても精通していて、テストの準備や題材に関するインタビューについて快諾してくれた。インタビューは、最新の受験者ハンドブックに書かれているガイドラインに関して行なわれた。インタビューの目的は、専門家に直接インタビューをすることで、試験のための準備の要点をどの程度確認でき、そしてその示唆をどの程度明らかにすることができるのかを知るためであった。

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Having been granted a sabbatical leave from teaching to research various aspects of TOEIC while at Asian University, Thailand, in 2009, I had the opportunity to contact Robert Woodhead, a test writer at the Center for Professional Assessment (Thailand). He was very knowledgeable about Educational Testing Services (ETS), the producers of both the TOEIC and TOEFL tests. He kindly agreed to be interviewed on the subject of test preparation and materials. The interview questions were based on the guidelines given in recent examinee handbooks, the aim being to see to what extent a live interview with an expert would confirm the preparation points and perhaps shed more light on their implications.

David John Wood (DJW): Is TOEIC something you can or should try to teach or prepare for?

Robert Woodhead (RW): TOEIC is a test, so preparation of the test item types cannot hurt and should in fact help. The purpose of the test is to obtain the best representation of a test taker's listening and reading ability as possible, so the more familiar a test taker is with the item types the more reliable their results are likely to be.

DJW: What new learning strategies does the new TOEIC imply?

RW: The new TOEIC does not really require any new learning strategies. The test item type changes were made to update

the test in relation to current language usage in work-related environments.

DJW: How important is studying past papers?

RW: Studying past forms of the test may help the test taker become more familiar with the test item types, but will not help in actually improving a test score or a test taker's overall proficiency.

DJW: What preparation tips can candidates get from using the TOEIC homepage?

RW: Using the *take the TOEIC Tour* link of the <ets.org/toEIC> webpage may provide new test takers with a better understanding of the test format, but nothing on that page is designed to improve overall language proficiency.

DJW: Graded readers are flooding the commercial market – is this the right way to go or are there other as good or better kinds of reading?

RW: Assuming you mean in relation to improving general reading proficiency to be measured by the TOEIC, the kind of reading activities would need to be leveled (I prefer this term to *graded* as we are always talking about proficiency levels) for purposes of either developing confidence in a student's ability (using materials at the student's current ability level) or helping the student move to the next highest level.

DJW: Many of the readers are actual British literature, often classics. Content-wise, wouldn't they be less relevant than writings relating more to the current use of language in a work-related environment?

RW: As the TOEIC is designed as a test of English used in the international workplace, I don't really think classic British literature would have all that much value. More effective materials might be written using contemporary language. Materials we have seen that have value (and remember I am an American so I tend to lean toward things I know) include magazines like Reader's Digest that contain relatively short, easy to read 1-3 page articles written at an intermediate – high intermediate language level. Some possible online sources like the Voice of America Special English materials would also be

very helpful, as they can be printed out and the audio downloaded for listening exercises.

DJW: Are any Business English materials a good source for preparation?

RW: This is a very subjective issue and depends more on how the materials are used in a teaching experience. No material I have seen is by-and-of-itself better than any other.

DJW: If any materials are potentially useful depending on their use, does it matter if they are of limited scope (such as classic British literature)? Or is a wider variety better?

RW: As I said before, the more limited the scope the less useful they would be in terms of test preparation.

DJW: Should materials include information about business culture?

RW: If the purpose is preparation for the TOEIC, then probably yes. This, like everything else, depends on the level of the student. At the very lowest levels language needs to be of a very general nature at first. As the student's proficiency improves, more targeted topical information could be included in the lessons.

DJW: I have heard several sources say TOEIC is less relevant to low proficiency students because the further below 400 points they score, the smaller their prospects of significant gain become. Would the TOEIC Bridge be a better option for them as their motivation might be weakened otherwise?

RW: There are a couple of answers to this: First, the test a person takes should generally depend on the intended use and acceptance of the resulting score. TOEIC is usually the better option for organizations wanting to measure many positions across many levels. Second, TOEIC is not really less relevant to low proficiency test takers. Expected gains from both the TOEIC and Bridge actually compare closely to each other. The issue is one of training time. Neither TOEIC nor Bridge are designed for re-testing with less than 90 – 120 hours of instruction time in between each attempt.

DJW: How about TOEFL study materials – are

any of them relevant to TOEIC?

RW: Here is another of those *it-couldn't-hurt* answers. The fact is the two tests are both proficiency tests and as such have many similarities. However, the target for each is completely different, a fact affecting test item development. TOEFL is more academic in nature and TOEIC more general/work environment related.

DJW: Is actual work experience advantageous to taking the test?

RW: From a strictly test taking point of view, no. If the position a person is in requires a lot of use of English as part of the daily workload, then that experience may have a more positive effect on test results.

DJW: Some teachers believe in focusing on the exact vocabulary – any comments?

RW: For what purpose? A vocabulary focus would be less effective than a broader preparation method. TOEIC measures holistically and does not rely heavily on specific vocabulary knowledge.

DJW: Chujo and Oghigian (2009) suggest that one approach to exam preparation is to prep students by identifying what TOEIC vocabulary is. What do you think of this idea?

RW: Usually when people talk about *focusing on exact vocabulary* they are actually talking about some form of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Our view is that these kinds of courses are more vocabulary courses and less proficiency courses. The higher up the proficiency scale a person travels the broader the range of vocabulary they will have (both in terms of numbers of words and topical coverage). The reality of TOEIC is that it measures what a person can do with the language they have (in terms of listening and reading skills) across a wide range of proficiency levels. Low level proficiency test takers with a limited vocabulary base will score low, and the higher in proficiency a person uses and controls language, the higher their score. Simply learning the words that might be in a TOEIC, however, will generally NOT improve a score if all the other aspects of language are not also developed.

