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## English for International Communication Part 1: Does TOEIC® Pass the Test?

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## Abstract

*This is the first in a series of studies about English for international communication (EIC) in the context of tertiary English education in Japan. International Communication is a distinct political and theoretical field, while EIC has come to be seen in the context of a major international English proficiency test. However, this invites closer scrutiny into the latter's accuracy, as TOEIC® (Test of English for International Communication™) centers on linguistic accuracy, construct validity and international workplace English. This conflicts with its title's apparent aim. The US company producing it, Educational Testing Service (ETS) invests in research justifying its construct validity, but fails to account for communicative validity. The recent addition of a Speaking and Writing test compounds the problem as it invites more questions than answers about its role and requirement. Its development and rationale seem hard to justify. The new test is unpopular compared to the original Listening and Reading (LR). To evaluate LR TOEIC®'s communicative and international value, we consider some definitions and applications, noting the commercial divide between the two major kinds of mainstream English, British and American. The test's origins are examined to assess how its original purpose has been redirected, as its use has spread globally. Its self-proclaimed validity has become increasingly superficial, and the dialog with ETS (**4. The Basis for ETS's "Communication"**) suggests fundamental problems with its own real-world communicative ability. Some of the issues that exist with the new Speaking test are detailed, especially in terms of the questionable literature and conclusions derived from data analyses. We compare international communication's interpretations and applications (other than those offered by ETS and its affiliates) to counter some tenuous claims in their publicity. The reality*

*is at variance with the image the test's name seeks to create. To indicate how students see TOEIC® and its communicative claims, we present findings from several questionnaires. Compared to other courses taught by this writer, students rated TOEIC®'s communicative value the lowest. To show that the findings detailed in this study are not limited to a single evaluation, both in the conclusion and throughout, specific references are given to others who have found serious communicative flaws in the test. There is a good case for ETS to re-evaluate its conclusions about TOEIC®'s communicative validity or amend its name and use.*

## **1. What's International English Communication?**

International English Communication is primarily spoken, especially for students of English whose first language is not English. Their largest context is EFL (English as a Foreign Language) to be English communicators in countries where English is not the main language. For most learners and users, the priority must be the natural order of acquisition, listening and speaking first, not reading and writing. Verb frequency lists support this, placing “say” 4th (after main auxiliaries, followed by “tell” and “ask” at 18th and 19th). Not appearing in the top 50 of the lists researched (based on OED, 2023) are “read” or “write”. Communication means spontaneous spoken exchange of information, ideas and feelings, with the aim of mutual understanding and development. Without more clarification of communication's meaning, teaching and learning have no basis, yet meaning often gets sidestepped in the Japanese context. So-called “communication” falters as top-down written, commercial content, without real interaction. TOEIC® ignores the criteria as well, as it lacks essential elements of communication. It is one-way, predetermined and closed to any exchange of real views or experiences. We cannot assume communication means the same in every language and culture, or to every person and group. Many EFL teachers neither speak their students' language well, nor know enough of their cultural systems, but the concept is fundamental to education as one's culture can impede communication. Teachers need to be better language learners than those they teach. The individual, like communication, evolves by communicating his or her self and immediate situation, and then communicating about others and their situations. EFL in Japan, especially, often reverses the process, cutting out crucial foundation stages, without which there is no sound basis for communicative acquisition. While the best-known de facto measure of English for International Communication is mainline TOEIC®, how much communication does it involve? Communication must be spoken for learners with other first languages. That immediately reduces TOEIC® to a sub-50% score; only the listening section (half of the test) could relate to quasi-communication. While a recent spoken and written version

of the test exists, it attracts few takers. This writer previously questioned TOEIC®'s Speaking test on similar grounds to the Listening test, as both rely on other factors, like reading (Wood, 2019). Neither Reading nor Writing include spoken content. Speaking and Listening tests are not communication. That requires equal spontaneous interaction between participants, without pre-determined content, answers or models. TOEIC® contains no mutual spontaneous exchanges for participants or idea development.

## 2. Which International English?

When considering in more detail what could constitute “International English” we may lean towards either British or American English, a habit reinforced by most publishers and their respective camps of supporters in the educational establishments controlling text and curricular policy-making. These factors can cause geo-linguistic prejudice and contribute to the sustained stranglehold on international communication, not least as texts are only meant to be read. While tending towards one of the two major forms of English is not necessarily unnatural or detrimental, the further teachers incline towards one or the other, the less international the form the language takes and the content may risk becoming. Even the main names we associate with teaching, TESOL (used mostly with American English) and TEFL (usually British) only reinforce this divide. This may serve those specifically aiming to function in countries where either form dominates, but it is ultimately divisive, failing to facilitate true international communication.

