Using TOEIC Preparation to Assess English Language Skills

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Abstract− **All students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology (TNI) must complete nine required and six elective credits in English. In addition to those requirements for graduation, students are expected to achieve a minimum score of 600 on the TOEIC (test of English for International Communication). TNI students complete their required English courses in the first two years of their studies but are not required to take the TOEIC until their third or fourth year. We hypothesized that specific preparation for the TOEIC could be used to assess the English language skills of TNI students. Using random selection, we divided first-year students into three different groups. Each group was given identical TOEIC preparation material but the presentation of this material and the skills challenged would be different for each group. The results of the study indicated both the student's proficiency in English, and, the most effective method to present the preparation material.**

Keywords− **TOEIC preparation, English language skills assessment**

I. INTRODUCTION

A generic problem with norm-referenced tests of second-language proficiency is that the test scores do not provide any direct indication of actual levels of functional ability to use the target language(s) involved. That being said, there is a real need to evaluate both student's abilities and the effectiveness of any program used to train them. Accountability in such programs is often contingent on a comparison of standardized test scores before and after the program of instruction. A parallel need in language program evaluation is in describing not only that there has been language gain, but also in providing information about features of the program that are related to gains. With that in mind, this study was conceived. As with many other institutions, each English class at TNI has students with a wide range of English proficiency. Would it be possible to develop a program that could assess an individual's language skills as well as expand those skills?

At the outset of the study, the author randomly divided his 16 sections of students into three (3) different groups. All sections were students enrolled in ENL-102 English for Communication (first-year). Each group would be given an identical TOEIC preparation material but the presentation of the material would be different for each of the three groups. The intention was to determine which presentation technique would result in better scores on an abridged version of the TOEIC exam.

I. *The first group* would receive the material presented only as an oral presentation. Students in this group would not be encouraged to take notes nor would they be given any audio-visual aids during their TOEIC preparation. These students served as my control group. The following sections were the "Control" group:

> AE-3
> BJ-14
> BJ-15
> IM-17
> IM-18

II. *The second group* would receive the identical TOEIC preparation material as the Control group. However, as much as possible, this would group would not be given oral direction. The material would be presented via PowerPoint presentation and written on the whiteboard. This group would not be instructed or encouraged to take notes on the material. These students would be referred to as the "Visual" group. The following sections comprised this group:

> AE-1
> PE-6
> CE-10
> BJ-13
> IM-16
> IM-19

III. *The third group* would receive the identical TOEIC preparation material as the first two groups. With this group, the material would be presented via PowerPoint presentation and written on the whiteboard. Additionally, all the information would be read aloud to the students. They would be given notebooks and encouraged to take notes on the presentation. This group would be referred to as the "Full" group. The following sections comprised this group:

> CE-8
> BJ-11
> BJ-12
> IT-20
> IT-21

The hypothesis was that students in the Full group would have higher scores on a TOEIC exam than students in the other two groups. It was surmised that students in the Visual group would have scores lower than the Full group but higher than those of the Control group. Further, it was supposed that students with advanced English language skills would score higher in each of the groups and students with limited English ability would score lower. It seemed probable that the TOEIC preparation would also help to assess the English language skills of all students in the study.

II. METHOD

Over the course of eight (8) weeks the students were given TOEIC preparation material as part of their regular conversational English classes. The material was identical in content with the variable for each section (depending on their grouping) being the method with which it was imparted. During the final week in January, 2009, all 16 sections were given an abridged TOEIC exam. The exam followed the TOEIC format but contained only 30 questions instead of the 200 that would be on a full exam. The exam was in two parts, a listening (14 questions in 8 minutes), and, a reading (16 questions with a 12 minute time limit) section.

III. RESULTS

The TOEIC scores for each of the sections are provided below. The maximum score on the full TOEIC is 990 points. The abridged TOEIC exam used in this project follows the same weighted scoring system for the full TOEIC. However, because the abridged TOEIC is only 20 minutes in duration one key element that has been proven to affect scores on the full exam is absent: fatigue. According to information provided on the TOEIC website, over 90% of TOEIC examinees have described the exam as "exhausting" on post-test questionnaires. Of the respondents who failed to answer all 200 questions (30% of examinees) on the exam, fatigue was cited as the leading factor for under-performance. According to literature provide by ETS (Educational Testing Service, the company that developed the TOEIC exam), scores on the TOEIC abridged exam "reflect potential TOEIC scores within 40 point accuracy, nine times out of ten". Given prior research and experience with the TOEIC exam the author agrees with the test organizers. If the students had been given a full TOEIC exam immediately following the study, most of their scores would be within 40 points of their score on this abridged exam. TNI expects graduates to score 600 on the full TOEIC exam.

