

An Overview of the Issues on Incorporating the TOEIC test into the University English Curricula in Japan

TOEIC テストを大学英語カリキュラムに取り込む問題点について

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Abstract: The TOEIC test, which was initially developed for measuring general English ability of corporate workers, has come into wide use in educational institutions in Japan including universities, high schools and junior high schools. The present paper overviews how this external test was incorporated into the university English curriculum, and then examines the impact and influence that the test has on the teaching and learning of English in university. Among various uses of the test, two cases of the utilization will be discussed; one case where the test score is used for placement of newly enrolled students, and the other case where the test score is used as requirements for a part or the whole of the English curriculum. The discussion focuses on the content and vocabulary of the test, motivation, and the effectiveness of test preparation, and points out certain difficulties and problems associated with the incorporation of the external test into the university English education.

Keywords: TOEIC, university English curriculum, proficiency test, placement test

要約: 企業が海外の職場で働く社員の一般的英語力を測定するために開発された TOEIC テストが、大学や中学、高校の学校教育でも採用されるようになった。本稿は、TOEIC という外部標準テストが大学内に取り込まれるに至る経緯を概観し、テストが大学の英語教育全般に及ぼす影響および問題点を考察する。大学での TOEIC テストの利用法は多岐に及ぶが、その中で特にクラス分けテストとしての利用と単位認定や成績評価にこのテストのスコアを利用する 2 種類の場合を取り上げ、テストの内容・語彙、動機づけ、受験対策の効果などの観点から、外部標準テストの利用に伴う困難点を論じる。

キーワード: TOEIC、大学英語教育カリキュラム、実力テスト、クラス分けテスト

1. Background of the TOEIC Test

1.1 Socio-economic pressure on English education

The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) test is an English proficiency test for the speakers of English as a second or foreign language developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the same organization which creates the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test. The test was initiated at the request of the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry. Historically, the

reasoning for launching the TOEIC test was the social need of Japan to build a workforce with sufficient English communication skills to compete in international business settings. Instead of the TOEFL test, which was used as a major English proficiency measurement at that time, the business world searched for a reliable test that can measure business people's English ability at all levels on one scale, at a low cost and in a short period of time. As the global standard for assessing English proficiency for business, TOEIC test scores are used by over 10,000 companies, government agencies and English language learning programs in 120 countries.¹

According to the report by the Institution for International Business Communication (IIBC), an institution which promotes and administers the TOEIC test in Japan, in 1979, the first year that the test was administered, approximately 3,000 people sat for the test. The number of test-takers has increased steadily since the initial year, and in 2009 it reached 1,680,000 including 761,000 people who took the TOEIC official test and 919,000 who took the TOEIC IP (Institutional Program).

Starting as a tool to measure English proficiency levels for assigning or hiring Japanese business persons, the TOEIC test has spread over the world, and it is now the most influential test in Japan not only among business people (both employers and employees), but the test is also used at educational institutions. The IIBC publishes the data and information regarding the TOEIC test including numbers of test-takers, average scores, profiles of the test-takers, etc. every year. According to the 2010 data,² 245 out of 736 universities use TOEIC test scores as evidence for English proficiency for admission requirements or application qualification, and as many as 305 universities issue a certain number of credits based on TOEIC test scores exempting students from sitting in class.

The use of the TOEIC test scores for university admission purposes seems to have had a considerable impact on formal education at the level of high school or even junior high schools. In 2010, the total number of schools that adopted the TOEIC test was 850.³ This number includes high schools and junior high schools by more than 30%. This popularity of the test at the level of secondary education can be seen as a natural consequence since those institutions that engage in the secondary education in a large part are responsible for preparing their students for university. Given that a certain test score on university entrance examinations may position their students for better future career opportunities, it naturally follows that the educators help the students do well on the test and take measures in order to equip them with skills they need to achieve higher scores.

It is clear that behind this prevalence of the test exists a kind of pressure onto university English programs from the business world which needs workers proficient in English. Economic globalization necessitates not only international corporations but also small- or medium-sized Japanese companies based in Japan to recruit university students who possess workable knowledge of English. Moreover, Japan's weakening economy could be partly responsible for the increase in this pressure. Companies which have to cope with economic recessions want to recruit more proficient university graduates without spending as much money as they did on in-house English training before the recession.⁴ Just as high school encourages students to study for the TOEIC test in order to prepare them for university entrance examinations, universities hope to equip their students with better scores for job placement. The current popularity of the TOEIC test in universities, in one sense, should be seen as a reflection of voices from the Japanese business world, and for another, of universities' responsibility to meet such social needs.

