

An experiment to improve listening skills and TOEIC scores

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Introduction

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) has been widely used in Japan to measure an individual's English proficiency in work-related situations. Many companies now use TOEIC scores when hiring new employees or considering promotions, so increasing number of college students, as well as office workers, go to language schools in the evening to study for the test to get higher scores. As Moritoshi (2001) pointed out, "What was once an advantageous inclusion in a resume is increasingly becoming more of a prerequisite, particularly in qualification-oriented cultures such as Japan" (p.5). To meet such students' needs, many universities and colleges in Japan have recently started offering TOEIC preparation classes, though such classes are often the targets of criticism in academia.

The Faculty of Foreign Languages at Kyoto Sangyo University started the Special English program in the spring of 2003 to offer practical English classes. When we conducted a survey at the end of the year to find out what kind of classes students wished to take, a TOEIC preparation class was at the top of the list. Whether we should teach preparation for such commercial tests at university was thoroughly debated in the Faculty. After a series of discussion, we decided we should not ignore students' needs, and we opened TOEIC preparation classes in 2004.

This study was conducted to investigate effective and also ethical ways of improving students' listening skills and their TOEIC scores using TOEIC preparation materials. The listening section of the test is especially difficult to EFL learners who do not have many opportunities to communicate in English in daily life. It is hoped that this study can help both teachers and students understand that there are ways of improving their listening skills and performance on the test

even in the EFL situations. Teaching or learning test-taking strategies is not the only way.

Relevant Studies

Now that test scores of TOEIC or other standardized achievement tests are used to make important decisions (e.g., admitting students to schools, or hiring or promoting employees), teachers may be tempted to “teach to the test too directly” (Mehrens, 1989, p.2). It is generally considered ethical and appropriate to help students familiarize with “test administration procedures, item types and layouts, and strategies for effectively approaching the different item types,” which is called “test-wiseness training” (Schmidt, 2003, p.77). The study conducted by Amer (1993) on the effect of teaching a test-taking strategy showed that test-taking skills, such as read carefully, find clue words, answer easier questions first, allocate appropriate time for each question, and check answers, enabled students to improve scores. However, Rogers and Bateson (1991) claim that if test-wiseness affects scores, it should be taken into account when developing tests and interpreting scores. If teaching for the test actually improves scores, “then, the test no longer can be said to measure general proficiency. Rather, it measures how well people have studied for the test” (Robb and Ercanbrack, 1999, p.2).

Actually, some researchers warn against test preparation courses. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) claim that teaching for the tests only makes us “part of a huge test preparation industry fuelled by students’ anxiety to succeed” (p.293). Students may be “diverted from mainstream, well-designed language classes . . . into unproductive, test-mimicking exercises” (Hamp-Lyons, 1998, p.335). Meanwhile, it seems very important to conduct research on whether test preparation programs or courses are effective and improve students’ scores because “this is the very reason all students take such courses” (Hamp-Lyons, 1998, p.331). Studies of the effectiveness of test preparation courses seem to be limited in number even though such courses are high in demand.

Language schools are advertising how effective their test preparation programs are. Looking at gain scores of some of the students in the advertisements, many students decide to enroll in their programs. It seems, however, difficult to find any objective data presented by such schools. The institution where Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) conducted their research on TOEFL preparation classes gathered no data. In a study on preparation courses for the IELTS (International

English Language Testing System), the institutions which Coomber (1997) observed boasted of their programs, but they only provided insubstantial subjective optimism rather than substantial objective data.

Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) conducted research on the effect of direct test preparation on TOEIC scores and found that non-English majors in TOEIC preparation courses demonstrated significant gains on the reading section only, and concluded that TOEIC preparation courses were of little benefit to English majors who studied in a comprehensive English program. Narron, Hirase, Minami, Takekata, and Adachi (2003) studied the effect of test preparation materials on TOEIC scores to determine whether using general English materials would be a disadvantage to students who wished to improve TOEIC scores. Their results showed that test preparation materials had no significant effect, and they concluded that general English courses were as effective in improving scores.

