

Enhancing Students' Communicative Competency and Test-Taking Skills Through TOEIC Preparatory Materials

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Abstract

With the aim of enhancing students' English proficiency, many Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand are adopting TOEIC as a component of tertiary-level EFL exit requirements (IIBC, 2005, p. 7; Pan, 2010). However, preparing students for international standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS is often considered unethical because of concerns over the issues of narrowing the curriculum, overemphasizing test-strategy instruction and mechanical practice, neglecting high-order thinking skills, and causing test-wiseness (Haladyna et al, 1991; Hamp-Lyons, 1998; Miller, 2003; Noble & Smith, 1994). The goal of this paper, which has a foundation in the metacognitively-based approach, is to offer teachers a variety of activities dealing with how to both teach the TOEIC® listening and reading test interactively and to prepare their students for success.

Keywords: washback, metacognitively-based approach, test preparation

Introduction

With the aim of enhancing students' English proficiency, many Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand are adopting TOEIC as a component of tertiary-level EFL exit requirements (IIBC, 2005, p. 7; Pan, 2010). However, preparing students for international standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS is often considered unethical because of concerns over the issues of narrowing the curriculum, overemphasizing test-strategy instruction and mechanical practice, neglecting high-order thinking skills, and causing test-wiseness (Haladyna et al, 1991; Hamp-Lyons, 1998; Miller, 2003; Noble & Smith, 1994). Because of this, many teachers resist offering test preparation in regular English classes although students request more of such instruction and practice in order to pass the test (Hanson-Smith, 2000; Pan, 2010). It is the intent of this paper to provide teachers with techniques that can help students to do well on the test without the instructors themselves teaching to the test.

The TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test

The TOEIC® (Test of English for International Communication) test measures test taker's communicative ability of everyday English skills with others in business, commerce, and industry (TOEIC Handbook, 2008, p. 2). It covers Section 1: Listening and Section 2: Reading. Each section consists of 100 multiple-choice questions. The listening tasks consist of four parts: (1) choosing the best

description that matches the photograph, (2) responding to one short question or statement, (3) choosing the best response to the question from a conversation, and (4) choosing the best response to the question from a short talk. The reading section includes three parts in the forms of (1) incomplete sentences, (2) error recognition or text completion, and (3) reading comprehension.

The Integration of Communicatively-Oriented Instruction and Test and Test Preparation in Curricula

Hughes (2003) and Messick (1996) contend that the alignment of curricula with test content can generate positive effects. In addition, the offering of test-preparation instruction could increase student confidence when preparing for tests (Green, 2007). However, many test preparation classes are teacher-centered, where the students were engaged in test-oriented activities, such as listening to the recording and choosing the correct answer on a picture, repeating after the teacher, and practicing the possible alternative answers to the oral questions (Pan, 2010). Falout (2004, p. 39) also observed similar phenomenon in his classes:

Using examples of past tests, or mock exams, learners practice taking the test in samples as short as one question at a time. Then the teacher explains why answers are right or wrong. Often students listen to the same audio segment again and again and the teacher explains why they listened to. Or the teacher explains discrete points, especially the ones often found in the reading section. Teachers might also prime learners for a practice test by focusing on a phonological or grammatical feature, or a learning or test-taking strategy”

In order to elicit beneficial washback from test preparation classes, the following sections explain how to use TOEIC practice tests as preparatory materials to enhance both students’ communicative competency and test-taking listening and reading skills.

Metacognitive-based Approach to teaching the TOEIC Listening and Reading Test

Metacognition is a concept that refers to one’s awareness about his/her thinking processes. It has been applied extensively to describe the process of second language learning (Ellis, 1994; Ellis 2003; Woolfolk, 1995). However, strategies for teaching metacognition are not yet widely developed or discussed in this field. This section discusses how to design metacognitively-based instruction activities to enhance students’ communicative competence and prepare them for success on the test.

According to Woolfolk (1995), there are three types of metacognitive awareness: 1) declarative knowledge; 2) procedural knowledge; and 3) conditional knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to knowledge about knowing something, procedural knowledge refers to how to do something, and conditional knowledge refers to one’s awareness of what to do in order to complete the task.