1.2 Necessity of English measurement tools

It would be too myopic, however, to attribute the cause of the popularity of the TOEIC test to the critical and pessimistic view that university education is subsumed under the pressure from the business world. Universities have their own cause to find an objective measure to self-inspect and overhaul their EFL programs. Goal setting and evaluation are a crucial matter at every corner of educational contexts, but English education in Japan in general is in lack of clear goal setting. The Course of Study, the national syllabus by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), provides goals of English courses for junior and senior high schools, but the statements are general and almost vague except their emphasis on the importance of fostering the attitude that students participate in communication in English (Takahashi: 2009). In this regard, it seems useful to consider how an external English proficiency test such as the TOEIC test was brought into educational contexts.

To the author's knowledge, it was *A Strategic Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities"*⁵ announced by MEXT in 2002 in which Japan for the first time referred to externally-administered English proficiency tests as goals of teaching English at junior and senior high schools. In this plan, specified proficiency targets for junior and senior high schools were set for the 3rd grade and the Pre-2nd or 2nd grade of EIKEN (Test in Practical English Proficiency administered by the Society for Testing

English Proficiency) respectively. As for Japanese teachers of English, the Pre-1st of EIKEN, 550 points on the TOEFL test, or 750 points on the TOEIC test were set as goals. For universities, the plan states that each university should establish attainment targets from the viewpoint of fostering personnel who can use English in their work. It would be reasonable to assume that this move towards clear goal settings using specific English proficiency tests has led universities to make use of the TOEIC test, and combined with the voices from the business world, made Japanese universities “TOEIC-oriented”⁶.

Although the TOEIC test is very prevalent among Japanese universities, not all opinions of its use are positive and there is a fair amount of criticism among those engaged in English education. Some question why it has to be the TOEIC test rather than another test. Others claim that TOEIC is inappropriate because it is not academic, while other critics comment that preparing students for a specific test is not the mission of university. However, unless universities are capable of devising externally verifiable measurement tools or systems on their own, it seems inevitable to adopt some kind of externally verifiable proficiency tests in order to establish an objective assessment system.

The present paper, therefore, does not argue for or against the implementation of the TOEIC test in university curricula. The following discussion presumes the situation where universities cannot devise an externally verifiable assessment of their own, and consequently decide to adopt the TOEIC test. Problems and difficulties discussed below will not be limited or inherent to those arising from this specific test. Regardless of which proficiency test is adopted, similar problems would be observed in different degrees and manners. The point is that curriculum developers and decision makers of EFL programs should not blindly follow current trends in adopting the test a priori, but recognize both its positive and negative impact so that such English proficiency tests as TOEIC can be placed appropriately within the curricula.

2. Place of the TOEIC test in Curricula and Related Problems

Ways in which the TOEIC test is used in universities vary in a wide unpredictable range, but they can be categorized as follows: assessment of newly enrolled students, measurement of curriculum effectiveness, encouragement of students' independent studies, placement tests, requirements for credits, job-hunting support, and others (Trew:2006). In the following sections, two cases of utilization of the TOEIC test will

be examined. In the first case, the test is used as a placement test for new university entrants. The other case is one where universities require students to take the TOEIC test at the end of English courses, for example after one-semester of teaching, and use its result as a part or the whole of the student's evaluation, for example issuing credits as a certification of completing a certain unit of study. The reason for limiting the subsequent discussion only to these two cases is that those excluded, encouragement of independent studies and job-hunting support, can be considered as more peripheral than central in the ESL programs.

2.1 Placement of entrants to university

First, we must examine whether it is legitimate to use the TOEIC test as a placement test or not. The first concern is related to the test contents. Most of the test-takers who take the test for the purpose of placement are high school graduates from Japanese high schools. The settings and situations covered by the TOEIC test consist of corporate development, dining out, entertainment, finance and budgeting, general business, health, housing, offices, etc. (ETS:2006). These are clearly different from those that are covered in English curricula at high school. Then the students who sit for the TOEIC test are tested on the unknown type of questions different from those they have been exposed to in the past (Kato et. al.:2011).

Concerning the discrepancy between what is tested and what the students learned, the vocabulary covered by the TOEIC test is far exceeding the vocabulary high school graduates are exposed to before university. Nakajo and Genung (2005) show statistical evidence that only 88.7% of the vocabulary that appears on the TOEIC test is covered by the vocabulary contained in junior and senior high school textbooks. This means that the test-taker encounters one unknown word per 8.8 words on the TOEIC test text. It is commonly agreed among the researchers in the related fields that readability is assured at the 95% coverage rate, which means that the reader encounters one unknown word per 20 words. Thus, there is a huge gap between the vocabulary in the TOEIC test and the test-taker's existing vocabulary. This may lead us to assume that the TOEIC test is not recommended for the students who have just graduated from high school. It should be noted further that this coverage rate assumes an ideal student who has successfully acquired all the vocabulary taught at junior and senior high school through English text books. For the learners who rank moderately low in English proficiency at the stage of taking TOEIC, the rate of unknown words should be much higher.

