

# **Incorporating the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing Test into Regular First-year English Writing Classes**

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This article reports on a project in which the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing test is incorporated into regular first-year English classes. We investigate the effects of these classes on students' productive English abilities (speaking and writing), along with their motivation to learn English. The study builds upon previous research investigating a program (HiSPEC) which integrates TOEIC® Speaking and Writing with small-group classes (Uenishi et al., 2017; 2018; 2019).

The classes under investigation here again consisted of students from a variety of faculties, but unlike those in the HiSPEC program, were of regular size (about 30 students). We wished, therefore, to investigate whether it would be possible for teachers to successfully incorporate the TOEIC® S&W test into the syllabus with relatively large classes, and whether students would be able to benefit to the same extent as those in small-group classes. For scheduling reasons, it was only possible to provide the tests in the second semester, when writing courses at Hiroshima University are held; consequently, our focus here is on the effects of the classes on the development of writing skills.

## **BACKGROUND**

The teaching of writing skills in secondary education in Japan has traditionally been neglected, with the emphasis instead being placed on written content (Gosden, 1996). At the tertiary level, Sadoshima (2008) has noted that the traditional Japanese academic system places little importance on English writing in the curriculum, although it is taught at a rudimentary level. Kikuchi and Browne (2009) comment that, despite the stated goals of English educational policy in Japan, the primary focus of writing classes appears to be the memorization of grammatical structures, with very little realization of communicative objectives. In a similar vein, Mulvey (2016) discusses the systemic weaknesses in high school writing instruction which make it extremely difficult for students to master this important communicative form.

### **The HiSPEC Program**

In 2014, Hiroshima University was selected as one of the "Top Global Universities" (Top Global University Japan, 2019) designated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Following MEXT's goal of enhancing the competitiveness of higher education in Japan, the HiSPEC program was established with the aim of developing first-year students' English abilities, particularly their speaking and writing skills. Conducted in 2016 and 2017, HiSPEC has been well documented in our previous articles (Uenishi et al., 2017; 2018; 2019), and the reader is referred to these. A summary of the project is provided below.

The program initially involved small-sized classes of students from just four of the university's faculties: Education, Engineering, Integrated Arts and Sciences, and Biological Sciences. The following year, students belonging to a further four faculties (Letters, Science, Law, and Economics) were added to the program. Five instructors were involved with the 2016 course, and four with the 2017 course; each had the autonomy to teach in his/her own way. The focus was on oral communication skills in the first semester, and writing skills in the second semester. In academic year 2016, the students were required to take the first TOEIC® Speaking and Writing (S&W) test at the beginning of the academic year, the second TOEIC® Speaking test near the end of the first semester, and the second TOEIC® Writing test towards the end of the second semester.

However, in 2017, TOEIC® Speaking and Writing tests were given near the beginning and the end of the second semester, with both tests taking place during the writing course. Consequently, students were adequately prepared for the writing test, and most of them were satisfied with their writing classes, which they felt were meaningful. At the end of the HiSPEC program, feedback was obtained from the students in the form of a questionnaire, and instructors were asked to reflect on their own experiences as well.

With regard to TOEIC® Speaking and Writing results for HiSPEC 2016 and 2017, the writing test averages improved, with a t-test showing a significant difference between the first and second test scores. On the other hand, the average speaking test scores for the speaking test showed no improvement between the two tests. Uenishi et al. (2019) discuss possible reasons for this discrepancy, which include instructors' methodology, choice of material, and the lack of relevancy of the speaking test content to the actual goals of an oral skills program.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS FOR THE 2018 PROGRAM**

### **Course Objectives**

In 2018, for practical reasons, the decision was made to continue the program with regular-sized classes rather than the small-group classes involved in the HiSPEC course. By incorporating the TOEIC® S&W tests into all levels of the regular writing course (Communication IIA), the objectives were as follows:

- 1) To better develop students' English proficiencies, especially their writing ability.
- 2) To arouse students' interest in studying abroad and in cross-cultural issues.
- 3) To motivate students and encourage them to study English autonomously.

### **Overview of the Course Schedule**

Four instructors taught the regular courses to eight groups of students from the Faculties of Science, Applied Biological Science, and Informatics and Data Science. The class size ranged from 26 to 28 students. The Writing course started in October 2018 (the second semester), and each teacher taught a 90-minute session, once a week during the semester (15 weeks). Speaking skills had been taught in the first semester. The tests taken were the first TOEIC® S&W test in mid-October, and the second TOEIC® S&W test in mid-January. Students took 11 classes between the two TOEIC® S&W tests.