Based on this concept, three types of instruction are designed to teach the TOEIC® listening and reading test (1): bottom-up instruction, 2) interactive instruction, and 3) test-strategic instruction. Bottom-up instruction refers to those activities that can enrich students’ declarative (Johnson, 1996; Ellis, 1994) or prior

knowledge (Anderson, 1980; Sun., et al, 2001) in order to facilitate the occurrence of their procedural knowledge (Johnson, 1996) that underlies spontaneous L2 use. Sun et al. (2001) summarize the benefits of declarative knowledge by reviewing the related literature. According to them, declarative knowledge: 1) speeds up the learning process, 2) facilitates the transfer of skills, and 3) helps in the communication of knowledge and skills to others (p. 206). In view of these benefits, the aim of bottom-up instruction is to aid students in familiarizing themselves with the fundamental knowledge (e.g. vocabulary, grammar rules, pronunciation rules) they should know in order to participate in future interactive activities.

Interactive instruction helps students to make use of their declarative or prior knowledge and then turn that into procedural knowledge. According to Ellis (2003), learners with only declarative knowledge are not able to perform language tasks successfully because they focus merely on rule memorization and fail to communicate in the real world. In other words, interactive activities help students to become “more familiar with, and confident about, the test if they have actually used the language from the test” (Forster & Karn, 1998, p. 46).

Test strategy instruction enriches students’ conditional knowledge so that they know when and how to employ the skills (including declarative and procedural knowledge) teachers instruct and why to do so when taking the TOEIC® listening and reading test (Woolflok, 1995).

Figure 1 shows the metacognitively-based approach to eliciting beneficial washback from the TOEIC test preparation class.

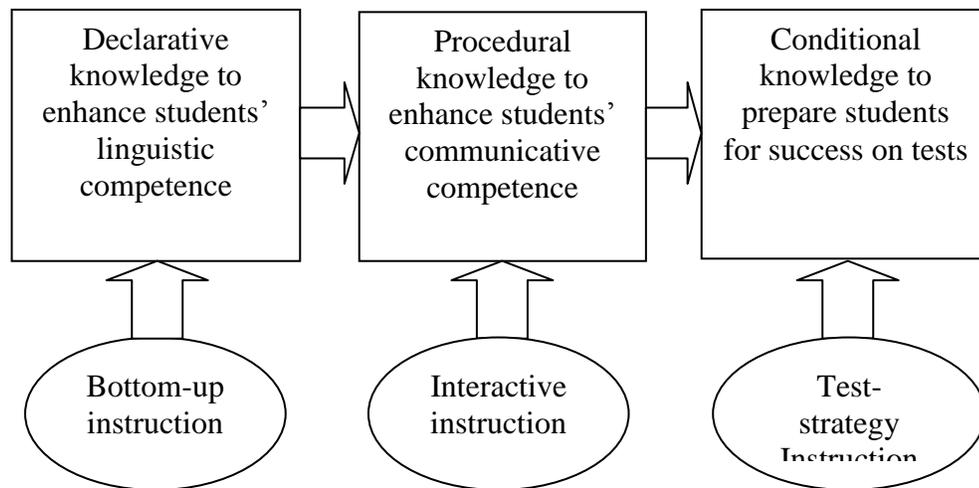


Figure 1. Metacognitively-based Approach to Teaching the TOEIC Test (adapted from Ellis, 2003)

Bottom-up Activities for Enhancing Linguistic Competence in Listening and Reading Skills Related to the TOEIC® Test

Nation (2007, cited in Hue, 2010) suggests that students will not be able to perform a given task if they do not know enough. Before they practice the listening

and reading questions on the TOEIC preparatory material, students should be provided with worksheets that contain sufficient vocabulary, phrases, and sentence patterns related to the listening and reading tasks, as shown in Table 1 and Table 2. These activities are recommended by the researcher's teaching experience, and Cheng (2009) in New TOEIC.

Table 1

Bottom-up Activities for Enhancing Students' Linguistic Competence in Listening Skills Related to the TOEIC® Test

| Bottom-up activities for practice on listening skills |
|---|
| 1. Distinguish minimal pairs/homophones/synonyms/antonyms/words with similar pronunciation. Ex. teething/teasing, mail/male, guarantee/promise, exit/entrance, oppose/propose/dispose/suppose |
| 2. Identify sentences in difference tenses. Ex. The door has been painted by the man./The man is painting a door./ The door is open. |
| 3. Identify people, things, actions, and places in the photos given and describe them. Ex. The woman is at a supermarket. The woman is raising her hand. The woman is looking at the shelf. The woman is wearing a T-shirt and a skirt. |
| 4. Identify questions in different forms such as wh- questions, yes/no questions, and tag questions. Ex. Why didn't you call me this morning? What are you serving for dinner? When's the car going to be ready? How long was your flight? This year went fast, didn't it? The bicycle is broken, isn't it? Would you call this number and ask what their hours are? Would you mind packing the luggage? |
| 5. Identify words, phrases, expressions often used in different work settings such as general business contracts, finance, accounting, conferences, hiring, purchasing shopping, housing, entertainment, and visiting doctors. |