It can be said, on the other hand, that assessment by means of a test that can objectively measure English communication ability such as the TOEIC test is more useful and more appropriate than the type of tests which focuses on students' knowledge of the language because communicative proficiency in English is the major concern for English educators. It should be feasible, for example, to use the TOEIC test for assessment and placement of new entrants in the cases where the teachers or curriculum developers need to roughly estimate how much English they can use communicatively in real contexts. If it is possible to measure the students' English communicative abilities, the results will provide fundamental information for the teachers or curriculum developers.

There are, however, a number of criticisms against the validity of the test as an accurate measurement of communicative abilities which can ensure the test-taker's interactions in real life contexts, mainly on the grounds that such a pencil and paper multiple choice test cannot measure communicative proficiency. It is also the common case against the validity of the test that what is measured is only the degree of receptive skills since the test paper consists of listening and reading sections. While ETS claims that the TOEIC test correlates with other oral proficiency tests, there are some research results which cast doubts on the reliability of the test as a measurement of communicative proficiency (Cunningham:2002). The fact that ETS started TOEIC Speaking & Writing Test can be seen as a sign of its shortcomings or inadequacy of the test as a measurement of communicative proficiency. According to Knapman (2008), theories of language behind the TOEIC test are cognitive, as contrasted with more "communicative and contemporary theories of language." The TOEIC test, then, should only be viewed as a reliable measurement of listening and reading skills, not as an inclusive measurement of communicative proficiency. Following these arguments, the TOEIC test scores do not seem to provide teachers or curriculum developers with sufficiently reliable information to be set on the table for designing the communicative syllabus.

By nature, validity of any test cannot prove itself on its own right, but truly depends on the purpose and the contexts where it is used. As we have seen, the vocabulary in the TOEIC test questions exceeds the test-taker's knowledge. If such is the case, giving the test to the learners who have just finished high school may result in incorrect assessment of English ability. This tendency could be stronger with the students whose general English proficiency level is assumingly low. Moreover, according to Hirai (2002) cited in Newfields (2005), the TOEIC test can distinguish

extremely high proficiency test-takers from extremely low proficiency test-takers, but it fails to distinguish intermediate levels. For these reasons, it is not effective to use the TOEIC test to place a group of students whose English proficiency is low. In another context where the entrants' proficiency is expected to drastically vary from very high to very low or their English ability is totally unknown, just as in the case of business people, it can be an effective tool for placement not as an accurate measurement of communicative proficiency but as a reliable measurement of listening and reading skills. Which tests or methods to use for the purpose of placing the students depends on institutional decisions, but those decisions must be well-grounded on justification on their own.

2.2 Course requirements

In this section, we examine the case where universities make it mandatory for students to take the TOEIC test and intend to use its results for placement at the outset of program and then for evaluation or graduation requirements after some coursework is carried out. Some universities specify certain TOEIC scores as goals of learning English in the TOEIC-preparation-centered curriculum. There are others that require students to fulfill certain points on the test, but do not provide any test preparation courses. In either case, the impact of the test is much greater than in the case when the TOEIC test is used just for the purpose of placement.

The effect of testing on the process of learning and teaching, known as washback, can be both positive and negative. For instance, if a test encourages students to study more, its washback is positive. It can be said that when introducing the TOEIC test into the English curriculum leads to students' motivation for learning English, the test has positive washback. As is often reported in the testimonies of teachers and educators interviewed by the Institution for International Business Communication (IIBC), the TOEIC test can be instrumental in motivating students since the scores can be used for clear goal settings.

Negative washback from the TOEIC test would be the cases where students are so enthusiastic about earning more points on TOEIC scores to the extent that they believe the TOEIC scores are equal to the level of overall English communication proficiency, which, as we have seen in the previous sections, has not been sufficiently verified. Particularly under the circumstances where the test is used as a high stakes test, that is to say, where specific scores are set as requirements for graduation or for advancement

in the years of university studies, the pressure on the students of scoring high points on the test is naturally strong. Once students perceive the importance of TOEIC scores, they are eager to master TOEIC test-taking strategies, searching for a direct route to higher scores on the TOEIC test, and in some cases viewing the test preparation as detached from other learning activities. In fact, the report by Tokunaga (2008) shows that more than 50 percent of the students in her survey feel that general English courses will not help increase their TOEIC scores, and that over 90 percent believe that it is necessary to study for the test using TOEIC preparation materials in order to increase the scores. In extreme cases, some students “don’t want to study English” but they “want to study TOEIC” as reported by Brown (2006). For these students, the goal of learning English is to do well on the test, rather than to learn the essential skills to use English in real life contexts. Thus, there is a possibility that the TOEIC test exerts negative influence over the whole scheme of the curriculum.