The TESOL organization, while international in structure, always defaults to American English as standard, and a search of thousands of hits on its site in response to the key phrase “International English Communication” elicits few helpful statements of intent about anything else. Similarly, as might be expected, the Department of State’s English teaching site’s primary directive is, of course, “American English”. Both camps thus favor limited international English dialects.

As for the British perspective, the British Council states: “In addition to opening up employment opportunities, being able to speak a foreign language helps to make a real connection with people and to know more about diverse cultures, places and lifestyles. The more proficient you are, the better you can express yourself.” While the message seems undeniable, it begs the questions: Are students only training to work in the UK; and, Will they thus only be able to communicate with half of the estimated two billion plus would-be speakers world-wide? (The estimate and references are derived from the British Council’s 2020 homepage.)

The commentary continues: “Last but not least, it is the language of international communication, the media and the internet . . . it is highly likely that if you meet someone from another coun-

try, you will both be able to speak English. It gives you an open door to the world and helps you communicate with global citizens. Whether it is for fun or for work, if you understand English, you will be able to exchange information with more people online and use many more materials.” The final point seems especially redundant, as online “communication” often defaults to writing, while listening and speaking must be most learners’ primary priorities.

The meaning of the term “international communication” in Japan is confused. Littlecott (2019) favors a future Japanese English variant, claiming it is part of an international tendency for nations to develop domestic variants by asserting that cases in other countries are similar when they are not. Such a form of English might only attract Japanese to use it, deepening Japan’s long-term linguistic insularity. Such approaches would unlikely qualify as “international English communication”.

### 3. What is TOEIC®?

When Educational Testing Services, or ETS, designed TOEIC® (Test of English for International Communication™) at Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry’s bidding in the 1970 s, the aim was different from what it has become. Initially, MITI was opposed as it had given an English monopoly to the domestic proficiency exam, STEP (*Eiken* in Japanese) but one bureaucrat used his power and influence to push a lucrative deal through by promoting TOEIC®. The process itself was thus based on manipulation (as with many monopoly deals in Japan, especially) exemplifying where TOEIC®’s roots are to be found. As if to confirm this, the domestic company given the monopoly to control it, IIBC (Institute for International Business Communication) later narrowly avoided corruption charges by slightly lowering test fees (for more on IIBC, see McCrostie, 2010). As STEP (its one rival) accumulates billions of yen too, *communication* sounds more like *corruption*, as monopolies easily degenerate into exploitation.

The original intention was supposedly employment-related to help takers gain objective recognition of being able to communicate in an English-language workplace, but the test has been increasingly repurposed for non-work-related proficiency proof, and it is now widely used in educational environments as well.

It attempts more practical English in its Listening questions especially, but its domains and style are still strictly business. The Listening section is more popular and comparatively easier, with higher frequency language, while the Reading section is more formal and grammatical, with multiple passages of increasing difficulty that many candidates (certainly in Japan) cannot possibly handle. As the two sections can only be taken together, with half the score assigned to each, it cannot satisfy either most takers or the real requirements of communication, but has ended up as

the major English language proficiency test in Japanese society. The contents always default to American standard English, despite the cosmetic multiple accents currently employed to simulate something more international.

Despite TOEIC®'s ostensibly international and communicative limitations, ETS's promotional reasoning consistently claims the opposite, while leaving blank the most crucial matter of communication's meaning: "TOEIC® stands for Test of English for International Communication and is an internationally recognized test to assess English communication abilities . . . in more than 90 countries (and a) total number of 5,000,000 examinees a year . . . With (the test's) precise assessment, reliability and consistency have been highly recognized so it is used as one of the world standards to judge (a taker's) English level." (ETS, 2019).

