

An Examination of the Proposed Use of the TOEIC at Asia University

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INTRODUCTION

The teachers of the Center for English Language Education (CELE) at Asia University (AU) teach a required Freshman English (FE) course to all first year students. Students enter AU with a wide variety of English abilities as they begin a four-year program in Law, Business, Economics, or International Relations. Each year brings us approximately 1600 new students. Our first task is to place them in FE levels representative of their various proficiencies. We do this by having all students take the Freshman English Placement Test (FEPT). This test was developed within our department, requires about an hour to complete, and is made up of a series of multiple choice questions divided between listening and reading sections. After the FEPT scores have been tallied, students are placed into levels based on their scores, and teachers conduct an oral proficiency interview with each student. These interviews are about 5 minutes in length and employ graded questions intended to produce an additional measurement of a student's ability, and to catch any major discrepancies between the FEPT results and an individual's actual oral proficiency.

During this past year, the teachers of CELE were asked by AU administrators to consider the use of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) as a placement tool to be used to arrange students into appropriate English levels. The TOEIC is a standard by which many institutions, companies, and individuals measure English ability. In Japan, it has become widely accepted as a tool to gauge English proficiency. Many employers who require any use of English on the job use TOEIC scores to set benchmarks for applicants. Typically, a score of 600 is the minimum requirement. Because of employer interest in TOEIC scores, some universities have provided students with the opportunity to take the TOEIC. Upon receiving the administrative request to consider the TOEIC as a placement test, we looked into the issue of using the TOEIC in two ways: as a placement test and as an exit test. The following is a report of our findings.

THE TOEIC AS A PLACEMENT TEST

In June 2002 we collected TOEIC scores obtained during the Asia University America Program (AUAP) placement process¹. The test was administered to primarily International Relations students, who are generally much more proficient with English than the Economics, Law, and Business students. We found that the range of scores varied significantly within each of the FE levels. For example, the range of scores of the level 1 students was 270 – 570, while in level 6 (a much lower proficiency level) the range was 155 – 465, and again in level 10 the range was 290 – 555. As mentioned above, our students have been placed in their current levels through the use of a combination of the FEPT and individual interviews. It should be noted that the TOEIC has not been designed as a placement tool, and in fact, the scores that we observed reflected this. Students from our lowest level classes did not receive the lowest scores on the test. The scores were inconsistent and widely varied in all of the levels (see Appendices A, B, and C).

There are a number of influencing factors that need to be considered when reviewing the data. We believe that students with TOEIC experience have an unfair advantage over students that have not taken the test before. It is probable that some of AU's new students have experience in taking the TOEIC while others may not. This can cause a large discrepancy in the scores of two individuals. Consider, for example, Student A, who has taken a TOEIC prep course and has written the test twice previously, and Student B, who has never seen a TOEIC test before. Student A will be well versed in the TOEIC instructions, and general TOEIC test taking strategies, such as budgeting time for answering questions. Student B, on the other hand, requires much more time just to understand the structure of the test question, and then to attend to instructions and process them before being able to proceed with the test.

In addition, students are rarely able to answer all the questions on the test. One review of the TOEIC suggested that in the listening portion of the test, with 100 questions on tape and a testing time of about fifty minutes, a student would have roughly thirty seconds to listen to and answer each question (Gilfert, 1996). It would be very difficult for any student to match that pace and complete all 100 questions. Another issue is accuracy. Consider the following scenario: Student C receives a hypothetical score of 385 despite not finishing the test while Student D does finish the test but receives the same score.

¹ The AUAP program is a study abroad program in which Asia University students attend one of three consortium schools in the United States for one semester.

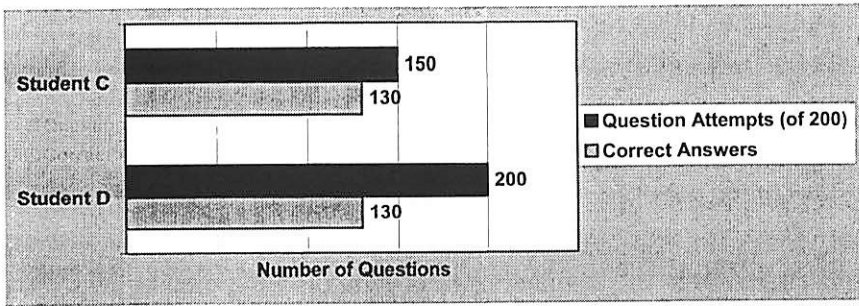


Fig. 1

This result could be the result of different factors such as previous TOEIC taking experience or perhaps just different individual test taking styles. In the above scenario, Student C has a higher degree of accuracy but has spent too much time on each question; he or she is likely to have received a better score if he or she had been aware of test-taking strategies such as time-budgeting and judicious guessing when necessary. Taking these factors into account, is it then accurate to place these two students together in the same level?

