Learner Autonomy and Teaching the TOEIC to Corporate Clients

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Abstract

The TOEIC test is taken by many company employees throughout Japan every year. In some cases, the students who take the test are not ready to do so. They lack the basic skills necessary in grammar, reading and listening to obtain a score of 400 or over. Part of the problem also lies with their method of study. Too often do they expect the teacher to do everything for them, hoping this will raise their score sufficiently. This study looks at a six month TOEIC program that was designed with learner autonomy in mind and implemented at a major electronics firm in Japan. The program was aimed at low level TOEIC students and was designed to increase their scores by 50 points or more. Results indicated significant improvements in most scores upon completion of the program, suggesting that a learner-centered approach toward teaching TOEIC can be effective in helping Japanese students raise their overall test scores.

Key words: TOEIC, learner autonomy, attitude, motivation, self-instruction and learning styles

A. Introduction

The TOEIC test is considered one of the primary benchmarks of workplace English language proficiency worldwide with 1,266,950 test takers in 2005 (TOEIC Report on Test-Takers Worldwide, 2005). Japan makes up a large part (65%) of this demographic. Thousands of people, ranging from university students to company employees to retirees take the test every year. In many cases, it may be *the* test by which a company bases an employee's chances for promotion or for an overseas posting. It is, for many, a chance to showcase their English skills and move on to bigger and better things either within or outside of their current work situation.

As any EFL teacher knows, success on TOEIC requires a great deal of time, patience and of course, study. Students who are thinking about taking the TOEIC test have usually put in several hundred hours or so of English study, both formal and informal. Of the myriad of TOEIC textbooks and prep books that are available to the student, the vast majority are aimed at those individuals who have a decent grasp of both everyday English and business English. These resources often focus on people whose TOEIC scores range from 400 and up and as such make the assumption that the student is already at this level. This is the case in Japan where the average TOEIC scores of test takers in 2005 was 457 (TOEIC Report on Test-Takers Worldwide, 2005). However, there are instances where an individual or group of individuals, usually in a company, are asked to take the TOEIC test but are nowhere near the 400 level. They are faced with the daunting task of not only studying English but also with taking one of the most difficult English proficiency exams around today. How does the EFL teacher go about preparing these students for what lies ahead? This paper seeks to address this point by first examining what I deem necessary for any successful study program, namely, learner autonomy. In the second part of this paper I will look at how a TOEIC program for low-level students has been developed that is intended to foster learner autonomy and give the students a greater role in determining their TOEIC success.

B. Learner Autonomy

At the outset, is important that we do not confuse self-instruction with learner autonomy. The former implies an approach where all decisions regarding learning are made internally, whereas the latter lends itself to outside, teacher -directed influences. Little and Dam (1998), referring to learner autonomy, remark that "the learner must take at least some of the initiatives that give shape and direction to the learning process" (para.2). For a student to be successful, it stands to reason that they should take a vested interest in what they are studying and make every effort to ensure that they do their utmost to take advantage of the learning opportunities afforded them. Students need to keep a positive attitude, adopt a study approach that allows for both insight and reflection, and take initiative in self-management and when communicating with others (Little, 2005). Learner autonomy and self-instruction are not mutually exclusive; rather, the latter can be seen as a goal of the former. In a traditional language classroom, students are accustomed to the idea of the teacher as the main source of knowledge. All decisions with regards to learning are left up to the instructor. A program that focuses on encouraging learner autonomy, however, seeks to reverse this trend. Students are

discouraged from relying on the teacher to provide them with all the necessary information and instead are encouraged to discover how to learn for themselves. As such, the teacher becomes less of an instructor and more of a facilitator. In this capacity, the teacher helps students make decisions about what they learn, makes them more aware of personal learning styles and differences, and helps them develop and use a variety of learning strategies. The teacher and students can work as a team to set learning goals and plan and implement learning activities. Students understand the rationale behind their learning program, accept responsibility for their learning, and reflect on the effectiveness of their choices. This leads to a greater sense of involvement and, idealistically, a greater sense of achievement. Through teacher-directed study students are better equipped to make independent decisions regarding the direction their studies take. Ultimately, then, fostering learner autonomy in students should ideally result in self-instruction.

