

Genre Features of the Listening Texts in the TOEIC®

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Reference Data:

Yasunaga, A. (2014). Genre features of the listening texts in the TOEIC®. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Using the theoretical framework of active listening and fluency development, a study was conducted on the listening passages of Part 3 and Part 4 in the officially authorized TOEIC® test exercise book by Educational Testing Service (ETS). The goal was to identify genre features of the test items and to suggest effective teaching methods to boost university students' scores on the test. Genre features are important for establishing the formal schema of the texts because the schema helps to activate shared background knowledge of the text, which is an integral aspect of active listening (Rost & Wilson, 2013). Results of the study indicate that prototypical features in Part 3 are problem–solution structure and discussion, and the structures appearing most often in Part 4 are explanations and directions. It is suggested that through genre-oriented listening instruction, students can develop engaged processing of meaning and train listening fluency.

本論では、積極的な聴解と流暢な聴解力（聴解力の発達向上）の理論（Rost & Wilson, 2013）を応用し、TOEIC®テストの開発団体であるEducational Testing Serviceが発行した『TOEIC®テスト新公式問題集』のリスニングセクションのパート3とパート4のテキスト分析を試みた。研究の目的は大学生のTOEIC®テストのスコアを伸ばすために、リスニングセクションのジャンル形式を確認し、効果的な聴解指導について考察することである。ジャンル形式は形式スキーマを確立する上で重要であり、形式スキーマはテキストに関して話者と共有する背景知識を活性化し、積極的な聴解を促すことを可能にする。テキスト分析の結果、パート3では問題提起と解決及びディスカッションの構造が顕著であり、パート4では説明と手順を示すテキストが極めて多かった。研究結果から、ジャンル重視の聴解指導を通じて、意味理解の活動に深く関わり、流暢な聴解力を伸ばすことができると推測される。

THE NEED to help Japanese university students to get higher scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC®) is on the rise. Because many business enterprises have adopted the TOEIC test for evaluating new employees' communicative ability in English, many universities offer TOEIC test courses to help students to apply for qualified employment. In response to this growing need, a text analysis was conducted to identify genre features of the listening passages in the test. The data for the analysis are taken from the officially authorized textbook, *TOEIC® Test New Official Exercise Book, Vol.5 (2012)*, by English Testing Service (ETS)—the test organizer—in order to ascertain the reliability of identical text features of the test.

Genre analysis of the texts in the TOEIC test has not been conducted before, and most research related to the TOEIC test has been conducted in terms of vocabulary. As a result, many textbooks titled as *TOEIC Test* on the market contain differing text features and rhetorical



organization—in particular for Part 3 and Part 4—because it is difficult to define linguistic items (e.g., the content, the speech event, the context, etc.) identical to those that appear in the actual test. The aim of the study was to examine genre-related text features in Part 3 and Part 4 of the listening section in order to suggest effective listening methodology for the test.

Rost and Wilson (2013) described the term *active listening* for effective listening instruction. Active listening refers to enhanced engagement in listening through attending to a range of cognitive as well as affective activities to promote “engaged processing” (p. 1). Another key element for successful listening is developing fluency in listening. Fluency in listening refers to an increase in the ability to process rapid stretches of language quickly and almost “*automatically*” (Rost, 2014, p. 225, italics in original). To deal with the natural speed of spoken language in the test, students must have sufficient opportunities to develop fluency in listening. In later sections, methodological approaches applying the terms *active listening* and *fluent listening practice* will be discussed.

Listening Section of the TOEIC Test

The listening section of the TOEIC test is comprised of four parts—a total of 100 questions. The test employs multiple-choice questions for each part. Part 1 consists of 10 picture description questions; Part 2 is a set of 30 questions or statements and responses; Part 3 includes 30 questions, 10 short conversations between two people with three questions per conversation; and Part 4 consists of 30 questions about 10 short talks, each spoken by one person, with three questions per talk. The entire listening section lasts 45 minutes.

An important characteristic of the listening section is an increase in the difficulty of Part 3 and Part 4. In Part 1, the texts are short and simple. In Part 2, the texts are still short, but they contain a lot of idiomatic expressions in which subtle meanings

are implied. In Part 3 and Part 4, the passages become longer and more complex. The items in those parts require test takers to answer questions not only about the particular information that is directly stated in the passage but also about global information (e.g., the context and the purpose of the passage) that is implied in the discourse. In addition, these sections require the integration of reading and listening skills, as the multiple-choice sentences are written on the test sheet and the test takers must read the sentences to choose the correct answer.

