

Evaluation of the TOEIC Test Preparation Class at Konan University

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Introduction

More and more Japanese college students are interested in taking the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) test because “obtaining a TOEIC qualification will be beneficial as college graduates to secure employment in Japanese companies” (Abe & Tanner, 2001, p. 7).

In 1997, Konan University started offering intermediate TOEIC preparation classes, since many students were interested in taking the TOEIC yet did not know test-taking strategies. We started out with 15 classes, and, in the year 2001, the TOEIC preparation class expanded to more than 40 classes, with an enrollment of more than 1,000 students. Although the TOEIC preparation class has been very popular, we had never attempted to evaluate this class. Without evaluation, we cannot find out what is working and what needs to be changed to meet the needs of the students. The purpose of this paper is to report how the students feel about the TOEIC preparation class and how we can improve this class in the future. Concerning the significance of evaluation, Rea-Dickins and Germaine (1992, xii) state:

We feel that evaluation has a very important role to play in the improvement of teaching and learning. It is something that should not be seen as an additional ‘chore’ for teachers. Evaluation is to be considered the *means* by which both teaching and learning may function more efficiently and quality be assured.

Characteristics and Purposes of the TOEIC Test

Before exploring the subject of evaluation, it is useful to mention the basic characteristics and purposes of the TOEIC test. In the mid 1970s, the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry asked the Educational Testing Service in America to design the TOEIC test to measure English language listening and reading comprehension of individuals for whom English is not a native language. The TOEIC test is taken mainly by business people worldwide (Wilson, 1989).

Gilfert (1996) says that most TOEIC test takers are company employees in their mid-twenties to late forties. However, recent TOEIC examinees include many college

students, because more and more companies require TOEIC scores for job applications. For the past twenty years, the use of the TOEIC has spread from Japan to most Asian countries, and it is now being used in Europe and South America.

Gilfert (1996) states that the TOEIC test is used to assess an individual's English proficiency in business situations. TOEIC scores are increasingly used by employers in hiring new employees or considering promotions or overseas assignments. As a result of this practice, more colleges and tertiary-level vocational schools are offering TOEIC preparation courses than ever before.

TOEIC Preparation Classes at Konan University

As I mentioned, Konan University started offering 15 intermediate TOEIC classes in 1997. The following year, we expanded the number of intermediate TOEIC classes and created a few advanced TOEIC classes. Since then each year we have expanded TOEIC classes as the enrollment has increased.

Completing three freshman English classes is a prerequisite for the intermediate TOEIC class. Therefore, the majority of students who are enrolled in the program are sophomores or juniors. In addition, in order to sign up for the advanced TOEIC class, students need to complete the intermediate TOEIC class.

The TOEIC preparation class meets once a week for 90 minutes. The entire intermediate or advanced program continues from April to July and September to January for a total of about 40 hours of instruction a year.

Three years ago, we began to administer a placement test for those students who wish to enroll in the intermediate TOEIC class. Then according to the test result, students either study in an upper level intermediate TOEIC class called TOEIC AV (advanced) or a lower intermediate level class called TOEIC IM (intermediate) class. We also chose materials for the AV and IM class. On the other hand, the Advanced TOEIC class did not have a placement test since the enrollment was not very high.

At the end of the year, students who take both intermediate and advanced TOEIC classes are expected to take the TOEIC test to see how high a TOEIC score they can obtain.

Each year we have a TOEIC faculty meeting and talk about our evaluation of the TOEIC class; however, an evaluation from teachers alone does not seem to help us improve the course. Consequently, we came to the conclusion that an evaluation from students would help us find out what is working and what needs to be improved in the TOEIC preparation class.

Type of Evaluation and Survey Instrument for the TOEIC Class

Worthen, Sanders and Fitzpatrick (1997) state that there are two types of evaluation: formative and summative evaluation. In the formative evaluation, we are interested in what is working, what needs to be improved, and how it can be improved. In the summative evaluation, we tend to make judgments about the program's worth or merit. "Its focus is on continuation, termination or adoption of a program" (Torres, Preskill & Piontek, 1996, p. 46). In regards to the type of evaluation for the TOEIC preparation class, this is mainly a formative evaluation of how our program is working and how we can improve the program.

