

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Students' assumptions for TOEIC classes

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## Reference data:

Tokunaga, M. (2008). Students' assumptions for TOEIC classes.  
In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT 2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Recent reliance on TOEIC scores in Japan's English language education has brought debate among teachers on how or whether TOEIC preparation should be taught in universities, but teachers' and students' expectations may differ. Based on a survey of students' expectations and assumptions towards TOEIC classes and teachers, this paper will discuss how understanding the students' beliefs can help fill the gap between the teachers and the learners. This paper will also compare the skills students feel important to improve their TOEIC scores and what their actual scores show.

今日の日本の英語教育とTOEICの関連が深まるにつれ、大学でTOEIC対策をどう指導するべきか、またはTOEIC対策そのものを行うべきなのか、という点においては教員の間においても議論がなされているが、教員の考えと学生の考えとではまた異なるのではないか。そこで、本稿ではTOEIC対策に関する学生アンケートのデータをもとに、学生の期待にどう対応していくべきかを考えるとともに、学生がTOEICスコアを伸ばす為に必要だと考えているスキルと実際のスコアを比較する。

**R**ecently, an increasing number of universities seem to be requesting English teachers to improve their students' TOEIC (IIBC, 2003) scores. This may be the cause or the effect of the fact that more and more Japanese people are taking TOEIC every year. According to The Institute for International Business Communication (IIBC), which is responsible for administering TOEIC in Japan, 4.5 million people worldwide took TOEIC in 2006 (IIBC, 2007a). In Japan, the number of test takers has been increasing since the test's launch in 1979 and reached 1.5 million in 2006. Out of that, 380,609 were students who took TOEIC's Institutional Program (TOEIC IP) at their schools, and 243,376 were students, including elementary school and junior high school students, who took the regular TOEIC test. Thus, 623,985 students in Japan took TOEIC in 2006.

TOEIC is now one of the most common assessments used by schools and employers to evaluate the English abilities of students and employees. According to a survey conducted by IIBC in 2006 (IIBC, 2007b)

242 (34%) out of 712 universities and 128 (22%) out of 578 graduate schools answered that they accept students' TOEIC scores as a part of their entrance examination, and 289 (41%) of universities grant credit hours for certain scores. IIBC also reports that, out of 506 companies surveyed, 55% answered that they consider TOEIC scores when they choose new employees, and 18% answered that they would like to do so in the future. Along with the spread of TOEIC, other questions arise: Does TOEIC actually measure the students' English proficiencies? Why TOEIC and not other tests such as STEP (STEP, 2007) or IELTS (IELTS, 2007)? Should teachers teach English or test preparation? Whatever views teachers may have, the uses of TOEIC scores by universities, graduate schools and employers show that TOEIC is important for Japanese students who are studying English. Thus, to find out the students' perceptions of TOEIC and TOEIC classes, a survey was conducted. Although blindly following students' opinions is not advised, ignoring them can be a waste of valuable information. Yorio (as cited in Christison & Krahnke, 1986), after surveying 711 students in an academic intensive program in Toronto, concluded that the information from students should be taken into account when designing a language program. Valuing the students' opinions, several studies based on student surveys have been done in Japan (Shimizu, 1995; Hadley & Hadley, 1996; Long, 1997; Cutrone, 2001). As many university English programs are putting more emphasis on TOEIC, finding out students' perceptions about TOEIC and TOEIC classes could help design a good TOEIC course.

## Participants

A total of 126 students from 4 different universities were surveyed (Table 1). All of the students except the students at University C were in the author's classes, and the survey was conducted on the first day of the classes so the students did not know the author's TOEIC teaching history or her teaching style. At University C, the survey was conducted within the first month of classes. At University A, students are required to take TOEIC IP at the end of every semester. Average TOEIC score for this group and University A's juniors were taken from their TOEIC IP at the end of the semester, at the beginning of which the survey had been given. At University B, students must take TOEIC Bridge IP, which counts for 30% of their final grade, at the end of each school year. The average TOEIC score for University B's students was converted from their TOEIC IP scores according to the score comparison chart by Educational Testing Service (ETS, 2006). University C's students took TOEIC IP as a placement test before the survey was conducted. Their average score was not available, so the score reported in Table 1 is an estimate provided by their classroom teacher, based on what was known about the school's overall scores and the placement procedure. University D's TOEIC program was a special mixed major, mixed year course that the students took in addition to their regular coursework. They had taken TOEIC before the course started, but their scores had not been returned yet at the time of the survey. The 20 students in this groups included one freshman, one sophomore, 5 juniors, 4 seniors, 7 graduate students and 2 doctoral students.