These considerations indicate that a practice session prior to the test would be necessary. Nishikawa-san, of the AU International Affairs office, suggested that a two hour training period for all students would be required to help students get used to the mechanics of taking the TOEIC, and to allow them to focus on answering the questions. This raises a practical question: Is it realistic to expect all of the approximately 1600 entering freshmen students to attend a two hour training session prior to the actual two and a half hour test?

Additionally, it is important to understand that few companies requiring TOEIC scores with applications would consider a score of less than 600 for any position. Moreover, the TOEIC organization has stated: "The TOEIC test is designed for use by organizations working in an international market where English is *the primary language of communication.*" (The Chauncey Group International, 1988, p.2, italics ours). Clearly, AU does not fit this characterization, nor is it likely that the majority of AU graduates will be working in such an environment in the future.

The TOEIC is a more appropriate tool to distinguish proficiency levels higher than those of the general student population of AU. The average score among International Relations students, the highest of the four majors, at 385, was low. We feel that the FEPT in conjunction with the OPI is an effective means of placing students. It is perhaps a disservice to our students to place them into levels based on TOEIC scores. Since the FEPT is shorter

in length, all students are able to attempt all questions, so we achieve a more reliable score. For a test to be an acceptable placement tool, it is important that a majority of the students finish the test, as is the case with the FEPT.

Logistically too, the FEPT is much more practical to administer with no training for students. It is also easier to make up if missed. This past year, fifty students missed the main FEPT and had to do a make up test. However, of the fifty students who missed the original FEPT, less than twenty made the effort to make it up, despite being informed of its importance. It may be unrealistic to expect students to attend separate training and testing sessions, particularly when they may not truly understand the significance of the training session.

USING THE TOEIC AS AN EXIT TEST

Although AU's chief interest in the TOEIC is as a placement test, we are aware that its usefulness as an exit test at the end of FE classes is also being considered. We understand why a TOEIC exit test for our students may seem attractive. It would provide students who are entering the workforce with a TOEIC score. Even if their test score is too low to be useful in their job search, many students will be curious to know it. We are also aware that a number of universities in Japan, such as Yamaguchi University, already use the TOEIC in this way. At Yamaguchi the goal for students is to achieve a score of 300 prior to graduation. It is a low score and probably most students can achieve it.

Nevertheless, we have some concerns about using the TOEIC as an exit test. It is well known that "the TOEIC is designed to locate the test-taker approximately on the worldwide curve of English ability of nonnative speakers. It is not designed to measure the amount of learning resulting from a given course of study" (Childs, 2002). Our first concern is that once the TOEIC becomes an exit test it will become the primary focus of AU's FE program, at the cost of its varied goals and objectives, which were designed specifically for the needs of the AU student population. We believe using it as an exit test may have an immediate negative effect on students' attitudes toward English, and we also believe that in the long term, this may lead to changes in the FE program that will be detrimental to the quality of the program's content.

Even if there is no minimum score requirement, some students will experience anxiety over their upcoming TOEIC. We at CELE work hard to motivate students to improve their speaking skills. The TOEIC does not measure speaking skills, and using it as an exit test will only reinforce a negative attitude toward improving oral ability.

The cause of internationalization will not be served by producing students who have adequate reading and writing skills but are unable to speak confidently to foreigners. AU's mission statement, created by university founder Ota Kozo, reflects the value placed on students' internationalization as part of their education at AU. It states that students are prepared to "to make a positive contribution to Japanese society, to the development of Asia and to the greater international community" (AU International Affairs Office, 2002, p. 2). According to the mission statement, individuals are encouraged "to achieve personal autonomy" and "self-reliance" (Ibid.). Examples of important FE goals that reflect AU's mission statement are the following: "students will gain an understanding of select, intercultural topics," and "students will be able to describe selected aspects of their own cultures" (Bess, 2002, p.50).

One of the ways that we strive to build our students' confidence is to evaluate them according to their individual ability. CELE's goals and objectives are broken down by level. Our expectations for our level one students, compared to those for our level twenty-one students, are quite different. An in-house exit TOEIC test would overshadow our attempts to meet individual student needs. Instead of focusing on their accomplishments in their particular levels, students will be forced to compare themselves with other TOEIC-takers.

We are also concerned about how exit TOEIC scores would be used by university administrators. It would be natural for administrators to compare test scores from different years and even perhaps from different FE levels. Such comparisons may lead to using TOEIC exit scores as a way of evaluating the health of the FE program. Decreased scores may reflect poorly on CELE teachers of a given year. However, as outlined in section one, the TOEIC does not accurately reflect English proficiency among low-level students.