Attitude and motivation play a central part in learner autonomy as well. How interested a learner is in learning is often pivotal to their success. An individual who is being forced to study something i.e. a person at a company who has joined an English program not out of personal interest but at the behest of their boss, is less likely to succeed than a person who joins the same program out of a desire to learn and further themselves. Teachers who have to deal with students who are studying just to please their boss or supervisor face an uphill battle in steering those students toward becoming autonomous learners. In a similar vein, the attitudes a student brings with them to class also factor into the equation. It is understandably difficult to take responsibility for one's own learning if one dislikes the reasons and rationale for that learning from the beginning. The attitudes a learner has are closely connected with their motivation for studying. Brown (1994) strongly emphasised the role of two types of intrinsic motivation in language learning and the "strategic investment" that successful learners make in themselves. The first of these, integrative motivation, comes from the learner having a sincere interest in the field of study. The second type, instrumental motivation, looks at acquisition as a means to achieving other skills, qualifications or employment. This is particularly important in the corporate context when TOEIC is taught, as many students take the test out of a desire for promotion, an overseas posting or even in some cases a cash bonus. If the teacher is to guide students towards greater autonomy, then a better understanding of students' motivation (or lack thereof) and attitudes is an essential part of the process. By doing so, teachers "may be able to press the right motivational buttons earlier in their respective courses of study and encourage learners to make the necessary strategic investment to build a more successful future" (O'Dowd,

2003, p.17).

I formerly worked at an English conversation school that offered classes at a large, multinational Japanese company. The director of the English program at the company approached our management staff and asked them to change the direction of these classes from conversation to TOEIC. The teachers involved with the company, myself and a co-worker, were asked to design a 6-month program aimed at improving the students' TOEIC scores by 50 points. The catch: most of the students had not studied English since high school and even fewer had any experience with the TOEIC test. My co-worker and I were clearly in for a challenging six months! We decided that the first thing to do was to have the students take the next available TOEIC test, analyse their scores and then group students according to level. Of the 12 students who signed up for the program, six had scores ranging from 160 to 300. An additional four students had scores between 400 and 500 and the remaining two were around the 700 mark. Based on these results, we decided to create three separate classes. Class A consisted of the 160-300 people, Class B the mid range group and class C the high group.

The overall aim of the program, aside from increasing the students' TOEIC scores, was to foster learner autonomy, especially with the "A" group which we felt would best benefit from such an approach. The idea was to work toward a more student-centered class as opposed to a teacher-centered one as we had been doing prior to the start of the program. To this end, we set three main goals for the program. First, we wanted to dispel the idea that studying English once a week for 90 minutes was sufficient. Too often, in the interests of renewing a contract or arranging for a new class, prospective students are told that studying in one class a week for 60 to 90 minutes is going to lead them down the road to English proficiency. We decided that it was time to take a "gloves off" approach as it were, level with the students and tell them in no uncertain terms what it would take to become better at English and increase their TOEIC scores.

Second, we wanted to instil a sense of responsibility in the students – put the onus on them to improve their scores and take more responsibility for their learning. Finally, we wanted to introduce the students to a variety of activities and study methods that they could use outside of class. Holmes and Ramos (1991, cited in James and Garrett, 1991:198) echo this sentiment, saying that it is important to "help (students) become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or potentially use". With these three goals in mind, the main challenge for us as teachers was developing a suitable program for the A group. How does one teach TOEIC to people with scores between 160 and 350? With the exception of TOEIC Bridge exercises, there are few

resources available for people at this level and indeed we felt it was in the best interests of these students that they first study an intro level, business-based English course that focused on conversation and fundamental grammar skills. We hoped that this would provide the students with the basics from which they could move on to a full-fledged TOEIC course. The director of the program, however, was adamant that we teach TOEIC right from the beginning. We came to a compromise, opting for a business-based conversation course interspersed with TOEIC practice throughout.