Table 1 shows how the schedule for the classes was organized for the different groupings. In principle, teachers could evaluate their students as they wished, but they were encouraged to include the results of both TOEIC® Writing tests as part of their student evaluations (approximately 20%).

**TABLE 1. Scheduling of Classes**

Class	Instructor	Day	Class	Instructor	Day
1	A	Tuesday	5	A	Friday
2	B	Tuesday	6	B	Friday
3	C	Tuesday	7	C	Friday
4	D	Tuesday	8	D	Friday

## **METHOD**

Drawing on our previous research (Uenishi et al., 2017; 2018; 2019) which investigates the spoken and written components of HiSPEC, our methodology utilizes a mixed-method approach involving a combination of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. We address the following three research questions:

RQ (1) How were teachers affected by the course incorporating the TOEIC® S&W test?

RQ (2) How were students affected by the course?

RQ (3) How did the students perform on the TOEIC® S&W tests?

To answer the first question, we relied on informal feedback from the teachers regarding their general impressions of the course and specific issues they had incorporating the TOEIC® S&W tests into their syllabus. To investigate RQ2, we investigated students' responses to a questionnaire survey as a means of evaluating student satisfaction and the perceived effectiveness of the Writing course. To measure student performance, we examined the TOEIC® S&W test results obtained in October 2018 and January 2019, and made comparisons with the results achieved in the previous year.

### **The Questionnaire**

The questions asked in the survey were essentially the same as those in the evaluation of the HiSPEC programs (see Figure 1). Questions 1 to 6 required responses on a 5-point Likert scale, and Question 7 was a free description item. The questionnaire was administered after the students finished the writing test.

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| <p>Q1. To what extent could you improve your English language knowledge and skills in this course?</p> <p>Q2. How satisfied were you with the course?</p> <p>Q3. How appropriate was the course in terms of difficulty?</p> <p>Q4. How appropriate was the class size of the Communication IIA writing class?</p> <p>Q5. How useful were the course materials in helping you improve your communication skills?</p> <p>Q6. Has participating in this course increased your motivation to learn English?</p> <p>Q7. Please leave any comments you have about this course.</p> |
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**FIGURE 1. Questionnaire Items**

As mentioned above, the students were expected to take the two TOEIC® S&W tests and answer the questionnaire (Figure 1). There were 191 and 172 students taking the speaking and writing tests in October and January respectively, with 128 students answering the questionnaire as well as taking the speaking and

writing tests. To investigate the research questions, we analyzed the data from these 128 students both qualitatively and quantitatively.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### **Research Question (1): How were teachers affected by the course incorporating the TOEIC® S&W test?**

In academic year 2018, TOEIC® S&W Tests were held in October 2018 and January 2019. This meant that in the first semester teachers did not have to concern themselves with teaching TOEIC® Speaking-related content. However, regarding TOEIC® Writing, this test had varying degrees of influence on teachers' approaches to the teaching and content of their writing courses, and to their overall experience with the classes.

#### Pedagogical Approach to the Writing Classes

In the liberal arts classes held at Hiroshima University, teachers have autonomy over choice of classroom materials. For the Writing course being investigated here, teachers followed the same pedagogical approach as in their regular writing classes. The extent to which TOEIC® Writing was integrated into the lessons varied among classes, but most teachers included some specific TOEIC® Writing practice or related activities to prepare their students for the test.

#### Teacher Opinions of the Classes

Although there were clear differences in ability within each class, instructors indicated that they enjoyed teaching the classes and that they felt that most of the students were motivated and keen to improve their English writing skills. However, the use of TOEIC® Writing as an objective measure drew a lukewarm response. Most teachers felt that it was relatively easy to accommodate the test into their syllabuses, but some felt it did not reflect their own goals for a writing course. The extent to which TOEIC test materials were used in class activities varied considerably, with only one teacher providing actual test practice, but the teachers all covered at least some of the types of writing that make up the test content (e.g., writing emails, expressing opinions).

There was some concern among teachers that the TOEIC® Writing test does not evaluate authentic use of language, although this was less of an issue than with TOEIC® Speaking (see Uenishi et al., 2019). However, there was agreement that while the TOEIC® S&W test may have its limitations, its use does at least promote awareness of the need to assess all four skills – not just listening and reading – systematically when measuring students' proficiency levels.

