

Moving from the TOEIC Test to a Test of Communication for Placement Decisions

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Abstract

The Faculty of International Tourism Management had been using the TOEIC Test for placement decisions in compulsory classes until recently. On top of that, recent curriculum changes mean that students will study reading and communication in their first year of compulsory English study. Although the TOEIC reading could be used for placement decisions for the reading class, its (and the TOEIC Test in general) use for placement decisions in the communication class are hard to justify. A communication test was developed to help stream students of similar abilities in communication classes. This study's purpose was to demonstrate that scores on the TOEIC Test are not related to students' ability to communicate in English. The results showed that, although there was a significant correlation between scores on the communication test and parts of the TOEIC Test, the correlation values were low. Therefore, the justification to use a communication test and not the TOEIC Test as a streaming instrument would appear strong.

Introduction

Over the past number of years, the TOEIC Test has become prominent at the university level. This test serves a number of different purposes, including acting as a yardstick of English ability for job-hunting. It is also widely used as placement test at the Faculty of International Tourism Management (formerly Faculty of Regional Development) at Toyo University. The faculty has used the TOEIC Test for over five years, originally from the Bridge version (an easier version of the TOEIC Test), specifically for placement decisions for first and second year compulsory classes.

In a previous analysis carried out on TOEIC Test scores in the faculty (Robson, 2010), it was found that there was a high degree of positive skewness within the data, meaning that many low scores were found near the start of the distribution. However, a visual inspection of the scatterplots within PASW showed somewhat of a normal distribution, which is important for identifying a range of abilities within the students to stream them into classes of similar English proficiency.

In light of recent developments at Toyo University, three new faculties were formed, one of which was the Faculty of International Tourism Management. In time for the foundation of the faculty, a revision of the curriculum became necessary. One of the results of discussion was to place prominence

on communication abilities of the students, so that they would be able to function in different fields when the Tokyo 2020 Tokyo Olympics arrives. For the first years, compulsory classes in English communication and reading were established. It was felt that right at the start of the first year, students should develop communication and reading skills before more tourism English-related classes in the second year (details of this curriculum change will be published at a later stage).

Although the TOEIC Test is available in all sub-skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, the basic components of TOEIC Test commonly used by universities, including many faculties in Toyo University, are the paper-based listening and reading parts. The concept of using the TOEIC Test for placement of a reading class makes intuitive sense because there is a separate reading component in the basic test, and it has shown to separate students into distinct ability groups.

However, the reading and listening test basic components of the test appear to be incompatible with the student placement of a communication class. In the literature this (in) compatibility is referred to as construct validity. Construct validity is "the degree to which a test measures what it claims, or purports, to be measuring" (Brown, 1996, p. 231). For example, a test that seeks to measure or make decisions about a student's communication ability would have low construct validity if it used the scores from a grammar test.

There is a speaking test within the TOEIC Test battery. However, requiring students to pay for this test would be very costly. This leaves the problem of using a paper test for placement decisions of communicative ability. Therefore, it became necessary to create a separate placement test for the communication class, without relying on the standard TOEIC Test (development of the placement test will be reported in future publications).

Based on the premise that a paper test, as represented by students' TOEIC Test scores, would be ineffective at measuring the communication abilities of students, this study seeks to address if there is any relationship between students' scores on an in-house communication placement test and their TOEIC scores.

Method

The data for this small study was taken from 367 first years entering the Faculty of International Tourism Management in April 2017. This does not account for all the first years as some have been assigned to a separate cohort within the faculty and their scores were not included. The data from the TOEIC Test part can be seen in Table one. The point worth mentioning in this table are skewness and kurtosis values of the tests. The skewness refers to the lopsidedness of the distribution and kurtosis means the peakedness or flatness of the scores. In order to interpret these values, the skewness and kurtosis values are divided by their respective SE (standard error measurements). Values over two show significant amount of skewness. All test values lie well beyond this, especially the reading (5.3), signifying the mean is greater than the median and many low scores are concentrated at the start of the distribution. The kurtosis result shows the reading and listening slightly above 2, but the total score is

well above at 4.52. The results show that the many scores are tightly packed around the mean and display less separation than a normal distribution. However, for placement decisions for the reading class, the test is sufficient.

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics from TOEIC Test April 2017.*

	TOEIC Test scores		
	Reading	Listening	Total
Low	55	70	130
High	70	495	900
M	130	227	402.98
SD	67.51	72.29	127.68
Skewness	.69	.49	.68
SES	.13	.13	.13
Kurtosis	.62	.59	1.13
SEK	.25	.25	.25

The speaking test data was from a test on the 1st April requiring each student to be tested by one examiner for four minutes. There were five placement decisions for teachers to choose, ranging from low to high. Figure one shows the distribution of the five levels. Although not perfect, the chart does appear to show some normality of distribution. These are only count values, so skewness and kurtosis values are not applicable, but students are spread out well, an important criterion for placement decisions.

