大学英語授業における英語資格・検定試験の利用と位置付け
－自主的学習促進の観点から－
Positive Use and Positioning of Language Proficiency Test in Undergraduate EFL Courses: From the Viewpoint of Autonomous Learning

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ABSTRACT

　文科省によるグローバル人材育成推進を目的とした英語力評価及び入学者選抜における資格・検定試験の活用促進は，大学の一般英語授業の内容や評価指標に少なからぬ影響を与えている。中でも TOEIC は，企業や就職活動との関連性が強いことから，多くの高等教育機関において正課および課外のカリキュラムに取り入れられている。本論では，TOEIC の一般英語授業への適用方法や学習効果を考察するため，2 年生必須のビジネス英語（授業 A）と 3 年生の選択英語ライティング（授業 B）の 2 つの授業を取りあげ，省察と検証を行う。各授業のと TOEIC との関係性と評価方法，取り入れた問題の具体的な内容等を報告する。特に授業 A については，TOEIC 対策問題の授業内導入に対する学生の受け止め，モチベーションなど，学習者アンケートの結果，および事前事後のミニ模試の結果もふまえて，低習熟度クラスへの外部検定試験の導入に対する問題点を探る。

　Now that the term globalization is sweeping across Japan, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology Japan (MEXT) is aggressively promoting the use of foreign language (FL) proficiency tests to foster human resources with high-level FL competence. Many of Japanese universities and colleges are

mainly focusing on TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) because of its strong relation to job market requirement and its pervasiveness in Japan's society. They are offering TOEIC preparation courses in both regular curricula and extracurricular activities. Moreover, as the test spreading more and more widely, the influence of TOEIC on ordinary English courses may become significant, in terms of content, activities, purposes, and assessment. The present research notes report on the application of TOEIC in regular skill-based English courses and discusses the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing language proficiency tests in higher education. Two English classes discussed in this paper are a compulsory business English course for sophomores (Class A) and an academic English writing course for juniors and seniors (Class B). The paper examines their relationship with TOEIC, the inclusion of materials and content of TOEIC, and effects of the application of TOEIC.

1. Introduction

Now that the term globalization is sweeping across Japan, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology Japan (MEXT) is aggressively promoting the use of foreign language (FL) proficiency tests to foster human resources with high-level competence in FL communication. MEXT indicates active use of foreign language proficiency test by popular companies to assess English four skills in Common Test for College and University Entrance Examination starting in 2020 academic year in place of the current standard test offered by National Center for University Entrance Examination. Many educational institutions follow the governmental policy and promote outsourcing tests in their FL education, and focus on TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). TOEIC is used most frequently in them because of its strong relation to job market requirement and pervasiveness in Japan's society. Japanese universities and colleges are enthusiastically offering TOEIC preparation courses in both regular curricula and extracurricular activities for senior students. Moreover, as the test spreading more and more widely, the influence of TOEIC on ordinary English courses has become significant, in terms of content, activities, purposes, and assessment. The present research notes report on and review how the author has applied TOEIC content into class activities in regular English courses she has taught. The paper

discusses the possibility of a positive use of TOEIC in relation to autonomous learning in the last section.

2. Use of TOEIC in Higher Education

2.1 Background

TOEIC seems to be the most popular language proficiency test in Japan. According to the official data by The Institute for International Business Communication (IIBC) (2019), which is responsible for implementing TOEIC in Japan, TOEIC was taken by more than two million and four hundred thousand people in total in 2018, including individuals and groups of people from companies, schools, and other institutions. Among the publicly traded big companies and enterprises in Japan, more than about sixty percent of them use TOEIC test scores for the screening process of employment. These companies also use the ratings for self-enlightenment of new employees, assessment of the effects of staff training, criteria for the appointment of overseas posts, and the requirement for a promotion. New employees at general office job are expected to have scores of minimum 600, and those who work in international relations should have 730 in TOEIC LR (listening & reading). In this way, TOEIC has permeated into business society, and this may lead to higher diffusion of TOEIC in educational institutions than other language tests such as TOEFL and Eiken.

IIBC's statistical data show more than seven

hundred sixty thousand university students sat in the TOEIC test in 2017, including the examination open to public and the institutional program (IP). Universities use TOEIC scores as a proficiency level assessment for new students, a placement test for the class allocation, evidence for English proficiency for entrance admission requirements, and evaluation of the effectiveness of English programs. Some universities incorporate TOEIC into the assessment of student achievement and give a certain number of credits according to TOEIC test scores a student has gained.