### **Research Question (2): How were students affected by the course?**

#### Quantitative Analysis of Responses to the Questionnaire Survey

In this section, the data obtained from questionnaire items 1 to 6 are collated and described, followed by a discussion of the free descriptions obtained from item 7. Table 2 shows the proportion of students giving a positive response to the first six questions for the 2018 course, along with the equivalent figures for the previous year.

In answering the first question (*To what extent could you improve your English language knowledge*

and skills in this course?), 55% of the respondents answered that their English had either improved or greatly improved as a result of taking the course. However, this proportion was lower than that of the previous year's HiSPEC program (75%). It is not clear why this should be, but it is possible that the larger class size was one of the factors.

The second question (*How satisfied were you with the course?*) asked participants to rate their satisfaction with the Writing class. The results showed that 58% of the respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the course. This proportion was much lower than the 83% for the HiSPEC writing course in 2017. The third question asked participants about the difficulty level of the course, and 76% of the respondents answered that it was appropriate. However, 20% of them felt the course was difficult.

With respect to the fourth question (*How appropriate was the class size of the Communication IIA writing class?*), 85% of the respondents answered that they were satisfied with a class size of about 30 students. Interestingly, the feedback from the HiSPEC program in 2017 showed that an almost identical 86% of the students felt that the small class size of about 14 students was appropriate.

Regarding course materials, the responses to Question 5 show that 51% of the students agreed that the materials helped them to improve their communication skills. This figure was slightly lower than that in the previous year (2017). As for the sixth question, only 19% of the participants were found to regard the study of English more positively after taking the course. This figure is much lower than that of the previous year (51%), with 77% of the students giving a neutral response to the question (3 on the 5-point scale), implying more of a mismatch between learners' and teachers' expectations than in the previous year.

**TABLE 2. Proportion of Students' Positive Responses to Questionnaire Items (%)**

Year	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
2017	75	83	81	86	63	51
2018	55	58	76	85	51	19

Note: Q4 to 6 in 2018 correspond to Q5 to 7 in 2017.

**TABLE 3. Correlative Coefficients (Q1 to Q6)**

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
Q1	1	0.70**	-0.39	-0.07	0.53**	0.28**
Q2		1	-0.09	-0.12	0.56**	0.25**
Q3			1	-0.08	-0.11	-0.15
Q4				1	-0.12	-0.19*
Q5					1	0.35**
Q6						1

When we look at Question 1 (Improvement of English language knowledge and skills through this course), we find a strong correlation between this question and Question 2 (Satisfaction with the class). This suggests the possibility that student satisfaction with the course is a result of a perceived improvement in their language knowledge and skills.

Regarding Question 5 (Usefulness of materials in improving English ability), we find a moderate

correlation between this question and the first two questions. As mentioned in the analysis, many students felt the materials used in class were either useful or very useful for improving their English ability, including writing skills. The implication of this is that the classroom materials selected by the teacher had an important part to play in the improvement of students' English knowledge and skills, and, consequently, their overall satisfaction with the classes.

#### Qualitative Analysis of Students' Comments

Here, we look at the qualitative data obtained from questionnaire item 7 (free description), and note students' overall impressions concerning the writing classes. These are based upon their comments, which were placed into four categories. Disappointingly, the number of comments written by the students was small, with over half of them (73 out of 128) not writing anything at all. The comments were categorized as shown below (Table 4).

**TABLE 4. Free Comments on the Course**

No	Item	N
1	Enjoyment of/ satisfaction with the writing class	13
2	Improvement of writing skills	8
3	Usefulness of English	3
3	More enthusiasm for English study	2

The most prevalent comment, given by 13 out of the 55 students who commented, expressed satisfaction with and/or enjoyment of the writing class. Following this was the students' feeling that they had improved their writing skills (8 students). These comments relate directly to the actual process of writing, and it is pleasing to learn that a good number of students felt they were able to study English writing in an enjoyable way and that their writing skills had improved. Also, three students wrote that they had become aware that English is useful through the writing classes. Two of the students commented on having greater motivation to learn English, stating that they felt more enthusiastic about studying the language than before. Although most of the students' comments were positive, some were critical, such as "There was too much homework," "I wanted to do more pair work activities," and "The schedule including the TOEIC tests was tight."

#### **Research Question (3): How did the students perform on the TOEIC® S&W tests?**

In this section, the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing test results are used as an indicator of students' speaking and writing proficiency. Using the TOEIC® S&W test result data collected in October 2018 and January 2019, comparisons were made using a t-test.