#### **4. The Basis for ETS's "Communication"**

To determine ETS's basis for defining communication, asking directly seemed a possible starting point. The prospect of a definitive or even a helpful response became doubtful, however, after receiving an initial automatic acknowledgement, then a human response just repeating the problem without actually addressing it:

##### **4.1 Author's e-mail to Educational Testing Services, February, 2023**

*I've tried searching the ETS sites that I have found to help me with my research into the meaning of communication, especially in relation to learners of English as a foreign language, but have so far drawn a blank. Could you direct me to any papers or studies that might clarify what communication is and how the TOEIC® addresses that?*

*I understand that TOEIC® is aimed at would-be workers in an English-speaking environment whose first language is not English, and that its development has been long and complex, but I feel it is vital to have a clear and detailed definition of communication in any TESOL/TEFL context to enable effective learning. There are many preparation texts and I think I've seen the majority of them, but they all fall short on a clear communicative rationale.*

*I am aware that ETS produces many exams and bases this production on a solid research basis, but still find the most important matters missing; the meaning of international communication and how it relates to the TOEIC® test, which impacts so heavily on millions of learners worldwide.*

##### **4.2 ETS's human reply, following an initial automated response:**

*Regarding your inquiry: The TOEIC® program is the global leader in assessing English-*

*communication skills for the workplace and everyday life. For any further information related to TOEIC® Exams, please visit our website. We appreciate the opportunity to assist you. If replying via email, please include all previous correspondence, or a summary of your inquiry. For more information about TOEIC®, please visit our website.*

#### **4.3 Author's follow-up:**

*After requesting a definitive meaning of communication in the context of TESOL and TEFL (as the ETS site does not seem to make any such definition apparent or easily accessible) I was informed that someone would reply to my request, but the response redirected me to the ETS site, the reason for my original message! If this treatment is typical of ETS, then the answer to my question by default must be that using the term communication in the TOEIC® is a mere cosmetic. I would appreciate a sincere answer to my original question: What does communication mean? Further deflection will only confirm the inevitable conclusion that ETS and TOEIC® bear no relation to communication.*

This prompted a detailed answer. As the exact content is prohibited from verbatim transmission to others, only a reported summary of its contents can be given here. After apologizing for my having been repeatedly sent to the ETS website without a clear direction about where to look for the information requested, the ETS research team responded, giving several links to studies deemed relevant. The team representative interpreted my request as being about the communicative language construct providing the basis for their assessment; what was meant by “English language proficiency for the international workplace” and what proficiency was meant to entail, plus how theory and research in applied linguistics related to language assessment. By construct definition, they cited the knowledge, skills, and, or abilities targeted by an assessment as the very core of the assessment.

To that end, they referred me to the four-skills approach defining proficiency, with specific definitions of each receptive or productive language skill; reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking and writing, stating that the test was designed to elicit evidence of a test-taker's knowledge and skills with respect to each claim. Further references were to the TOEIC® Listening and Reading test construct definitions (e.g., Schedl, 2010 and Ashmore et al, 2016).

As for the Listening section, they stated that it measured the ability of beginning through advanced English language learners to understand spoken English “texts” in every day and workplace contexts. The TOEIC® Listening test section was reportedly developed using evidence-centered design (Schedl, 2010), an approach to test design that requires specifying claims about test-takers' abilities, test tasks being designed to elicit evidence of test-takers' abilities with re-



spect to the following claims. The successful test taker should be able to understand 2 things:

- \* The main meaning and details in short spoken and extended spoken passages.
- \* The purpose or implied meaning therein to demonstrate logical understanding.

These abilities are assessed in task types that incorporate a variety of everyday and workplace situations (domains) including business, dining out, entertainment, finance and budgeting, general corporate fields, health, housing and other kinds of property, manufacturing, offices, personnel, purchasing, technical areas, and travel. These settings provided context for listening test questions, but test takers were not required to have business experience or to understand specialized vocabulary.

The Reading section measured the ability of beginning to advanced English language learners to understand written English texts in both every day and workplace contexts. The TOEIC® Reading test section was developed using evidence-centered design (Schedl, 2010), an approach requiring that claims about test-takers' abilities be specified. Test tasks were designed to elicit evidence of test-takers' abilities relating to the following series of competences:

- \* To infer meaning based on explicit information in texts within and across texts.
- \* To understand specific information in tables and passages, plus negative facts.
- \* To connect information across multiple sentences in single texts and across texts.
- \* To understand necessary vocabulary and grammar.

These were assessed in task types incorporating various every-day and working settings, as above. The settings provided context for test questions, but again it was emphasized that test takers were not required to have business experience or to understand specialized vocabulary. Information was also provided about the TOEIC® Bridge and the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing test construct definitions, though, as indicated above, their relative lack of takers justified excluding them from some central considerations of this study, other than the latter's unpopularity.