Because CELE's goals and objectives are designed specifically to meet the needs of AU's students, graduates can be expected to have a range of abilities¹. It is not difficult to imagine that eventually CELE teachers would feel direct or indirect pressure to produce improvements in their students' TOEIC scores. The problem with such pressure is that even small improvements in students' scores could only be brought about by eliminating virtually all classroom activities that promote speaking ability, cultural awareness and communicative confidence. The TOEIC is a difficult test and to improve one's score requires a great deal of

¹ Examples of typical goals that reflect a broad and varied approach to language production ability are the following: "students will be able to use a variety of functional phrases (e.g. greetings, person information questions)," "students will be able to use appropriate pronunciation, intonation, and stress patterns to convey meaning (e.g. question intonation)" (Center for English Language Education, 2000, p. 48).

motivation. It also requires a narrow focus on business language and situations. Furthermore, it takes a great deal of time to increase a score by even a few points. Even if the FE program were to dedicate itself exclusively to TOEIC-related content, the improvement of scores would, in many cases, be negligible. The following graph (Fig. 2) shows how much TOEIC training is required to improve one's score by a single point.

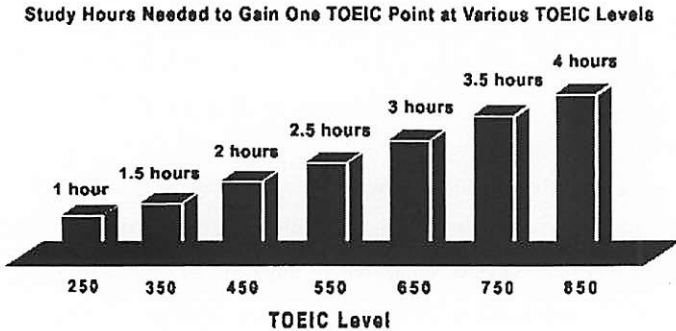


Fig. 2

Source: Prolingua Executive Language Services. Used by Permission

As shown in this chart, a student with a current score of 350 would require an hour and a half of TOEIC training to raise his or her score by one point. A student whose TOEIC score is 550 could, at the very most, expect an improvement of 32 points (a mere 5.8% increase) after an entire year of Freshman English devoted *exclusively* to TOEIC instruction and *nothing else*. At present, there are not enough hours in the FE program to bring about significant changes in TOEIC scores.

CONCLUSION

The disadvantages of turning FE into a TOEIC preparation program are obvious. We would lose students who are not interested in the TOEIC and we would compete with other TOEIC preparation programs in Japan. Given that the AUAP and the Asia University Global Program (AUGP) are among the most popular features of AU, our general English program that emphasizes speaking skills and cultural awareness would seem to be the most suitable complement for those programs.