#### TOEIC® Writing Tests Results

Table 5 shows the results of the TOEIC® Writing tests. There was a significant difference between the two tests ( $t(127) = 8.397; p < .0001$ ), with the TOEIC® Writing scores between October and January showing considerable improvement. Although the writing courses in 2018 were conducted in regular classes, unlike the HiSPEC program (small classes with high-level students), it is interesting that a similarly large

improvement in scores was found.

**TABLE 5. Results of TOEIC® Writing Tests in 2018 (2017)**

	Min.	Mean	Max.	SD
October	60.0	118 (132.3)	160.0	20.4
January	70.0	133.4 (144.2)	160.0	18.4

**TABLE 6. Results of TOEIC® Speaking Tests in 2018 (2017)**

	Min.	Mean	Max.	SD
October	50.0	94.8 (102.5)	130.0	16.6
January	50.0	94.5 (96.0)	130.0	16.4

#### TOEIC® Speaking Test Results

In contrast to the TOEIC® Writing test results, when we look at TOEIC® Speaking we find that the mean score for the second test was almost identical to that of the first test (Table 6); with the 2017 HiSPEC classes, the scores were actually lower. These results are perhaps unsurprising, as the classes were strongly focused on improving writing skills; even so, students were provided with numerous opportunities for speaking in some way throughout the course, and we might expect writing practice to have some effect on the improvement of speaking proficiency.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this article, we have reported on the regular first-year English productive skills classes incorporating TOEIC® S&W tests. Our investigation has focused on the effects of these classes on students' English abilities, especially their writing skills, and on their motivation to learn English.

When we consider student satisfaction, our findings for the course are less positive than those of the 2017 course. The majority of students in the small-sized classes of the HiSPEC program were satisfied overall with the course. However, in 2018 only half of the students expressed satisfaction with the course. Interestingly, though, despite a regular class consisting of about 30 students, most students were satisfied with the class size.

Regarding the TOEIC® Speaking test, as mentioned above, we should perhaps not be surprised that there was no significant difference between the two sets of test scores. There are some possible reasons for no increase in the scores being found. One explanation is that the two speaking tests were not held in the first semester, when students took the Communication IA Speaking class. Another reason concerns the difficulty of measuring oral skills in this type of test; some teachers felt that the test format (requiring use of a computer) and the questions offered are too artificial, and are not reflective of real-life communication.

Concerning the TOEIC® Writing test results, a significant difference was found between the results of

the two tests (held at the beginning and end of the second semester). This indicates that students, at all levels of ability and motivation, and even in relatively large classes, can make good progress with their writing skills over a short period of time. Also, it would seem to be easier to bring about improvement in writing than in speaking, at least over the short term. The fact that teachers were better able to provide adequate test preparation and appropriate learning content in their writing classes may be a factor.

Looking ahead, there are several aspects worthy of our consideration in future research involving courses incorporating the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing test. These include test validity, timing of the tests, and teacher autonomy.

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## APPENDIX 1. The TOEIC® S&W Test

As its name implies, the TOEIC® S&W test consists of two parts: TOEIC® Speaking, and TOEIC® Writing, designed to measure English language speaking and writing skills respectively.

### TOEIC® Speaking Content

The TOEIC® Speaking Test consists of six sections with 11 questions. The total time allowed for the test is approximately 20 minutes. All the examinee responses are recorded on a computer and scored by multiple evaluators. Students receive scores on a scale ranging from 0 to 200.

Task (Number of items)	Response time	General outline of task	Assessment	Scale
Read a text aloud (2)	45 secs. per item (Prep time: 45 secs. per item)	Test-taker reads aloud a short text, such as an announcement or advertisement.	Pronunciation, Intonation and Accent	0-3
Describe a picture (1)	45 secs. (Prep time: 30 secs. per item)	Test-taker gives a verbal description of a photograph.	In addition to everything above, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Cohesion	0-3
Response to questions (3)	15 or 30 secs. (Prep time: none)	Test-taker responds to questions on a commonplace topic, as if responding in an interview.	In addition to everything above, Content validity and Content completeness	0-3
Response to questions using information provided (3)	15 or 30 secs. (Prep time: none)	Test-taker responds to questions based on written information (such as a schedule of events) that appears on the screen.	Everything above	0-3
Propose a solution (1)	60 secs. (Prep time: 30 secs)	Test-taker listens to a voice mail message describing a problem and gives a response. In the response, the test-taker indicates recognition of the problem and proposes a solution.	Everything above	0-5
Express an opinion (1)	60 secs. (Prep time: 15 secs)	Test-taker expresses an opinion about a specific topic and the reasons for that opinion.		0-5