While the reply and references were sincere and helpful, there were still many grey or unexplained areas about what communication might mean to the majority of takers, whose goals were not business English or entering an English working environment, but simply to assist with their acquisition of "International English Communication". Overall, TOEIC® (as most candidates know) is not about communication as there is no spontaneous interaction, and while the research basis of the test seems both sound and carefully developed, the aims and outcomes are not what the test's title infers, as TOEIC® is ultimately still non-communicative.

Therefore, the naming of the test would seem a potential stumbling block. Few if any tests include all the necessary facets of international communication, and the role of business (which is not included in the title) dominates. As some of the main researchers for ETS themselves admit: "Despite high demand for the TOEIC® Listening and Reading test, the selective coverage of only

reading and listening occasionally gave rise to complaints from TOEIC® users, who observed that test takers sometimes achieved high test scores despite being seriously deficient in their overall ability to communicate in English” (Powers, 2018).

## 5. TOEIC® Speaking Test’s Paradoxes

With only a tiny per cent of takers, TOEIC® Speaking’s role is very limited. The education ministry’s efforts to expand the test continue to be unsuccessful.

*Table 1 – TOEIC® Takers in Japan* (Based on ETS TOEIC® Data and Analysis, 2022)

Year	Speaking/Writing	Listening/Reading	SW as % of LR
2019	37,800	2,205,000	1.7%
2020	27,900	1,533,000	1.8%
2021	34,900	2,123,000	1.6%

The consistency of these figures is shown by data from the test’s establishment, January 2016. During the first three years, candidates’ numbers peaked (SW over 30,000; LR over 2.5 million takers) with no significant increase in SW figures compared to those of LR. For every SW candidate, there are as many as 70 LR takers. Another point of concern is that an average of only 2,000 actual students take the SW test annually, or 1% of the total. In comparison, half a million candidates take LR each year, indicating a huge disparity between the availability and appeal of the two tests for those studying full-time, up to as much as 250 to 1. Even if such practical considerations as the small number of venues plus the over-intensive and the extra-expensive examiner requirements were not insurmountable, many logistical and communicative validity questions would remain unanswered. For example, these would likely include some or all of the following points:

- \* Does Speaking make Listening redundant and is the format real communication?
- \* How could a test, given by a variety of examiners, in different places and under conditions so difficult to duplicate at the different testing locations, really be fair?
- \* Both Speaking and Listening tests include read and written elements, so why is it that Reading and Writing do not include any spoken or listening elements?

The above merely scratches the surface of such a problematical test. Unsurprisingly, therefore, these and many other considerations have made the Japan’s education ministry’s attempts to institute the test widely for college entrance purposes an embarrassing failure. The problems have been discussed frequently since the test’s unspectacular beginning (e.g., Wood, 2019) so a detailed appraisal of the numerous flaws in the test’s planning is unnecessary here.

Updated issues should be discussed, but so little seems to have changed or improved since the discussion referred to above, which asserted that: “TOEIC® has in recent years developed spoken tests but they don’t amount to anything like living communication, nor are they appealing. While TOEIC® L&R attracted 2.5 million takers in Japan alone (similar to STEP’s 2016 annual numbers) the S&W exam was taken by a mere 25,000. ETS’s 5-10 minute spoken test includes reading a text, describing a picture, a highly constrained question session and a final problem to solve. It seems cast in the same age-old mold” (Wood, 2019).

## 6. TOEIC® Speaking Test

Speaking and Writing’s unpopularity and distance from communication have changed little since the original consideration (Wood, 2019) except that it is termed “computer-delivered” to reflect the intervening covid-19 period. However, the original problems largely persist. With a speaking length requirement of about 5 minutes out of a total test time of 20 minutes, how can it be possible to determine any individual’s actual spoken ability objectively, let alone differentiate candidates accurately on the 200-point scale for a test originally targeting millions of students in dozens of countries. Although the same point scale applies to Writing, the latter lasts 60 minutes, and has significantly more time allowed for actual writing. The two parts are usually taken together for 10,450 yen (IIBC, 2023), but Speaking can also be taken by itself for 6,930 yen. The much shorter test therefore costs more.

In addition, so much of the Speaking test involves things that are not actually speaking, like passages to read, pictures to look at and written matter to study, only serving to dilute the “speaking” experience further. Time alone limits the already restricted range of spoken areas included, many of which only seem to duplicate or at least imitate the STEP speaking test model, one of the most heavily controlled but (based on previous analyses, Wood, 2019, and my decades of actual STEP spoken examination experience) one of the least communicative tests imaginable.