The Present Study

This study tried to investigate ways of improving students' listening skills and their TOEIC scores without teaching to the test unethically – without limiting “instruction to the actual objectives sampled in the test, or worse yet, to the actual questions on the test” (Mehrens, 1989, p.4).

It has been said that reading aloud and shadowing (i.e., repeating what you hear as soon as you hear it) would improve listening skills as well as speaking skills. In bookstores, there are a large number of books for practicing reading aloud and shadowing. Recently, “speed-listening” (as opposed to speed-reading) also has been getting popularity. Speed-listening is listening to English recorded at a faster speed than normal speech. Publishers of such materials claim that speed-listening can activate your brain and improve your memory and listening skills. In this study, I modified and combined these approaches, and investigated if these could improve students' listening skills and TOEIC scores.

Participants

Intact classes were used in this study. The study was first conducted in a TOEIC preparation class in the fall semester of 2004. Then the study was replicated in the fall semester of 2005. Nineteen students participated in this study in 2004, and 27 students in 2005. These classes had mixed students in terms of majors – English majors or non-English majors – and years in school (Table 1).

Although the class was intended for students whose TOEIC scores were below 550, some students who had higher scores also enrolled, so the students' scores varied between 300 and 700. No control group was set up in this study.

Table 1

Majors and Years in School of Students

Year	2004		2005	
	English	Non E	English	Non E
2	6	5	12	3
3	0	3	4	5
4	5	0	2	1
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Total	11	8	18	9

Treatment

The TOEIC preparation class met once a week for 90 minutes. The text used was “TOEIC Official Test Preparation Guide, Vol. 2” (The Chauncey Group International, 2002), which contains 432 authentic TOEIC questions. Generally in a listening class, teachers play CDs or tapes and students answer questions. But in this class, the students spent more time reading the transcripts aloud. After listening to the CD once, the students followed the next steps:

1. Read many times the transcripts aloud as fast as they can – much faster than the actual speed of the CD.
2. Listen to the CD again. Students usually feel as if the speed of the CD had slowed down, and can hear it very clearly.
3. Read aloud along with the CD – read aloud at the same speed as the CD again and again.
4. If the sentence is a short one as in Parts I and II of the test, repeat after the CD without looking at the transcripts.
5. Shadow with a very low voice or in a whisper so that students' own voice would not hinder them from hearing the CD.

Tests

A pretest was administered on the first day of class and a posttest, which was exactly the same as the pretest, was administered in the 12th week. The same test

was used to eliminate the possibility that the tests would lack comparability. The students had not been informed about the tests beforehand, so they did not know they were going to take the same test on the first day and the 12th week of class. The 12-week interval was assumed to be long enough to eradicate the effects of short-term memory. The test used in this study was the listening comprehension section of a practice TOEIC test from a magazine, TOEIC Friends (March, 1999).

The listening comprehension section consists of four parts:

Part I. Photograph (20 items) – Listen to four statements and choose the one that best matches the photo.

Part II. Question – Response (30 items) – Listen to a question and choose the best answer from three spoken sentences.

Part III. Short Conversation (30 items) – Listen to a short conversation, and then read a question and choose the best answer.

Part IV. Short Talks (20 items) – Listen to a talk, and then read questions and choose the best answer for each question.

Although scores on the TOEIC test are determined by converting the number of correct answers to a scaled score, in this study, scores were simply the number of correct responses, so the total possible score was 100 instead of 495.

Results and Discussion

The students were originally more than the numbers mentioned above, but some students did not take either pre or posttest, so such students' scores were excluded from this study. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the test scores.