2. 2 Existing Research on TOEIC

While junior and senior high schools have clearly defined common objectives, procedure, and assessment in English education, that of universities is unregulated and has a lot of problems. Ishikawa (2017) points out that given that language proficiency tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC are incorporated into regular English curricula, there is a concern about what the right positioning of these tests is. In many cases, universities leave what and how to teach in general English courses to an individual teacher, and there is no such systematic plan for nation-wide or institution-leveled educational reform (Ueno, 2016). How to deal with the test scores varies from institution to institution and depends on the program aims. When the curriculum and assessment are connected to TOEIC test scores, learners in such a class need to spend much more time for TOEIC study than ordinary English classes, and they have to study hard by themselves outside the classroom in order to gain high achievement in TOEIC (Bresnihan, 2019). Saegusa's study (1985) with more than one thousand young Japanese workers in 1985 suggested that less than 80 hours of instruction was not very effective and successful TOEIC score gain would require at least 100 or even 200 hours of instruction. Comparing the improvement in listening section and the reading section, improving learners' listening ability seems to take more time than reading ability. Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) compared English-major and non-major groups of university students and reported that English majors made an equal improvement in both listening and reading scores, while non-majors' improvement was great in reading, though little in listening.

Whether TOEIC can measure students' English proficiency and communicative competence is another concern. Test-takers tend to study and review past tests and concentrate their efforts on the types of language and test items supposed to appear on the test; if a test can be prepared for, then the test no longer can be said to measure general proficiency, and rather, it measures how well people have studied for the test (Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999). Although using TOEIC scores for the placement of students is common in Japanese universities, English, McShane, Honobe, and Kelland (2019) suggest that "TOEIC scores may reflect more on test-taking ability than a student's actual language ability," (p. 125) and the score "does not reflect a student's language learning ability" (p. 126).

Thus, TOEIC cannot be a completely effective instrument to measure a learner's English communication ability. However, as researchers (e.g., Takahashi, 2011) suggest, university education needs an effective measure to evaluate educational programs and projects.

3. Applying TOEIC Content in General English Courses

The research has targeted two English classes in the 2018 fall semester: Business English Reading and Writing for the first-year students (hereafter called Class A) and Academic English Writing for the third and fourth-year students (Class B). This section describes each class, in terms of (1) what the relation between the course assessment system and TOEIC test score is, and (2) how the contents of TOEIC are applied in the course.

3.1 Class A: Business English Reading and Writing

This is a compulsory English class focusing on business reading and writing for university sophomores in the department of social study, with 23 students including three males and twenty females. Their ages range from 19 to 20, and they have sat in TOEIC IP once or twice so far. The class level is the lowest of the seven levels divided based on the previous year's TOEIC IP test scores. This classification means that most of the students in this class have not yet obtained 450 in TOEIC. The purpose of the class is to enhance students' English reading and writing abilities in the context relating to business activities. The university of this course administers TOEIC IP test twice a year and aims to utilize the test in fostering students' ability to take an active part in the globalized society. Besides the official IP test, a mini mock test was conducted as a pre-test and a post-test at the beginning and the end of the TOEIC treatment. The test consisted of a reduced number of items extracted from the TOEIC materials. Also, a background questionnaire and a final questionnaire were implemented on the first and the last day of the treatment.

3.1.1 The Relation between the Assessment System of the Class and the TOEIC Test Score

The class has a close connection with the TOEIC test score in grading. Syllabus of this course shows that every student must gain at least 450 in TOEIC test score at the TOEIC IP test just after the end of a semester; otherwise, the student will fail in the class, irrespective to the actual grade he/she has achieved. According to the preliminary questionnaire on the first day of the course, students all recognized the assessment criteria of the course, and most of them eagerly wanted to fulfill the requirement.

3.1.2 Application of TOEIC in Class Content

During the fifteen sessions, twenty to thirty minutes were spent for the general TOEIC study, and forty minutes were used for the pre-test and post-test. Besides, five-minute mini vocabulary test with the frequently appearing verbs was administered ten times. The teacher used the original handouts to explain the problems and the extracts from the official TOEIC test practice material. In practicing the questions in Part 2 and Part 3, students were engaged in aural activities such as reading aloud and role-plays. As homework to supplement the lack of practicing listening, students were asked to study one unit of 'TOEIC 2000' in NetAcademy 2, an e-learning material developed by ALC, ten times using the institutional system. As for the reading section, the class focused on Part 5, Part 6, and relatively easy problems of Part 7, considering the students' proficiency level.

