

Testing and its Role in Efficient Learning of a Second Language*

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Efficient learning, whether it is of a language or any other skill, involves several crucial elements. Among these elements are: exposure to an accurate model of the target behavior, opportunities to imitate the model, immediate and accurate feedback on one's approximation of the model, chances to emit closer approximations based on the feedback received, and finally, chances to create new and original behavior which in turn will be shaped by the teacher and learning community (Splosky, 1989; Williams & Burden, 1997).

In other words, we do not expect a beginning violinist to create a near-perfect sound without ever having heard a violin being played, or without ever having had the chance to play the instrument. Nor do we expect the sound emitted to improve very quickly without the feedback and suggestions of a teacher and a listening community (at times perhaps the new musician's own family!).

Likewise, we use our first language to obtain what we want from others, express our needs and desires, and make connections with other human beings and the world around us. We receive immediate feedback from the surrounding language community as to whether these attempts at communication have been successful or not. When successful, we are more likely to emit the same behavior in future situations. When we are not understood, we make additional attempts and are especially persistent if what we wish to communicate is truly important to us. Thus through use and interaction with a language community, our first language is shaped (Dember, Jenkins and Teyler, 1984; Skinner, 1958).

It follows that the same principles should hold true when learning a second language. However, what is lacking in most language classrooms are opportunities for students to use the language in a real way—to communicate their wants, needs, and express their desires—and truly create with the language. Furthermore, immediate and accurate feedback on their spontaneous use of the language from not only the teacher but also a larger language community is virtually nonexistent.

This concerns us when we have examined in our research most tests, the reasons why they are given, and the great emphasis put on test scores—especially standardized tests like the TOEIC and TOEFL. Test scores are often used as admission criteria to select students, used as placement tests, and used to select those who will be offered jobs. The question we are

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asking is how this testing environment affects learning, and more specifically the efficient learning of a second language. What can these tests scores tell us about what our students have learned and how they will be able to actually cope when they use the language in real-world situations? More importantly, does studying for such tests and interpreting the results promote efficient learning of a language (Chapman, 2003)?

In regard to what we believe to be the factors surrounding efficient learning of a second language, we also notice that many teachers feel pressured to teach for the test, which usually results in even fewer opportunities for students to truly use the language in the classroom and fewer chances for their language to be efficiently shaped. Instead we trust experts to create tests whose results we hope will mean something to students, teachers, and employers (Chapman, 2003; Hashimoto, 2004).

As part of our larger research project examining the conditions surrounding efficient learning, we are measuring the power of nearly instant and accurate feedback on student learning and examining the dialogue that is created between the teacher and student in various conditions that we feel support efficient learning. In regard to these aspects, we see some problems with giving tests and the tests themselves. Most noticeable is the fact that students receive either little or conflicting feedback from the results of their test taking.