Table 2

Bottom-up Activities for Enhancing Linguistic Competence in Reading Skills Related to the TOEIC® Test

| Bottom-up activities for practice on reading skills |
|--|
| 1. Identify word families including their parts of speech, suffixes, and affixes. |
| 2. Enhance students' vocabulary banks by providing them with categories of words based on various topics such as School & Education, Food & Shopping, Health & Sports, Entertainment, and General Business. |
| 3. Enhance students' grammatical knowledge by providing them with fundamental grammatical rules such as tenses, auxiliaries, gerund, infinite, passive voice, and subjunctives. |
| 4. Enhance students' systematic knowledge of prepositional phrases such as for the sake of, at least, change in, demand for, alert to, apply for, and end up, and conjunctions such as because, although, and even though. |

Interactive Activities for Enhancing Communicative Competence in Listening and Reading Skills on the TOEIC® Test

After the students familiarize themselves with the words and phrases related to the listening tasks, the teacher then asks them to do communicative activities, as in Table 3. The interactive activities are listed from simple ones to more complicated ones in order to improve students' confidence. These activities are recommended by the researcher's teaching experience, Cheng (2009) in *New TOIEC*, Trew (2008) in *Tactics for TOEIC listening and Reading test* and Razenberg (2003) *Reading Strategies for the TOEIC® Test*.

Table 3
Interactive Activities for Enhancing Communicative Competence in Listening Tasks on the TOEIC® Test

| TOEIC Listening Tasks | Interactive Activities |
|------------------------------|--|
| Part I Photographs | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask students to answer yes/no questions related to the photographs to check their listening comprehension. 2. Ask students to answer wh- questions related to the photograph to help them make a list of predictions of possible statements that they might hear. 3. Ask students to form pairs of two to practice both yes/no and wh- questions that they have practiced to reinforce their listening/speaking skills. |
| Part II Question/Response | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask students to read the responses to check their understanding of these answers. 2. Ask students to answer your questions choosing from the four statements. These questions can be yes/no questions, wh- questions, or statements. 3. Ask students to form pairs of two to practice the questions you have given. 4. Ask students to make possible questions for the statements they will be choosing from. |
| Part III Conversations | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher revises the conversation first and then reads it to the class. If students do not understand it the first time, the teacher can repeat it. 2. The teacher asks students yes/no and wh- questions related to the revised conversation to check their comprehension. 3. Ask students for form groups of five. Two students act out the revised conversation, one student asks questions, and another two answer them. |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Cont. Table 3</p> <p>Part IV Short Talks</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The teacher revises the short talk or lecture first and then reads it to the class. If students do not understand it the first time, the teacher can repeat it. 2. The teacher asks questions about the revised short talk/lecture related to main idea/subject, facts, conditions, purposes, prediction, and exclusion (i.e. Which of the following was not the reason for the late shipment?). 3. Pass out the revised short talk/lecture and ask students to read it. Then ask several students to read it in front of the class and the other students to make their own questions for the students in the front. |
|---|--|

Table 4
Interactive Activities for Enhancing Communicative Competence in Reading Tasks on the TOEIC® Test

| TOEIC Reading Tasks | Interactive Activities |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Part V Incomplete Sentences | Ask students to form groups of five and give them a list of 50 words. Then ask them to arrange every four words in the same category based on their parts of speech, meanings, prefixes, suffixes, and so on. The group that completes this task first is the winner. |
| Part VI Text Completion | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask students to form a group of five and ask them to write a short paragraph that uses the phrases the teacher has provided. 2. The teacher corrects the short paragraph, passes it out to the group and asks them questions about it. |
| Part VII Reading Comprehension | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask students to read the articles in the preparatory material and then ask them the following questions: (Adapted from Razenberg, 2003) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What is the text-type? b. Where is the text used? c. What is the purpose of the text? d. What are the main points? e. Who is the audience? f. What are the meanings of new vocabulary, phrases, and expressions guessed from the context? |

Test Strategy Instruction to Prepare Students for Success on the TOEIC® Test

Test-strategy instruction is offered after students practice bottom-up activities for building up fundamental knowledge and interactive activities for using the language from the test. Students are asked to do TOEIC practice tests, utilizing what they have learned from bottom-up activities and interactive activities, to

familiarize themselves with the format and content of the test. In order for them to feel confident when doing the test, Table 5 presents test-strategy instruction teachers can offer for the listening and reading test. These activities are recommended by the researcher's teaching experience, Cheng (2009) in New TOIEC, and Trew (2008) in Tactics for TOEIC listening and Reading test.