**Table 1. Students surveyed**

University	Class	# of students	Average TOEIC score
University A, Freshmen	Business English I (Japanese Teacher)	60	286.7
University A, Juniors	TOEIC Seminar (Japanese Teacher)	12	318.2
University B, Freshmen	English V (Japanese Teacher)	13	TOEIC Bridge 150 (about TOEIC 470)
University C, Juniors	Oral Communication (NES Teacher)	21	Around 425
University D, Mixed	TOEIC Program (Japanese Teacher)	20	478.9

## Survey

The survey was conducted anonymously in Japanese. On the survey sheet, it was clearly stated that the survey was for research and not for testing the students' knowledge of TOEIC, and thus not to affect their grade in any way. The 10 questions and the choice of answers translated into English are listed in Table 2. These questions were chosen in order to find out what the students' opinions are on the topics that seem to be often discussed among English teachers: Is TOEIC important for our students? Should we teach English in general or teach for the test? What skills do our students need to improve their scores? Should Japanese teachers or NES teachers be teaching TOEIC specific classes? Should teachers take TOEIC? Questions 1, 6, 7, and 10 were alternative answer questions, with question 6 allowing multiple answers. Questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9

were Likert-scale questions with an even number of choices to avoid students choosing “the middle option as a way to avoid taking a clear stand on the topic” (McKay, 2006, p.38). Questions 8, 9 and 10 also asked why the students had chosen their answers, and provided some space for written comments.

## Results and implications

### *Question 1: Students' TOEIC experiences*

At the time of the survey, all the students except University A's freshmen had taken TOEIC before. This question was asked to see whether having taken the test before might affect their responses in some of the questions. Although University A's freshmen's responses showed some differences from other groups, they may have been affected by their previous education as they have similar opinions with the other freshmen group (University C) in some questions. This point will be discussed further in each appropriate section.

### *Questions 2 and 3: Significance of TOEIC*

Figures 1 and 2 show the results for Questions 2 and 3. While Question 2 asked the importance of TOEIC to students themselves, Question 3 asked whether the students thought TOEIC was helpful in getting a job. While 94% of the students answered Strongly Agree or Agree to Question 3, 85% did so for Question 2. Thus, there was almost a 10% difference between these 2 questions, and it seems that some students believe that TOEIC may be helpful in getting a job but not personally useful.

Table 2: Survey questions (Translated from Japanese)

Questions	Answer choices			
1) Have you ever taken TOEIC?	Yes		No	
2) Do you think TOEIC is important for you?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3) Do you think TOEIC is helpful in getting a job?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4) Do you think studying general English will improve your TOEIC score?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5) Do you think it is necessary to study for TOEIC using TOEIC materials?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6) What skills do you think are important to improve your TOEIC score? (multiple answers)	Listening	Reading	Vocabulary	Grammar
7) What skill do you think is the most important to improve your TOEIC score?	Listening	Reading	Vocabulary	Grammar
8) Do you think Japanese teachers who teach TOEIC classes should have experience in taking TOEIC?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
8) Why?	space provided for comments			
9) Do you think NES teachers who teach TOEIC classes should have experience in taking TOEIC?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
9) Why?	space provided for comments			
10) Do you think TOEIC classes should be taught by Japanese teachers of NES teachers?	Japanese Teacher	NES Teacher	Either	
10) Why?	space provided for comments			