TOEIC

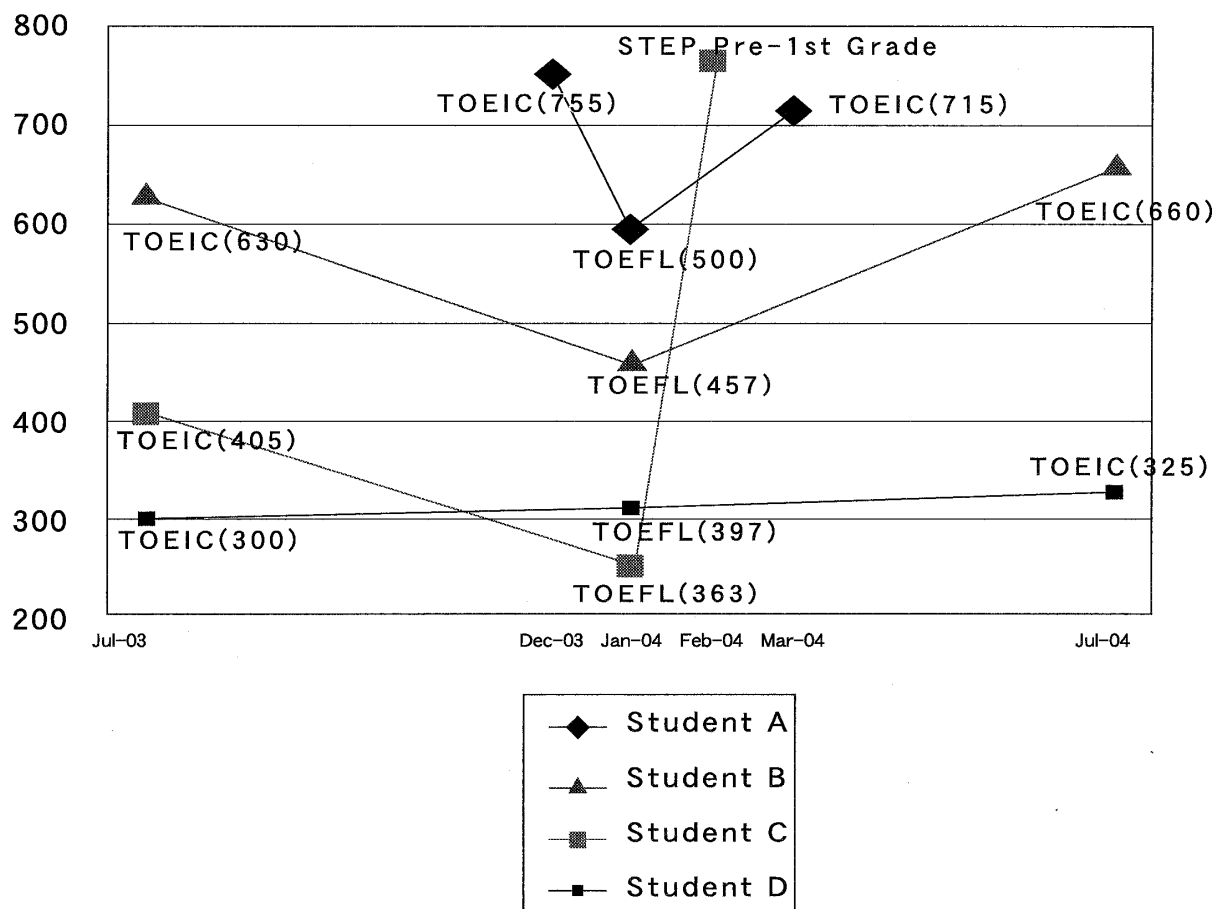


Fig. 1 English Examination Scores Converted into TOEIC Scores

One example of this was taken from the standardized test results of a handful of students at Kyushu Lutheran College. The chart (Figure 1) shows the scores that these students received for TOEIC IP tests and their converted scores for TOEFL and Eiken (STEP) tests that they took over the course of one year. Their TOEFL and Eiken scores have been converted into TOEIC equivalencies in accordance with the correlation charts published by the Institute for International Business Communication (TOEIC Un-ei linkai, 2004) and Oxford University Press.

As one can see, the scores present conflicting information and could be interpreted in various ways. This chart demonstrates, for instance, that student C experienced an extreme fluctuation in scores (the difference being approximately 400 points) within seven months, while student D produced nearly identical scores over a period of twelve months, despite studying at a normal pace. Thus, these students may be hard pressed to know their accurate language level. In addition, with these particular tests, feedback in the form of receiving their scores is delayed, students never are told which items they answered incorrectly, what the correct answers actually were, etc. Furthermore, none of these tests have asked students to use the target language in any spontaneous, real, or creative way (except perhaps the Test of Written English section of the TOEFL). So, test takers may not have the confidence that in a real situation they will be able to use the language at their tested level.

In examining both our students' standardized test scores and their class work, we also see the potential for students to receive conflicting messages about the extent that they are actually able to use the language in real-life situations. Our definition of having learned a language is being able to use it in an appropriate way in an appropriate context. When given a task where they were encouraged to express their ideas more spontaneously in English, which we argue is closer to real-world, real-time use of the language, some interesting trends have been noted. One task was for students to write their impression of a movie that was shown in class and chosen specifically to evoke a response. From an observational standpoint, it appeared that students' involvement and motivation while completing the task were high.

