

# Integrating the TOEIC® Writing Test with Small-Group Classes

Koji UENISHI, Tatsuya SAKAUE, Simon FRASER, Walter DAVIES  
Joe LAUER, Jaime SELWOOD, Katherine SONG  
Mitsuhiro MORITA, and Shusaku KIDA

Institute for Foreign Language Research and Education  
Hiroshima University

Since being designated as one of Japan's 'Top Global Universities' in 2014 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter, MEXT), Hiroshima University has been undergoing a process of change, with the aim of rising in world university rankings. In relation to this aim, fostering foreign language skills, particularly in English, is crucial. In this article, we evaluate the writing component of an experimental program: Hiroshima University's Program for English Communication (HiSPEC). As part of the Top Global University initiative, the HiSPEC program has involved the creation of small-group classes for first-year students who have the best English-test results in their respective groupings. HiSPEC students are required to take TOEIC® Speaking and Writing tests, and these are scheduled in their courses.

In this article, an analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data is conducted, and the program is examined from the following perspectives: Teachers' reflections on the course, students' perceptions of the program, and TOEIC® Writing results.

## BACKGROUND

In English language education initiatives in Japan, there has been a focus on developing students' productive English abilities, especially speaking, both inside and outside the classroom. MEXT has carried out various educational reforms on English language education at educational institutions from primary through to tertiary level.

In the primary sector in Japan, in order to improve communication abilities in English, MEXT has decided to implement full-fledged English language teaching from 2020 at the third and fourth grades as 'foreign language activities', and at the fifth and sixth grades as a formal English subject. At the secondary and tertiary levels, MEXT has already started funding a number of schools and universities in order to nurture students who have "English ability that can be used", by designating those high schools as 'Super Global High Schools' and universities as 'Top Global Universities'.

In 2016, Hiroshima University was one of 13 universities to be given Top Global University status, and as part of the process of the university's change, the HiSPEC program is an innovation designed to improve students' productive skills at the tertiary level (Uenishi et al., 2017). It has two components, one focused on spoken communication, and one on written communication.

Regarding writing skills, Gosden (1996) observed that emphasis was traditionally placed on written content rather than on writing skills at school. He argued that Japanese students had few opportunities to develop their writing skills in secondary education. Also, more recently, with regard to writing education at university, Sadoshima (2008) pointed out that the traditional Japanese academic system placed little

importance on English writing in the curriculum, although it was being taught at a basic level.

In order to improve students' writing abilities in English, one key factor is the teacher. However, as Tashima (2015) notes, in general education it is usual for teachers to be allocated a large number of first-year English writing classes, often with many students in each class. This results in a heavy workload for teachers, allowing them little time to help individual students. Under such conditions, it is unlikely that students' writing skills can easily or quickly be improved.

One reason for implementing the HiSPEC Writing course was to create the conditions in which teachers could focus on individual learners by creating classes with small student numbers. The focus is on top-level students in the first year of their university studies. By creating classes with small numbers of students, our main aims are to develop students' English proficiency in written English and to motivate them to pursue their English studies further. A further aim is to gauge the effectiveness of the program through an objective test (TOEIC® Writing), taken by the students in the HiSPEC program.

The HiSPEC Program was an experimental one, run over a two-year period, implemented for the first time in 2016. The specific contents of the program (Uenishi et al., 2017) were as follows:

- (1) Each class had a maximum of 14 first-year students, representing those students who had achieved the highest English entrance exam scores from several faculties.
- (2) Each teacher was free to conduct the class in any way he or she felt best, with the ultimate aim of improving students' productive English abilities.
- (3) The students were required to take the TOEIC® (IP)<sup>1</sup> in July and January.
- (4) The students were also required to take the TOEIC® Speaking (April and July) and Writing<sup>1</sup> (April and January) components.

### Overview of the HiSPEC Schedule

The TOEIC® Speaking and Writing Tests were administered in July, 2016 and the final TOEIC® Writing Test was held in January, 2017. Table 1 shows how the schedule for HiSPEC Writing was organized for the different groupings.

**TABLE 1. Scheduling**

Class	Instructor	Day	Class	Instructor	Day
Engineering 2	A	Mon	Education 2	D	Fri
Arts and Sciences 1	B	Mon	Education 1	E	Fri
Biological Sciences 2	A	Mon	Engineering 1	B	Fri
Arts and Sciences 2	C	Fri	Biological Sciences 1	D	Fri

### Evaluation

In principle, teachers could evaluate their students in their own ways, but they were encouraged to include the results of both TOEIC® Writing Tests in their student evaluations.