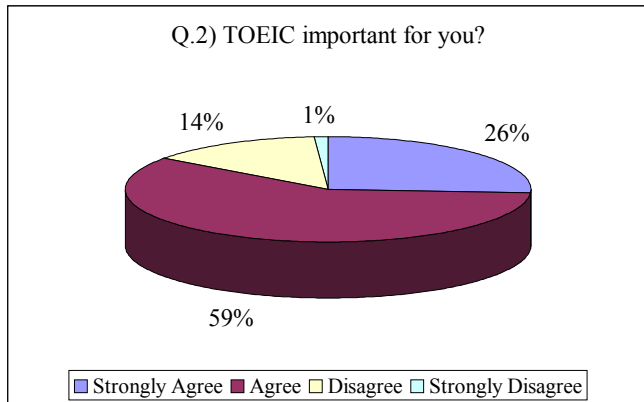


Figure 1. Results for Q. 2

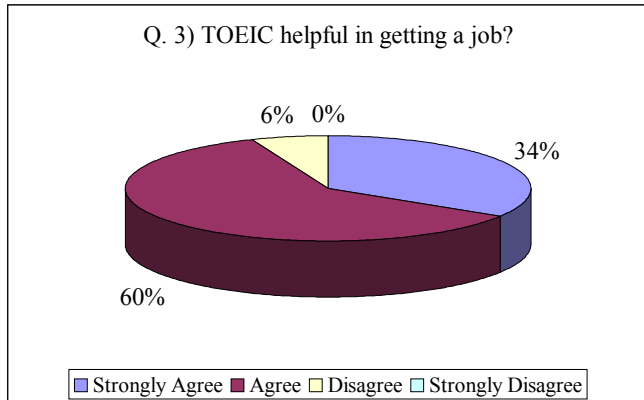


Figure 2. Results for Q. 3

Figure 3 shows the percentages of students who answered either Strongly Agree or Agree to Question 2 in each group. Looking at the 5 groups separately, groups with lower average TOEIC scores have less percentage of students who feel TOEIC is important for themselves than groups with higher average scores do. That seems natural as the students with low TOEIC scores may not be thinking about applying for jobs that require English abilities.

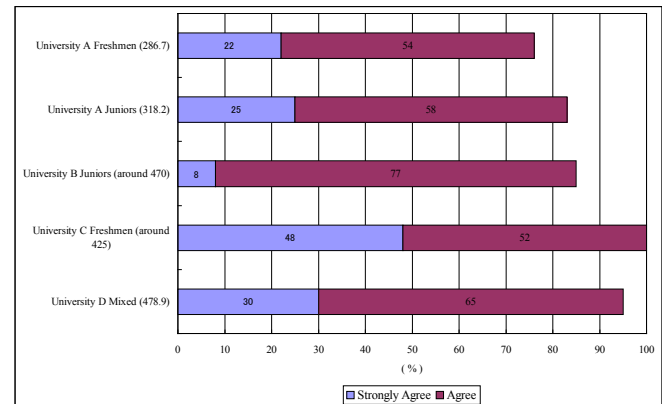


Figure 3. Results for Q. 2 by groups

When the students do not believe that TOEIC is important for them, and if the stakes are not high, teachers cannot force students to study for the test. Despite the growing interest in TOEIC by universities and employers, TOEIC is not for everybody. However, there are some students who fail to realize they need TOEIC until they are ready to look

for a job or move on to graduate school, and they won't have enough time to improve their scores. Students tend to assume that English qualifications are not necessary if they are not English majors. However, the companies that specify TOEIC scores criteria for employment or promotion decisions are not necessarily directly linked with English. They are, for example, the IT industry, electronic industry, car industry, food and beverage industry, and music industry (Three Sisters, 2005). Saegusa's study (as cited in Trew, 2006) reported that improving TOEIC scores by 100 points requires about 200 hours of studying. High scores on TOEIC cannot be achieved by "a short intensive cram session" and requires "an extensive vocabulary, highly-developed listening skills, and a solid grammatical model" (Trew, 2006, p.7). Thus, it is important that the students be well informed about TOEIC when they come to university and be aware that what they hope to do in the future, either getting a job or going on to a graduate school, might require a certain TOEIC score, for which they need to start preparing well in advance.