When examining these samples (see Appendix), we were struck by the range, scope, and nature of students' expression in English. Even the students who are considered to have lower skills and ability are able to express their ideas in English. All seem able to convey their ideas at an adequate level, albeit with errors in grammar and usage. Additionally, all of these students have been grouped in classes according to TOEIC IP scores. These particular students are part of a class whose TOEIC IP scores range from 305-395, which is considered an intermediate level by their university.

Our questions are how this range of expression and students' ability to convey meaning are being measured by standardized tests, and how students' ability to use the language is being translated into meaningful test score. Furthermore, should we even attempt to do such a thing? In regard to efficient learning, wouldn't our time be better spent focusing on giving students feedback as to what ideas they have clearly conveyed in their writing and how they

can express their ideas more clearly on a more individual basis?

This observation of students' unedited written work also concerns us because it may indicate there is a serious mismatch between a students' tested language level and their "real-world, real-time" ability to use the language (Chapman, 2003). This could occur in two ways: students with low test scores could be underrated in their actual ability to use the language, and the ability of students with high test scores may be overrated. Let's return to the analogy of the violin player. What we might be doing to our students could be likened to calling the violin player an expert based solely on his or her results on a test of music theory, not on his or her actual performance. Imagine if you never had an opportunity to play your instrument before a teacher or audience, and yet you were called an expert and expected to play a solo with the symphony. Perhaps even though students have tested at a high level, they have had few opportunities to use the language and receive accurate feedback. This might explain any lack of self-confidence or even panic when required to use English in real life.

In conclusion, we are reminded again that our university students, despite at least six years of study of the English language still have difficulty using the language in a spontaneous way, and when they do, often continue to make basic errors in sentence structure and word usage. What is missing in our method of instruction? Are we spending our face-to-face class time with students efficiently? How can we better maximize and enrich students' learning environment? We feel the challenge for educators is to re-examine with a clear mind and without prejudice what truly are the conditions that surround efficient learning and have the courage to create an environment that incorporates these elements in our classrooms.

For us, this means reducing emphasis on teaching for standardized tests and foregoing attempts to explain what those scores mean to students, at least until we have confirmed the results of our research. Instead, we should attempt to create a richer environment for learning, provide more opportunity for students to use the language, and examine more closely our role in shaping the language of our students.

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Appendix

Un-edited writing samples from students whose TOEIC IP scores range from 305 to 395 and are enrolled in a required Freshman writing class at Toyo Eiwa University. The task was to write their impression of the movie *Shallow Hal*.

Student A:

I think that this story is very good. At first I do not like Hal and Hal's friend. Because they were judged a person by appearance. But Hal met counselor, then his thoughts are odd. And I think Hal was bounded to friend by ties of passionate friendship. Rosemary was hurt by his sharp words and actions. But I think she got more than to things. Hal was going to party when he spoke Rosemary. This scene moved me. Surely appearance is very important. But I think character and a similarity is very important. This story was thinking me again.

Student B:

I think this movie is very nice! Because it is humorous, nice music, mysterious and nice characters. I can also identify myself with the story. I judge a person by his character, but think his appearance a little. I want to meet a very nice person such I don't care his appearance. I think Hal is very nice. Because he noticed don't judge a person by her appearance. I want him to be happy with Rosemary. I want to know whether Hal and Rosemary are happy now.

Student C:

I think that I was well impressed by this wonderful movie. First my expectation hit. Hal became return, but Hal's heart remains finally. This development can expect. Even so it is good to choose Rosemary. Rosemary is very happiness woman. In future, please continue that their matrimony. I enjoy this movie. thanks!!

Student D:

The movie touches me to the heart. I doubt Hal to betray Rosemary from her true shape. But Hal said to Rosemary that she is beautiful when he see true her shape first time. If I can see people's beautiful of spirit, what do I do to see my friend? I want to become grown-up like Hal.

Student E:

I like this story so much. There are three reasons. First, the movie is so fun. It made me laugh many times. Hal's actions and words are very interesting. Second, the characters in this movie are charming. Hal is comic. Rosemary is pure. Mauricio is friendly. Every characters have attractive personality. I love them!! Third, this movie taught me an important thing. In this movie, Hal knew that beauty isn't appearance but it is the inner side. In everyday life, we are apt to care about an academic background and appearance as Hal. But I think a real important thing in our life is kindness. I want to say thank you to this movie.