

Content-based Frameworks for TOEIC Instruction

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Background

In the Fall Semester of 2011, I was offered to teach a new sophomore English class in the following academic year with the understanding that normally a new course like this would continue to be taught for at least 5 years. Over the course of last two decades, I had previously taught many TOEIC classes for adult learners either in private groups or in company classes including several years for the Japanese employees of a large American technology firm at one of their production sites in Saitama where I was the in-house English instructor.

The aim of this new course would be to familiarize students with the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) and also aid them in improving their subsequent scores. The students would be selected from the top tier of all the students based on an annual placement examination. They would be notified that they could opt for this course to fulfil the requirement for Sophomore English C which is a regular conversation class for sophomores.

The class would be taught by two teachers and meet for 90 minutes twice a week. My counterpart would be a Japanese teacher of English. This format is similar in goals, teacher responsibilities, student selection and scheduling to a TOEIC class which had already started for the top tier of freshman students since the Spring 2011 Semester.

Practice Test Drills As Syllabus

During that Fall semester, prior to the year in which this sophomore TOEIC class was to begin, and also subsequently I spoke with several teachers. This included the two teachers of the Freshman TOEIC classes. Prior to 2011 neither had ever taught a TOEIC class before. One, was a senior American professor whom I shall refer to as Mr. A, and his Japanese counterpart, whom I shall refer to as Ms. B. Their method consisted almost exclusively of drilling students weekly using multiple choice practice tests. Neither of them cited any empirical studies to support their choice of syllabus however. I take this to mean that it was self-evident and so obvious to them what the appropriate syllabus should be that any investigation into the matter was unnecessary and would only affirm what they already strongly held to be the appropriate course of action.

Also, among these teachers I mentioned having spoken with were two foreign teachers who are native speakers of English and who had some experience teaching TOEIC classes elsewhere at one time. I did not necessarily solicit their suggestions but both of them, although they had never in the previous three years once made any recommendations to me about teaching methods, were suddenly very eager to approach me with their ideas. They described to me a regimen of drilling students not unlike what I have described above and what I shall continue to describe below as the “default method” for teaching TOEIC classes.

This default method generally may be described as follows. Find a book with lots of practice tests or similar drills and simply drill the students on this material week in and week out, one set of tests or drills after another. This and perhaps some kind of discussion about their errors and what the correct answer should be and why.

At the end of the semester, they would evaluate students using a more or less random set of questions using a multiple choice format for answering the test questions. Here, what I mean by “random” is that in terms of specific content, the evaluation test did not necessarily have anything to do with the initial or interim tests it was going to be compared to. Therefore, one has to assume that what was being tested was simply a skill that could be applied across any kind of English content deemed to be from or like the TOEIC. Either this or that the teachers did not stop to check whether or not there was an appropriate correlation between the initial or interim practice tests and the latter tests being used to evaluate students’ progress. Mr. A and Ms. B both seemed not to question their procedures and simply reported that very few students showed any significant improvement and that scores remained within a similar range from each other. Looking at the scores, most seemed to fall within a range from about 325 to 480 with the highest score about 20% above the mean.

One especially disappointing area had to do with reading levels. Extensive reading is one of the most recommended methods for improving reading fluency as I shall discuss below and was also an important feature in the learner profiles I shall discuss later. Neither of the two existing freshman TOEIC classes had in place an extensive reading program in their first year and to my knowledge this did not change in the second year either. Nor am I aware of any of the other English classes these students might be enrolled in where there is an extensive reading program being used.

Extensive Reading and Other Media

In light of the prevailing tendency towards a skill-based methodology for TOEIC instruction I was prompted to review the website of the Educational Test Service (ETS) which is the testing service which runs the TOEIC testing program.

In addition to familiarizing oneself with the test format (and they refer readers to a booklet they distribute) here is what the ETS itself recommends to examinees under

the heading of Preparing to Take the TOEIC Test (ETS, 2008). “Immerse yourself in the language as frequently as possible and in as many ways as possible if it has been some time since you have had contact with English. Reading, watching TV and videos, listening to recordings, taking an English course, and speaking with friends and colleagues are some of the ways to practice English.” So in other words, they do not recommend focusing solely on the practice test material.

Essentially, what the ETS recommends can be described as seeking out a large volume of comprehensive input and is supported by much of the empirical research in areas such as extensive reading (Nation, 2001; Nation & Wang 1999) regarding L2 acquisition in general. I believe that with recent advances in digital and storage technologies this can also be extended to include audio and video content in English since these media have been made much easier to gain access to and to use as conveniently and portably as books. (Choy 2009, 2011).