#### Questions 4 & 5: General English or TOEIC specific English

Figure 4 shows the percentage of students who answered Strongly Agree or Agree for Questions 4 and 5. While the majority (97%) of the students Agree (72%) or Strongly Agree (25%) that they need to use TOEIC specific materials to study for TOEIC, only about half (48%) of them believe that studying general English will improve their TOEIC scores.

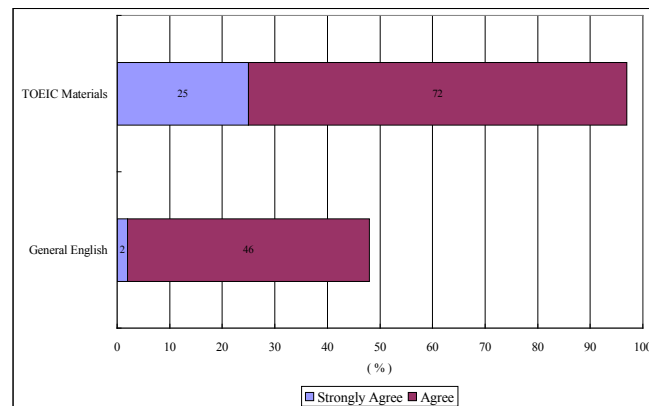


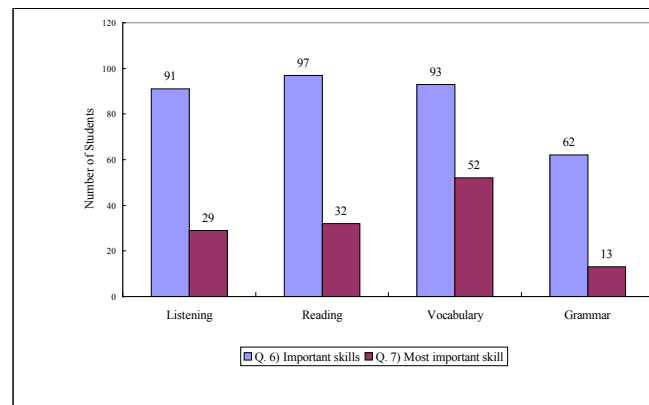
Figure 4. Results for Q. 4 & Q. 5

Just because students think it is necessary to use a TOEIC textbook to improve their TOEIC scores, that does not necessarily make this the most effective approach. TOEIC is a test of communicative English ability. Studying for TOEIC by using well-designed TOEIC textbooks exposes students to a lot of authentic listening and reading materials that they might encounter in the real life, such as airport announcements, weather reports, news, e-mail, letters, employment ads, itineraries and invoices. This means that studying general English, using similar materials, should lead to improved test scores. However, the problem is that Japanese students are used to studying for exams using past exam questions. Universities publish their old entrance exams, Center Test questions get released on the internet, and there is a special section in book stores for qualification exam textbooks. Of course, TOEIC has its own extensive

section. Thus, when 97% of the surveyed students believe that it is necessary to use TOEIC material to improve their scores, some use of this material would seem to be appropriate. Using the exam-specific materials can help students develop familiarity with the test, which can lead to improved performance (Wharton, 1996). Teachers may believe that studying general English would help improve students TOEIC scores as well as, or even better than using TOEIC specific materials. However, when the students don't share the same opinion, it is our responsibility to explain that to them, so that the students do not have to worry and look for some other means to study for TOEIC. When students are evaluated by an external test, "the challenge for the teacher is to respond both to the broad goal of helping students to learn more, and to learn more effectively, and to the specific goal of helping them to pass the exam" (Wharton, 1996, p.155).

### **Questions 6 and 7: What skills are important to improve TOEIC scores?**

Figure 5 shows the results for Questions 6 and 7. Even though the students were allowed to check more than one skill as important for Question 6, only 62 (49%) thought grammar was important. Although this was a surprising result, it may be because the students feel they have studied enough grammar before they started university. The greatest number of students chose reading (97, 77%), then vocabulary (93, 74%), and listening (91, 72%). When they were asked to choose one most important skill in Question 7, 52 (41%) chose vocabulary, 32 (25%) chose reading, 29 (23%) chose listening, and only 13 (20%) chose grammar.