Importantly, the proportional weight of parts 3 and 4 is high, accounting for 60% of the total listening section; therefore, students’ success in getting correct answers on these parts significantly influences their final score on the listening section. In an unpublished pilot study I conducted in 2012 using the TOEIC practice test in the exercise book published by ETS, the percentages of the students’ correct answers in Parts 3 and 4 were found to be consistently lower than those in Part 1 and Part 2. Considering the proportions and the complexities of the linguistic elements, teachers must instruct students effectively on those sections in order for the students to obtain higher scores; for example, above 500 or 600. Genre analysis of the test items is necessary to provide better and more effective listening instruction.

Genre Features

Genre features include distinctive text features in overall organization and structural moves of the text. The Sydney School—the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) camp—has extensively researched discourse structures across genres. In the SFL camp, for example, Martin and Rose (2008) documented organizational features of families of genres. In their book, *Genre Relations: Mapping Culture*, they compiled a list of four genre families: stories, histories, reports and explanations, and procedures and procedural recounts. In the story genre, structural features of

various kinds of stories (e.g., recount, anecdotes, narratives, and news stories) are described, and in the history genre, biographical recounts (telling life histories) and historical accounts are included. In the report genre, expositions, discussions, challenges, and explanations are described.

Labov and Waletzky (as cited in Riessman, 2008) described the prototypical structure of narrative form in everyday conversation. It involves an abstract (summary of the story); orientation (to time place, characters, situation); complicating actions (unfolding complicating events); evaluation (where the narrator communicates emotions about the event); and finally, resolution (the outcome of the plot). However, the above typology of genres is wholly text-oriented and genres are classified by prototypical organizations.

Genre specialists claim that a defining feature of genre is having communicative function in a particular context (see Swales, 1990; Johns et al., 2006). Swales described the notion of *discourse community*, which is comprised of members who share common goals and make use of regular inner group communication to achieve those goals, and importantly, use agreed prototypical genres to accomplish effective communication. Examples of discourse communities are those who read and contribute to scholarly journals, magazines, newspaper editorials, and so forth. Most genre researchers now acknowledge that genre study is not confined to a style or text type, nor to a situation in which it is used; rather, genres construct a functional relationship between the types of texts and the situation. The discourse and the situation are intimately connected to each other to realize communicative function (Coe, 2002).

The notion of communicative function is important because the communicative event significantly influences the types of the texts and the organization of discourse. For example, in the discourse community of a news report, the purpose of the report might be to give information on a particular occurrence; based

on the information, the reporter may suggest or encourage particular concepts, actions, or processes. Thus, for genre research, three components are considered to be important: the context in which communication is realized; the purpose of communication; and the role of the speaker and the audience (Hyland, 2003; Johns et al., 2006; Swales, 1990).

In short, different genres are repeatedly used for communicative purposes in a distinct discourse community to achieve a shared communicative goal among the members using prototypical text. Additionally, instruction on genre features improves comprehension of the whole text, because genre features include not only linguistic text items or the styles of the texts, but also embody functional means of communication.

The Study

The aims of the study were twofold: In the search for effective listening instruction for longer texts in Part 3 and Part 4 of the TOEIC test, (a) the organization of the listening passages in the official TOEIC exercise book published by ETS was examined, and (b) based on the analysis, methodology and instructional approaches for those parts were explored, applying the key implications from active listening and listening fluency. The study was aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. What genre features appear in the listening texts in Part 3 and Part 4 in the official TOEIC exercise book authorized by ETS?
2. Based on the results of the analysis, what types of listening instruction could be effectively implemented in the TOEIC course?

The data for genre analysis are taken from the listening parts in *TOEIC® Test New Official Exercise Book Vol.5: "The Answers & Explanations Edition": Answers, Explanations, and Transcripts of the TOEIC Practice Test (1) & (2) in TOEIC® Test New Official Exercise*

Book Vol. 5 (ETS, 2012). The textbook contains two complete sets of the TOEIC practice test, which include the following.

- Part 1: Two sets of 10 picture description questions.
- Part 2: Two sets of 30 sets of a question or a statement and responses.
- Part 3: Two sets of 30 questions for 10 short conversations by two people with three questions per conversation.
- Part 4: Two sets of 30 questions for 10 short talks by one speaker with three questions per talk.

