

## Assessing TOEIC as a Measure of Business English:

Does TOEIC content reflect workplace English needs?

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『ビジネス英語能力を測る試験としてのTOEIC—TOEICの問題内容は実際の  
職場のニーズを反映しているか』

ロバート・ジー

### アブストラクト

TOEICは日本の企業において最も認知度が高く、受験者数も最多の英語能力試験となった。日本の企業が時の英語能力試験に対する不満を持っていたことから創出されたTOEICという英語能力試験の歴史を簡単に振り返り、本稿ではTOEICの聴解と読解のセクションの内容を検証する。目的は、例えばTOEIC受験のために英語を勉強した者は、英語を使う職場で実際にその勉強が役に立つかという視点から、TOEICの内容がどのくらい妥当性があるかを測ることである。TOEICは今まで様々な批判に対して内容を改善してきたが、現場の実情にあった英語能力を測定するためにはさらなる改善が必要であると結論づけた。

**Key words**   ☐ English for Specific Purposes   ☐ Business English  
                  ☐ TOEIC   ☐ World Englishes  
                  ☐ Language Assessment   ☐ ELF/BELF

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 TOEIC's origins

After being established just over 30 years ago, TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) was taken more than 7 million times in 2013 (ETS, 2014a). As noted in Gee (2012) and McCrostie (2009), TOEIC was initially proposed by Japanese supporters including powerful bureaucrats in MITI and many large corporations here because they were dissatisfied with English tests, particularly the STEP EIKEN test which in Japan was the most popular proficiency test for English in pre-TOEIC days. Corporations often found that even when their employees achieved the top level of the general English STEP EIKEN test, their language level was still

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insufficient for them to work using English. TOEIC was developed to assess Business English using the expertise of the American-based NPO, Educational Testing Service (or ETS), which had developed the successful SAT used for university entrance purposes in the USA.

In December 1979, the first TOEIC was administered to 2,773 people in 5 cities and quickly spread from there. It grew from only being offered in several major cities to be able to be sat at many cities throughout Japan, and in 1982 began to be offered in overseas locations too. In 1990, more than 1 million people sat TOEIC and the number of takers continued to increase and exceeded 5 million in ninety countries by 1998 (ETS, 2009). It is the only English test developed outside of native English speaker (or NES) countries to have enjoyed any major success as an English test, even to the extent of being exported to NES countries.

### **1.2 The basis of TOEIC's success**

The popularity of TOEIC has involved many factors. The convenience of frequent test dates of up to ten times throughout the year, and the ready access to a test center (for example, a medium-sized city such as Nagoya has eight different locations within the city while in Tokyo TOEIC can be taken at one of nineteen regular venues) were certainly major factors but there were also other advantages. The test fee of 5,725 yen (or around US\$60) is highly affordable and, most conveniently, the standard listening/reading test can be completed in a few hours on a Sunday. The nature of the test is also advantageous with results returned as a norm-referenced total score (out of a maximum of 990 points) meaning that the test can measure a wide range of abilities from beginner through to expert users. Also, unlike the criterion-referenced STEP EIKEN test with a pass or fail result given according to the level (grades 5 to 1) you sat for, it is certainly easier to analyze your progress with TOEIC's clear numerical results. Finally, the stigma of 'failing' is also avoided with TOEIC.

Perhaps the main reason why the test grew so quickly was the support it enjoyed from major Japanese corporations. Large and influential companies helped develop the test and remain associated with TOEIC through their membership as its directors and trustees. Companies also sometimes provide free or subsidized TOEIC tests on-site for employees, as well as arranging TOEIC and other English classes to support their employees to develop English skills. Some companies have even made taking TOEIC mandatory for all of their workers. English is seen as a vital business tool for export-oriented Japanese companies which, although often widely respected and successful, are generally not known for the English expertise of their Japanese staff. Because English is considered so valuable to the many export-oriented companies in Japan, their support and encouragement of a test which is based on Business English such as TOEIC, rather than the general English tested in STEP EIKEN, is understandable.

## **2 Test content**

“Know who has the English skills to succeed in the workplace.” (ETS, 2014b)

Given the above headline which greets visitors to the TOEIC homepage, and the faith placed in

TOEIC test results by many large corporations which use them to decide weighty matters such as employment, promotion and overseas posting, it is only prudent to confirm whether the test does in fact assess what it purports to. That is, does it assess actual Business English needs as they are likely to be found in everyday work situations? More importantly, does it follow that success in TOEIC should closely correlate to success in business? It should be noted that since 2006, ETS has also made available a test of speaking and writing skills referred to as the TOEIC Speaking and Writing Tests. These are taken and applied for separately to the standard listening and reading test but they remain relatively unpopular and, as such, will not be covered in this study.