3.2 Class B: Academic English Writing

This elective course aims to teach English paragraph writing to the third and fourth graders of the university. Ten third-year technology-major students, eight males and two females, aged twenty to twenty-one, enrolled in the course. They had taken the TOEIC IP test at least twice before then. The class is not based on the students' English proficiency level nor previous achievement, without the requirement of the TOEIC score. Consequently, their English ability varies from lower to upper-intermediate. The course objective is to teach students necessary academic skills and knowledge of English writing so that they can express their opinions and ideas clearly and appropriately in various contexts. The university of this course is quite enthusiastic in promoting foreign language education because it is selected as a "super global university" by MEXT.

3.2.1 The Relation between the Assessment System of the Class and the TOEIC Test Score

Students in the course are expected to study the reading section of the TOEIC test spontaneously. Grading involves 60 percent of achievement in course work and 40 percent of the count of TOEIC IP Reading Section score. Total score and the score of Listening Section of the TOEIC IP are not considered for the assessment.

3.2.2 Application of TOEIC in Class Content

Of 100 minutes class time, 30 to 40 minutes were used for TOEIC study. Mini mock test was administered three times, spending about 40 to 60 minutes. The first and the last tests served as pre- and post-test, while the second one was used for the practice. Like Class A, five-minute mini vocabulary test with frequently appearing verbs was administered ten times, and the teacher's original handouts and the extracts from the official TOEIC test practice material were used. The students have well recognized the organization of the reading section and the whole test, and some of them had their own learning strategies of TOEIC. Taking the situation and the students' needs into account, the class focused on Part 6 and Part 7. The teaching of Part 7 attempted to include the reading comprehension questions with more than one document.
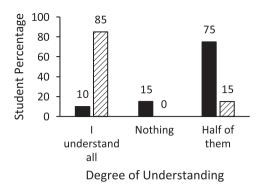
4. Review and Reflection

Reviewing the content and instruction of the two target classes provides both positive and negative sides of incorporating the language proficiency test score into the class grade. In the case of Business Reading and Writing (Class A), the original course goal was to make students familiar with essential English reading and writing in the business context through business conversation, documents, telephone exchange, and E-mails. Since these contexts have something in common with the situation appearing in the TOEIC test, incorporating TOEIC into the class activities was mostly acceptable for both the teacher and students. However, the class had to spend a certain amount of time for the TOEIC preparation study, especially reading comprehension, and this resulted in the reduced time for students to learn course materials. Studying the TOEIC Listening questions seems to be useful because it supplemented the lack of listening materials in the original course textbook. As for the use of e-learning material, only totally twenty-nine percent of students completed their homework during the ten weeks, although students recognized the completion of homework would cover ten percent of the whole assessment points. This result may be attributed to the tendency that low-proficient EFL students are susceptible in teaching instruction, need a teacher's support, and cannot learn autonomously in the non-face-to-face communication settings (Matsuoka, 2016).
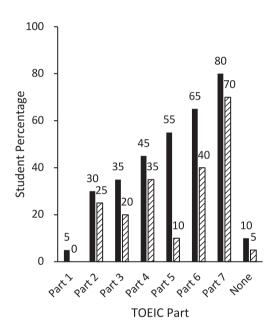
The two-mini mock-tests covered every part of the TOEIC test and were conducted to measure students' improvement. According to the results of pre-and post-test scores, there was a slight improvement in the percentage of correct answers. The figure increased from 46 percent to 49 percent in the Listening section, 30 percent to 38 percent in the Reading section, and 41 to 43 percent in total, although students' achievement was still quite low.

Results of the background and final questionnaires conducted on the first and the last day of the course indicated the change in students' understanding of the content, perception of the test difficulty, and their situation of self-study. According to the data, the degree of students' understanding of the TOEIC organization increased considerably after the treatment (see Figure 1). When the class started, only 10 percent of students understood the whole organization and content clearly. Seventy-five percent understood only half of them, and 15 percent answered they understood nothing about the TOEIC test. After 15 weeks of the

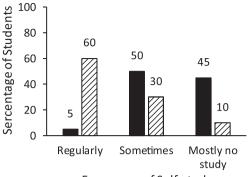Figure 1. Degree of students' understanding of the TOEIC organization and the percentage of students.

Figure 2. TOEIC Part with the questions that students found difficult to solve before/after the treatment in Class A (more than one items can be chosen).

Figure 3. Students' self-study situation before & after the treatment in Business R & W (Class A).

find difficulty in Part 5 in Reading section decreased dramatically from 55 percent to 10 percent and decreased from 65 percent to 40 percent in Part 6. Seventy percent of students still seem to feel difficulty in answering questions in Part 7. In the Listening section, the figure decreased somewhat moderately relative to Reading section, from five percent to zero in Part 1, from 35 percent to 20 percent in Part 3, and 45 percent to 35 percent in Part 4, respectively. Although the percentage slightly increased in Part 2, students' overall perceived difficulty seems to have decreased through the TOEIC study in class.

