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Teaching Grammar for the TOEIC Test: Is Test Preparation Instruction effective?

ABSTRACT. This study was conducted to investigate the effect of test preparation instruction on TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores, especially on the grammar section. Data were gathered in two intact classes, a TOEIC preparation class and a communicative grammar class, at a Japanese university during two semesters (Spring 2004 and Spring 2005). A pretest and a posttest were administered on the first day and the last day of class respectively, and the means were compared. The results showed that the students in the TOEIC preparation classes demonstrated statistically significant score gains. The findings of this study suggest that test preparation instruction is effective in improving scores of the grammar section of the TOEIC test.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) has been developed by the Educational Testing Service to measure the ability to communicate in English at workplace, and TOEIC fever has been spreading through our society in Japan. Many companies now use the test as one of the screening tools for job interviews or promotions, so college students, as well as office workers, tend to go to language schools in the evening to study for the test to get higher scores. To meet students' needs, many universities and colleges in Japan recently started offering TOEIC preparation classes, though such classes are often the targets of criticism in academia.

The Faculty of Foreign Languages at Kyoto Sangyo University started the Special English program in the spring of 2003 to offer practical English classes. When we conducted a survey at the end of the year to see what kind of classes students wished to take, a TOEIC preparation class was at the top of the list. Whether we should teach preparation for such commercial tests at university or not was thoroughly debated in the Faculty. Those who opposed to opening such classes argued that general English classes should

enable students to get good marks because the test itself is designed to measure general proficiency. After a series of discussions, we decided we should not ignore the students' needs and opened a TOEIC preparation class in the spring semester of 2004.

This study was conducted to investigate the effect of test preparation instruction on students' scores. This study specifically focused on grammar and tried to see if students who studied grammar in a TOEIC preparation class would obtain higher gain scores on Parts V and VI of the TOEIC test, which measure grammatical competence, than students who studied grammar in a communicative grammar class, where students practiced grammar for better communication. The TOEIC test consists of the listening section (Parts I – IV) and the reading section (Parts V – VII), but I use the term "the grammar section" in this paper, meaning Parts V and VI of the reading section. It is hoped that this study can help both teachers and students decide whether offering or taking test preparation courses are worthwhile or not.

2. RELEVANT STUDIES

Some warn against such test preparation courses. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) claim that teaching for the tests only makes us "part of a huge test preparation industry fuelled by students' anxiety to succeed" (p. 293). Students may be "diverted from mainstream, well-designed language classes ... into unproductive, test-mimicking exercises" (Hamp-Lyons 1998, p. 335). Rogers and Bateson (1991) claim that if test-wiseness affects scores, it should be taken into account when developing tests and interpreting scores. If teaching for the test actually improves scores, "then, the test no longer can be said to measure general proficiency. Rather, it measures how well people have studied for the test" (Robb and Ercanbrack 1999, p. 2).

However, it seems very important to conduct research on whether test preparation programs or courses are effective and improve students' scores because "this is the very reason all students take such courses" (Hamp-Lyons, 1998, p. 331). Studies of the effectiveness of test preparation courses seem to be limited in number even though such courses are high in demand.

Language schools are advertising how effective their test preparation programs are. Looking at gain scores of some of the students in the advertisement, many students decide to enroll in their programs. It seems, however, difficult to find any objective data presented by such schools. The institution where Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) conducted their research on TOEFL preparation classes gathered no data. In a study on preparation courses for the IELTS (International English Language Testing System), the

institutions Coomber (1997) observed boasted of their programs but only provided insubstantial subjective optimism rather than substantial objective data.

The study conducted by Amer (1993) on the effect of teaching a test-taking strategy shows that test-taking skills enable students to improve scores, but other studies show that test preparation programs have little or no significant effect. Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) summarized research on preparation programs for the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) and concluded that "the most well-known commercial coaching programs (e.g., Stanley Kaplan, Inc., and the Princeton Review) produce only modest score gains" and "the effects of coaching may fall far short of students' expectations" (p. 3). Neither courses nor materials designed for test preparation seem to have any significant effect on students' scores.

Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) conducted research on the effect of direct test preparation on TOEIC scores and found non-English majors in TOEIC preparation courses demonstrated significant gains on the reading section only, and concluded that TOEIC preparation courses were of little benefit to English majors who studied in a comprehensive English program. Narron, Hirase, Minami, Takekata, and Adachi (2003) studied the effect of test preparation materials on TOEIC scores to determine whether using general English materials would be a disadvantage to students who wished to improve TOEIC scores. Their results showed that test preparation materials had no significant effect, and they concluded that general English courses were as effective in improving scores.

One of the reasons I have decided to focus on grammar and examine two grammar classes (a TOEIC preparation class and a communicative grammar class) in this study is that consciousness-raising--drawing learners' attention to form--may make a difference. General English classes usually do not spend much time focusing on grammar, so students in TOEIC preparation classes, where students receive explicit grammar explanation, may have an advantage in improving their scores on the grammar section due to consciousness-raising. As Rutherford (1987) argues, consciousness-raising seems important for successful language learning. It is considered as an acquisition facilitator, which makes grammatical forms salient and enhances acquisition. Learners may fail to pick up certain forms through natural input (Schmidt 1990; Spada and Lightbown 1993; Terrell 1991; White, Spada, Lightbown and Ranta 1991). In other words, students may not be able to pick up and acquire some grammatical forms in general English classes which do not put much emphasis on grammar or lead to consciousness-raising. I, therefore, have chosen the two classes, both of which would give explicit grammar explanation to students and could lead to consciousness-raising.

3. METHOD

3.1. Subjects

The study was first conducted in two classes, a TOEIC preparation class and a communicative grammar class, in the spring semester of 2004. The TOEIC preparation class consisted of 21 students and the communicative grammar class consisted of 15 students. Then the study was replicated in the spring semester of 2005, in the TOEIC preparation class with 38 students and the communicative grammar class with 28 students. These classes had mixed students in terms of gender (Table 1), majors--English majors or non-English majors--and years (Table 2).

Table 1. Gender of Students

Gender	2004		2005	
	TOEIC	Communicative	TOEIC	Communicative
Male	5	3	3	7
Female	16	12	35	21

Table 2. Majors and Years of Students

Year	2004				2005			
	TOEIC		Communicative		TOEIC		Communicative	
	English	Non E	English	Non E	English	Non E	English	Non E
2 nd	5	4	4	4	16	15	5	19
3 rd	2	5	5	0	3	3	2	0
4 th	1	4	0	2	1	0	2	0
Total	8	13	9	6	20	18	9	19

3.2. Instruction

Both the TOEIC preparation class and the communicative grammar class met once a week for 14 weeks. Each class lasted 90 minutes. In the TOEIC preparation class, test-taking skills and test items which frequently appeared on the test were introduced and practiced. This class covered not only grammar but also reading comprehension exercises. Grammar was taught in the first eight weeks of the course, and then reading was taught for the rest of the semester. In the communicative grammar class, each lesson consisted of explicit grammar explanation, controlled practice (e.g., fill-in-the-blank questions), less-controlled practice (e.g., open-ended questions) and communicative practice (e.g., discussion questions). The aim of this class was to enable students to communicate effectively by using grammar appropriately, which should meet the criteria the TOEIC test is designed to test. No reading

comprehension exercises were included in this class. All materials used in this study were commercially available textbooks. I taught both classes so teacher difference would not affect this study.

3.3. Tests

A pretest was administered on the first day of class and a posttest, which was exactly the same as the pretest, was administered on the last day of class. The same test was used to eliminate the possibility that the tests would lack comparability. The subjects had not been informed about the tests beforehand, so they did not know they were going to take the same test on the first day and the last day of class. The 14-week interval was assumed to be long enough to eradicate the effects of short-term memory. The test used in this study was Parts V and VI of a practice TOEIC test from a magazine, TOEIC Friends (March 1999). Part V consists of 40 fill-in-the-blank questions which test students' vocabulary and grammatical competence. Part VI consists of 20 find-an-error questions which test students' grammatical competence. Each question comes with four answer choices. The subjects were given 40 minutes to take the test. Although scores on the TOEIC test are determined by converting the number of correct answers to a scaled score, in this study, scores were simply the number of correct responses, so the total possible score was 60.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The subjects were originally more than the numbers mentioned above, but some subjects did not take either pre or posttest, and some enrolled in both classes, so such subjects' scores were omitted from this study.