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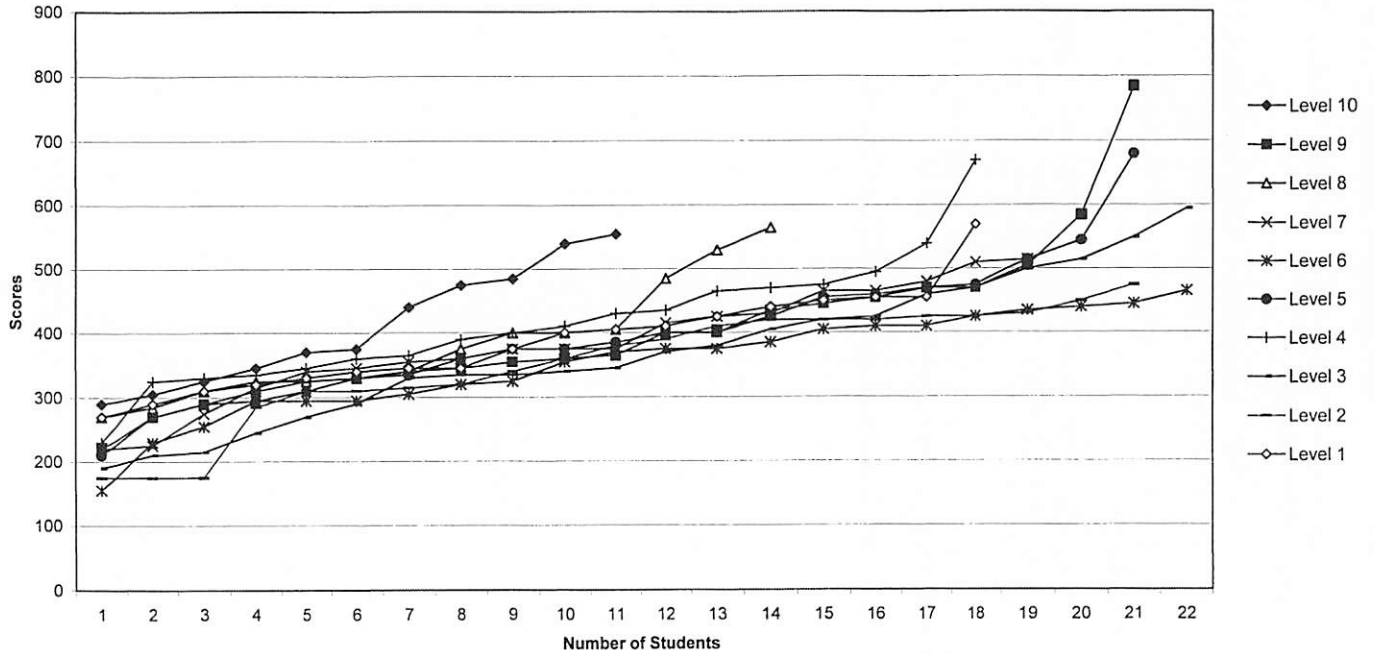
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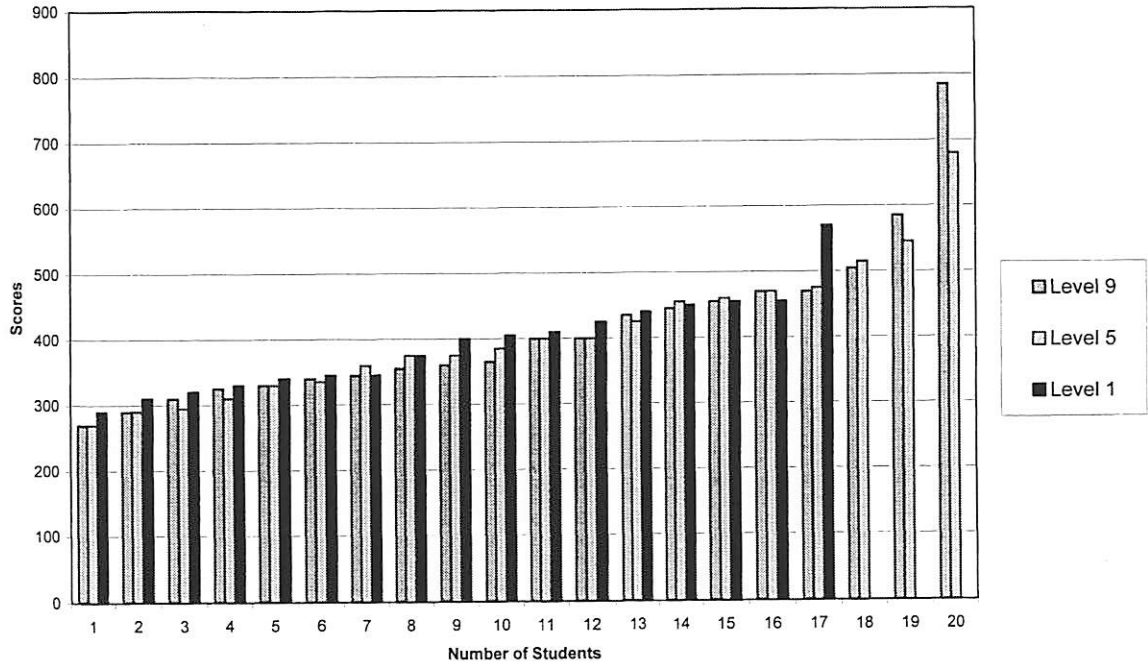
Appendix A

IR TOEIC SCORES



Appendix B

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Appendix C
IR TOEIC SCORES BY LEVEL

Number of Students	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Level 10
1	270	175	190	230	210	155	220	270	220	290
2	290	175	210	325	270	230	225	285	270	305
3	310	175	215	330	290	255	275	310	290	325
4	320	285	245	335	295	295	315	325	310	345
5	330	310	270	345	310	295	340	325	325	370
6	340	310	290	360	330	295	345	330	330	375
7	345	315	330	365	335	305	355	340	340	440
8	345	320	335	390	360	320	360	375	345	475
9	375	340	335	400	375	325	375	400	355	485
10	400	360	340	410	375	355	375	400	360	540
11	405	380	345	430	385	370	375	405	365	555
12	410	390	370	435	400	375	415	485	400	
13	425	410	380	465	400	375	425	530	400	
14	440	420	405	470	425	385	430	565	435	
15	450	420	420	475	455	405	465		445	
16	455	420	425	495	460	410	465		455	
17	455	425	460	540	470	410	480		470	
18	570	425	470	670	475	425	510		470	
19		430	500		515	435	515		505	
20		450	515		545	440			585	
21		475	550		680	445			785	
22			595			465				