The fundamental problems remain glaringly obvious, as the following suggests:

- \* Scripted and controlled “speaking” simply is not the same as communication.
- \* Candidates are likely to have learned model answers by rote, again defeating the whole purpose of communication, while ironically gaining higher scores.
- \* While test purveyors insist business is not necessarily the main or only focus, ETS still insists that it is, as their following would suggest business is paramount: “The TOEIC® Speaking and Writing tests measure your speaking and writing skills used in the workplace. You’ll respond to real-world questions and scenarios in spoken and written English. The tests use common everyday vocabulary, phrases and key expressions used in a workplace environment.”

Repeating “workplace” confirms this, while “respond” sidesteps real interaction, emphasizing that “talking” is mono-directional (*to* not *with*) the opposite of communication. TOEIC® business has been associated with untoward influence both in Japan and other countries, like the UK, when some takers paid to pass to help residence. ETS overreaction led to many innocents’ deportation (BBC, 2022).

The trend to overstate TOEIC®’s communicative value is widespread in ETS affiliates’ literature. Further examples could include typical claims about its use. For example, some of these excessively assert that TOEIC® scores will help to:

*\* Measure how well candidates will perform in the workplace and real-life situations where they need to communicate in English.*

(This is at best only half true as the test’s limitations are that it is never multidirectional or spontaneous, without which interaction is absent.)

*\* Make hiring decisions (to) determine if employees have the English communication skills needed to carry out specific job responsibilities or communicate successfully in English when working in an English-speaking country or with colleagues and clients around the world.*

(Here again, the identical weaknesses in the previous claim are merely reiterated.)

*\* Determine if students have met specific levels of English proficiency and have the skills needed to communicate effectively in their careers once they graduate.*

(Here, no distinction is made between passive, mono-directional and scripted English compared to authentic communication, though they are not the same thing. TOEIC®’s passively receptive pre-determination cannot guarantee this outcome.)

*\* Place incoming students, monitor progress and evaluate program effectiveness.*

(There are many tests that can do the same more cheaply, and return results faster, essential for prompt placement. There is also the problem of difficulty and inappropriateness of both the language and content levels. Either way, no non-communicative test could ever “evaluate” a communicative program. IIBC now attempts to cover the communicative defect: “Multiple trained raters assess effective communication skills or English-language proficiency” IIBC, 2023).

## 7. Towards More Meaningful Communication

TOEIC® avoids meaningful definitions of communication, but teachers need to think deeply about what they believe communication is before attempting to teach in order to ensure their students believe in what they are doing. Otherwise, the latter may lose motivation and become distrustful of those obliging them to study. To this end, we need to see clearly what researchers, teachers and students believe.

After teaching thousands of students TOEIC® for more than a decade, its communicative value seems low to this writer. Its face value in society, on the other hand, is widely respected. As most students are career-oriented, they accept the need for a reasonable score to ensure their futures, as well as for various in-school requirements, like travel-abroad scholarships, higher placement in streamed classes, and so on. Some Japanese universities even make a specific TOEIC® score a graduation requirement. However, while students admit to the reality, compared to all other classes taught by this researcher, TOEIC® classes are rated lowest by students for communication, though that is still higher than the overall school average, and the general school response rate is extremely low.

*Table 2 – TOEIC® Class Communication Comparison*

Class	Size	Respondents	Communication
TOEIC® (writer's year 3)	100	50 (50%)	11%
TOEIC® (years 1 & 2)	156	40 (24%)	6%

The reality of TOEIC® is that grammar, vocabulary and speed-reading for item location are the dominant skills, alienating any real spoken communication. Listening questions are generally less difficult than reading, so that part of communication is of less value to attaining students' ideal scores. Overcrowded classes also make a difference, though the year 1 and 2 classes taught by other teachers were smaller (Year 3: 100 students; both Years 1 & 2: 78 on average) those experiencing actual communication were significantly fewer (50% as compared to 24%). 22 juniors commented (all positively; e.g., *Thanks to this class, my TOEIC score was up from 490 to 705*) which was twice as many as both other year groups combined, indicating greater feedback and communication in a large Year 3 group.