In the spring of 2001, we made an announcement to all TOEIC teachers that we would conduct a student survey of intermediate TOEIC classes at the end of the school year. With regards to the advantages of using a survey instrument, Brown (2001) states that surveys are very efficient for obtaining data on a large scale. Although interviews may be used effectively with a small number of participants in a language program, a survey is more effective when we would like to get the views of all participants. Isaac and Michael (1995, p. 136) state the purpose of the survey as follows:

Surveys are the most widely-used technique in education and the behavioral sciences for the collection of data. They are a means of gathering information that describes the nature and extent of a specified set of data ranging from physical counts and frequencies to attitudes and opinions. This information, in turn, can be used to answer questions that have been raised, to solve problems that have been posed or observed, to assess needs and set goals, to determine whether or not specific objectives have been met, to establish baselines against which future comparisons can be made, to analyze trends across time, and generally, to describe what exists, in what amount, and in what context.

In constructing a survey, I consulted J.D. Brown's *Using Surveys in Language Programs*. Brown (2001) mentions that there are usually two types of responses in a survey: closed responses and open responses. In closed or structured responses, respondents are required to choose their response from among several options. In open or explanatory responses, respondents are required to answer in their own words. Even though Brown points out advantages and disadvantages of both responses, he recommends using both types since they serve different purposes. In our TOEIC evaluation survey, we included both closed and open responses for each question. For example, one question asks students whether the class is useful. They are required to choose whether the class is "very useful," "pretty useful," "not very useful" or "not useful at all." Then there is a space below the choices where students are able to explain why they choose that response. In this way, students are able to express their responses in detail, and we are able to find out more about the reasons for their choices.

After constructing a survey for the TOEIC preparation class, I circulated it to all the TOEIC teachers for their feedback in order to revise our survey instrument. Then we finalized all the question items for the survey.

Student Surveys

Since there are more than 1,000 students in the intermediate TOEIC class and the survey format includes a number of open responses, it was not practical to administer the survey to the entire population. Instead, a sampling method was used, in which data was gathered from a smaller population to represent the entire population.

In December 2001, we asked all the TOEIC teachers (11) to conduct the survey in one IM and one AV TOEIC preparation class that they teach. As a result, we administered the survey to 182 IM students (7 classes) and 153 AV students (6 classes). The purpose of the survey was to find out how the students feel about the TOEIC preparation class and how we can improve this class in the future.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the survey results were very positive; students thought that the TOEIC preparation class seemed to be helpful for learning test taking strategies. More detailed information concerning their responses to each question in the survey is presented below.

Table 1

IM students' perceptions of the level of the TOEIC preparation class

too easy	a little too easy	just right	a little too difficult	too difficult
N=2	N=31	N=115	N=33	N=1
1.1%	17.0%	63.2%	18.1%	0.5%

Table 2

AV students' perceptions of the level of the TOEIC preparation class

too easy	a little too easy	just right	a little too difficult	too difficult
N=0	N=15	N=100	N=31	N=7
0%	9.8%	65.4%	20.3%	4.6%

Table 1 and Table 2 show that most AV and IM students felt that the level of the class was just right. They made comments as follows: "I found the class was just right for me." (IM) "The teacher's explanation was very clear." (IM) "I learned basic things

and I was able to work on application exercises.” (AV) “We had a quiz every week and I sometimes found the class was difficult. However, I’ve improved my learning.” (AV)

Some students who found the class was easy said that the actual TOEIC test is much more difficult than what they learned in the class, so that the class should be more challenging (IM & AV). One student mentioned that the class should be more strict (IM) and another student said that exercises were easy and there were not many new things to learn (AV).

Those who responded “difficult” said that they were not good at English (IM & AV), listening was rather difficult (IM & AV) and that they hadn’t studied English for a long time (IM & AV).