Some studies (Dolan, 2002; Mason, 1987) specifically discuss extensive reading and the TOEIC but do not come to any clear conclusions so the use of skill-based approaches as a default approach rather than a content-based one should come as no surprise. However, I believe that this is mainly because university classes of this kind, while they may generate a wealth of quantitative data, generally allow for time studies of only very short length such a semester or two rather than the longer time periods I cover below in observing learners over the course of up to several years.

Learner Profiles

One great advantage a teacher has having taught TOEIC classes in a wide variety of contexts and over the course of a couple of decades now is that of being able to draw on various learning experiences viewed over the long term and in which learner feedback became available directly in some instances and articulated directly to the teacher in ways that almost never happen in the context of a university class.

Learner A is a former bank employee who decided to make a career change and studied at night school to receive his teaching credential. Today he teaches high school in Shizuoka Prefecture. He was able to attain a TOEIC score of 990 despite having never been outside of Japan in his life. During his university years, he had had a roommate from England who had come to study in Japan, however this was perhaps several years prior to his having become a teacher.

He followed a number of daily routines such reading aloud from the newspaper in the bath. One skill helps improve the other. Purposely walking to his school from the train station, instead of taking the bus as most of the students and school employees would, he would listen to news programs and other content on his iPod. These are all excellent methods of learning vocabulary in context (Gu, 1996) in a natural way, that is more or less in the same way that native speakers acquire much of their own language.

More recently, he reported having watched TV series on video such as *Prison Break* and *24* in English but with subtitles. A long series on video is a good way to experience an extended “feeling for the language” Childs (2005) which can help to promote interest and motivation.

Two points struck me as instructive regarding Learner A. One was that he spent no time doing practice tests at all. This implies that doing well on the TOEIC involves much more doing the kind of than the practice test drilling that is the staple of a typical TOEIC class. The second, was that beyond the kinds of activities he had chosen, as those seem all like obvious and good methods, he had built them into daily or regular routines. This more or less automizes time management issues as far as allocating ample time for language acquisition to take place and helps one sustain one’s learning for the many years usually necessary not only to initially attain but more importantly maintain a very high level of English proficiency. A number of Japanese learners I am acquainted with who return from long stays overseas initially score well on the TOEIC (around the 850 level and higher) but then see their scores drop significantly as they lose contact with the English language back in Japan and have no routines in place to maintain a once very high level of proficiency.

Learner B who worked in the personnel department of a fabrication plant in Japan for a large manufacturer of semiconductors whose headquarters is in the U.S. The official language of the company is English. At the time that he was my student he was eventually able to achieve a score of at least than 550 which qualified him to be assigned to an overseas job position. He told me that in addition to the work we did with practice tests in our TOEIC class he also read articles from an English language newspaper everyday and learned about 20 new words per day using a dictionary in conjunction with this reading. To me this sounds like an example of both intensive (strong form) and extensive (weak form) reading.

Learner C was a foreign exchange student who had spent a year of high school in Northern California and impressed me as a good speaker of English at a conversational level in a class I taught in Kawasaki. By that time he had been working for several years at a Japanese logistics firm and was hoping to be posted overseas one day but needed to achieve a certain TOEIC score in order to become a candidate for such a post. After the conversation class ended we kept in touch for a few more years and he told me that in spite of having taken a number of TOEIC classes on his own such as one offered at the YMCA he was not making enough progress. Thinking back on this student and comparing what I knew him to be doing with Learners A and B it strikes me now that he was not doing anything besides practice tests and drills. He never told me about his having read books or newspapers in English and did not seem to realize that although he was proficient in conversation to a certain degree that in order to acquire a higher mastery of the language and especially reading fluency which is half of the TOEIC that he would have to be doing a lot more reading beyond what was in

these practice tests or otherwise gain extensive exposure to the language through various forms of audio and video content such as news programs, TV shows and movies.

Learner D had an experience similar to this. He also hoped to be posted overseas. This learner was in a conversation class I taught at the Yokosuka Shimindaigaku for beginners. He was not really a beginner but the school had required this class to be designed for entry level students and so it was one of the only conversation class offered under their program and therefore learners of various levels enrolled in this class simply to have the opportunity for review and to practice using English. Similar to Learner C, he did not report having done much if any extensive reading and seemed to believe that taking the TOEIC prep class also offered at the same school would help him. It didn't, however, as he told me afterwards. He repeated this TOEIC course a number of times but was unable to achieve any significant improvement much less attain the score he needed.