**Figure 5. Results for Q. 6 & Q. 7**

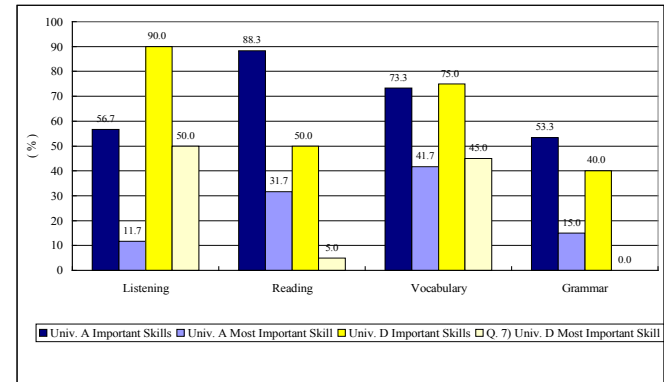
When the revised TOEIC test was introduced in Japan in May 2006, the score report was also redesigned. In addition to the listening score, the reading score and the total score, now the report also shows "Abilities Measured" which are the percentages of correctly answered questions, not for each part of the test, but for 9 specific categories of abilities. The description of each category is written in Japanese on each score report (ETS, 2007), and Table 2 shows the English translation by the author.

**Table 3. Abilities Measured**

<b>Listening</b>	1. Able to infer the overall meaning, key points and intentions from the clearly stated information in short conversations, announcements and narrations.
	2. Able to infer the overall meaning, key points and intentions from the clearly stated information in longer conversations, announcements and narrations.
	3. Able to understand the details of short conversations, announcements and narrations.
	4. Able to understand the details of longer conversations, announcements and narrations.
<b>Reading</b>	5. Able to infer from the given information in the passage.
	6. Able to find and understand specific information in passages and documents.
	7. Able to relate scattered information within one or more passages and documents.
	8. Understand vocabulary.
	9. Understand grammar.

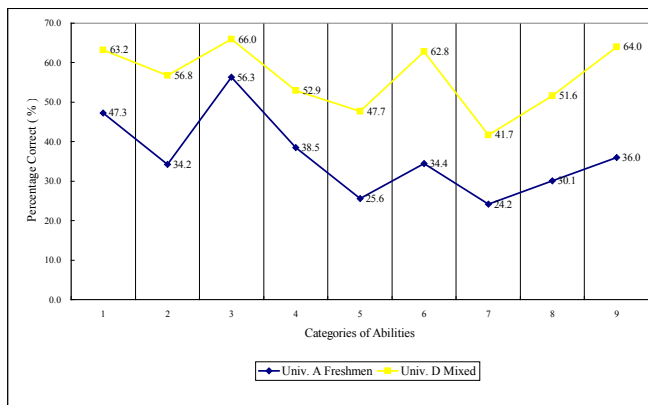
As the author had access to the full score reports for students at University A and University D, University A's freshmen and the University D's students' opinions on what skills are important and their abilities measured were compared. At the time of the survey, University A's freshmen had never taken TOEIC, and University D's students had taken the TOEIC, but not received results. Figure 6 shows what skills University A's freshmen and University D's mixed group students thought important, and Figure 7 shows their abilities measured. Because these two groups did not take the same TOEIC IP, the abilities measured cannot accurately be compared against each other. However, within

each group, it is possible to see which categories had higher percentages of correct answers than other categories.