Table 3

IM students’ perceptions of the usefulness of the TOEIC class

very useful	pretty useful	not very useful	not useful at all
N=12	N=116	N=44	N=6
6.7%	65.2%	24.7%	3.4%

Table 4

AV students’ perceptions of the usefulness of the TOEIC class

very useful	pretty useful	not very useful	not useful at all
N=18	N=100	N=19	N=4
12.8%	70.9%	13.5%	2.8%

Table 3 and Table 4 show students’ perceptions of the usefulness of the TOEIC preparation class. Most IM and AV students responded that the class was useful for preparing for the TOEIC test. Some representative comments are: “I was able to learn the format of the TOEIC test.” (IM & AV) “I was able to learn strategies for the test.” (IM & AV) “The teacher taught me useful techniques for taking the test.” (IM & AV) Students’ comments indicate that they learned a great deal of test taking strategies and skills in the class.

The majority of IM students who felt the class was not useful responded that they had not taken the TOEIC test. Therefore they said that they could not tell the class was useful or not.

Some AV students who responded “not useful” said that there was a big gap between the actual TOEIC test and the material covered in class. They expressed their concern that the actual test was very difficult, and the class did not seem to prepare them for the level of the test.

Table 5
IM students' evaluation of the textbook

very good	fairly good	not very good	not good at all
N=29	N=126	N=22	N=5
15.9%	69.2%	12.1%	2.7%

Table 6
AV students' evaluation of the textbook

very good	fairly good	not very good	not good at all
N=20	N=112	N=17	N=2
13.2%	74.2%	11.3%	1.3%

In the year 2000, *Longman Preparation Series for the TOEIC Test: Introductory Course* was used in the IM TOEIC class and *Longman Preparation Series for the TOEIC Test: More Practice Tests* was used in the AV TOEIC class. Concerning the text, the majority of IM and AV students responded that the text was fairly good (Tables 5 & 6) and said the following: "The text was easier than the actual test and the level was just right for me." (IM) "It was easy for me to study because there were a lot of basic things." (IM) "I learned what the TOEIC was about from this text." (IM) "The text was very practical." (AV) "Exercises were similar to the actual TOEIC test." (AV)

Both IM and AV students who said the text was not very good made similar comments, such as that the actual test was much more difficult, the tape in the text was slow, the content of the reading material in the text was easy and it was difficult to use for self-study because it lacked clear explanation in Japanese. Overall, the students would like more challenging texts with clear explanations in the answer keys.

Table 7
IM students' perceptions of the amount of exercises covered in each class

too much	a little too much	just right	not quite enough	not enough
N=1	N=21	N=143	N=14	N=0
0.6%	11.7%	79.9%	7.8%	0%

Table 8
AV students' perceptions of the amount of exercises covered in each class

too much	a little too much	just right	not quite enough	not enough
0	12	122	15	4
0%	7.8%	79.7%	9.8%	2.6%

With regards to the amount of exercises covered in each class, most students felt it was just right (Tables 7 & 8).

Meanwhile, students who felt that the amount was too much wanted teachers to explain each problem in more detail (IM & AV). Students who responded “not enough” would like to have more exercises during the class (IM & AV).

Table 9

Degree of IM students' comprehension of the material

very good	fairly good	not very good	poor
N=12 6.7%	N=120 66.7%	N=47 26.1%	N=1 0.6%

Table 10

Degree of AV students' comprehension of the material

very good	fairly good	not very good	poor
N=12 8.3%	N=103 71.5%	N=28 19.4%	N=1 0.7%

Most of the students seemed to understand the material well by the end of the class (Tables 9 & 10) because they said that the teacher's explanations were very clear (IM & AV). Those students who did not seem to understand well made the following comments: “Exercises were actually not very difficult, but the explanation was written in English. Because of this I thought that Japanese explanation would have been much easier to understand.” (IM) “Because the amount of exercises in the text was insufficient, I was not able to understand well.” (IM) “My vocabulary is limited.” (IM) “I forgot a lot of grammar and I'm not good at listening.” (IM) “I need clearer explanation for each problem.” (AV)

Table 11

IM students' perceptions of the pace of the class

too slow	a little slow	just right	a little too fast	too fast
N=0 0%	N=18 10.1%	N=132 74.2%	N=26 14.6%	N=2 1.1%