In addition, the students’ belief that test preparation is essential to increase their scores may not be rewarded with real gains on the test scores, and in turn result in discouragement rather than encouragement. This tendency seems evident for learners with low proficiency in English because the questions on the TOEIC test are too difficult for them to study. Designed as a test to measure English proficiency at all levels, the test covers a wide area of the language including advanced vocabulary, complex sentence structures and texts spoken at the natural speed. This advantage of being able to target learners of various levels can also be a disadvantage for low-level learners; for the test domain is so huge that low-level learners are apt to be left at a loss for how to prepare for the test. In addition, as Miller (2003) points out, it is very difficult to find low-level TOEIC preparation materials. Numerous textbooks have been published under the title of TOEIC preparation, but the textbook writer’s effort to adjust the levels to the low-level learners appears unproductive in duplicating materials similar to the real TOEIC test since, as he mentions, TOEIC is not low-level.

Furthermore, such an extrinsic motivation as aiming at doing well on tests does not seem to be the attributes of those who gain high scores on the TOEIC test. Examining the relationship of TOEIC scores with learning strategies, motivation, and study time, Mizumoto et. al. (2008) reports that intrinsic motivation and extracurricular study time showed higher correlations with TOEIC scores, while the correlation coefficients between the TOEIC scores, extrinsic motivation, and vocabulary learning strategies were shown to be very low.⁷

The foregoing discussion emphasizes the following two points. First, contrary

to teachers' or curriculum developers' expectations for the positive washback that the TOEIC test motivates students by providing them with clear goal setting (i.e. specific scores on the test), there is a possibility that that kind of motivation could negatively affect students' attitudes towards the learning of English itself. Second, low-level students in particular are likely to suffer negative washback from taking and preparing for the test.

3. Final Remarks

In Section 1, we reviewed how the TOEIC test was introduced into educational institutions in Japan, and argued that its current popularity among university English curricula is attributed to two situations. The first situation relates to the social needs for universities to prepare students for future careers, while the second situation arises from the implementation of externally accountable EFL programs. Many universities adopt the TOEIC test to meet these two demands, but it was claimed in Section 2 that the consequences are not without problems particularly when the test result was used as part of course requirements for those students who rank low on the test. When they are required to increase the score, it is likely that they tend to be extrinsically motivated, but they would have to waste their time preparing for the test on inappropriate test preparation materials. Some measure must be taken so as to minimize those negative influences over these students. As Miller (2003) mentions, low-level students should concentrate on general English courses to master basic skills until they can make use of authentic TOEIC preparation materials.

Most of the problems discussed so far might also occur with other proficiency tests since the uses of proficiency test scores as part of course requirements impose definite pressure on the students to study for the test. Any other English proficiency test could have a certain degree of negative washback on the process of both learning and teaching English. Those problems, in short, can be boiled down to the disparity between what is taught and what is tested. This disparity is inherent and therefore unavoidable because a proficiency test, by definition, cannot cover the syllabus contents. However, under the circumstances where a specific English proficiency test score is used as such a high-stakes index for a graduation requirement, the curricula should be devised so that achievement of the course objectives in EFL programs contributes to gains on the test.⁸ In case of the TOEIC test, the disparity can be reduced to the minimal level if the test is introduced into the curriculum in which the

goal of teaching English is to prepare students for job placement in international work places and accordingly the course syllabi are structured around those settings that are included in the TOEIC test.

Even though it is ever possible that the test is integrated in such course syllabi, the exclusive reliance on the TOEIC test as a measurement of English abilities should not be recommended because of the number of disadvantages such as cited in this paper and other problems which the author might have failed to capture. The claim that the TOEIC test cannot measure communicative competence appears to be serious. Testing has shifted its approach from discrete-item paper tests toward performance-based tests which focus not on what test-takers know but on what they can do. The TOEIC Speaking & Writing Test is an example of performance-based tests and might replace the TOEIC test in the near future as a more reliable tool to measure the students' practical communication skills.

Notes

¹ <http://www.ets.org/toEIC/succeed>

² http://www.toEIC.or.jp/school/school_sort.php

³ http://www.toEIC.or.jp/toEIC/pdf/data/TOEIC_2010.pdf

⁴ Torikai (2010: p.136).

⁵ http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/020/sesaku/020702.htm

⁶ Torikai (2010: p.147).

⁷ Their questionnaire on extrinsic motivation consists of three items: need to study English for school credits to graduate, a prestigious job in the future, or a better salary later on.

⁸ See Brindley & Ross (2001) for a model of EAP programs in which achievement of different skill courses and proficiency gain can be interconnected.

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