Content-based Framework: Reading, Chunking and Task-based Activities

As discussed above, empirical research, a survey of learner profiles and the ETS itself either suggest or imply that natural language use and extensive input such as reading and from other media can all be beneficial to improving English fluency and thus should over the long-term have a positive effect on TOEIC scores. Accordingly, I have included an extensive reading strand in my syllabus in which students read at least 10 pages per week from a graded reader of their choice. They are asked to report a few (only a limited number as I am trying to emphasize pleasure reading and fluency) of the new words they have learned in this reading by e-mail to me as a weekly homework assignment.

In addition to this, I have introduced into the course syllabus a content-based strand that includes the use of content-based tasks which allow for several exposures and not merely one or two exposures which I have seen tends to be the norm for more test drilling focused syllabi where one practice test is corrected after another and little attention is given to repeated exposures and review over time. Brown (2001) emphasizes the principle of automatization in language acquisition and as the TOEIC is a timed examination in which examinees are under constant pressure to process language at a very rapid speed some in-class practice focusing on automatization rather than mere explanation can be beneficial. I shall describe some of these content-based tasks below.

One of these tasks involves a cloze task which is included in a weekly quiz given at the beginning of each class. At the beginning of the semester a full TOEIC practice test is given to the students and the teacher analyses their results in order to learn which items were most frequently missed by the students for further review. Students are then asked to study materials written in both English (for transcripts and other actual

test content) and Japanese (for translations and explanations) which have translations from past TOEIC tests which are made available for practice. The weekly assignment for this material typically covers approximately 10 questions from the test and the teacher chooses the most frequently missed. Notably, these cloze items, unlike the actual practice test items, are not multiple choice in format (that is to say tests of recognition) but rather the student must recall the correct answer and write the answer in the space provided in the cloze from memory. This is a generative task involving a higher cognitive load but one that involves recall which we know to be more beneficial than mere recognition tasks for increasing the retention of what has been learned according to Hill (2001) writing on the implications of work done by Ebbinghaus on memory and learning. Questions were based on content and checked to see whether or not they understood the content they had been assigned.

This quiz usually included five questions, that is the four items most of the students missed on the initial practice test, and a fifth question usually an open-ended question about their current reading from the graded reader they had selected or a question where they could simply write down what they had studied from the TOEIC items assigned assuming that they had actually done some kind of study but, for some reason, just not for the items that happened to be selected to appear on the quiz. Students were given a choice on the quiz of answering three of the five questions. Two of the questions they chose were required and as a motivational factor they were offered the chance of doing an additional question to obtain an extra point so that sometimes a student could have a score of three out of two correct or 150% .

The quiz results suggested to a certain degree a kind of measure to me of uptake by the students as all had access to the same materials yet some could produce no answers at all and had perhaps not done any of the homework, assignments or other necessary preparation adequately. Although placement tests and a random TOEIC practice test (the content being random to the students in that they had no preknowledge of any of the content) might show them to be more similar in proficiency level at a certain stage, this quiz index suggests a greater difference may exist between students when it comes to choosing either to actively participate in trying to improve their English proficiency or opting not to do so. While the difference between the mean and the top score in the “random” test was only 20% the difference between the mean and top score was 170% for the quiz totals through several weeks into the semester for the first seven quizzes. The quiz scores ranged from 15.1 for the top student all the way down to 1.5 (Appendix 1).

A second task involves cards and works similar to the card game called “concentration” in English where all the cards in a deck of playing cards are randomly laid out face down and players take turns at trying to find the most pairs by turning over two cards on each turn. Attempting to remember where certain cards are over the course of the game is central to this game. In this version of the game, instead of

using a pair of numbers as for example found on the front of playing cards in order to form a match, very short chunks of language are used. They are taken from the most frequently missed items on the practice test and have already appeared on one of the weekly quizzes. The chunk is split into two parts so that a match will consist of pairing up the two parts from memory. This kind of practice promotes the chunking of language in order to achieve automaticity and fluency which are important for L2 acquisition and have been discussed by researchers (Ellis 2003; Pawley & Snyder 1983; Ellis 2003).