Table 12

AV students' perceptions of the pace of the class

too slow	a little slow	just right	a little too fast	too fast
N=2	N=18	N=113	N=17	N=1
1.3%	11.9%	74.8%	11.3%	0.7%

Tables 11 and 12 show that the majority of students thought that the pace of the class was just right. Students who thought the pace was slow said that the pace could be a little faster (AV), more exercises could be covered (IM) and pair practice was a little too long (IM). Students who thought the pace was a little fast said: "When the time was running short, the teacher explained too fast and I was not able to follow the teacher." (AV) "Checking of answers was too quick to understand." "The teacher often checks answers before I complete all the exercises." (IM) "We covered a number of exercises, but it didn't mean we understood them well." (IM)

Table 13

Types of exercises IM students would like to have more of in class

1. listening, listening exercises, listening comprehension (N=74)
2. grammar exercises (N=17)
3. practical exercises/questions that appeared in previous TOEIC tests (N=16)
The way it is now is fine./Nothing in particular. (N=16)
4. reading (N=6)
5. vocabulary/idioms (N=4) timed exercises (N=4)
6. more exercises (N=3) music (N=3)
7. timed reading (N=2) more explanation for the answers (N=2)
pronunciation (N=2) conversation (N=2) video (N=2)

Table 14

Types of exercises AV students would like to have more of in class

1. listening (N=74)
2. grammar exercises (N=16)
3. The way it is now is fine./Nothing in particular. (N=15)
4. reading practice, reading exercises (N=9)
5. vocabulary/idioms (N=9)
6. more exercises (N=3)
7. questions that appeared in previous TOEIC tests (N=2) conversation (N=2)
songs (N=2)

Many students would like to have more listening exercises followed by grammar exercises (Tables 13 & 14). Meanwhile, some students seem to feel satisfied with the types of exercises covered in their current classes. A few students would like to have more reading, vocabulary and exercises that actually appeared on previous TOEIC tests.

Table 15
Types of exercises IM students would like to have less of in class

1. Nothing in particular. The way it is now is fine. (N=88)
2. vocabulary (N=5) pair-work (N=5) listening (N=5)
3. reading (N=4)
4. grammar (N=3)
5. checking answers in class (N=2) too-easy questions (N=2) repeating after the tape (N=2) quizzes (2)

Table 16
Types of exercises AV students would like to have less of in class

1. Nothing in particular. The way it is now is fine. (N=59)
2. pair-work (N=4) grammar (N=4)
3. reading comprehension (N=2) vocabulary (N=2) listening (repeating after the tape) (N=2)

Tables 15 and 16 show that most students felt that there were no exercises that needed to be reduced, as they indicated "The way it is now is fine." A few students desired less pair-work, grammar, reading, vocabulary, listening (repeating after the tape) exercises.

Table 17
IM students' perceptions of effectiveness of the placement test

effective	I am not sure.	not effective
N=111	N=66	N=4
61.3%	36.5%	2.2%

Table 18
AV students' perceptions of effectiveness of the placement test

effective	I am not sure.	not effective
N=69 45.7%	N=77 51.0%	N=5 3.3%

Compared with the AV students, most IM students thought that the placement test was effective (Tables 17 and 18). Many IM students said that if they had studied with AV students there would have been no way they could have kept up with them. Therefore they seemed to be happy with the placement test. Other IM students indicated that it was good to study at the right level. AV students who responded "effective" commented that the placement test was an important tool for helping students study at the right level.

Many IM and AV students who responded "I'm not sure" indicated that they were not satisfied with the current placement of the two different levels. They suggested having more levels for the TOEIC class; one AV student said, "I'm not good enough to study at the AV level."