Part 1 and Part 2 were excluded from the analysis because the sentences do not entail genre-specific features; thus, only the texts from Part 3 and Part 4 were analyzed in terms of semantic organization across the beginning, middle, and ending of each item.

Results

In Part 3, the most frequently appearing structure was the *problem–solution pattern*. This pattern generally orients the listener to a specific context or place from the outset, then unfolds complicating problems or unforeseen circumstances, and finally presents a resolution for the problems. The sequence of structure resembles what was called the narrative form by Labov & Waletzky (1967), although the texts are dialogically constructed. Following is a conversation that exemplifies the common problem–solution pattern:

This is David Manning in room 417. I checked in about an hour ago and it's much too warm in my room [orientation]. I tried adjusting the air conditioning but it doesn't seem to be working [presenting a problem].

I'm very sorry about that, Mr. Manning. If you'd like, I can move you to a different room [proposing a solution].

There's one down the hall from you that's being cleaned right now, so it should be ready in a few minutes.

Thanks, that'd be great [evaluation]. Should I come down to the front desk? (ETS, 2012, p. 19)

In the above conversation, the first speaker presents a context—a report of an unusual circumstance, i.e., the problem of the air conditioning. Then the respondent suggests a solution—changing his room to down the hall. The multiple-choice questions for this conversation ask whether the test taker can get the gist of the conversation: what problem the man asks to be resolved and what the woman tells the man to do.

The second most frequent type of conversation was that of *discussion*, which is used to open up conversation by initiating a discussion to get ideas from the respondent. An example of a discussion is the following:

Our apartment-rental service is really starting to grow. Last month we placed more new tenants than ever before [orientation]. I've been trying to think of ways to keep this trend going—any ideas? [eliciting ideas]

Well, so far the advertising we've done in newspapers has been really effective. Maybe we could go a step further and make a video ad to put on the Web—it could feature testimonials from clients who've found housing through our services [offering ideas].

That's a great suggestion [evaluation]. Why don't you bring this Web video idea to the whole team at next week's staff meeting? [suggestion] (ETS, 2012, p. 24)

The purpose of discussion is to create new ideas by sharing thoughts and opinions with other persons. The questions for discussions like the one above ask test takers whether they

understood the new ideas shaped through discussion or not. In the above example, the question asks what the man suggests the business do.

Other text patterns were much less frequent compared to the above two text types. Other types included having an interview, placing an order, and checking progress. Table 1 shows the number and type of texts that appeared in Part 3. The conversation pattern that most frequently appeared in Part 3 was that of problem–solution, followed by discussion.

Table 1. The Types and Number of Texts in Part 3

Type of text	Number
Problem–solution	14
Discussion	3
Interview	1
Placing an order	1
Checking progress	1

In Part 4, the following text types were found: telephone messages, news reports, event announcements, commercial advertisements, and excerpts from workshops or tours. Table 2 shows the number of each text type.

Table 2. The Types and Number of Texts in Part 4

Type of text	Number
Telephone messages	7
News reports	4
Event announcements	3
Commercial advertisements	3
Excerpt from workshop or tour	3

The texts were evenly distributed in Part 4, and all had shared organizational patterns; namely, describing explanations and directing actions. For example, the texts in Part 4 typically first orient the audience to the particular context of the talk (e.g., a speech event, an arrangement to be made, introduction of a tour, a workshop, etc.), then explain why the occurrence happened or what the consequence of it was, and lastly suggest or encourage the audience take a particular action or describe specific activities, with or without steps, that explain how to do the processes. The components of the above text structures involve orientation, explanation, and information about procedures (what or how to do something). The following excerpt from a radio broadcast exemplifies the structure:

This is WST Radio's Samuel Kane with your weekend traffic report. The roads in the area are already busy [specify the context], all because Colfer Street is closed today for the Madison Heights Food Festival. There are booths selling food from local restaurants all along Colfer Street [causal explanation], so you'll have to follow detours to avoid that part of town. If you're planning to attend the festival, it's a good idea to take the city bus that leaves from the public library every half hour [directing the action]. It'll drop you off right near the festival. (ETS, 2012, p. 28)