## **TOEIC® Writing Content**

TOEIC® Writing is a computer-based test and takes approximately one hour. It consists of three main sections. In the first section, students look at a photograph and must write a sentence that includes two words on display just below the picture. Students answer five such items (10 minutes in total). In the second section of the test students must read, then reply to an email (two items, 10 minutes each). In the third part of the test, students must write an opinion essay (one item, 30 minutes).

## **METHOD**

In keeping with our research (Uenishi et al., 2017) on the spoken component of HiSPEC (HiSPEC Speaking), we use a mixed method approach, involving both quantitative and qualitative data. Our focus is both on teachers through feedback summaries, and students in terms of feedback through a questionnaire survey and TOEIC® Writing results. Consequently, the research questions in this paper are as follows:

- (1) How were teachers affected by the HiSPEC Writing course?
- (2) How were students' perceptions affected by the HiSPEC Writing course and the TOEIC® Writing test?
- (3) How were students' English abilities affected by the HiSPEC Writing course?

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to evaluate affective aspects such as student satisfaction and perceived effectiveness of the HiSPEC Writing classes, a questionnaire survey (Figure 1) was conducted. Questions 1 to 7 required responses on a 5-point Likert scale, and Questions 8 to 10 were free description. The questionnaire was administered after the students finished the writing test.

- Q1. To what extent could you improve your foreign language knowledge and skills in this course?  
Q2. How satisfied were you with the course?  
Q3. Was the course appropriate in terms of difficulty?  
Q4. How do you feel about participating in small-size writing classes?  
Q5. What did you think of the class size of Communication IIA?  
Q6. Did the course materials help you improve your communication skills?  
Q7. Has participating in HiSPEC changed your attitude towards learning English?  
Q8. Please leave any comments you have about HiSPEC.  
Q9. Please write any positive comments you have about the TOEIC® Writing test.  
Q10. Please write any negative comments you have about the TOEIC® Writing test.

**FIGURE 1. Questionnaire Items**

As mentioned above, the students were expected to take the two TOEIC® Writing tests and answer the questionnaire (Figure 1). A total of 90 students answered the questionnaire, and 83 students took both tests in April and January. The number of students both answering the questionnaire and taking the writing tests was 78. To investigate the research questions, the data from these 78 students were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, we integrate an examination of the data with a discussion of the issues that emerge from it. We examine each research question in turn, and consider the links between the questions.

### **Research Question (1): Instructors' Reactions to the Course**

In this section, we address Research Question (1): *How were teachers affected by the HiSPEC Writing course?*

#### Teaching content

Within the Hiroshima University system of first-year English courses, teachers have autonomy over the choice of teaching materials. There were eight HiSPEC Writing classes, and these were taught by five different teachers, who were from the UK and the USA; a wide range of material was taught. For most teachers, their HiSPEC classes followed the same pedagogical approach as their other writing classes, but included some specific TOEIC® Writing practice or related activities to prepare them for the test.

#### Teachers' opinions of the course

All the instructors enjoyed teaching smaller groups of able students. However, while the level of the students was generally high, instructors teaching more than one class judged that there were clear variations of ability between them. This perhaps to some extent reflected the importance placed on English by various faculties in entrance examinations. The use of TOEIC® Writing as an objective measure drew diverse reactions. Some teachers felt that it did not reflect their own aims and plans for a writing course, while others felt it could fairly easily be accommodated into their syllabuses.

### **Research Question (2): Students' Feelings about the Course and TOEIC® Writing**

In this section, we consider Research Question (2): *How were students affected by the HiSPEC course and the TOEIC® Writing test?* First, the quantitative data obtained from questionnaire items one to seven are analyzed, and the qualitative data obtained from items eight to ten are then discussed.

The primary purpose of carrying out this quantitative analysis was to get feedback from the students concerning their satisfaction with HiSPEC Writing, and also on the perceived effectiveness of the course. In the first question, 90% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the HiSPEC class was useful for improving English communication skills.

The second question asked participants to rate their satisfaction with the HiSPEC course. It was found that 90% of the respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the course, with only one student giving a negative response. The third question required participants to rate the difficulty of the course, and 82% of the respondents answered that it was appropriate. When asked in the fourth question whether they preferred small student numbers for their writing class, 87% said that they did so.

Regarding the fifth question, 87% of the respondents answered that they were satisfied with the HiSPEC class size. The responses to questions six and seven show that 81% agreed that the course materials helped the students improve their communication skills, and that 58% of the participants came to like studying English more than before.