Table 5

Test-strategy Instruction for the TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test

| Test-strategy instruction |
|---|
| <p>Before the test</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain the format of the listening and reading section so that students can save time on reading directions and therefore have more time to look at the questions for each section. 2. Ask students not to feel worried if they do not understand each word/phrase they hear because the test does not test them on the details. <p>During the test</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Ask students to practice each section in the timed condition so that they know time management techniques when taking the real test. 4. Ask students to look at the photos and answer items before they hear the questions so that they will have some ideas about what to hear/predict. 5. Ask students to look at the question and answer items in the Reading Section before they read the text so that they will have some ideas about what to focus on. 6. Ask students to guess the words/phrases from the context and do not get stuck on them, wasting too much test time. 7. Ask students to delete the answer items they find most impossible when they hear the questions they don't understand so that there are fewer items left for them to choose from. <p>After the test</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Ask students to practice doing the listening/reading questions on the TOEIC more than one time so that they can get used to speakers' speed and learn more new words/phrases/expressions from the test. Ask students to write a short sentence/paragraph/conversation using these new words/phrases/expressions. 9. Ask students to finish the learning log as shown in Appendix 1 when practicing the test questions so that teachers can diagnose what difficulties students are experiencing with a particular section of one of the tests. |

Conclusions and Suggestions

The goal of this paper, which has a foundation in the metacognitively-based approach, is to offer teachers a variety of activities dealing with how to both teach the TOEIC® listening and reading test interactively and to prepare their students for success at the same time. Using test preparatory materials does not necessarily imply that instructors are teaching to the test; indeed, if their instructors utilize appropriate activities designed specifically for lessons, students can both learn the language from the test and improve their test scores. Students can truly benefit from TOEIC classes.

However, students possess a vast array of differing levels of English proficiency, and their learning styles and learning strategies exhibit a similar variety. Because of these differences, teachers must utilize three essentials in metacognitive regulation: planning, monitoring, and evaluation (Cross and Paris, 1988). In regard to planning, teachers should select appropriate instruction to suit their students. Vandergrift (2007) recommends that “listening instruction should not be a stand-alone activity” (p. 197). For example, Brown (1990) proposed an approach that facilitates the enrichment of students’ knowledge of phonological rules, as suggested in the bottom-up activities presented in Table 1, and then uses those contexts to make predictions, as suggested in test-strategy instruction in Table 5. As for monitoring, teachers should always check students’ awareness of comprehension and task performance (Paulsen & Zimmerman, 1995). The interactive instruction suggested in Tables 3 and 4 can assist teachers in assessing students’ comprehension and difficulties through a variety of communicative activities. Regarding evaluation, test-strategies instruction can help teachers understand their students’ learning outcomes. In addition, the learning log (see Appendix 1), as suggested in Table 5, can help teachers diagnose what difficulties students are experiencing with a particular section of one of the tests. Field (1998) and Goh (2000) propose an approach that scrutinizes learners’ difficulties and then uses appropriate exercises to help them practice those skills they must improve. As Goh (2000) states, “By concentrating on only those areas that affect their [students’] comprehension most, we [teachers] can use limited teaching time more profitably” (p.69).

The implementation of the metacognitively-based approach to teaching the TOEIC listening and reading test in test-preparation classes can generate beneficial washback on learning and teaching.

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Appendix

Student No.: _____ Name: _____

| | | |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Time | 9/20, 9:10- 9:30pm | |
| Test content | TOEIC Practice Test Listening 1, Q 1- Q10 | |
| Score | 5/10 | |
| Reflections | Questions that I answered right | Q1, Q3: Because I guessed right Q4, Q5, Q7: Because I understood most of the words/phrases/expressions |
| | Questions that I answered wrong | Q2, Q8: Because the speakers spoke too fast Q6, Q9: Because most of the words/phrases/expressions were too hard for me Q10: Because I got stuck at Q9 so I did not concentrate on Q10, and chose a wrong answer. |
| Suggestions | To myself | 1. I should memorize the new words/phrases/expressions that I learned from the test. 2. I should listen to the 10 questions 3 more times. |
| | To the teacher | 1. The teacher should explain the questions and answers in class. 2. The teacher should have us practice additional similar questions in class. |
| Teacher's comments | I will focus on improving students' vocabulary banks to facilitate listening. | |

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