According to the ETS Examinee Handbook, the TOEIC test covers a wide range of situations candidates are likely to encounter in the workplace such as:

- “☐ **Corporate Development:** research, product development
- ☐ **Dining Out:** business and informal lunches, banquets, receptions, restaurant reservations
- ☐ **Entertainment:** cinema, theater, music, art, exhibitions, museums, media
- ☐ **Finance and Budgeting:** banking, investments, taxes, accounting, billing
- ☐ **General Business:** contracts, negotiations, mergers, marketing, sales, warranties, business planning, conferences, labor relations
- ☐ **Health:** medical insurance, visiting doctors, dentists, clinics, hospitals
- ☐ **Housing/Corporate Property:** construction, specifications, buying and renting, electric and gas services
- ☐ **Manufacturing:** assembly lines, plant management, quality control
- ☐ **Offices:** board meetings, committees, letters, memoranda, telephone, fax and e-mail messages, office equipment and furniture, office procedures
- ☐ **Personnel:** recruiting, hiring, retiring, salaries, promotions, job applications, job advertisements, pensions, awards
- ☐ **Purchasing:** shopping, ordering supplies, shipping, invoices
- ☐ **Technical Areas:** electronics, technology, computers, laboratories and related equipment, technical specifications
- ☐ **Travel:** trains, airplanes, taxis, buses, ships, ferries, tickets, schedules, station and airport announcements.” (ETS, 2013, p. 3)

How these themes are used as test items is described next.

## 2.1 Listening Component

Comprising half of the total score, TOEIC’s listening section is designed to reflect the needs of users in situations such as meetings, telephone and work-based conversations. There are 100 questions split up into four parts, namely, photographs, questions and responses, conversations and short talks. The Listening component itself takes 45 minutes and candidates are awarded scores of 5~495 points.

The listening test was revised in 2007. Changes included a reduction in the number of photograph-based questions and individual questions which were replaced with an increased number of question sets, that is, sets consisting of three questions pertaining to a single listening

task, in order to better assess overall understanding. The range of NES accents heard was expanded from American English exclusively to four countries: United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Australia. All spoken and written test instructions are given solely in English.

## **2.2 Reading component**

After listening, a reading test of 75 minutes is claimed to test skills needed for reading emails, letters and other business materials found in the workplace. The reading section is comprised of three parts of incomplete sentences, error recognition/text completion, and reading comprehension. As in the listening component, all of the 100 questions are multiple choice and scores range from 5~495 points.

The TOEIC Reading section was also modified in 2007 with the elimination of grammatical error recognition questions and an increase in the number of reading comprehension questions. Newly introduced question types included text completion and sets of questions pertaining to two related passages. According to ETS these changes were made to TOEIC to align the test closer to communicative competence and “to better reflect international business communication styles and real language contexts.” (Powers et al, 2008, p. 2).

## **3 Concerns about Listening**

In order to acknowledge progress, it must be repeated that the 2007 revision of TOEIC expanded the variety of NES accents used to include British, Canadian, Australian & New Zealand accents. Prior to that time US English was the only variety used. Although this is most welcome, as well as necessary given the test’s name which unequivocally states it to be of “international English”, it has not gone far enough. In this era of an increasingly globalized business environment, TOEIC test content continues being based on this limited sample of accents, which seems to imply that business is only taking place between NESs. This is patently untrue and is argued to be quite the opposite in reality. Although not restricted to Business English, Promodou (1997) estimated that 80 percent of English communication takes place between non-native English speakers (NNESs).

While it may be difficult to create a standard English proficiency test which can completely reflect all NES and NNES accents, it does not seem fair or realistic to ignore this situation as is being practiced at present, consciously or unconsciously. Chapman and Newfields (2008) suggest the use of only NES varieties in TOEIC appears unrepresentative of the world English speaking situation given the large number of English speakers in India, the Philippines, etc. who when combined form a population many times greater than that of Australia. So why was Australian or New Zealand English included while these far more populous varieties were excluded? Canagarajah (2006) argues that TOEFL or TOEIC test content is not objectionable per se, but becomes problematic because they claim it to be “international” yet restrict their interpretation of the term to several NES accents along with those Inner Circle (Inner Circle referring to NES countries such as Britain, North America and Australia) rules and conventions. At least some NNESs should be

represented in the voices used or TOEIC risks being unrealistic as far as reflecting actual Business English situations, as well as guilty of promoting linguistic imperialism.