DJW: What kind of videos and recordings do you recommend?

RW: Again, for what purpose? In general we find that the *Voice of America Special English* programs <www1.voanews.com/learningenglish/home> are a good source of materials for helping build effective lessons, especially at the low and intermediate levels. Moving up the proficiency scale, you could include regular VOA recordings, or use the *National Public Radio* <npr.org> readings and recordings. For TOEIC preparation purposes, video is less directly effective as the test itself does not use video as a stimulus. This does not mean that video cannot be an effective tool in a classroom, but the purpose needs to be specified.

DJW: I have been referring to the TOEIC handbook (2008) as a guide for some of my questions. The handbook singles out video as a useful means of preparation—do you think differently?

RW: I never disagree with the handbook, which in this case is encouraging learners to immerse themselves in a variety of different sources of natural language. Obviously, TV and video would be part of that process. Reading is also an especially overlooked source as it helps introduce real language use to a learner. However, movies are almost always loaded with idioms and slang, something that isn't covered in the TOEIC. Learners must be careful not to focus too much on these aspects because novice-to-intermediate levels are mostly fact based, containing *who, what, where, and when* kinds of language.

DJW: Do you think American English materials are best? I ask as the implications of *International Communication* suggests other possibilities, too.

RW: As an American, my bias is toward the things I know and am comfortable with, which tend to be American materials and sources. I am sure there are other good sources out there, I just cannot attest to them personally. More important than where material originates from or what version of English it uses is the relevance of the material to language development across a full range of proficiency.

DJW: What is the best way to prepare?

RW: Improve overall language ability. There is no easy answer to this question as the best ways to prepare for a test are as varied as the number of learning styles individuals prefer.

DJW: What are the best study materials? Do you think official materials are better, or are there any superior unofficial ones? Besides the official preparation guide, the only other that looked interesting to me was the OUP guide. Do you know of any others that I should look at?

RW: All of these questions can be answered the same way. The *OUP Tactics for TOEIC* (Trew, 2007) series are the official materials and as such are fairly effective. They are the only materials that have practice tests of any value. We have not seen any other current materials with effective practice tests. The Barron's TOEIC Test series written by Lin Lougheed (2006) is also a good teaching resource, while I am less confident that the practice tests in this series are as valuable as the general learning material.

DJW: What is the best way to self-study?

RW: First the student needs to be motivated to learn English and NOT simply to pass the test. After that I refer back to my answer on the issue of learning styles.

DJW: What would be the best way to teach TOEIC?

RW: TOEIC is a test, not a language, so *teaching TOEIC* is not really an option. The best thing to do is to teach English focusing on proficiency rather than rules or vocabulary.

DJW: Is it possible to make TOEIC part or all of a curriculum?

RW: In most places, English is already part of the curriculum. The change in the curriculum that might be advantageous would be to stress ability over knowledge.

DJW: Do you know of any successful English courses?

RW: Success can be measured in many ways, but here I am assuming you mean courses that help test takers to improve their TOEIC scores. Improvement on a TOEIC score most often

depends on where the individual is at the start of a program AND what the separation is between the Listening and Reading score. In general, the lower the starting point, the quicker the initial success in score improvement. However, this does not necessarily mean improvement to functional language ability. We tend to see individual test takers already at intermediate levels (TOEIC scores between 500–700), accomplishing improvement of their listening scores more quickly than on the reading section. That improvement is not, however, always permanent. It is our policy to NOT recommend any particular course or program, or even a general course of study until we know the starting point of an individual's language ability as measured by the TOEIC. Even then we never recommend a particular school or course as we have found that success in these programs is almost always more dependent on the individual instructor than it is on any curriculum or program type.

DJW: So, what do you think are the most important qualities of a good instructor?

RW: I'd really rather defer to teacher trainers on this as they are much more familiar with the success and failure rates of instructors. In general, however, I think a good instructor needs to be flexible, have a good sense of humor, be patient, and be as completely prepared for everything that can (and usually will) go wrong in a classroom as possible. We tend to be very strong proponents of lesson planning, lesson planning, and MORE lesson planning. We find the better prepared the instructor is to deviate (in a structured way), the quicker they can get back on track and the more useful the deviation is likely to be.

DJW: In terms of test-taking techniques, there is a pretty standard set: work quickly, don't spend too much time on any single question, return to Reading section questions later if necessary, and answer all the questions. Which are the most important and are there any others you could recommend?

RW: In terms of the Listening Section, the best advice is to NOT fall behind the audio. Test takers often focus so hard on one question that they miss the next one altogether. The TOEIC only

allows 8-12 seconds between listening section questions, so test takers who cannot answer a question should let it go as soon as they hear the prompt for the next question. For the 75-minute reading section, the best advice is to start from the beginning and be aware of the time. Test takers often try to gain advantage by starting with the last part first. They then end up spending too much time on that part and end up missing much of the earlier reading sections.

DJW: What was the purpose behind the new TOEIC? Has it been achieved, or can it be?

RW: The TOEIC revision was meant to bring the test into alignment with changes in the way language is used in the workplace today versus when the test was first developed. Also, it was done to bring the test into alignment with more recent advances in test item types. Those purposes have indeed been achieved.

DJW: How has the new TOEIC been received – is it now perceived as more difficult?

RW: The revised TOEIC is well accepted wherever it has been introduced. Beginning in 2010 it will have been introduced in all countries offering TOEIC testing. ETS went to a great deal of time and effort to ensure that the revisions did not negatively impact the test. Regarding the difficulty level of the test, it has remained equivalent to the original TOEIC. Perception of difficulty by individual test takers will vary, and while some may feel the test is more difficult, they would receive an equivalent score on either the original or revised versions.

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