In the context of this writer's other classes, let's compare students' ratings of communication to evaluate this supposedly fundamental feature of TOEIC®:

*Table 3 – Writer's Overall Class Communication Comparison*

Class	Size	Respondents	Communication
TOEIC®	100	50	11%
Visual Literature	27	12	33%
Year 3 Conversation	33	14	33%
Reading & Writing	10	9	90%
Senior Seminar	10	5	100%

Year 3 Conversation (recently renamed *English Communication*) might be expected to score higher, yet all 4 such junior classes taught by different teachers were around 33%. Class size can

make a difference as the communication rankings for classes of around 10 students increased significantly. However, smaller classes are no guaranteed indicator of communication as the data for all the English Department's classes indicate that many smaller classes were below 10% and more than a few were rated absolute 0% for communicative content. Even though this may only be a rough guide, the number of classes in this group was more than 50, with over a thousand students, so the indications would seem sufficiently valid.

Teachers in general have great difficulty helping students do better at TOEIC®. Out of 13 full time English Department staff at this writer's school, only 2 are required to assist with TOEIC®. An in-house session given by this writer to upgrade our attempts was attended by less than 50% of staff. Many in Japanese higher education seem unwilling to confront the real test of what and how to teach. That thinking sidesteps objective international evaluation and real-world English proficiency teaching, which undermines a country's education. The main measures of global rankings (Times, 2018 & 2022) are: global outlook; staff teaching ability/ teaching content; broad-based research; and, national and international outreach.

No matter how satisfied a country may feel about its own research directions, the international standards indicated above oppose Japan's insular research ethos. Since 2018, only 2 of Japan's top-heavy 700 plus tertiary education facilities reached the Times' top 100, after briefly hitting a peak of a humble 5 out of 100 in 2014. Even the long-standing but unassertive official target of 10 in the top 100 now seems beyond reach. Meanwhile, much smaller territories like Singapore and Hong Kong, with a mere fraction of schools, continue to surpass Japan's unwieldy system because of the latter's chronic inability to develop the English abilities of its student and teaching population, as well as their learning and teaching styles.

Instead of looking outwards to globalization, local and national Japanese administrations continue to look inward, focusing on the superficial appearance of micro faculty development, with too little international vision of what a university could or should be in the modern world. Both the quality and range of English and research in Japanese academic publications illustrate a dearth of ability to use English as a global medium, leaving true international communication out of reach.

## **8. Factors Helpful to English for International Communication**

The key to any communication is equal-opportunity response: "To communicate successfully in an international environment, you need to be able to grasp what is being said and respond appropriately" (Chong, 2016). Whether students want to speak mostly to native speakers of English or not, they need to be ready and able to speak just as much if not even more with the far greater number of other learners whose first language is not English. Chong refers to this as ELF (or,

English as a Lingua Franca) and it is by far the most likely use that students of English in Japan will have an opportunity to attempt. Many will not have or take even that chance. However, some students may experience this in their part-time jobs (which many in Japan have all year round) or in their everyday lives. To maximize these often rare but significant opportunities, TOEIC® will be less useful than grasping what real hands-on English for international communication can mean. As Chong points out, English is “the global language of business, trade, education and tourism.” She continues by estimating that over 80% of non-native English speakers use English to speak to other non-native speakers of English, not in an over-simplified form, but in such a way as to “grasp what is being said and respond appropriately” requiring “a degree of intercultural awareness and an ability to detect possible misunderstandings”. To succeed at this requires an increased self-awareness of one’s “norms, expectations, communication styles, and ways of seeing the world . . . to adapt and accommodate to different styles of communicating, different levels of proficiency, and different ways of seeing the world; . . . to have interpersonal skills that include the ability to build rapport, influence others, handle feedback and resolve conflict.” These are definitely not in TOEIC®’s rubric. Chong emphasizes the ability to manage “critical incidents” when meaning can break down completely, and the crucial need to “identify ambiguity and clarify meaning” by figuring out and asking the right questions. To this end, Chong recommends role-playing class activities, but equally important must be the practice of students trying to explain themselves to each other. The teacher plays devil’s advocate, challenging logical non sequiturs by deliberately misunderstanding what they say to prompt realistic experience for them to resolve communication breakdowns. Chong’s checklist for avoiding misunderstandings in international communication is a valuable starting point. It includes the following.

- \* Considering cultural differences involved and different possible interpretations.
- \* Clarifying the important points, and, if there is action to be taken, repeating the main point at some point in the conversation to confirm mutual understanding.
- \* Listening carefully, not making assumptions and asking questions freely.
- \* Being aware of who one is talking to as conversation partners and their reactions.