Table 19
IM students' satisfaction with the TOEIC class

very satisfied	satisfied	not very satisfied	not satisfied at all
N=15 8.3%	N=138 76.7%	N=24 13.3%	N=3 1.7%

Table 20
AV students' satisfaction with the TOEIC class

very satisfied	satisfied	not very satisfied	not satisfied at all
N=23 15.3%	N=107 71.3%	N=18 12.0%	N=2 1.3%

In response to how satisfied students were with the TOEIC class, both IM and AV students seemed to be satisfied with the class (Tables 19 and 20). They made the following comments: "I was able to get a better TOEIC score than I expected." (IM) "I was able to increase my TOEIC score." (AV) "I was getting used to the TOEIC test format." (IM) "I was able to learn test taking skills." (AV)

Students who were not satisfied with the class made the following comments: "My TOEIC score was bad." (IM) "Too many exercises and not enough test taking skills." (IM) "I had a lot of homework for the TOEFL class and it was very helpful. TOEIC

class wasn't challenging, and I was not able to improve my English." (IM) "I wanted to work on more exercises and get used to the TOEIC." (AV) "Listening exercises were good, but I wanted to learn more vocabulary." (AV)

Table 21

Number of TOEIC tests IM students have taken & their best score

0	once	twice	three times
N=42	N=89	N=16	N=4
27.8%	58.9%	10.6%	2.6%

mean average of their best TOEIC score: 403

Highest score: 570 Lowest score: 270 range: 300

Table 22

Number of TOEIC tests AV students have taken & their best score

0	once	twice	three times	four times
N=22	N=95	N=20	N=5	N=1
15.4%	66.4%	14.0%	3.5%	0.7%

mean average of their best TOEIC score: 476

Highest score: 765 Lowest score: 200 range: 565

Tables 21 and 22 show that most students have taken the TOEIC test at least once. To our surprise, 27.8% of IM students and 15.4% of AV students have never taken the TOEIC test even though all the students in the TOEIC class were expected to take the test in November. This seems to indicate that some teachers were not concerned whether students took the test, or that they neglected to tell all the students to take the test.

The substantial difference in the mean scores of the IM and AV classes occurred due to the placement. However, the range indicates that there seems to be a greater difference in levels among AV students than IM students.

The last section of the survey concerned any other comments or suggestions regarding the TOEIC class. Since this section invited open-ended responses, I will reproduce a few comments from students:

"I was not good at listening, but I've improved a lot." (IM) "Both TOEFL and TOEIC classes were very helpful. I'd like to take them again next year." (IM) "Studying vocabulary was very useful." (IM) "The pace was slow. Rather than working on each problem one at a time, we should cover a number of exercises first. Then we should go over each problem." (IM) "The teacher should be more strict with the students." (IM) "The teaching method and the content of the class were very good." (AV) "I was able

to learn how to answer the questions. Studying in the class was more beneficial than studying alone.” (AV) “There was a big difference between exercises in the text and the actual test. I was not able to get a good score.” (AV) “I need clearer explanation in the class.” (AV)

Conclusions

Beretta (1992) states, “The evaluation of language education will be an increasingly serious, professional concern, to the benefit of everyone involved in language education” (p. 20).

The purpose of this paper is to report how the students feel about the TOEIC test preparation class at Konan University and how we can improve this class. The survey elicited very positive feedback from the students, as most students indicated that the level of the class was appropriate, the class was useful, the textbook was fairly good, the amount of exercises covered in each class was just right, they understood the material well, the pace of the class was just right, and they were satisfied with the class.

However, there were several things that we now know need to be improved in the TOEIC preparation class as a result of the student survey. First of all, although the level was right for most students, many students seemed to feel that the class was not challenging. They found after taking the actual TOEIC test that there was a big difference between the level of the class and the test. They suggested that exercises in class could be a little more difficult. Their perception of this as an “easy class” also reflects on the materials used in the class. Many students said that some exercises were too easy compared with the actual test, and that the tape was too slow. The selection of materials is not easy, because if we start using a text at the same level as the actual TOEIC test, most lower level students will feel the test is too difficult and lose their self-confidence.

One good solution to this problem is to use the TOEIC level mock test in *TOEIC Friends* as a supplement outside the class. *TOEIC Friends* is published every other month by Kokusai Business Communications, which develops TOEIC tests in Japan. *TOEIC Friends* is a magazine that introduces various topics for improving English and includes a mock test with answer keys and detailed explanation in Japanese. By using this material, students will be able to find out their TOEIC score and review correct answers with clear explanation according to their own pace and needs. Many students commented that they wanted to have more listening and grammar exercises and clear explanation in Japanese in their materials; *TOEIC Friends* serve both purposes. Currently, many issues of *TOEIC Friends* are available in the library and self-study room at Konan University. Taguchi (1999) also recommends that using a supplementary material in a self-study room can be an effective way to improve students’ TOEIC

scores.