After the pretest data had been collected in 2004, the reliability of the test was checked and confirmed (.90) using the Winsteps program. Then an F-test was used to determine if the two groups were drawn from the same population because I used intact classes and was not able to assign subjects randomly to either group. The homogeneity of the groups was confirmed in both 2004 ($p = .91$) and 2005 ($p = .94$). Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. Pretest

Factors	2004		2005	
	TOEIC (n = 21)	Communicative (n = 15)	TOEIC (n = 38)	Communicative (n = 28)
Mean	25.90	22.80	26.95	24.46
SD	6.80	6.55	5.21	5.26
	F = 1.07	p = .91	F = 1.02	p = .94

Next the pretest scores were analyzed using a T-test. The results showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups in both 2004 ($t = 1.37$, $p = .18$) and 2005 ($t = 1.88$, $p = .06$), indicating that the two groups were essentially comparable in both years.

Then the posttest scores were analyzed using a T-test as well. As seen in Table 4, the results showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups in both 2004 and 2005, indicating that the students in the TOEIC preparation class outperformed the students in the communicative grammar class on the posttest in both years.

Table 4. Posttest

Factors	2004		2005	
	TOEIC (n = 21)	Communicative (n = 15)	TOEIC (n = 38)	Communicative (n = 28)
Mean	29.95	23.87	31.37	23.64
SD	5.44	6.10	5.52	6.32
	$t = 3.14$	$p = .0035$	$t = 5.28$	$p = .0000016$

The results suggest that the students in the TOEIC preparation classes significantly improved their scores, and imply that TOEIC preparation instruction is effective and leads to significant gains on the grammar section (Parts V and VI) of the test. It should be remembered that the students in the TOEIC preparation classes had just finished working on the reading comprehension exercises (Part VII) when the posttest was given. They had completed studying the grammar section several weeks before the posttest. However, the students in the TOEIC preparation classes still outperformed the students in the communicative grammar classes on the posttest. This makes it more salient that test preparation instruction seems highly effective and efficient in improving scores on the grammar section of the TOEIC test.

5. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to determine whether test preparation instruction would improve students' scores on the grammar section of the TOEIC test. Two classes, a TOEIC preparation class and a communicative grammar class, were compared in the spring semester of 2004 and the spring semester of 2005 at Kyoto Sangyo University. A pretest was administered on the first day of class and a posttest, which was exactly the same as the pretest, was administered on the last day of class, and the means were compared. The results showed that the students in the TOEIC preparation class

demonstrated statistically significant score gains in both 2004 and 2005. The findings of this study indicate that test preparation instruction has a significant effect in improving scores on the grammar section of the TOEIC test.

The TOEIC test is designed to measure general English proficiency and should be utilized as such. Students should not study for the test and teachers should not teach for the test. We, teachers should focus on developing students' general skills or communicative competence, which should naturally lead to good marks on the test. However, in reality, we do have many students who seriously and urgently wish or need to obtain good scores on the test. I personally believe that teachers should cater to students' needs and help them succeed in such tests if their future success depends on the test scores even in part. Both a TOEIC preparation class and a communicative grammar class are popular among serious students at Kyoto Sangyo University. Students enroll in either class (or sometimes both) believing that these classes will help them improve their TOEIC scores. Although a communicative grammar class, which aims to develop grammatical competence for communication, should enable students to better their TOEIC scores eventually, the results of this study imply that a TOEIC preparation class leads to higher score gains more effectively and efficiently. The findings of this study suggest that TOEIC preparation courses are worth offering or taking.

Further research needs to be conducted to examine the findings of this study more fully, and determine whether these results apply to other settings such as randomly assigned classes, or to the other sections of the test (i.e., the listening and the reading comprehension sections).

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