Our next challenge was a pedagogical one. Aside from TOEIC Bridge exercises, a lack of TOEIC material for people at the 160-350 level meant that we had to make all of our own resources. These consisted of the following:

- reading exercises based on short news articles that were taken from newspapers and edited for level appropriateness;
- TOEIC style questions utilizing vocabulary from the students' business text;
- weekly TOEIC quizzes given at the start of each class;
- mid term and final TOEIC "tests", 30-minute versions of the real test, simplified for the students' level and based on their text. Pictures for Part 1 listening were largely downloaded from the Internet. The listening sections were done using school recording equipment and a female co-worker assisted in doing the short conversations for part 3.
- All classes were also offered the option of using Oxford graded readers. For more on the effectiveness of using these readers in a TOEIC program, see Brown (2005).

C. Implementation of the program

Thanasoulas states that autonomous learners are "expected to assume greater responsibility for and take charge of their own learning" (2000). Students must be made aware, from the outset of the course, of what will be expected of them. It must be made clear to them that success on TOEIC will only result from a continuous effort on their behalf. The instructors act as guides and facilitators, however, in the end it is the *students* who will ultimately be responsible for their failure or success. With this in mind, the following guidelines should be implemented:

1) Students are given homework every week and it *must* be completed. Incomplete assignments are noted each week by the teacher and a final tally

will be compiled at the end of the term.

2) Students must account for any class they miss. This can be done by contacting the teacher directly through e-mail or by informing the course co-ordinator. If the student chooses to use e-mail, they should be encouraged to write their e-mails in English to the best of their ability. E-mails written in Japanese can be translated by the teacher (if possible) at his/her discretion and handed back to the students at the start of the next class.

3) Students must be made aware that their reading assignments, whether business-based or not, are essential in helping them increase their vocabulary and reading speed – two factors crucial for success on TOEIC.

At first glance, it may seem that the above guidelines come across as almost childish in nature. After all, these are rules one would expect to see at a junior high school, not with adults, many of whom have advanced degrees in engineering. However, the instructors felt that it needed to be made clear from the outset that this course was going to be different than what students were previously used to. Also, making students keep up to date on their assignments and account for their absences was also thought to be more in line with the learner autonomy focus to the program.

In the program that was run, the above points were outlined in an open letter that was handed out to students in the first class of term. The letter was written in both English and Japanese and read in its entirety, in English, by the teacher during their first lesson. Our school's office manager was on hand to answer any questions the students had. Also included in this letter were some tips on how to effectively study, use and increase exposure to English. These tips were written in both English and Japanese (see Appendix 1). In addition to this, the students were given two other documents, namely a list of common classroom expressions and a list of grammatical terms that they might encounter during their TOEIC studies. Again, both these pages, like the English study tips, were handed out in both English and Japanese. Finally, a course syllabus and timetable were handed out along with the open letter.

D. Monitoring of Program

With this type of program, students were given the opportunity to keep in touch with the teacher via e-mail or by telephoning the school. Virtually all of the students chose to use e-mail and the vast majority did so in Japanese. The teacher sent an e-mail to the students every week one or two days after their class. The purpose of this e-mail

was threefold:

1) The e-mail was written in English and thus gave the students another opportunity to practice their reading skills;
2) The contents of the e-mail were a brief description of the current week's lesson and an overview of what would be covered in the following lesson;
3) The e-mail allowed those students who did not attend class to find out what was covered in class and what was for homework.

With class "A" the e-mail was also translated into Japanese. It should be noted that this was done at the behest of the course co-ordinator and was not originally planned by the teachers. She felt that the students would feel more at ease if they were able to read the e-mails in Japanese, plus it would also avoid any confusion over homework assignments or class content. E-mails for both B and C classes were not translated – a reflection of their higher TOEIC scores and ability to read and comprehend English e-mails. The school manager also made monthly visits to classes at each level. During these visits she discussed the program with the co-ordinator and students and how they felt things were progressing. Following these visits, the manager held a meeting with the teachers and told them of student concerns and questions. In this way were the classes modified and improved upon throughout the term. Throughout the course, students were also encouraged to send e-mails in English to the instructors at any time and on any topic. Several of the students who attempted this did so hesitatingly at first but gradually became more comfortable with it as the term progressed. All such e-mails were responded to and hardcopies of each e-mail, containing corrections to spelling, vocabulary and grammar were provided to the students at the beginning of each weekly lesson.

