

# **Tactics for Teaching to the TOEIC Test**

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東北公益文科大学総合研究論集第35号別冊 抜刷

2019年3月10日発行

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### Abstract

The purpose of this brief paper is to look at the benefits of using a textbook, *Tactics for TOEIC*, for teaching an Intensive TOEIC class for university students in a private university in Japan. This paper will examine the contents of the textbook and provide data which suggests that the use of the textbook facilitated overall improvement of students' test results. As the improvements in listening were much greater than in reading, the author concludes that the balance of listening and reading should be addressed in future courses.

**Keywords:** TOEIC, Intensive TOEIC

### 1. TOEIC Background

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is an English language test designed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) at the behest of the Japanese government. The test is for non-native speakers of English and aims to measure how well they can communicate with others in an international environment (ETS, 2017). In Japan these tests are popular with companies who wish to evaluate the level of their employees' English and TOEIC is one of a number of tests used by educational institutions to evaluate the English ability of students (others include TOEFL and Eiken). There are two different versions of the TOEIC test: the TOEIC Listening & Reading Test and the TOEIC Speaking & Writing Test. This paper will discuss the former only; henceforth "the TOEIC test" will refer specifically to the Listening & Reading Test.

### 2. TOEIC Classes at Koeki University

There are three classes specifically focusing on TOEIC at this university: TOEIC

(中級), TOEIC (上級), and Intensive TOEIC. They can be described respectively as intermediate, pre-advanced and advanced, and are all aimed at preparing students for the Listening and Reading TOEIC test. All three classes are elective classes for second- to fourth-grade students but are compulsory for students on the International Liberal Arts (ILA) course. Students at this university are not required to take an actual TOEIC test, but ILA students are strongly encouraged to do so and there is an incentive for them to do well in the test as they can receive course credits for scores over 550. The university holds a TOEIC IP (Institutional Program) test twice a year for students who wish to take it.

### **2.1 Intensive TOEIC Class**

The Intensive TOEIC class is taught by a native English speaker (from 2018, the author). This class is taught as a quarterly course; there are two lessons a week for seven weeks and the duration of each lesson is 105 minutes. The final (14<sup>th</sup>) lesson is set aside for the final test. For the 2018 class there were 22 participants of whom two were 4<sup>th</sup>-year and two were 3<sup>rd</sup>-year students; the remainder were all second-year students. All 22 students were members of the ILA course; the English level of the majority of students is estimated to be in the A2/A2+ CEFR range. Out of 22 students, only 6 said that they had taken the TOEIC test before attending the course.

### **2.2 Teaching Materials**

This course was taught using a textbook, *Tactics for TOEIC, Listening and Reading Test* by Grant Trew (Oxford University Press). According to the publisher, “this textbook is authorized by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the makers of the TOEIC test, and contains official TOEIC test items” (Trew, 2007). The textbook contains 28 units which are arranged in 4 blocks of 7 units, with the first 4 units of each block focusing on the Listening test and the remaining 3 units covering the Reading test practice. Each unit includes a test tactic, such as skimming the text or prioritizing the questions, as well as practices aimed at helping students avoid common mistakes (for example, noticing same word distractors). There are mini-tests in each unit which are similar to parts of the

TOEIC test and there are also word lists and word quizzes organized by unit to help students improve their knowledge of useful vocabulary.

### **2.3 Teaching Methodology**

The basic aims of the class being to help students to improve their English and attain a high score on the TOEIC test, the textbook was chosen in the belief that the tactics and test practices would allow students to familiarize themselves with the test format and at the same time learn vocabulary in context. Due to time constraints the decision was made to focus on the listening test practices during class and assign most of the reading sections as homework. The listening sections of the textbook facilitate pair-work and groupwork by encouraging students to work together (for example, to predict content from photographs). It was felt that this form of active learning would be interesting for students and thus increase their motivation. This course is considered an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course and thus taught solely in English. In line with the opinions espoused by Nation (2013) and Folse (2004) - among others - of the importance of vocabulary learning for second language acquisition, it was decided that a strong emphasis would be put on vocabulary practice.

### **2.4 Course Assessment**

The student grades were determined as follows: 50% on the final test result, 25% on class work and 25% on homework. The Tactics for TOEIC teaching pack includes two practice tests; Practice Test 1 was given as a pre-test at the start of the course and Practice Test 2 was used for the final test. Both Practice Tests follow the same format as the TOEIC test – a listening test for 45 minutes and a reading test for 75 minutes. The class work assessment was based on active participation in class and the homework assessment took the form of short tests administered in class based on the Unit Word Quizzes in the textbook which the students were asked to complete for homework.

## **3. Test Results**

All students took Practice Test 1 as a pre-test and Practice Test 2 as a post-test. The

results of the practice tests show that 17 students improved their score, 4 students had a worse score and 1 student had no difference in the pre-test to post-test scores.