In my TOEIC class I have used this *TOEIC Friends* as a part of the requirements outside of the class because I wanted my students to find out what the actual TOEIC test was like, as an aid in preparing for the test. As my past student surveys indicated, most students appreciated the *TOEIC Friends*' mock test, and some students continued to use this material even after completing the course.

In the TOEIC teachers' meeting in May of this year, I reported the result of the student survey and mentioned *TOEIC Friends*. Some teachers did not know about this material, but they indicated that they would like to use it this year.

At the teachers' meeting, in addition to the supplementary material, we talked about the concerns with the existing material and the level of the students. After discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each textbook, since many students mentioned their concerns with the two different levels and the unchallenging materials, I proposed the following changes for the next year: we will create three different levels for the intermediate TOEIC class and the textbooks will be as follows:

Intermediate AV (advanced) class: *Building Skills for the TOEIC*. This textbook is currently used in the advanced class. The speed of the tape is very close to listening on the actual TOEIC test and the exercises are lot more challenging than the current AV textbook.

Intermediate IM (intermediate) class: *TOEIC Preparation Series for the TOEIC Test: More Practice Tests* or *Complete Guide to the TOEIC Test*. *TOEIC Preparation Series* is currently used in the AV class, but since the text is not challenging enough for many AV students, this text may be more appropriate for the IM class. *Complete Guide to the TOEIC Test* contains a lot of listening and reading exercises for the TOEIC test so this text is very suitable for IM students who have not taken the test before.

Intermediate PI (pre-intermediate class): *TOEIC Preparation Series for the TOEIC Test: Introductory Course*. Although this text is used in the IM class, it is probably more appropriate for the lower level. This text is a good introduction to what the TOEIC test is about and what skills students need to learn.

In addition to introducing supplementary material and establishing three different levels with new materials, I mentioned my concern with the advanced TOEIC preparation class at the teachers' meeting. During registration this year, some students said that they were in IM TOEIC class last year, and they would like to register for the intermediate AV TOEIC rather than the advanced TOEIC class. Since the intermediate IM and AV TOEIC class are the same three credit course, the students who already took IM TOEIC cannot register for the AV class. The creation of the three different levels may cause more concern for the students, who may register for the PI and IM classes.

Most students who will take PI and IM may not be ready for the advanced TOEIC class. For this reason, we will create PA (pre-advanced) and advanced TOEIC classes next year. Those students who finish PI and IM TOEIC classes and would like to continue studying in a TOEIC class the following year can register for the PA class. In this way, students will have no problem with the level and registration process.

Finally, the survey indicated that some students (IM 27.8%, AV 15.4%) have not taken the TOEIC test, and I addressed this concern to the teachers at the meeting. One of the main purposes for the TOEIC class is to help students prepare for the test. How can we find out whether we have served this purpose or not if students do not take the test? I asked the teachers to make sure this year that all their students take the TOEIC test.

Brown (1995) says program evaluation is “the systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of the curriculum and assess its effectiveness within the context of the particular institutions involved” (p. 218). Although the TOEIC preparation class has been very popular, we have not had any idea how the class has been working. The student survey gave us a lot of information about what was happening in the classroom and what needed to be improved.

However, Sanders (2000) states that getting information is not enough for evaluation. He addressed his concern that it will be a waste of time and effort if “an evaluation sits on a shelf or receives no follow-up” (p. 52). After collecting all the data from the students, I was able to follow through with what needed to be changed. We held a TOEIC teachers’ meeting in May this year and with the teachers’ approval, we could make some changes to the TOEIC class.

In conclusion, this evaluation of the TOEIC class helped us become aware of what is going on in the class and what needs to be improved. Even though it took us a lot of time to construct the survey and analyze the data, it was worth the effort to improve the TOEIC preparation class and help students study more effectively in the future.

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