E. Results

At the end of six months, students took another TOEIC test, and a survey, prepared by the school, was handed out in class (see appendix 2). TOEIC scores showed a general overall improvement, with some students raising their scores by 50 points or more. Several students showed marked increases in all sections of the test, resulting in a general increase of over 100 points. Survey results indicated overall satisfaction with the course, although some students in class "A" noted that their reading assignments were too difficult for them and took too much time to do. It is unclear from the data

collected at the end of this program if any one particular factor resulted in increased TOEIC scores. However, the teachers believe that a focus on reading and maintaining a steady study program including completion of all homework assignments more than likely contributed to the overall improvement in scores.

F. Conclusion

There are many unique challenges that a teacher faces when teaching TOEIC to a beginner level group of students. A focus on business English while at the same time providing the students with TOEIC style questions is essential for both student and program success. A beginner level course like the one outlined here must have clear goals and objectives, be monitored by both teachers, school managers and course co-ordinators, and have the support and participation of students. A focus on learner autonomy to help students build and implement their own study program with the goal of making them independent learners, is paramount to this type of program where many of the students start off at a lower level than is normally associated with a TOEIC course. Holding students accountable for their own progress via homework and attendance checks is also key in helping students reach their TOEIC goals. TOEIC is not a test in which students can see overnight results, but by enrolling in a course that is tailored to their needs it is possible to see improvement over the course of 6 months to a year.

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Appendix 1

To make sure you get the most out of your English class we have prepared some advice for you. Learning English depends on 3 things: how much you **study English**, how much you **use English**, and how much you are **exposed to English**.

Top 10 Ways to Improve Your English

1. Come to class on time every time. Make notes about new words or ideas that you learn. Review them after class and again before the next class.
2. Use an English workbook for homework. If your class does not have a workbook, ask your teacher. We can get one for you and recommend which parts to study.
3. Use English only in class. Talk to your classmates in English. Ask and answer questions in English. Have a small chat with your classmates before or after class in English.
4. Join an online discussion group. Check out this page for a list of English student discussion groups on many different topics. Join one that you are interested in. http://www.eslcafe.com/discussion/
5. Listen to English practice CDs in your car or on the train.
6. Watch TV in English. If you have satellite TV there are hundreds of choices. But even on regular TV there are quite a few English programs. Find one that interests you and make a habit of watching it. Make a video tape and watch the program several times and note down any new vocabulary and expressions you hear.
7. Rent videos and DVDs in English. Watch the movie twice: once with the subtitles on and once with them turned off. If regular movies are too long, try watching some short movies on the Internet. www.atomfilms.com has hundreds of short movies in English. They are all free and you can watch them as many times as you want.

8. Read English books.
9. Send emails to your teacher. Answer if your teacher sends you an email or a fax.
10. Keep a diary in English. Your teacher can check it for you if you like.

We hope these ideas help you. If you want some other ideas, or need help getting started with these suggestions, please consult with your teacher.

英語の学習方法について

クラスでの英語学習を十二分に活用してもらえるように、いくつかのアドバイスをしたいと思います。それは次の３つのことを心がけて学習することです。どのくらい英語を勉強するか、どのくらい英語を使うか、またどのくらい英語環境に身をおけるかといったことです。

英語を勉強する方法ベスト **10**

1. クラスには、毎回遅刻をせず時間とおりに出席すること。クラス中に学んだ新しい単語や考えはメモをとること。レッスン終了後、また次のレッスン前に復習するとよいですね。
2. 英語のワークブックを自宅で利用すること。クラスでワークブックを使っていない場合は、担当教師に相談していただければ、あなたのレベルにあったワークブックを紹介し、学習すべきパートをアドバイスします。
3. レッスン中は、もちろん英語だけしか使わないこと！クラスメートとの会話はもちろん、質問、回答もすべて英語です。レッスンが始まる前、また終わったあとにもクラスメートと英語で話しをしてみましょう。
4. オンラインディスカッショングループに参加することもよいでしょう。ホームページ（http://www.eslcafe.com/discussion/）にアクセスし、いろいろなトピックについて話をするグループリストがあるので、興味の持てるグループに参加してみるのもいいでしょう。
5. 電車や、車で英語学習ＣＤをきく。
6. 英語放送でテレビをみる。サテライトテレビがあれば、かなりたくさんの選択肢があります。地上波ＴＶでもいくつかのプログラムがあるので、自分の興味がもてるプログラムを選んで、毎回英語でみる