Note: The contents of this table are based on information obtained from the following sites:

<http://www.toEIC.or.jp/english/speaking/about/tests.html>

<http://www.toEIC.or.jp/sw/about/tests.html>

### TOEIC® Writing Test Content

The TOEIC® Writing is a computer based test and takes approximately one hour. The test consists of the following three main sections:

- (1) Students are asked to look at a photograph and write a sentence that includes two words on display just below the picture. Students answer five such items (10 minutes in total).
- (2) Students must read an email and reply to it (two items, 10 minutes each).
- (3) Students must write an opinion essay (one item, 30 minutes).

All the examinee responses are typed on a computer and scored by multiple evaluators. Students receive scores, from 0 to 200.

Question	Task	Evaluation Criteria
1 to 5	Write a sentence based on a picture	Grammar Relevance of the sentences to the pictures
6 & 7	Respond to a written request	Quality and variety of sentences Vocabulary Organization
8	Write an opinion essay	Whether opinion is supported with reasons and/or examples Grammar Vocabulary Organization

## ABSTRACT

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In this article, we report on a project in which the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing test is incorporated into regular first-year English classes. The effects of these classes on students' productive English abilities, particularly writing, are investigated, along with their motivation to learn English. The study builds upon previous research investigating a program (HiSPEC) integrating TOEIC® Speaking and Writing with small-group classes (Uenishi et al., 2017; 2018; 2019). Our primary aims were to determine whether it would be possible for teachers to successfully incorporate the TOEIC® S&W test into the syllabus with relatively large classes, and if students would be able to benefit to the same extent as those in small-group classes. Teachers' feedback and students' responses to a questionnaire survey were analyzed, along with the students' TOEIC® S&W test results obtained at the beginning and end of the regular writing course.

Regarding student satisfaction, our findings for the regular-sized classes are less positive than those of the 2017 course with small-sized classes, with only about half of the students expressing satisfaction with the course. However, most students were satisfied with the class size. Looking at the test results, although we found no significant difference between the two sets of Speaking test scores, there was a significant difference between the results of the two Writing tests. These findings indicate that students, at all levels of ability and motivation, and regardless of class size, can make good progress with their writing skills over a short period of time. Also, it would seem to be easier to bring about substantial improvement in writing than in speaking, as measured by the TOEIC® S&W test, at least over the short term. Looking to the future, research into courses incorporating the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing test might usefully investigate factors such as test validity, the timing of tests, and teacher autonomy.

## 要 約

### TOEIC®スピーキング・ライティングテストと通常の1年生 英語ライティングクラスとの統合

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本稿では、TOEIC®スピーキング・ライティングテストを通常の1年生英語クラスに統合したプロジェクトについて報告する。英語学習のモチベーションとともに、これらの授業が学生の英語発信能力、特にライティング及ぼす影響を調査している。本研究は、TOEIC®S&Wテストを少人数のクラスに統合したプログラム（HiSPEC）を調査したこれまでの研究（Uenishi et al., 2017; 2018; 2019）に基づいて行っている。主な目的は、教師がTOEIC®S&Wテストを比較的大きなクラスのシラバスにうまく組み込むことができるかどうか、そして学生が少人数のクラスと同程度に成果が得られるかどうかを明らかにすることである。TOEIC®S&Wテストは、通常のライティングコースの最初と最後に行われた。

学生の満足度に関しては、通常クラスの調査結果は、小規模なクラスで実施した2017年の調査結果よりもよいものではない。しかし、ほとんどの学生はクラスサイズに満足していた。テスト結果を見ると、実施した2回のスピーキングテスト間には有意差はなかったが、2つのライティングテスト間の結果には有意差があった。我々の調査結果は、クラスサイズに関係なく、あらゆるレベルの英語力とモチベーションを持った学生が、短期間でライティングスキルを上達させることができることを示している。また、少なくとも短期的には、スピーキングよりもライティングの大幅な改善をもたらしやすいと思える。TOEIC®S&Wテストを取り入れたコースに関する今後の研究は、テストの妥当性、テスト時期、教師の自主性などの要因を調査するのに役立つであろう。