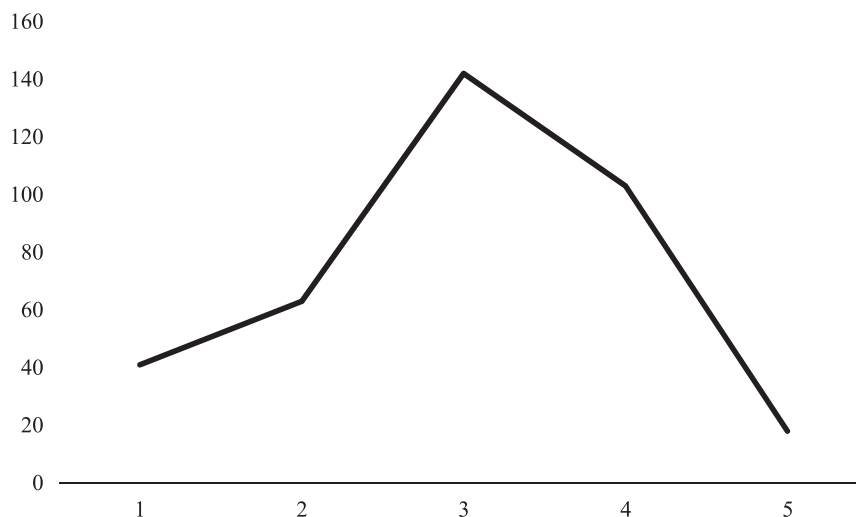


Figure 1. *A Line Chart Showing the Counts of Five Levels of the Speaking Placement Test.*

Results

Beyond the descriptive and frequency data, the point of this study was to explore the relationship

between the TOEIC scores and the speaking test scores. In quantitative analysis, this is done through the correlation co-efficient. However, the data type of the TOEIC and speaking tests are different. The data from the TOEIC test are interval. In other words, if we assume the test is a valid measurement of what it purports to test, then there is a difference between two values on the test. A value of 200 would be lower than a value of 600. For the speaking test on the other hand, although a value of five is higher than a value of one, there is little way to establish the difference between, say, a three and four. For the interval data, the Pearson correlation was used, but between interval and speaking test a Spearman Rho value was used for calculation. The correlation values were computed in PASW 18.0 (SPSS Inc., 2009). The resulting correlation table can be seen in table two.

Table 2 *Correlations between TOEIC Test scores and Speaking Placement Test Result.*

	TOEIC Listening	TOEIC Total	Speaking Test
TOEIC Reading	.66**	.91**	.23*
Speaking Test	.34**	.37**	
TOEIC Total	.92**		

Note. ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$.

This result shows a number of interesting and noteworthy points. As expected the correlation between individual parts of the TOEIC Test and the total show a high correlation. Those that are good at test-taking are able to employ strategies such as guessing to help improve their scores. However, looking at the speaking test, the total and listening scores are significant, but this is a product of the large sample size. The reading and speaking correlation scores are lower still and significant at only the .05 level. The correlations between the TOEIC Test and speaking test are low. Indeed, correlations under .50 are considered weak. Further, to understand the amount of variation explained by the speaking test within the individual tests, the correlation value should be squared. This is referred to as the coefficient of determination. In the values for the TOEIC Test, the coefficient of determination for the speaking test with the total was .13, .11 for the listening section and only .05 for the reading section. These values are very low.

Conclusion

In order for the Faculty of International Tourism Management to make good decisions regarding placement, a test that shows high construct validity or the ability to measure what the test should be, is important. This small study set out to investigate the relationship between student scores on a TOEIC Test and those for a placement test for communication classes. There was a significant positive correlation found between the speaking test and parts of the TOEIC Test. The listening test correlation was higher than the reading correlation, in part because listening is a major component of communication. However, these correlations and the corresponding coefficients of determination were low. The results mean that the decision to use a communication test to stream students into

communication classes was the correct decision. This was better than the previous method of using the TOEIC Test for similar placement decisions. The Faculty of International Tourism management can benefit from designing its own tests for placement and other decisions, instead of relying on pre-packaged tests like the TOEIC Test.

References

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TOEIC テスト利用による英語科目のクラス分けから コミュニケーションテスト利用への変更

ロブソン・グライアム

[要約]

国際観光学科では必須英語科目の学力別クラス編成に TOEIC テストを利用してきた。しかしながら、最近のカリキュラムの変更により、1 年次の必須英語科目ではリーディングとコミュニケーションを学習することとなっている。TOEIC テストのリーディングの結果はリーディングのクラス分けには利用できるが、コミュニケーションのクラス分けには適切ではない。コミュニケーションテストは英語コミュニケーション能力におけるレベル別のクラスを編成するために導入された。本研究は、学生の TOEIC テスト結果とコミュニケーション能力には相関性があまりないことを示すことを目的として始めた。結果は、コミュニケーションテストと TOEIC テストの相関性は部分的には有意ではあったが、実際の関連性は低かった。したがって、クラス分けには TOEIC テストではなく、コミュニケーションテストの利用のほうが合理性は極めて高い。