Both the listening and reading sections of TOEIC also contain situations related to general, rather than workplace-specific English usage. These situations may include shopping, dining out, checking into a hotel, visiting a medical specialist, making travel arrangements, or discussing personal interests such as those related to the cinema, books, music or similar matters. It could be thought that these are not appropriate content for Business English since they are not strictly about working. It is argued, however, that these are in fact much needed skills for those working in English. Not only are they useful for business trips or overseas assignments, but the inclusion of personal matters forms the basis of small talk which is an important Business English skill. Gee (2008) found that Japanese nationals who were regularly working in English believed small talk to be a vital skill which they felt needed greater emphasis in courses for Business English. Although seemingly trivial in nature, small talk has the ability to foster better working relationships by strengthening interpersonal bonds. Several Japanese speakers of very fluent English related how they were confident of their telephone or negotiation language skills as these topics were thoroughly covered in their studies. 'Soft skills' such as small talk were not studied, however, and their importance became obvious to them through their inability and lack of confidence in this area.

#### **4 Concerns about Reading**

The main problem about the reading test is not related directly to the content which, in the main, consists of prototypical workplace situations and documents. They are certainly valid themes. My concerns are about the suitability of some questions. For example, the sole purpose of many standard TOEIC questions is to test grammatical features such as the accurate use of tense, conjunctions or prepositions. Other questions focus on the ability to use vocabulary very precisely. A concern with such approaches is that the syntactic and lexical usage accepted as being correct aligns solely with NES rules. World Englishes supporters argue that TOEIC's approach discriminates against other English variety users as there is no allowance for the accepted and widely used grammar or vocabulary found in other English varieties that do not conform to Inner Circle rules (Davies, Hamp-Lyons & Kemp, C., 2003). As Lowenberg (2000, 2002) and Jenkins (2006) argue, the use of English in many non-Inner Circle countries has become nativized. By this they mean that these English varieties have developed some consistent grammatical and lexical usages which are fully accepted and in widespread usage. It is in this vernacular that many common business dealings are being successfully concluded, particularly between NNEs participants. Why then does TOEIC continue to insist that better Business English equates to Inner Circle English rules and usage only?

Moreover, it could be argued that having such as precise knowledge of formal vocabulary is not necessary for business. If a speaker, either NES or NNEs, uses difficult vocabulary their NNEs business partner may not understand them and could possibly become uncomfortable or embarrassed, up to the point of threatening the business relationship. It might also be argued that

paraphrasing, or the ability to explain a term, phrase or concept using less complex vocabulary, is a valuable skill that needs to be encouraged in intercultural situations. But testing the ability to avoid embarrassing your business partner, or to paraphrase for the purpose of better comprehension and communication, is difficult in multiple choice test formats such as TOEIC. Although evidence for this opinion cannot be offered, I believe that mutually beneficial situations sustain successful, long-term international business relationships and these are based upon experience, trust and understanding between the parties involved, rather than language ability. It is true that language is a tool which can be used to help achieve this situation, but I doubt that syntactic or lexical accuracy is the driving force although that seems to be the emphasis of TOEIC which claims to be the “global standard for English Language Testing” (ETS, undated).

As part of its official guide to candidates, ETS provides sample reading questions to illustrate what may appear in TOEIC tests. A number concern grammatical accuracy such as:

- “103. Last year, Andrea Choi \_\_\_\_\_ the Choi Economic Research Center at Upton University.  
 (A) to establish  
 (B) established  
 (C) was established  
 (D) establishing” (ETS, 2013, p. 14).

While grammatical accuracy can be argued to be important in some situations, there are many cases in which it may not be crucial at all. In the above case, it would be clear from the context of “Last year...” that the speaker meant past tense even if they did not use it. And in any actual conversation, any confusion or doubts about the meaning of the speaker could be confirmed with follow-up questioning. This is also an important conversation strategy and while it is commonly taught in Business English, it cannot really be tested in the current test format (with the exception of the TOEIC speaking test not covered here).

In the instructions and text supporting reading comprehension items, spelling and other conventions generally follow American standards such as the use of “apologize” rather than “apologise” (ETS, 2013, p. 11) or “inquiries” (ETS, 2013, p. 14) which, oddly enough, is used rather than the British spelling of “enquiries” even though it appears as *realia* in the context of a voucher for a dining chain which is supposed to be based in Britain. Such examples highlight the difficulty of a test purporting to be international in an age when it is widely acknowledged that all English varieties are more or less equal, at least within EFL/ESL circles. The sense of growing political correctness regarding English varieties certainly creates a dilemma for test writers. Should test writers favor consistency within a test, thereby running the risk of promoting one variety over all others? The alternatives do not seem practical either. Alternating spelling conventions for every test or for fixed periods of time for the sake of linguistic neutrality, or accepting a mixture of all varieties so that tests contain representative examples would probably confuse test-takers. Perhaps more dangerous is the risk of appearing unnatural or simply wrong in cases such as British or Australian varieties following American spelling or grammatical conventions when these things do not happen in reality, at least, not often. It appears that the current approach of assuming only American spelling conventions is a suitable compromise, however, examples of so-called *realia*

should reflect the appropriate conventions of that variety since that would be how the candidate would face the task in a real world situation.