Chong calls into question most (if not all) textbooks’ ability to handle those situations where students would need to take into consideration the context, expectations and backgrounds of the people involved, the relationship between the speakers, and so on. Furthermore, she emphasizes the fact that: “Just because the language of international communication happens to be English, it does not mean that the cultures of native English speakers should be the reference point for all users of the language.” This is an obvious but often overlooked pitfall. Teachers incline to superimpose their own agendas, feelings and norms on classes, denying international perspective. Chong concludes by emphasizing “soft skills” that many more international businesses require of new

employees “not directly connected to the learning of English pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar, students should be aware of the different ways people use English in international settings . . . after all, the better we can communicate, the more effective we can be.”

## 9. TOEIC® Class Survey

In addition to the school-wide evaluations (mentioned previously in **7. Towards More Meaningful Communication**), to detail students’ reactions, in-class questionnaires were also conducted. Here is a summary of the most salient points:

- \* Students in this survey were year 3 college undergraduates majoring in English, taking their final compulsory TOEIC® course in their second of 2 school semesters.
- \* They had had 5 courses during their 3 years, 1 in the second semester of their first year, then 2 each in their second and third years. However, some did not take semester-end tests due to absence or other issues so were not included in the data.
- \* After each course, there was a TOEIC® Institutional Program (IP) test, a large group test for schools, as opposed to the public test, applied for individually. Tests were required for students, though various circumstances prevented 100% turnouts.
- \* Courses in semester 2 (1 of which this survey covers) are more limited than first semester courses. The former offered over 10 ninety-minute classes before the test in July. As the second semester stopped abruptly in December, followed by a long winter break before final classes restarted, the test was in early December giving students just 9 or 10 classes, totaling between 13 or 15 hours of supervised study.
- \* The Educational Testing Service (ETS) which authorizes many millions of TOEIC® tests each year, recommends a minimum of 100 properly taught and supervised hours of small classes (10 to 20 students) to make any improvement.
- \* The combined courses this survey covered totaled approximately 100 students, and included a wide range of motivation, ability, age and experience.
- \* Of the 13 full-time English department teachers, only 2 currently teach TOEIC®. 2 others have taught TOEIC® in the past. Only 1 full-timer (this author) has regularly had to teach a whole year group of over 100 third year students.
- \* Of the 2 questionnaires, the first was completed in the class immediately following the IP Test and before students knew their results for a fresh perspective.
- \* There were 20 main questions plus 7 follow-on questions, totaling 27 in all.
- \* Questionnaire 2 was given 2 weeks later, after students had received their results.
- \* There were 83 respondents. (Year 3 students registered but those not completing the course did



not participate.) Results were from 155 to 880, averaging under 500.

\* 94% of respondents took TOEIC® so some responses were not applicable. Reasons for not taking the test included sickness and so on, as indicated above.

### **9.1 Questionnaire 1:**

\* All respondents answered all questions on the TOEIC® L, but 15% could not finish the Reading (R) section. This indicates one reason why R scores are always lower than those in L; texts are complex and required reading speeds are too high.

\* There was no clear result about whether students thought L or R sections were more or less difficult. As the test is always different, results tend to be subjective, and rise or fall according to whether content matches the individual candidate, as well as the candidate's emotional and physical condition, which can easily change.

\* Students were taught in class to begin the Reading section from the final Part 7 not the initial Part 5 as the final section carries far more points. 90% of students stated that they did so, and all indicated that they felt their score rose as a result.

\* Students took a full practice R test in their final class only, as it is not feasible to do this regularly, and all reported that this helped them when taking the actual test.

\* 75% stated that there were not enough TOEIC® classes to improve significantly. 60% said they would prefer smaller classes with students of similar ability.

\* A third of students planned taking the test again at the first opportunity. Many felt no need to take the test soon as results don't affect class selection post-year 3.

\* All students felt they applied themselves sufficiently to attending and studying.

### **9.2 Questionnaire 2:**

\* Students reported that they took on average 10 classes besides their single TOEIC® class, of which only half used any English, two thirds of students stating that they would have liked more of their other compulsory classes to use English.

\* Only 2 of an average 10 classes they took were perceived as helpful for TOEIC®.

100% of students stated that they would like more classes relevant to TOEIC®.