Table 1: Listening Test results (out of 100)

Pre-test				Post-test			
Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD
21	74	47.63	13.0	28	73	55.05	10.91

Note: n = 22.

Table 2: Reading Test results (out of 100)

Pre-test				Post-test			
Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD
11	56	39.45	9.90	14	60	44.18	10.58

Note: n = 22.

Table 3: Combined Listening and Reading Test results (out of 200)

Pre-test				Post-test			
Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD
32	123	87.09	20.56	42	127	99.22	20.49

Note: n = 22.

#### 4. Student Survey Results

After the course finished, the students were asked to give written feedback in English about the course and the textbook. 15 out of 22 students submitted responses. Of the 15 responses, 13 were positive, describing the course as “good”, “useful”, “helpful” or “interesting,” one commented that TOEIC “is very difficult” and the other recommended choosing a different textbook because of the difficulty of the textbook. Below is a selection of the comments (English errors have not been corrected).

“It was useful for me to get used to answer the questions about TOEIC test.”

“I think my TOEIC score goes up. I feel everyone TOEIC score goes up because we

can learn from the fundamentals.”

“I think that Intensive TOEIC course is good. We practiced listening test a lot and took mini test many times. I don’t practice to listening in the home, so I think that this course is good.”

“I learned a how to read English sentences in this class. TOEIC need to speed to get a high score. So, I’m glad to know what is the TOEIC.”

“I think it is good to take the course because My listening score is more higher than before. I enjoy the course because I have a time talk with a partner.”

“I think this class is very interesting for me because it is usefull for our students... I could concentration when I practiced with my classmates. So I think this class was so good.”

“[The course] is helpful because it’s easy to understand why did I make a mistake. But to be honest, I want to learn more about reading section. For me, reading section is more difficult than listening section.”

“I think so that “Tactics” is very difficult. But I can raise TOEIC listening score. I suggest that you should choose another book.”

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Course Discussion**

From looking at the survey responses, one can infer that the course was successful in that most students said that they felt that it helped them improve their TOEIC level, and this impression was borne out to a certain extent by the test results. As for the reasons for the improvement in the test results, the author suggests the following. The first reason is familiarity with the test. Most of the students had not taken a TOEIC test before the start of the course and so were unfamiliar with the format. In the pre-test, a number of students failed to finish the reading test and some left questions unanswered. The frequent test practice throughout the course and the experience of taking the pre-test, along with the test tactics learned from the textbook may be reasons why students were better able to answer the post-test questions. The second reason is the focus on listening throughout the course. The test data shows a greater improvement of listening test scores compared

to reading test scores. This can perhaps be attributed to the balance of listening and reading in class. The course followed the textbook guidelines for courses of less than 30 hours, by focusing on the Listening test units and the units covering Part 7 of the Reading test. In practice this meant there was a 9:2 ratio of Listening to Reading units covered in class. The main reason for focusing on listening is that the reading sections could be studied independently outside of class, although most students were reluctant to commit time to this when they already had other homework for the class, namely, the vocabulary quizzes.

## **5.2 Textbook Discussion**

According to the makers of the TOEIC test, the test's primary purpose "was to determine the proficiency levels of employees ... in the contexts of business, industry and commerce" (ETS, 2017). The *Tactics for TOEIC* textbook covers a wide range of content and features differing levels of difficulty. It has been argued by Shibata (2018, p.98) that studying TOEIC could be classified as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) due to the business-related content. For students at the author's university, which focuses on community welfare, there was a lot of unfamiliar content and vocabulary. The vocabulary in the textbook is learned in context and word lists and quizzes are provided for each unit, but the textbook does not include translations into the students' L1 (in this case, Japanese). Therefore, for the students there is a heavy cognitive load due to the necessity of working out the meaning largely from context. This may have led some to comment that the course or textbook was very difficult.

## **6. Thoughts on Future Classes**

The two main issues identified in this report are the lack of class time dedicated to the Reading sections, and the large amount of unfamiliar vocabulary. To address these issues, the author will consider increasing the time taken in class for reading and look at ways to help students who struggle most with the reading sections, such as scaffolding more difficult elements within the textbook. The author will also look at other ways to improve vocabulary retention, for example by providing L1 translations of high

frequency words. According to Folse (2004, p. 5), research shows that learners prefer L1 translations and they learn faster if the meaning of a word is given in their own language first, so this may be one way to help students' vocabulary acquisition and hence aid their comprehension of parts of the test.

## 7. Conclusion

The author's Intensive TOEIC course, using the *Tactics for TOEIC* textbook, was relatively successful in helping students improve their scores from pre-test to post-test. The test data showed that the improvement was more marked in listening than reading and the survey results indicated that the students were, in general, positive about both the course and the textbook. There were concerns about the difficulty of the textbook and the emphasis on listening over reading and the author will look at ways to address these concerns for future classes.

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