Taken as a whole, these results show that most of the students were satisfied with the course, and that

the HiSPEC Writing classes were as well-regarded by the students as the HiSPEC Speaking classes held in the first semester. In fact, the collated numerical values of positive responses in almost all questionnaire items from the second semester (Writing) were higher than those from the same questionnaire collected in the first semester (Speaking).

Next, we discuss the responses obtained from items eight to ten. Based upon the comments made by students in questionnaire item 8, their overall impressions about the HiSPEC classes are noted. The comments were analyzed, then categorized. First, we consider students' feelings about the HiSPEC course, based upon the responses to the item, "Please leave any comments you have about HiSPEC." The main comments in the free description were categorized as shown below (Table 2).

**TABLE 2. Free Comments on the Course**

No	Item	N
1	Acquisition of writing knowledge	9
2	Enjoyment of writing class	8
3	Small class	7
4	Improvement of writing skill	4

The most prevalent comment was that students felt they were able to acquire writing knowledge through the HiSPEC classes (9 students). Following this was the students' feeling that they had enjoyed the writing class (8 students). These comments are directly related to the writing process, so it seems that some students who attended the HiSPEC class gained knowledge on the mechanics of writing such as structure and organization and could learn English writing in an enjoyable way. Also, seven students described the benefits of small-sized classes; through small classes students could communicate more easily with the teacher and their peers, which probably led to further motivation in English learning/writing and enjoyment of English classes. A smaller number (4 students) commented on the improvement of their writing skill. A few students made comments such as "I am very satisfied with a wide variety of learning about writing" and "I have become accustomed to writing in English a little." On the other hand, there were some negative comments such as "We were provided with too many assignments" and "I felt too much pressure from the teacher."

**TABLE 3. Correlation Coefficients (Q1 to Q7)**

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
Q1	1	0.41**	-0.04	0.22	-0.19	0.53**	0.25*
Q2		1	-0.07	0.34**	-0.02	0.43**	0.36**
Q3			1	0.04	0.24*	0.07	-0.20
Q4				1	-0.12	0.40**	0.32**
Q5					1	0.02	-0.07
Q6						1	0.29*
Q7							1

When we investigated Question 6 (Usefulness of materials in improving English ability), we found a moderate correlation between this and questions 1, 2, and 4. This implies that the materials the teachers used in class had a positive influence on the improvement of students' English knowledge and skills, leading to students' satisfaction with the class content. Regarding the improvement of English skills, as noted in the analysis of Research Question (2), 90% of the students felt the materials they used in class were either useful or very useful for improving their English ability, including writing skills.

**TABLE 4. Good Points of the TOEIC® Writing Test**

No	Item	N
1	Free test	18
2	Writing more sentences	18
3	Making good use of learning in class	12
4	Knowing English writing ability	2
5	Faster typing on PC	2

Next, students' thoughts about the TOEIC® Writing test are discussed. Based upon the free description items, the qualitative data are categorized from the perspectives of good and bad points of the test and test items. From the responses to the questionnaire items, first the "good points" of the TOEIC® Writing test are listed (Table 4). A frequent observation did not concern the test content itself, but the test fee; 18 students were happy that they did not have to pay to take the TOEIC® test. Another frequent item was about writing itself, with 18 students feeling satisfied that they could write more sentences and more fluently. Twelve students wrote about the significance of the teaching content in the writing class. In short, they felt that they could make good use of what they had learned in class when they took the test.

**TABLE 5. Bad Points of the TOEIC® Writing Test**

No	Item	N
1	Ill-prepared	25
2	Limited vocabulary	12
3	Lack of time	7
4	Slow typing	6
5	PC-related matters	5

A large number of comments on students' concerns about the TOEIC® Writing test were received. The qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire were categorized as shown in Table 5. Twenty-five out of 79 students commented that they were ill-prepared for the test. Another frequent comment (12 students) concerned their limited vocabulary, with the students feeling they needed more vocabulary to be able to write sufficiently well for TOEIC® Writing. The third most frequent comment concerned the limited time for the test. Seven students felt that they did not have enough time to think about the content they wanted to express

and then type it in English. The fourth and fifth comments are related to the third. The fourth most frequent comment related to typing speed, and six students took more time to type the answers using a keyboard than they would have done if writing them on paper. Regarding the fifth most frequent comment, six students reported that, when they used a PC, they struggled to manage the operation of the mouse and keyboard.

### Research Question (3): Improvement of English Abilities

In this section, we address Research Question (3): *Did HiSPEC students improve their English writing abilities?* The TOEIC® Writing test is used as an indicator of student writing ability. Using the TOEIC® Writing test data obtained at the beginning of the first semester and at the end of the second semester, comparisons were made using a *t* test.