\* Although future TOEIC® exams are not compulsory, again two thirds of students stated that they intended to take the test again in future, and 75% said they would like to have had more TOEIC® classes than the 60 hours required over four years.

\* When asked what they thought would help improve their chances at TOEIC®, all students replied reading and especially grammar and comprehension would.

\* When asked if TOEIC® had value, there was an overwhelming 'Yes' response:

1. *It is proof of one's English ability.*
2. *Many companies check and require results;*
3. *It is essential for communication in and understanding of the modern world.*
4. *It increases travel and employment, mobility, self-confidence and outreach.*

Students need to see all English teachers being TOEIC® literate, and both positive and instructive about relevant grammar and reading comprehension. The findings were given to the department, without comprehensive action being taken. For many teachers, TOEIC® is too much of a challenge, although an English department's first priority should be to enable students' objective proficiency.

## 10. Conclusion

ETS and its affiliates assert TOEIC®'s power to grasp communication: "You can take the Speaking and Writing tests together or separately. (Taken together with the Listening and Reading test) you'll get a complete measurement of all four English-language communication skills." The unpopular Speaking test is far from real spoken communication. A genuine spoken event would mean none of the participants (including those conducting tests) knew the end point or questions and answers beforehand (Wood, 2019). The test's criteria fail the international communication Chong detailed (2019) which others (Im and Cheng, 2019) echo:

*TOEIC® Speaking may not be capturing certain aspects of communication that are vital in international workplaces. Some empirical studies on English communication clearly demonstrate that interactive communication skills (e.g., meaning negotiation, accommodation, and repair) are vital in international business workplaces. However, given that the TOEIC® Speaking is delivered in a single candidate format through a computer, it may not fully measure these communication skills to an adequate degree. There has been little research regarding how to engage a wider range of communication skills within the TOEIC® Speaking, nor how well TOEIC® scores reflect actual communication.*

This is confirmed by test takers. A former student, who aced the Speaking test after graduating, recently wrote me: "English is the biggest tool to communicate with people from all around the world. TOEIC® is held all in English; therefore, I think it includes International Communication (but) my own definition for communication is exchanging words with others, and it's preferably face to face. I feel TOEIC® is a bit far from communication because it's done one-sidedly."

While most students accept that they need a good score in a competitive job market, teachers do not uniformly tackle the challenges that TOEIC® creates for their students, leaving it to a

few obligated full-timers and temporary part-timers. ETS's promoters may prove TOEIC®'s construct validity beyond a quantitative doubt, and the test may be all that we have as an English standard, but we must question its claims and entitlement as the expertise it contains neither qualifies the test as a test of communication nor does it motivate per se students to communicate.

The best research informs our understanding of and ability to develop our charges' international English communication. TOEIC®'s title should mean that communicative validity outranks construct validity, not vice versa. The former requires unscripted, impromptu fluency. Currently, TOEIC® offers accuracy and complexity, not communication or fluency. The detailed nature of communication and the problems arising from sidestepping it in English proficiency testing as a result are the focus of a future part of this series. Until more teachers research the situation, however, responsibility for students' English education will be ignored. After a battle with its domestic high-school rival, STEP, TOEIC®, the current college go-to test for communication, has a history of questionable dealings in the shape of its monopolist, IIBC. Such tests' domination of Japan's English education fail communication. The company with sole authority over TOEIC in Japan has a long-term checkered course record, narrowly sidestepping criminal action on numerous occasions (see McCrostie, 2010 for various examples of abuse.)

The test may be an indirect indicator of "communication" but the lack of clarity regarding what communication means on the part of those constructing the test (as well as those in education responsible for improving students' communication ability) begs more questions than it scores correct answers, resulting in Japan's fuzzy notion of communication. More than education authorities, employers drive the TOEIC® engine, requiring current and prospective employees to keep retaking the test to get higher scores. University English departments sacrifice communicative acquisition to subjects unrelated to communication and to non-academic and career-based curricular.

There is as much ignorance as understanding about the exam. Shimomura (2015) for example, asserts a 10-point rise indicates significant improvement, but ETS literature states clearly that only 50-point plus increases indicate any significance. Other researchers (Hisatsune, 2018) do not even consider what TOEIC means, failing to mention "communication" or its concept once. Not only English for international communication, but also Japanese for domestic communication seem concepts often quoted, but little understood and never satisfactorily explained. Japanese hierarchy imposes age, station and gender stereotypes, at odds with cultures in which English functions as true interaction.

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