**Figure 6. Skills Thought Important by Univ. A Freshmen and Univ. D Mixed Group**





**Figure 7. Abilities Measured for Univ. A Freshmen and Univ. D Mixed Group**

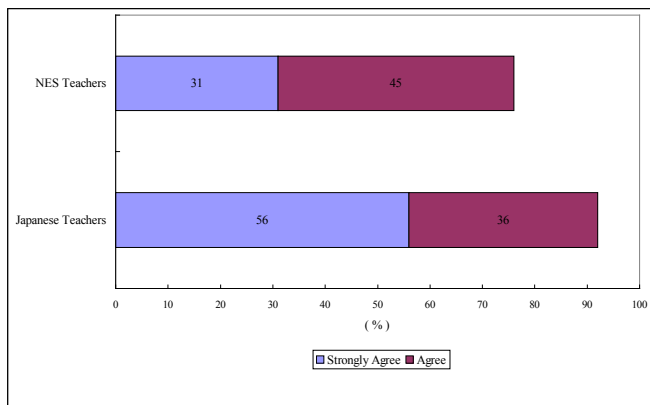
The results show that more of University A's freshmen thought that listening and grammar were less important than reading and vocabulary. It is interesting to see that, even though their scores are low (average 286.7), their abilities measured show that they have higher percentages of correctly answered questions in listening, especially short passages (categories 1 and 3). There is a big difference in University D. More students in University D's mixed group thought listening was the most important, while only one student (5%) chose reading, and none chose grammar as the most important skill. Interestingly, the percentages of correctly answered questions in their reading (especially category 6) and grammar (category 9) are quite high.

It is surprising that the students actually had an idea of what they need to work on. The results seem to well-reflect the students' study background. University A's freshmen are younger, and they probably had more listening practices in high school than University D's older students as a listening test was introduced to the National Center Test for University Admissions in 2006 (NCUEE, 2007). This change was announced in June 2003, when these freshmen were in the last year of junior high school, meaning that their high school English classes were designed to prepare them for the new entrance examination with the listening test. Cheng (1998) describes a similar situation in Hong Kong where the use of group discussion in the classroom showed a significant increase when this task type was introduced in a modified high-school exam curriculum, supporting claims of a washback effect on the content taught in the classroom.

On the other hand, University D is a very prestigious public institution, and the students had to have a strong knowledge of English, especially vocabulary and grammar, to pass entrance exams. From these survey results, it appears that a needs analysis to determine what students feel they need to work on can be helpful. Also, if the teacher has access to the students' full TOEIC scores, paying attention to the new Abilities Measured section seems essential if they were to help students with areas they need to improve. Going over this section, in addition to the actual scores, with the students could help the teachers decide what skills to emphasize in classes and help students feel assured that what they are studying is important for them.

**Question 8 & 9: Teachers should take TOEIC?**

Figure 8 shows the percentage of students who answered Strongly Agree or Agree to questions 8 and 9. While 92% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that Japanese teachers who teach TOEIC should have experience taking TOEIC, 76 % of the students said the same for NES teachers.



**Figure 8. Results for Q. 8 & Q. 9**

For these questions, the survey provided spaces for students to write their reasons, and most of them gave written explanations. The students' responses were written in Japanese, and they were translated into English by the author. Since many of the comments were similar, only a sample of responses is listed here. Those listed were chosen by the author to represent the varieties of reasons. Students' opinions are somewhat harsher toward Japanese teachers than toward NES teachers.

Some of the reasons for which the students thought the Japanese teachers should have experience in taking TOEIC are listed below.

- If the teacher has no experience taking the test, the students cannot ask questions with confidence. Also, the teacher cannot teach with confidence.
- TOEIC requires some technique, and the teachers need to know it from the experience.
- It is wrong to teach something you have no experience in.
- Teachers without experience lack conviction.
- TOEIC is different from everyday conversations. There are no trick questions in everyday conversations.
- I don't think the knowledge alone can prepare students for the test. The teachers also need experience.
- Learning TOEIC from a teacher who has never taken TOEIC is like learning architecture from somebody who is not an architect.
- Teachers should not teach something they are not sure of. That would make students nervous.
- It is meaningless to learn from somebody who does not know about TOEIC.

Some of the reasons for disagreeing are as follows.

- As long as the teachers knows what kind of questions will be on the test, that's good enough.
- Being good at English is enough.

- As long as the teacher knows how to teach, it won't be a problem.