## 5 Conclusion

There are undoubtedly good, and very practical reasons as to why TOEIC has become such a successful English proficiency test. First of all, relative to other exams such as TOEFL and IELTS it is relatively cheap at 5,725 yen (versus US\$225 or approximately 27,000 yen for TOEFL and 25,380 yen for IELTS.) IELTS can be sat for at 15 fixed locations in Japan. At larger centers such as Tokyo the test can be offered up to three times per month however, smaller centers such as Kanazawa have only two exams scheduled per year. TOEFL is offered in just over thirty locations within Japan and is available a few times a year in smaller cities to a few times a month in Tokyo. The TOEIC test can be taken in a far more convenient range of 80 cities, each of which may feature multiple venues, and is offered 10 times per year in Japan. TOEIC is also a simple test to operate, requiring only pencils and erasers to mark the computer-read answer sheets. The exclusively English instructions make it easily exportable, unlike STEP EIKEN which is still highly Japan-centered with Japanese language instructions also used. In addition, both TOEFL and IELTS are known for being primarily for either education or immigration purposes, and although IELTS offers a general English option, the cost remains the same as the academic test making it a relatively expensive option, as well as being not as well recognized in most Japanese circles.

Most important, however, has been the support TOEIC enjoys from Japanese companies. Kubota (2011) suggests that business leaders in Japan equate good TOEIC scores with communicative competence. He also concludes that rather than measuring linguistic ability, English proficiency tests such as TOEIC have driven demand for learning English as they provide evidence of the effort to attain a skill highly desired for work and personal success in a knowledge-based economy. In that sense, TOEIC provides objective and concrete proof of a worker's application to improving their English in the highly competitive, corporate arena.

The changes in the TOEIC test such as the increase in variety of NES accents, the reduction in emphasis on grammar (most notably by the elimination of the former section of error recognition questions), and the addition of speaking and writing skills in a separate test, offer proof that TOEIC is attempting to answer its critics by revising the test. Given TOEIC's role which ETS itself describes as "Since 1979, organizations around the world have used the *TOEIC*® test to hire, place and promote employees." (ETS, 2014b), it is incumbent on ETS to continually improve the test given its very real impact on the lives of the many people whose future employment, job prospects and/or working conditions depend on the results of what is after all only a multiple choice test. Canagarajah (2006) questions the validity of using discrete item tests to test real world skills such as those which are "interactive, collaborative, and performative". But the problem is how can such important skills be assessed without causing assessment difficulties and culminating in large cost rises? Furthermore, the content of TOEIC implies that future success in using English in business situations is dependent upon your listening comprehension ability and your knowledge of English



lexis and syntax. The message being sent (incorrectly, according to English as a Lingua Franca supporters such as Seidlhofer, 2011 and Jenkins, 2014) is that your business success is tied to English ability, and then only to native English speaker norms, which would seem to discourage careers unnecessarily. After all, many NNEs have had highly successful international business careers without the highly accurate English language skills that are required by a good TOEIC score.

In conclusion, TOEIC cannot be said to be a valid measure of business English ability given the above-mentioned problems relating to content and test format. Furthermore, as noted in many papers on language assessment, TOEIC regularly claims its tests to have high validity but does not make those statistics available for objective corroboration (Chapman & Newfields, 2008; Chapman, 2006). The fact that ETS does not release any TOEIC questions, on the grounds that the same test items are recycled at different times in different countries (ETS, 2014d), makes issues of validity and analysis of the test such as this paper's difficult to undertake and ultimately prevents any making more significant conclusions about how appropriate, reliable or trustworthy the TOEIC test may or may not be as a test of Business English. Diligent studying for TOEIC should help improve the accurate usage of English, however, this paper raises doubts as to the effectiveness of linguistic precision for business purposes since in reality the depth and success of business relationships depends on factors other than second language ability. This is certainly the argument used by proponents of the newly emerging field of BELF (Business English as a Lingua Franca) who maintain that the English used by NNEs for business purposes requires the communication of clear and accurate *content* rather than language (Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009). A more valuable test for the many corporations supporting TOEIC would be one that also reflects the effectiveness of language usage – the ability to make small talk, to paraphrase, to employ strategies to confirm meaning, to avoid intercultural miscommunication – and does not rely on assessing the accurate use of language, especially if, as it is at present, the assessment is based solely according to native English speaker models. Although these skills are admittedly not easy to assess, this is the direction TOEIC needs to move towards to become a better measure of Business English ability.

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