ことを習慣にしたり、ビデオにとって何度も繰り返しみたり、新し
　　い単語や表現はメモをとり復習するとよいでしょう。
7.　ビデオやＤＶＤをレンタルし、2 回みる習慣をつける。1 回目は、字
　　幕つきで、
　　2 度目は字幕なしか、できるだけ字幕を見ないようにしてみるとよい
でしょう。
　　もし普通の映画が長いと感じるならば、インターネットでショートフ
ィルムを観るといいでしょう。www.atomfilms.com は何百もの英語のショ
ートフィルムがあります。それらは全て無料で、観たいときに何度でも
観ることができます。
8.　英語の本を読むこと。
9.　教師に英語でＥメールを送信してみるのもいいでしょう。教師からの
　　メールや、ファックスにも英語で回答してみるのもいいですね。
10. 英語で日記をつけてみましょう。希望により、文法や表現方法を担当
　　教師がチェックすることもできます。

アドバイスが少しでも皆さんの英語学習の役に立てばうれしいです。こ
　　ういったアドバイスを実行する際に何か質問などがあれば、いつで
　　も教師にご相談ください。

Appendix 2 - Survey

Section 1 – About You

Class: A Class/ B Class/ C Class (circle one)

How long have you been with this company? _____ years/months

Which of the following best describes your main reason for joining the English program?

1. I want to improve my overall English. _____
2. I enjoy English. _____
3. To prepare for using English in business. _____
4. To improve my TOEIC score. _____
5. My boss told me to. _____
6. Other (please specify) _____

How long have you participated in the English classes?

Once (6 months) _____   Four times (2 years) _____

Twice (1 year) _____   More than four times _____

Three times (18 months) _____

Was your attendance rate over 80% this term? Y?N

How many times have you taken an official TOEIC test? _____ time(s)

What was your best score? _____

Section 2 – About your class

Which of the following elements did you find helpful in your class? Please rate each from 1 (not very helpful) to 5 (very helpful).

	Not Helpful			Very Helpful	
1. Weekly e-mail from the teacher	1…..2…..3…..4…..5	N/A
2. Grammar Lessons	1…..2…..3…..4…..5	N/A
3. Listening Practice	1…..2….. 3…..4…..5	N/A
4. TOEIC style question practice	1….. 2….. 3…..4…..5	N/A

5. Reading novels   1…..2….. 3…..4….. 5   N/A

6. Business English questions   1…..2…..3…..4…..5   N/A

7. Vocabulary study   1…..2…..3…..4…..5   N/A

8. Progress quizzes   1…..2…..3…..4…..5   N/A

9. Mini TOEIC tests   1…..2…..3…..4…..5   N/A

10. Homework assignments   1….. 2…..3…..4…..5   N/A

Comments:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Section 3 – Study Techniques

Check the study techniques that you used during this course and rate their effectiveness.

	Effective		Not Effective		
_____watched English T.V. programs, movies etc.	1	2	3	4	5
_____used a grammar study book	1	2	3	4	5
_____ accessed TOEIC practice problems on the Internet	1	2	3	4	5
_____ wrote e-mails in English	1	2	3	4	5
_____ used a CD-ROM learning program	1	2	3	4	5
_____ read English novels	1	2	3	4	5
_____ read English newspapers	1	2	3	4	5
_____ kept a diary in English	1	2	3	4	5
_____ joined an on-line English discussion group	1	2	3	4	5
_____ listened to practice TOEIC CDs	1	2	3	4	5
_____ other (please specify and rate)					
_____	1	2	3	4	5

Additonal comments: _____

_____

_____

_____