Although the students were more lenient towards NES teachers, the students who do agree that NES teachers should have experience in taking TOEIC have strong opinions.

- Being able to speak English and teaching it are completely different things.
- Some NES teachers do not know grammar.
- Even if the teacher's English is perfect, if the teacher does not know well about TOEIC, he/she cannot teach strategies for the test.
- TOEIC has its own characteristics, and the teachers can learn them by actually taking the test. Then, with that information and experience, they can teach their students well.
- It is not possible to understand and then teach the time management of the test if the teacher has never taken the test.
- People's knowledge on their native languages can sometimes be vague.

Some of the students who disagreed gave the following reasons.

- Because it's their native language.
- NES teachers do not have to study English.
- NES teachers do not have problem with listening.
- Because I want to learn listening from NES teachers.

- Teachers with better TOEIC scores are not necessarily better teachers.

Should the teachers take TOEIC? Taking the TOEIC alone will not make better teachers of English, and it is not argued that better scores mean better teachers. However, taking tests involves test taking knowledge in addition to the subject knowledge (Hughes, 2003), and according to the written responses from the students, they are expecting to learn this from their teachers. While it may be possible to teach test taking strategies by learning from textbooks written by experienced test takers, first-hand knowledge acquired by taking the test would seem on the face of it to lead to better understanding of the test.

The author has an attendance/comment card in all her classes and the students write comments or questions after each class. While students make comments on certain activities, ask specific questions on materials covered in that class, and seek for advices on general English studies, many have asked for details and author's personal opinions on TOEIC:

- Do you think the new TOEIC is more difficult?
- Do you finish all the questions in time? Should I finish all the questions?
- What's the difference between TOEIC IP and TOEIC?
- Can I use TOEIC IP score for job applications?
- I get better scores on TOEIC IP than the regular test. Why do you think that is?
- What is the good enough score to put on the resume?

- Is it true that I should do part 7 before part 5?
- Have you ever seen somebody getting caught for writing on the test-book?
- What happens if I forget an ID?
- Do I get to go to the bathroom?
- I heard that they are adding speaking to TOEIC. Is it true?

If students are in a TOEIC preparation class or they are required to take TOEIC by the university, it is natural that they ask these questions and expect the teachers to have answers. While teaching English, not test preparation, should be the priority of English teachers, providing students information they seek should also be important. When the majority of students feel that the teachers who teach TOEIC classes should take the test, and some of them say that they have a hard time trusting teachers who haven't, taking the test seems to be the easiest solution.

### Question 10: Japanese or NES teachers?

Figure 9 shows the results for Question 10. For this question, there seemed to be a difference between the response of first year students and the older students, so the results are divided in two. Out of the 126 students, 81 of them were freshmen. Among the 81 students, 31% said TOEIC classes should be taught by Japanese teachers, 27% said NES teachers, and 42% said either. Out of 45 students who were older, 65% chose Japanese teachers, 9% chose NES teachers, and 27% said either.

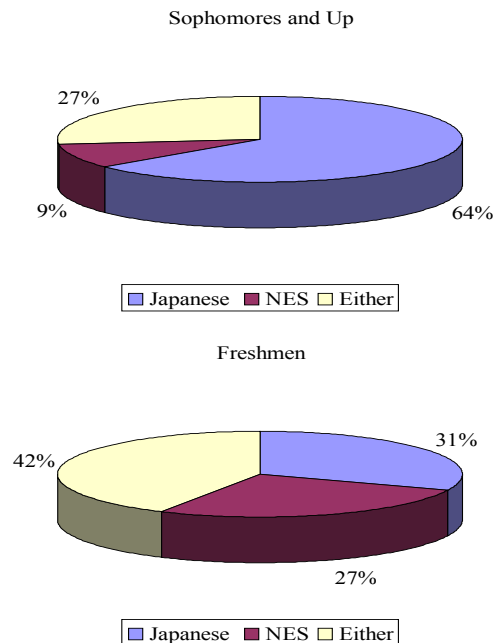


Figure 9. Results for Q. 10

The survey also asked the reason for this question, and similarly, most students provided their reasons for their choices. Their answers in Japanese were translated into English by the author. Some students who chose Japanese teachers gave the following reasons.