After the pretest data had been collected in 2004, the reliability of the test was checked and confirmed (.87) using the Winsteps program. Then the pretest and posttest scores were analyzed using a T-test. The results showed that $t = 2.31$ ($p < .05$) in 2004, and $t = 3.86$ ($p < .01$) in 2005, indicating that there was a significant difference between the pretest and the posttest in both 2004 and 2005, and the students performed significantly better on the posttest in both years.

Then Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was used to check if there was a difference between the class of 2004 and the class of 2005, and English majors and non-English majors. The results showed that there was no statistical difference (Table 3), indicating that the treatment was effective in improving listening skills and TOEIC scores regardless of classes or students' majors.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Each Test

	2004 (<i>n</i> = 19)		2005 (<i>n</i> = 27)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
<i>M</i>	46.42	52.74	44.04	53.37
95% CI				
Lower limit	43.15	48.01	40.79	49.61
Upper limit	49.69	57.47	47.28	57.13
<i>SD</i>	6.78	9.81	8.21	9.50
Skewness	.27	-.40	.81	.59
<i>SE</i> of skewness	.52	.52	.45	.45
Kurtosis	.14	.15	.94	1.51
<i>SE</i> of kurtosis	1.01	1.01	.87	.87

Table 3

Multivariate and Univariate Analyses of Variance for Each Test

Variable	Multivariate		Univariate	
	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Pretest	Posttest
Class (C)	1	1.85	2.08	.02
Major (M)	1	1.69	2.56	3.29
C x M	1	.59	1.20	.73

Note. Multivariate *F* ratio was generated from Wilks' statistics.

The treatment not only improved the test scores, but also resulted in high degree of student satisfaction. I asked the students to write comments about the class anonymously, and they all wrote positive comments. Here are some typical comments:

- I was very surprised and impressed. I couldn't believe how slowly and clearly the CD sounded after practicing reading aloud.
- The harder I practiced, the more clearly I could hear each word and sentence.
- I never knew how to study for listening, but now I know.
- Listening became easy as if by magic.
- It was a unique training, but it worked, and I enjoyed it.
- If anyone wants to improve your TOEIC scores, they should take this class.
- My TOEIC score actually improved.

- I'm confident that I can do better on the next TOEIC test. I'm looking forward to it.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate effective and ethical ways of improving students' listening skills and their TOEIC scores. The students who enrolled in TOEIC preparation classes in the fall semester of 2004 and the fall semester of 2005 at Kyoto Sangyo University participated in this study – 19 students in 2004, and 27 students in 2005. A pretest was administered on the first day of class and a posttest, which was exactly the same as the pretest, was administered in the 12th week of class, and the means were compared. The results showed that the students demonstrated statistically significant score gains in both 2004 and 2005, regardless of their majors. The findings of this study indicated that reading transcripts aloud in various ways had a significant effect in improving scores on the listening section of the TOEIC test, and also resulted in a high level of student satisfaction.

The TOEIC test is designed to measure general English proficiency and should be utilized as such. Students should not study for the test and teachers should not teach for the test. Rather, teachers should focus on developing students' general skills or communicative competence, which should naturally lead to good marks on the test. Teaching for the test too directly is considered unethical. However, in reality, we have many students who seriously and urgently wish or need to obtain good scores on the test. I personally believe that teachers should cater to students' needs and help them succeed in such tests if their future success depends on the test scores even in part. This study suggests that one way to do so without being unethical is having students read transcripts aloud in various ways – reading aloud as fast as possible, reading aloud along with the CD, repeating after the CD without looking at the transcripts, and shadowing in a very low voice. Teaching test-taking strategies or having students listen to a CD and answer questions is not the only way.

Further research needs to be conducted to examine the findings of this study more fully. Because no control group was set up, it is impossible to claim if this treatment was more effective than another treatment (e.g., just having students listen to a CD and answer questions). It is also necessary to investigate which method used in this study (i.e., reading aloud as fast as possible, reading aloud

along with a CD, repeating after a CD, or shadowing) is the most effective way of improving listening skills and TOEIC scores.

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