

# Renegotiating the TOEIC: A self-directed learning approach

The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is currently the main examination used in Japan as an employment requirement and in several institutions, to streamline students. For non-English majors, it can be especially difficult to reach the required target set by each organization. A self-directed learning model for TOEIC study was thus designed to encourage 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 acronym FITE (Focus – Input – Training – Evaluation) was used to help students focus on specific areas of their learning, find a good balance for their self-directed activities and self-monitor their development each month as they prepared for the test. This study follows the progress of a lower-proficiency level student who was struggling to achieve his target. After eight weeks of self-directed learning, he showed gains in both reading and listening scores. The research concluded 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 students to be cognizant of strengths and weaknesses; to focus on a particular area of improvement; to expose themselves to other forms of learning for enjoyment; and to self-evaluate their learning progress in order to increase their overall abilities.

TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication)は現在、日本で雇用に必要な条件として、また教育機関における学生の効率的なランク付けのために、使用されている主要な試験である。英語専攻でない学生にとって、企業や学校の定める必要スコアに到達することは大変である。そこで本論ではTOEICのための自主学習モデルを考案した。それは学生に学習到達目標を再設定させ、より集中的に学ぶTOEICの目標スコアに到達できるように、新しい学習スタイルを取り入れさせるものである。ここでは、「Focus(重点の絞り込み) – Input(インプット) – Training(演習) – Evaluation(評価)」の頭文字を取ったFITEというモデルを使用した。これは学生がTOEICの勉強をする際、ある特定の学習分野に重点を置き、自主学習行動の適切なバランスを発見し、毎月自らの進歩を自己観察することを促すものである。本論では、目標達成に努力していた習熟度の低い1人の学生の進歩を追った。8週間の自主学習の後、この学生はリーディングとリスニング両方のスコアを伸ばした。結論として、TOEICに特化した練習問題テキストの日々の学習が学習者の成功の主要因である一方、学生が自分の得意不得意を認識し、特定分野を重点的に改善し、他の学習形態への挑戦を楽しみ、学習進度を自己診断することも、総合力強化のために非常に重要であった。

Tanya McCarthy

Osaka Institute of Technology

**T**he 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](http://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. Jun's weekly plan

Week	F	I	T	E	TOEIC Score
				2 hours	355
1	1.5	0 hours	2.5 hours		
2	2.5 hours	4 hours	1 hour		
3	2 hours	3 hours	2 hours		
4	2 hours	1 hour	4 hours		
5	3 hours	1 hour	3 hours		
6	2.5 hours	1 hour	3.5 hours		
7	3 hours	1 hour	2 hours		
8	3 hours	0 hours	4 hours		
				2 hours	410

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 2. Jun's current score

	Listening	Reading	Total
<b>Test 1</b>	200	155	355
<b>Target</b>	220	180	400
<b>Test 2</b>	240	170	410

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

- Darmayanti, T. (1994). Readiness for self-directed learning and achievement of the students of Universitas Terbuka (The Indonesian Open learning University). *Unpublished Master's thesis*. The University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.
- Gibbons, M. (2002). The self-directed learning handbook: Challenging adolescent students to excel. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hsu Y., & Shiue, Y. (2005). The effect of self-directed learning readiness on achievement comparing face-to-face and two-way distance-learning instruction. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 32(2), 143-155.
- Kelly, G. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs*. New York: Norton.
- Long, H. (1991). College students' self-directed learning readiness and educational achievement. In H. B. Long & Associates (Eds.), *Self-directed learning: Consensus and conflict* (pp. 107-122). Oklahoma, OK: Oklahoma Research Center for Continuing Professional and Higher Education of The University of Oklahoma.
- Morrison, B. (2011). Self-directed learning modules for independent learning: IELTS exam preparation. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 2(2), pp. 51-67.
- Noguchi, J., & McCarthy, T. (2010). Reflective self-study: Fostering learner autonomy. In A. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2009 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 160-167). Tokyo: JALT.
- Savoie, M. (1980). Continuing education for nurses: Predictors of success in courses requiring a degree of learner self-direction. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 40, 6114-A.
- Schunk, D. H., & Zimmerman, B. J. (1997). Social origins of self-regulatory competence. *Educational Psychologist*, 32, 195-208.
- Stewart, R. (2007). Investigating the link between self-directed learning readiness and project-based learning outcome: The case on international masters students in an engineering management course. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 32(4), 453-465.
- Zimmerman, B. J., & Kitsantas, A. (1999). Acquiring writing revision skill: Shifting from process to outcome self-regulatory goals. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91, 1-10.
- Zimmerman, B. J., & Risemberg, R. (1997). Becoming a proficient writer: A social cognitive perspective. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 22, 73-101.
- Zimmerman, B. J. & Schunk, D. H. (Eds.). (1989). *Self-regulated learning and academic achievement: Theory, research and practice*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