- Japanese teachers teach me how to study.
- Japanese teachers understand what is difficult for Japanese students.

- Like I won't be able to teach Japanese to foreigners, the way native English speakers deal with English is different from how Japanese students do.
- To learn a foreign language, it is better to learn it from a person who has the experience of learning it.
- Because I have more problems with the reading section, I want to learn from a Japanese teacher.
- I may not understand all the explanations by a NES teacher. If it's a conversation class, I would prefer a NES teacher.
- If a student does not have a good listening skill already, listening to a NES teacher does not make much sense. And in that situation, I don't think the student's listening would improve either.
- It is easier to ask questions to Japanese teachers.

Some reasons for choosing NES teachers are as follows. The list is short because most of the students who chose NES teachers had similar reasons.

- Being able to listen to a native speaker will help me improve my listening skills.
- Even if a Japanese teacher's English is very good, it is not as good as a native speaker's.
- So that I can learn pronunciation and natural phrases.
- Because TOEIC is similar to everyday English.
- So that I can improve my listening skill and vocabulary.

Finally, the students who chose "either" explained as follows.

- I want to learn grammar from a Japanese teacher, and listening from a NES teacher.
- Teaching abilities depends on each teacher, regardless of the teacher's native language.
- If the teacher is a good teacher, students' scores will improve.
- If a teacher has the ability to teach the technique for the test, it does not matter.
- What is important is how enthusiastic and understanding the teacher is toward the students, not the teacher's native language.

One possible reason why the older students prefer Japanese teachers could be that, after several years of university studies, they have found that it is not very easy to study English in English, especially when difficult grammar and reading is involved. On the other hand, as stated above, younger students might have experienced more listening practice in high schools and are more confident about taking classes from NES teachers. As some students wrote, a teacher's native language is not the most important factor when choosing a good teacher. However, with 80 students out of 126 (63.5%) preferring either NES teachers or Japanese teachers for TOEIC classes, it is clear that the majority of the students believe that NES teachers and Japanese teachers are not the same. Shimizu (1995), after surveying 1,088 Japanese college students, found that NES teachers and Japanese teachers are perceived differently by

the students: while Japanese teachers are valued more for scholarly skills such as intelligence and knowledge, NES teachers are valued more for personal characteristics such as friendliness. There are some advantages and disadvantages being either Japanese or NES teachers, and in ideal situation, there should be a good balance between the NES teachers and Japanese teachers (Medgyes, 2001). At some schools, students have one Japanese teacher's class and one NES teacher's class each week. In that situation, the teachers should understand what the students are expecting from each teacher and maximize their strengths. However, when the students have only one teacher, the teachers need to focus on their weaknesses. Asking the students what they feel lacking or gaining by having a NES teacher of a Japanese teacher can be intimidating, but the information is useful in maximizing the strength and working on the weaknesses.

### Conclusion

Until recently, TOEIC seemed unconnected to universities' English language education. Students would go to language schools if they wanted to prepare for TOEIC. English classes at universities were mostly conversation lessons with NES teachers, and/or reading and grammar classes with Japanese teachers, with no specific common goal. Now many universities are using TOEIC to assess their students' English proficiency, with 479 universities conducting TOEIC IP in the 2006 school year (IIBC, 2007a). The more important TOEIC has become for the students and the universities, the more pressure is put on teachers. Despite resistance from teachers and the question of the appropriateness of TOEIC (Chapman & Newfields, 2008), the fact remains that many

students are required to take TOEIC by their universities and prospective employers. The survey results show that whether or not students believe TOEIC is personally important, they know that TOEIC can help get a job, and they feel that they have to study for the test to achieve good scores. Also, the students have high expectations for their teachers to know about the test so they can learn test taking strategies in addition to improving their English skills. What the students think may sometimes be misguided, but knowing what they believe need to work on and what they expect from TOEIC classes and the teachers should help teachers and universities improve their TOEIC classes.

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