Overall Scores by Section:

Section	High Score	Low Score	Average
AE-1	830	300	510
AE-3	520	210	370
PE-6	730	210	370
CE-10	680	220	450
BJ-11	690	120	390
BJ-12	760	340	490
BJ-13	640	260	465
BJ-14	650	190	370
BJ-15	550	220	370
IM-16	710	260	440
IM-17	480	160	300
IM-18	670	180	380
IM-19	790	120	400
IT-20	790	210	520
IT-21	620	160	400

Scores by Grouping:

Control Group

AE-3	520	210	370
BJ-14	550	220	370
BJ-15	540	180	360
IM-17	480	160	300
IM-18	670	180	380

The average score for students in the Control group was 360

Visual Group

AE-1	830	300	510
PE-6	730	210	400
CE-8	680	220	450
BJ-13	650	190	370
IM-16	710	260	440
IM-19	790	120	400

The average score for students in the Visual group was 430

Full Group

CE-10	690	120	390
BJ-11	760	340	490
BJ-12	640	260	465
IT-20	790	210	520
IT-21	620	160	400

The average score for students in the Full group was 450

IV. DISCUSSION

At this point a reasonable question would be, 'What bearing do these numbers have in terms of practical application?' What merit is there in scoring 600 or even 400 on the TOEIC?

Many companies operating in Asia have specific TOEIC score requirements, not just for prospective employees but also for promotion within the company. A number of companies pay additional salary to employees who reach certain target scores on the TOEIC. It is common for international corporations based in Asia to have a minimum TOEIC score requirement for employees who take part in meetings or conferences with partner organizations using English. These same companies usually have another, higher, required score for employees who travel on company business. A significant number of TNI students have future plans to seek employment with companies that have TOEIC score requirements in place, for both qualifying for employment and for promotion within the company. In cases where a company has set a minimum TOEIC score for prospective employees, it is not unusual for that score to be 450. Increasingly, the minimum score set by these companies is 600. The author has been in contact with several corporations that require employees to score 750 in order to qualify for positions within the company that require international travel. A student's TOEIC score has the potential to directly impact their career. Their score could play a part in determining their eventual employer

as well their eventual position within the company. With those factors in place, the meaning of the scores can be better understood.

If the scores are analyzed by groupings, the hypothesis has not been proven entirely true, nor has it been proven false. For the most part, sections in the Full group scored higher on the TOEIC than those in the other two groups, there was an exception however. Students in section CE-10 had an average score, 390, that was lower than the average score for most of the sections in the Visual group.

In the Visual group, students in section AE-1 had an average score, 510, that was higher than the average scores of most sections in the Full group. Also in this group, section BJ-13 had an average score, 370, that equals the average of those posted by two sections in the Control group.

In the Control group, students tended to score lower than students in either of the other two groups. Section IM-17 was notable for not having a single student score above 500 and by having more than 1 student score less than 200. Also of note, this same section produced exam results that probably merit an entirely new research project. Allow the author to explain: Part 2 of the TOEIC is a listening section, Question-Response. This part of the exam consisted of four (4) questions. Instructions for each part of the exam are written in the students test book as well as spoken. Here are the exact instructions that students were given for Part 2:

Directions: You will hear a question or statement and three responses spoken in English. They will not be printed in your test book and will spoken only one time. Select the best response to the question or statement and mark the letter (A), (B), or (C) on your answer sheet.

With those instructions in place, 18 of the 26 students in section IM-17 proceeded to answer at least one of the four questions in this part with a (D). Only students in section IM-17 made this mistake. The author found this to be puzzling and at this time can proffer no explanation for the anomaly.

With those exceptions noted, the scores for the TOEIC by grouping were as hypothesised.

V. CONCLUSION

In total, 396 students took the abridged TOEIC exam for this research project. Prior to the exam it was believed that scores, regardless of groupings, would fall in the following ranges:

15% of students would score 500 or higher
65% of students would score 400-500
20% of students would score 250-400

It was believed that 250 would be the lower limit on scores and that some students might score as high as 700. These estimates were based on classroom experience and previous research the author conducted involving the same students. That previous research, tried to determine the English language capabilities of the students, and it was felt that that experience would give the author some indication of overall scores for the TOEIC.

Here are the actual numbers:

8% of students scored 500 or higher
45% of students scored 400-500
47% of students scored less 400

Included in the 47% of students who scored less than 400 are 30 students who scored below 250.

The author believes the best method of TOEIC preparation involves audio and visual presentations. Students that had the opportunity to read the preparation material had, overall, much higher scores than those that did not have a visual presentation. Of the 30 students who scored below 250, 23 of them were from sections in the Control group. Of the 32 students who scored 500 or higher, 28 of them were from sections in the Full or Visual groupings.

It is the assertion of the author that any TOEIC preparation course that TNI offers has to comprise of audio-visual presentations and a strong emphasis on reading. This combination of techniques offers our students their best chance at reaching the 600 score goal that has set for them.

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