Table 6 shows the results of the TOEIC® Writing tests. There was a significant difference between the two tests ( $t(77) = 4.29, p < .001, d = .64$ ) and considerable improvement on the TOEIC® Writing scores between April and January. There are two possible reasons for this large improvement. First, students were able to get used to the format of the writing test, by practicing answering several types of test questions in class. Some teachers gave their students a lot of tasks based upon TOEIC® Writing questions in class, which could have positively influenced the writing test results. Second, writing improvement may be related to the small class size. As mentioned in the previous section, 87% of the students answered that the class size was appropriate. This implies that the greater number of interactions possible between the teacher and students in a small-sized class led to improvement in their writing skills. Another possible reason for the improvement could be the teaching which matched the level of the class, and the choice of appropriate class materials for developing writing skills.

**TABLE 6. Results of the TOEIC® Writing Test**

	Min.	Mean	Max.	SD
April	80.0	134.5	180.0	19.0
January	100.0	145.4	190.0	15.1

## DISCUSSION

The HiSPEC Writing course differs from other writing courses for first-year students in two major respects: It involves small class sizes of no more than 14 students, and an objective test is integrated into the course. Also, all HiSPEC courses involve students who have been identified as the best in their groupings, this usually being done on the basis of test results; a HiSPEC teacher is guaranteed students with a better than average English ability. In this section, we discuss teacher and student satisfaction, issues related to the TOEIC® Writing test, and pedagogical implications.

### Teacher and student satisfaction

Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction for both teachers and students relating to weekly classes. This was due to small-sized classes of students with an aptitude for English and motivation to learn. Also, the teaching team involved in HiSPEC Writing was very experienced, both in relation to longevity of

teaching English as a Foreign Language and in teaching Hiroshima University students.

### Incorporating the TOEIC® Writing test

The more controversial side of the HiSPEC Writing course was the TOEIC® Writing test, and the issues we discuss here relate to content and validity, teacher beliefs, and scheduling.

One key issue relates to the validity of using TOEIC® Writing as a measure of students' writing abilities in English. In a previous article (Uenishi et al., 2017), we considered TOEIC® Speaking and argued that it was highly artificial and excluded key aspects of communication such as face-to-face interaction and the negotiation of meaning. In contrast, written communication is more suited to computer-based testing, where a message is often written and sent. The main bulk of the test, taking fifty minutes, consists of sections 2 and 3. Section 2 involves email writing, an important skill in everyday communication. Section 3 involves opinion essay writing, which is an important academic skill, with good essay writers being able to organize and communicate an argument. Consequently, the test content is likely to dovetail much more closely with what teachers think it is valuable to teach. TOEIC® Writing appears to have much greater validity in measuring students' writing ability than TOEIC® Speaking does with regard to speaking ability.

In relation to validity, on the negative side, students have only 30 minutes to write an essay, and are only allowed to use the test computer. In non-test situations, many good essay writers sketch ideas and plan on paper before they write their essays. Time pressure also emerges as a problem in the negative feedback on the test, in conjunction with slow typing and PC-related matters. Some of the students' comments on expressing themselves may be related to such issues.

Teacher beliefs relating to testing were another factor. On the HiSPEC program in general, there were different views. Some teachers regard such testing as a minor challenge, while others worry that the tests are an imposition on students.

All teachers had to some extent to accommodate TOEIC® Writing because the tests were scheduled into the course. This impacted teacher contact hours, and for very carefully planned courses could be disruptive. Beyond accommodating the tests, teachers could tailor courses as they wished. As with TOEIC® Speaking, some teachers used part of their class-time to prepare for the test, while others kept to their usual syllabuses, and trusted that students' levels would improve through good teaching.

### Implications for teaching

There is clearly an affective factor in the creation of small classes of students with good language skills. Both teachers and students found the courses enjoyable and motivating.

Almost the same group of teachers taught TOEIC® Writing and TOEIC® Speaking, and it is interesting to note that while there was no significant difference between the results of the two TOEIC® Speaking tests, there was a significant difference between those of the two TOEIC® Writing tests. One interpretation of this could be that as the teachers became more experienced in teaching the HiSPEC courses, this had an effect on the test results. However, a more plausible explanation may be that, with students' limited experience of writing emails and essays in English, some good basic instruction and familiarization with the TOEIC® Writing test can quickly lead to increased test scores, especially where test questions reflect the kinds of tasks already planned by teachers in their syllabuses. Another factor may be that the TOEIC® Speaking test



involved tasks that were difficult for teachers to accommodate within the framework of a communicative approach to language teaching.