The speaker in the above text first orients the listener to the context, Colfer Street, and explains why the street is busy and what the consequence of this is—the street is closed and all drivers need to detour to avoid the street. The speaker then gives directions to explain how drivers can reach the festival. The common feature in most passages in Part 4 was the explanation of causal or consequential details of a particular occurrence; 18 talks (90%) in Part 4 included some explanations about a particular situation. However, the most significant feature was

direction of actions or procedures: 16 talks (80%) involved some form of directions for a particular action, for example, how to participate in an event or an activity, how to take an advantage of something (e.g., bring a ticket to get 10% discount), how to arrange a dispatch, and so forth. Only four talks out of the total did not describe what and how to do an action; those were news reports, tour guidance, and so forth. Importantly, almost all questions for Part 4 asked what actions were suggested in the passage for the listener to do. From the analysis, it seems obvious that test takers need to understand (a) the particular context of the talk, (b) causal or consequential explanations of the occurrence, and finally, (c) actions and procedures the listener is directed or encouraged to do in the text.

To summarize, in Part 3, the prominent text structure was that of the problem–solution pattern, in which the speakers unfold unforeseen circumstances or problems and demonstrate a solution or a suggestion to solve the problem. Short talks in Part 4 typically oriented listeners to a particular event or a context, explained causal or consequential details of the occurrence, and encouraged or directed the audience to do specific actions, sometimes with steps that explained how to do the processes.

Discussion

As for the first research question, the prominent text features in Part 3 and Part 4 of the official TOEIC exercise book are outlined in Table 3.

It should be noted that although the genre features in an exercise book might not be identical with those in an actual TOEIC test, from my personal experiences of taking and proctoring the TOEIC test numerous times, I believe that the results appropriately illustrate the features of rhetorical organization appearing in the test.

Table 3. Common Genre Features Across Parts 3 and 4

Part	Macro-structures	Micro-structures
3	Problem-solution structure	Orientation
		Presenting and/or elaborating a problem
	Discussion	Suggesting a solution
		Orientation
4	Explanation	Eliciting ideas
		Providing ideas
	Directions	Evaluating ideas
		Orienting to a context
4	Directions	Explaining causal and/or consequential details of a particular situation
		Directing particular actions and/or how to do processes

Identifying genre-specific features and rhetorical organization significantly improves the way educators can structure instructional approaches. The knowledge of prominent rhetorical organization helps learners to build formal schema (Rost & Wilson, 2013)—the way information is organized (e.g., cause and effect or problem and solution structures). This kind of knowledge helps test takers to anticipate where and when the essential information likely appears in the flow of a discourse structure. To some degree, difficulties in aurally comprehending a stream of oral discourse are that, whenever the listener mishears or fails to catch several key words, he or she often loses track of the text, because being aware of having failed to catch a few key words causes a significant cognitive and affective burden. However, by knowing the formal structure and organization of the text, listeners may be able to stay on track

even if they miss some words. In short, the formal schema helps test takers retrieve rhetorical organization based on their learning experience, and by doing so, they are more likely to follow the whole text, even if they miss some key words in the middle of the listening text.

As for the second research question—effective instructional approaches for Part 3 and Part 4—genre-oriented instruction seems to be effective. The aforementioned listening texts—problem–solution, discussion, explanation, and directions—have genre-specific structures (e.g., orientation, elaborating a problem, suggesting a solution, etc.) and linguistic devices that signal the discourse structures. Through the text analysis done, the following instruction can be suggested: First, teachers should teach the overall organization of the prominent genres explicitly; and, for the next step, students must train their listening comprehension using prototypical texts. If the students are not exposed to prototypical texts repeatedly, activating the formal schema of the texts seems to be unlikely; students need repeated practice in order to learn to comprehend the central meaning of identical texts and develop fluency in listening.

The important skill for comprehending passages in Parts 3 and 4 is skill in *inferencing*. Parts 3 and 4 require the test takers to infer meaning that is only implied in the texts. In other words, students must identify the context of a particular spoken text—for example, where the speech is mostly likely taking place, who the speakers are, and what the purpose of the speech is. All of these components correspond with the term *discourse community*. In order to grasp the implied meaning of the texts, students must activate *shared background knowledge* with the speakers (Rost & Wilson, 2013). Shared background knowledge refers to common ground between the listener and the speaker, which is mutual cognitive space with the speaker of the text. The prior activation of the similar cognitive space is a key implication of active listening: Without activating common cognitive ground, the listener cannot fully understand the message.