Figure 3 illustrates the situation of students' self-study of TOEIC before and after the treatment in Business R & W (Class A). Only five percent of students found to have studied English regularly by themselves, 50 percent studied sometimes, and 45 percent had no study habits for their own before treatment. On the other hand, after the treatment, 60 percent students answered they became studying English by themselves, and the percentages of those who studied English only sometimes and those who did not study English at all decreased considerably. Overall, the students increased their awareness of TOEIC and put English learning into practice.

While Class A used the total score for the

course, 85 percent of the students answered they understood them, 15 percent understood the half, and no one replied that they understood nothing. The results in Figure 2 show the change of the students' perceived difficulty in the TOEIC parts before and after the treatment. The percentage of students who

assessment, Class B only used the score of the Reading section of the TOEIC IP test. This salient difference between the contents of learning reduced the burden of students in the latter class considerably, together with the stretched class time, smaller class size, and their English proficiency levels. Out of 100 minutes class time of Class B, 30 to 40 minutes were spent entirely for the TOEIC preparation. Ten third-year students enrolled, which was fewer than Class A, and then, they were able to receive advice and feedback about their writing individually from the teacher. Although not every student's L2 proficiency level was high, the close contact between students and a teacher, their experience of sitting for the test several times, and their awareness to the needs for TOEIC in job-hunting made TOEIC instruction smoother.

5. Discussion and Implications

Considering whether the university English education should adopt external language proficiency tests, such as TOEIC, the question arises on whether it is an appropriate measurement tool of English proficiency. Takahashi (2011) argues the use of the TOEIC score in university curricula and its influence to students and suggests "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" (p. 135). Achievement in the TOEIC test attributes to both the language ability and test skills, and in this respect, TOEIC cannot purely assess a student's language proficiency. As Takahashi (2011) suggests, the problems of integrating TOEIC scores into the assessment are particularly serious when the test result was used for those students who rank low on the test. In fact, the problem was significant in Class A, where the assessment criteria of the class directly connected to the TOEIC L & R scores, even though most of the students' English proficiency level was lower than the requirement.

Although slight improvement was observed between the pre-test and post-test, students' English proficiency remained still low, and solving the TOEIC problems did not seem to have contributed to the improvement in students' L2 competence. If the students had insufficient English skills and knowledge, studying TOEIC materials would be of little benefit for them. Low-proficient students "should concentrate on general English courses to master basic skills until they can make use of authentic TOEIC preparation materials" (Miller, 2003, as cited in Takahashi, 2011, p. 135). The students of Class A could be provided with more opportunity to comprehend and practice essential English materials in class.

From a positive point of view, studying for TOEIC created the opportunity of self-study habit to promote autonomous learning. Learner autonomy refers to "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). Recently, fostering autonomy in learning English is the goal of many EFL programs in higher education. Universities and colleges are providing various programs and activities to foster autonomous learners, motivated by the educational paradigm shift from "teaching to learning" as well as the growing needs of human resources with high-level communication competence in English (Matsuoka, 2017). In the open-ended column of the final questionnaire at Class A, many commented although they had wanted to learn English additionally at home, they did not know what and how to do. Some students commented that they spontaneously studied English other than homework for the first time outside the classroom, while others stated that TOEIC was easy to study by themselves because it had problems in different-leveled parts. However, teachers and curriculum organizers should be conscientious about applying TOEIC into the class with low-proficient students because there is a possibility that these students may fail in achieving the designated scores and might be discouraged by the result. Teachers should avoid this kind of test to have a negative influence on the students. One suggestion is

to inform the students that the TOEIC score cannot evaluate their whole English competence.

It is prominent pressing low-level students to prepare for TOEIC or another language proficiency test does not help them master the target language, while the trend of utilizing the score of such tests in the university curriculum is in upwards. When the TOEIC is a hurdle for students to leap over, and especially when its height is beyond their abilities, teachers may naturally want to support their students. The survey of the frequent advising topics at the self-access language center in a private university shows students' unignorable needs of TOEIC: 147 out of 213 advising sessions related to the TOEIC, either directly or combined with other topics (Matsuoka, 2018). In spite of the criticism that using external language proficiency test is inconsistent to the fundamental goal of EFL learning and these tests may be inappropriate as the measurement tool of the academic study, the teachers in the field of education are expected to consider how to keep balance between the test preparation and class content in the situation they are facing.

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