A further issue is practical, and relates to technology. Some students' scores may have been affected by their inability to work quickly in English on a computer. This situation could be improved by giving more practice to students using computer rooms.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have reported on the introduction of small-sized, TOEIC®-focused English writing classes, and investigated the effects of these classes on students' English abilities, especially their writing skills, and their motivation to learn English.

The feedback from both teachers and students shows that, for students with good English proficiency, teaching and learning in small groups is beneficial. Despite some validity issues relating to the TOEIC® Writing test, results indicate that students can make good improvements in their English writing over a relatively short period. Adequate test preparation and/or appropriate learning content may be two of the factors contributing to this improvement. With regard to the latter, looking at the Pearson product moment, we find a moderate correlation between Question 6 (Useful teaching materials) and Question 1 (Improving foreign language skills and knowledge). This indicates that useful teaching content was one of the factors leading to writing improvement. The materials used by the teachers, and the classroom methodology adopted, seemed appropriate for improving student writing ability as measured by the TOEIC® Writing test. This finding has implications for future writing courses which incorporate tests such as the TOEIC®, or use them for assessment.

Second, it was shown that most of the students were satisfied with all aspects of the course, including the class size, class activities, and materials. The fact that 90% of the respondents were satisfied with the course indicates that HiSPEC Writing was successful overall. The high rate of student satisfaction is probably due to the combined effect of small-sized classes, experienced teachers, and the use of appropriate materials.

The HiSPEC writing program has been an experimental one, exploring how to improve the abilities of students who have shown an aptitude for English. It has had very positive feedback, and good results, as measured by TOEIC® Writing. Although the data are somewhat limited, the question is raised of where the focus should be in small group teaching. Writing classes generally take up more teacher time due to the checking of students' written work, and one issue that is raised by the results of the HiSPEC Speaking and HiSPEC Writing courses is whether small-class teaching should place equal emphasis on both productive skills, or on writing skills alone.

## NOTE

- 1) To find out more about the TOEIC® IP Test and TOEIC® S&W Test, please refer to the following website:  
<http://www.toeic.or.jp/sw/about.html>.

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## ABSTRACT

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Institute for Foreign Language Research and Education  
Hiroshima University

In this article, we describe and evaluate the writing component of Hiroshima University's Program for English Communication (HiSPEC) taught in 2016. The program was developed in response to Hiroshima University's change in status when it was designated a Top Global University by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The program involves the creation of small-group classes for first-year students with the best English-test results in faculty groupings, and testing through the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing tests.

The small classes contained up to 14 students, and were taught by British and American teachers of English. The course was held in the second semester of 2016, with students receiving 90 minutes of instruction per week over a period of approximately 15 weeks.

Evaluation of the writing course involved both quantitative and qualitative data, and took the form of teacher feedback through summaries, student feedback via a questionnaire survey, and an analysis of two TOEIC® Writing test scores using a t-test. It was found that both teachers and students enjoyed the small-group classes, and that most of the students were satisfied with all aspects of the course. The results of the t-test showed a significant difference between the test scores at the beginning of the course and the test scores at its end.

## 要 約

### TOEIC ライティングテストと少人数クラスとの統合

上西幸治, 阪上辰也, サイモン・フレイザー, ウォルター・デイビス  
ジョー・ラウアー, ジェイミ・セルウッド, キャサリン・ソング  
森田光宏, 鬼田崇作  
広島大学外国語教育研究センター

この論文は、本学学生の英語ライティング力向上に向けたプログラムについて述べたものである。それは、英語コミュニケーションに向けた広大プログラム（通称 HiSPEC）と呼ばれ、文部科学省の認定を受けた「スーパー・グローバル大学」の一環である。そのプログラムは、入学時で各学部のもっとも英語力の高い学生を1クラス約15人という少人数クラスに充当し、各クラスの学生は後期セメスターに週1回（90分授業）、計15回に渡って外国人講師の指導を受けた。

ライティング授業の評価は、量的及び質的データを基に分析が行われた。そのデータ分析は、外国人講師のフィードバック、学生のアンケート評価及びTOEICライティングテスト結果の統計的分析を基に行われた。その結果、外国人講師も学生も少人数授業は楽しく、大半の学生はそのコースの全ての側面で満足をしていた。また、ライティング力の向上に関しては、そのコースの最初と最後のテスト結果を比較すると、統計的に有意差が見られた。