**Tanya McCarthy** is currently employed as a senior lecturer/learning advisor at Osaka Institute of Technology. Her research interests include self-directed learning, self-directed professional development, self-access and the cognitive processes of advisors. She can be contacted at <mccarthy@rsh.oit.ac.jp>.



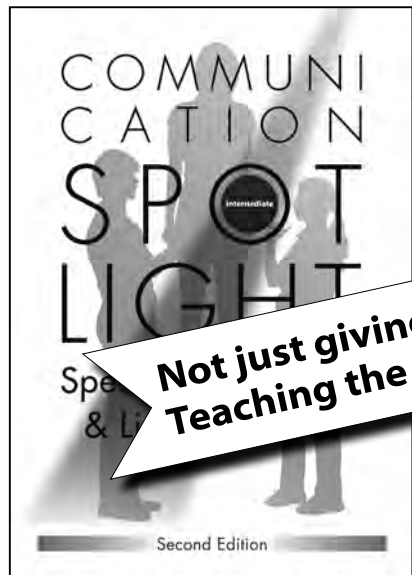
# Communication Spotlight: Speaking Strategies & Listening Skills

## 2nd Edition

by Alastair Graham-Marr

Now in 4 levels!

For college level students +



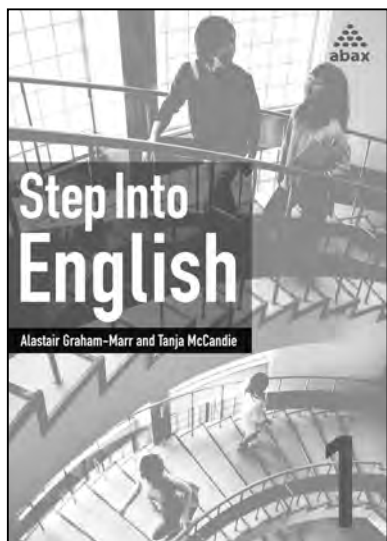
**Not just giving practice (though there's plenty of that).  
Teaching the hows of speaking, the hows of listening.**

- **Intermediate**  
(978-1-896942-67-4)
- **Pre-Intermediate**  
(978-1-896942-66-7)
- **High Beginner**  
(978-1-896942-65-0)
- **Starter**  
(978-1-896942-64-3)

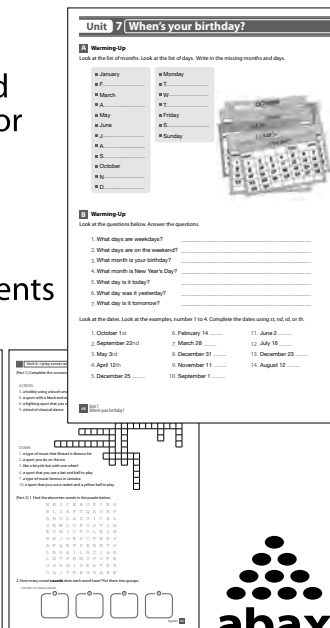
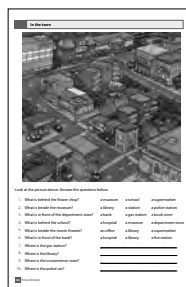


# Step Into English

by Alastair Graham-Marr and Tanja McCandie



- Gaining confidence in speaking and listening. A two-level series for junior high and high school students.
- Show your students how to listen!
- Patterned practice to get your students talking right away!
- Includes an appendix of extra activities and a picture dictionary.



● 1 (978-1-896942-44-5) ● 2 (978-1-896942-59-9)



For more information: [www.abax.co.jp](http://www.abax.co.jp)  
or write us at [sales@abax.co.jp](mailto:sales@abax.co.jp)