A third task, and one which also similarly promotes chunking, is called Team Dictation where students work in pairs, one dictating the chunks of language to be written down to his partner. The actual content (see Appendix 2 for an example) of the dictation is taken from past quiz material. They have also received several exposures to this language in doing the “concentration” task. Therefore, the learners should already be thoroughly familiar with the language so that it will require much less of a cognitive load than if it were all new content. The length of a dictation series is kept to a minimum of five short sentences with none of them being longer than one line. These appear on a large A3 sheet of paper and in a somewhat enlarged print size which is placed outside the classroom and students are allowed to go out as many times as they wish until the task is completed. Each time, they attempt to memorize as much as they can then coming back in to dictate as much of a particular chunk or fragment as they can recall to their partner. These last two tasks and other task suggestions appear in slightly different forms in Molinsky & Bliss (2007).

Conclusion

A test practice syllabus tends to be the preferred method for preparing students to take the TOEIC. This is probably due to the expectations of institutions and learners of what a TOEIC class should be and therefore many teachers have come to associate with TOEIC instruction almost exclusively with this approach. Indeed, in order to familiarize students new to the TOEIC with the test format it may make sense for a good deal of the class to involve specific test practice materials.

However, and keeping these expectations and constraints in mind, it is still incumbent on teachers at the same time not to lose sight of long-term objectives and to consider other frameworks such as one including content-based strands such as I have illustrated in this paper. To this aim, the current work we have begun with graded readers and extensive reading can be further enhanced by expanding the choices of book titles made available from the department’s lending library of graded readers. This should make it more likely that more learners will find books which genuinely interest them thus enhancing motivation and thereby promoting reading fluency which should do much to improve TOEIC reading scores, as well as help learners to build up their own

content-based routines that will be instrumental far beyond their university years and thus are more likely to produce greater ultimate gains in English proficiency levels than limiting themselves to exclusively concentrating on practice tests or test-like materials.

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Appendix 1

Quiz Score Totals (June 28, 2012)

1. 15.1	6. 9.3	11. 8.0	16. 5.2	21. 4.3	26. 3.1
2. 14.0	7. 9.2	12. 8.0	17. 5.2	22. 3.9	27. 2.4
3. 13.1	8. 9.0	13. 6.8	18. 5.0	23. 3.9	28. 1.9
4. 11.7	9. 8.8	14. 6.3	19. 4.8	24. 3.3	29. 1.5
5. 10.5	10. 8.2	15. 5.2	20. 4.3	25. 3.2	

Appendix 2

Team Dictation - Unit 9

1. The new equipment is **now** available in every room.
2. The company is hiring workers to address the present **demand**.
3. They should answer the questions as **accurately** as possible.
4. Tours **begin** at 10:00 A.M.
5. Visitors must provide photo identification to **obtain** visitor passes.

—Abstract—

Content-based Frameworks for TOEIC Instruction

Introduced in 1979 and revised in 2006, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) was designed to measure the ability of non-native English-speaking examinees to use English in everyday workplace activities. Today, the TOEIC is used in 60 countries around the world including Japan. Where TOEIC-based instruction is offered in Japanese universities, it appears that, by default, many teachers have simply chosen to implement a skill-based syllabus or framework which consists mainly of drilling students on practice tests. This paper considers the efficacy of exclusively drilling students on practice tests in attempting to aid them in improving their TOEIC results. Citing case studies, as well as drawing on research on learning strategies and linguistic theory with regard to content-based instruction (CBI), the author proposes that in order to significantly increase proficiency levels, and thereby improve test scores, both teachers and students need to take a larger, active role in seeking out more extensive learner exposure to appropriate English language input. He specifically demonstrates the benefits that can be obtained from extensive reading programs as well as through the extensive use of digital audio and video content.

〔抄 録〕

TOEIC 指導の内容重視型アプローチの枠組み

1979年に導入され2006年に改編された TOEIC（国際コミュニケーション英語能力テスト）は、非英語話者の受験者が日々職場で英語を使って業務を行う力を図ることを目的として作成されたものである。今日日本を含め世界60か国で利用されている。日本の大学で TOEIC の指導が行われているが、教師の多くは深く考えることなく単に、スキル重視あるいは主に学生を模擬テストを使って鍛えるアプローチをとっているように思われる。この論文では、学生の TOEIC のスコアを向上させる目的で模擬テストによる訓練のみの指導の有効性について考察する。著者は、内容重視型指導（CBI）に関する学習ストラテジーと言語学の理論に基づくとともにケーススタディの結果を引用しながら、学生の英語力を向上させ、それゆえテストのスコアを向上させるためには、教師も学生も適切な英語のインプットをより広範囲に得られる環境を求める点で、これまで以上に大きく積極的な役割を演じることが必要であることを提言する。著者は、特にデジタル音声ビデオ教材を広範囲に利用するだけでなく多読プログラムなどから得られる恩恵をこの論文で示す。