



# **Cultivating Effective Communication Skills in TOEIC Classes: Moving Beyond Drills**

**Niculina Nae**

Nagoya University of Commerce and Business, Japan

## **Abstract**

*The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) was first administered in Japan in 1979 as a tool to measure the English proficiency levels of businesspeople for hiring and promotion purposes. Soon after, it was adopted worldwide and utilized in educational institutions [1] to assess student progress and enhance employability rates. Previous research has questioned the validity and reliability of TOEIC as an instrument to measure students' English communication abilities. Some authors argue that due to its limited scope, de-contextualized questions and heavy focus on business situations, the test fails to accurately assess students' use of real language [2], [3], [4]. Despite many higher education institutions advertising their commitment to nurturing global communication competencies, students are demotivated to find that university courses rely more on the "teaching for the test" method employed in high schools than on teaching communication skills [5]. Teachers are faced with the difficult task of having to strike a balance between the university requirements and student expectations. In this paper, we propose several tactics and activities TOEIC teachers could use in addition to the traditional drills to offer a more engaging, collaborative, and ultimately beneficial learning experience.*

**Keywords:** TOEIC, communicative strategies

## **1. Introduction**

The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is a widely recognized standardized test designed to assess the English language proficiency of non-native English speakers, particularly in a professional or business context. It serves as a measure of one's ability to understand and use English effectively in various workplace situations. Originating in Japan in 1979 to address the need for improved English communication skills among Japanese individuals [1], the TOEIC test has played a pivotal role in evaluating English proficiency, especially in business and professional settings. In today's globalized world, where much of the business literature is published exclusively in English, possessing a working knowledge of the language is considered an essential factor in employability [6]. Moreover, the TOEIC test has been recognized for its effectiveness in assessing reading and listening skills, which are paramount for effective communication in business situations [7].

## **2. The Challenges**

In institutions of higher education where TOEIC is a mandatory component, educators encounter a series of challenges. Some of these challenges are externally imposed, such as the need to ensure high student retention rates and satisfaction while delivering quality instruction. Additionally, educators may face difficulties related to selecting appropriate preparation textbooks and may be arbitrarily assigned to teach TOEIC preparation courses with limited or no specialized knowledge in the subject. On the other hand, internal challenges are also prominent, including the management of large, multi-level classes, which may include unmotivated students who struggle to perceive the practical necessity of the TOEIC test or those who lack elementary English proficiency.

## **3. The Impact**

TOEIC practice and preparation can exert both positive and negative influences on learners. Research has indicated that integrating test content into university curricula can yield beneficial outcomes, especially when based on a thorough analysis of students' English language needs. However, it can also have adverse effects when students perceive the test as high-stakes and when teaching objectives are not aligned with the test content [12]. A pilot study among English teachers at a Japanese university revealed ambivalent TOEIC washback effects [13]. While some of the positive



effects included increased student motivation to study English, improved TOEIC scores, and a clear curricular focus for business majors, there were negative opinions as well. These mentioned test fatigue, performance anxiety, a focus on language skills unrelated to TOEIC, and demotivation among students with lower proficiency levels. Research further suggests that learners may become demotivated when they recognize a substantial gap between their abilities and the skills required to excel on the test [1]. Additionally, the lack of engaging and context-rich materials can lead to boredom and a loss of motivation. Consequently, motivating lower-level students to engage in TOEIC practice emerges as a major challenge.

## **4. Two Approaches: Contextualization and Metacognitive-Based**

### **4.1. Contextualization**

One viable approach to address this challenge is contextualization, which involves integrating foundational language skills with college-level content [16]. Frequently, TOEIC practice materials lack context and prove daunting for inexperienced students. Exposing them to authentic resources such as newspaper articles, video clips, or podcasts that are contextually relevant to their daily lives and interests can potentially rekindle motivation. Authenticity in this context implies using meaningful, relevant, and interesting materials that replicate real-world tasks, all conveyed in natural language [17].

### **4.2. The Metacognitive-Based Approach**

Another strategy is the metacognitive-based approach [18], which comprises three key components:

- Bottom-up instruction: This component enhances students' linguistic competence by deepening their declarative knowledge.
- Interactive instruction: It improves students' communicative competence by engaging them in collaborative tasks.
- Test-strategy instruction: This part provides students with specific advice regarding the challenges associated with each test section; it features mock-test practice within the real test's time constraints.

In addition to traditional teacher-centered instruction, the bottom-up learning aspect can be achieved through the integration of vocabulary and grammar learning apps or interactive quizzes featuring word families, parts of speech, grammatical tenses, and related topics. Incorporating elements of gamification and technology into TOEIC practice can be motivating for low-level students. Research by Steinkuehler and Duncan suggests that gamified activities and digital resources can increase learner engagement and motivation [19].

Interactive instruction involves students in collaborative tasks such as role-plays, discussions, and debates on various topics, reinforcing the knowledge gained during passive instruction. Task-based learning approaches, as suggested by Willis and Willis, involve students in real-world language tasks that mimic TOEIC scenarios. This approach encourages low-level students to apply their language skills in practical situations, making TOEIC practice more relevant and motivating [20]. Furthermore, promoting peer support and collaboration can foster motivation among low-level students. Research by Vygotsky highlights the significance of social interaction and learning from peers. Group study sessions, peer editing, and collaborative projects related to TOEIC content can be motivating and effective [21]. It is a way to shift the focus from teacher-centered to student-centered learning by involving the entire class in language production activities.

Test-strategy instruction can be accomplished by explaining and practicing various TOEIC test sections within the allocated time limits. It is advisable to alternate among these three types of activities to prevent student boredom and burnout.

### **4.3. Positive feedback and developing a growth mindset**

Providing positive feedback and encouragement is crucial for motivating low-level students. A study by Hattie and Timperley emphasizes the importance of constructive feedback and praise in fostering student motivation [22]. Recognizing and rewarding students' efforts can boost their confidence and motivation. Encouraging low-level students to develop a growth mindset, as discussed by Dweck [23], can boost motivation. Teachers can emphasize that language proficiency is not fixed but can improve with effort and practice. This mindset shift can motivate students to persist in TOEIC preparation.

## **Conclusion**

The TOEIC test stands as a critical instrument for assessing English language proficiency, particularly in professional and academic contexts. Its significance extends beyond employment opportunities to



encompass university admissions and language program implementations. Nevertheless, the challenges confronted by low-level students during TOEIC preparation are substantial, including issues related to demotivation, resource constraints, and the need for relevant materials. To address these challenges effectively, innovative approaches such as contextualization and metacognitive-based strategies offer promising pathways to engage low-level students, making TOEIC practice more motivating and relevant. Moreover, emphasizing a growth mindset, incorporating gamification and technology, and fostering peer collaboration can contribute to a more positive learning experience. Despite the hurdles, with careful consideration of learner needs and the integration of effective strategies, TOEIC practice can become a valuable tool in enhancing the English language skills and employability of low-level students. As this field continues to evolve, ongoing research and pedagogical innovation will be essential to unlock the full potential of TOEIC preparation for this specific learner category.

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