One way to promote activation of shared ground is to implement lexical priming during pre-listening tasks. Lexical priming refers to previewing key vocabulary in the passage, which stimulates the students to predict the context, the speakers, the purpose, or even the sequence of the discourse. For example, if the context is a conversation between a clerk and a customer, the names of the things, adjectives, verbs and activities, and so forth are taught before listening. This allows students to anticipate the organization and the content of the text using both the formal schema and real-world knowledge. The students can also discuss their prediction of global meaning (what the text is about) in groups, basing the predictions on key words, thereby enhancing engagement while listening.

Another way of activating prior knowledge is previewing the questions about the listening passage. By previewing the questions, students can create space for expectations and purposes—the gist of the information and the concepts they should be alert for during listening. Expectations and purposes are linked to one another and associated with a listener’s active participation in listening (Ur, 1984). Together with lexical priming, previewing the questions enhances the degree of active listening. Table 4 describes genre-oriented instructional approaches.

Table 4. Genre-Oriented Instruction

Instruction	Activities
Teaching genre-specific organizations	Conduct explicit genre instruction and teach rhetorical organization and the sequence of discourse.
Activating shared background knowledge	Pre-teach lexical items to get a big idea of the text. Preview questions for the listening passage and predict the sequence of discourse.

I conducted a pilot study (unpublished) of genre-oriented listening instruction in 2012. It was conducted with Japanese 1st-year to 4th-year university students attending a TOEIC course. The students' level of English proficiency varied from below 400 to over 700 on the TOEIC test. In personal conversation, a student whose score was over 700 commented that the explicit instruction on prominent genre features and the structures of the text significantly helped him to grasp what information he needed to be alert, and thus he was able to enhance his score. In contrast, a student with a score below 500 commented that she was so focused on listening to bits of connected words in trying to make meaning of the text, she was unable to activate the formal schema while listening to the passages. In a summative questionnaire on the course, over 88% of the students evaluated the genre-oriented listening instruction as either *very helpful* (40%) or a *little helpful* (40%), although 17% of the students perceived it as *not helpful*. From personal conversations and the comments in the questionnaire, it is fair to assume that genre-oriented instruction has the potential to expand listening instruction of the test course significantly.

To summarize, explicit teaching of genre features (e.g., rhetorical organization of the text) helps students to anticipate how the discourse is organized and where the central information is likely to appear. Furthermore, in order to understand the main idea of a listening passage, activating shared background knowledge is key. To achieve active listening, lexical priming and previewing questions significantly contribute to the activation of students' background knowledge.

Conclusion

Currently, TOEIC textbooks are widely available on the market; however, most textbooks focus on teaching points for listening that include sound perception, grammar, vocabulary, and test strategy training (e.g., avoiding distracting words that have

similar sounds in the question). The most common problem of those textbooks is that they utilize various different features of the texts for Part 3 and Part 4. In order to boost test scores, however, students should be familiar with the prototypical text structures. The problems that might affect the scores on the test are not only sound perception or vocabulary per se, but also unfamiliarity with the typical rhetorical organization in the passages. Grammar- and vocabulary-oriented listening instruction is widely conducted in TOEIC courses, and those are a basis for successful aural comprehension; however, in order to comprehend the central meaning in a stream of spoken language, students must learn formal organization of the texts: how the typical spoken discourse is organized, and what the text is about. In particular, this is important for second language learners if they must comprehend spoken language in which text patterns are different from those of their first language.

The study aimed to identify prototypical text structures in the listening section of Part 3 and Part 4 in the officially authorized TOEIC textbook. Through the study it was found that in Part 3, the problem–solution pattern was the most prominent text pattern, followed by that of discussion. Second, in Part 4, the prominent patterns were explanations of a particular situation and directions explaining how to do an action. From the results obtained, it is clear that instructors should teach not only vocabulary and grammar but also those prominent rhetorical organization, because the formal schema helps build mutual cognitive space with the speaker of the text, and through training in listening comprehension, students can develop fluency.

Applying the term of active listening, the following three instructional approaches are suggested: First, the teacher should teach the prominent genre features for Part 3 and Part 4. Second, the teacher should preteach key lexical items and have the students activate shared background knowledge of the text and predict the topic, the context, the speakers, or even the sequence

of the discourses. Lastly, students should preview the questions for the listening passage, thereby creating space for expectation and purpose for listening and alerting them to the information they should listen for.

Bio Data

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