
Test-taking strategy instruction for Part III of the TOEIC Bridge

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Abstract

Part III of the TOEIC Bridge requires candidates to listen to a short conversation and then answer a written multiple-choice question about it. A commonly-taught test-taking strategy for this part of the TOEIC is for test-takers to read the question and answer choices before listening to the conversation so as to know what to listen for, rather than trying to recall what had been heard and attempting to answer the question post-listening (Trew, 2008). The current study aims to examine the effectiveness of this approach to Part III of the TOEIC Bridge in two ways: firstly by comparing the gains of students who had and hadn't received this particular strategy instruction, and also examining the effect of forcing the strategy to be used. The study was carried out with 148 Japanese university students of low English proficiency with TOEIC Bridge scores between 90 and 140. Results seem to indicate that teaching this strategy to students at this level does not significantly improve scores, and may, in fact, hinder their performance.

Keywords: Test-wiseness, strategy instruction, TOEIC Bridge, testing

Studies have shown that high-proficiency learners and low-proficiency learners often use similar strategies but with varying degrees of success, especially when taking tests (Purpura, 1998). High proficiency learners tend to be product-oriented test-takers, paying more attention to what is read or heard by retrieving language from their long-term memory. Low proficiency learners, on the other hand, are more process-oriented test-takers, meaning they have to devote more attention to what the task is asking of them than reading or listening to the actual contents of the test. Purpura (1999) claims that process-oriented test-takers are highly disadvantaged in timed testing environments.

One way that process-oriented learners can improve their performance on tests is by improving their test-taking skills, often referred to as "test-wiseness". Millman, Bishop, & Ebel (1965) defined this as "a subject's capacity to utilize test characteristics and formats of the test-taking situations to receive a higher score" (p. 707). While knowledge of the content which is being taught is necessary to perform well on a test, evidence shows that test performance can be enhanced by improving test-wiseness and by acquiring test-taking skills (Rogers & Bateson, 1991; Sarnacki, 1979). A study by Yang (2000) found that takers of the TOEFL who were deemed to be "test-wise" were found to have a more thoughtful and less random approach to answering questions than "test-naïve" learners, leading to higher scores. It appears, therefore, that explicitly teaching test-taking skills and improving "test-wiseness" can enhance learners' performance on language tests, especially for process-oriented learners.

The object of the current study is test-taking strategies for Part III of the TOEIC Bridge, which despite being part of the listening section of the TOEIC Bridge, draws heavily on the students' reading ability. Hoover and Gough (1990) argued in their Simple View of Reading (SVR) that reading consists of only two components, decoding written text, and linguistic comprehension. Decoding is the ability to derive lexical meaning from written forms of words, whereas linguistic comprehension is the ability to derive sentence and discourse-level meaning from what has been decoded. These two components are independent, and one can be more skilled in one than the other, but reading proficiency depends on the ability to do both. Part III of TOEIC Bridge places considerable demands on the test-taker by combining a listening component with the already challenging task of reading the questions.

Outline of TOEIC Bridge Part III: Short Conversations and Short Talks

Like parts III and IV of the regular TOEIC test, Part III of TOEIC Bridge requires that candidates answer written multiple-choice questions, printed in their test book, pertaining to short audio conversations or talks that contain (or imply) the answer. Unlike the regular TOEIC, the Bridge test asks just one question for each short audio passage. There are fifteen items, and the audio passages are separated by approximately ten seconds of silence. In that short amount of time, candidates need to both select an answer for the passage they've just heard, and read ahead in order to focus their listening and search for answers during the upcoming audio. Good time-management skills are essential, and a common pitfall often warned against in TOEIC preparation textbooks (Trew, 2008) is for candidates to spend too much time thinking back over what they've just heard, attempting to remember what was said as they re-read a question, rather than utilizing the time available by reading the text of the upcoming question.

Current Experiment

This experiment was initially intended to test the following hypothesis: teaching candidates the strategy of utilizing the silent period between audio passages to read the upcoming question in preparation for the upcoming audio, rather than spending the time reflecting on the audio passage that had just passed, will lead to an improvement in their scores.

Materials by which to teach this strategy were created using audio editing software and presentation software, and are discussed at length below. The process of creating such materials, though, gave rise to an additional hypothesis that also warranted investigation. When using PowerPoint or Keynote for instructional purposes, for example to display sample questions on the screen, the teacher obviously controls what the class can and can't see on the screen at any time. That is, the teacher can limit and control what the student can place their attention on at any given time during the presentation. Perhaps, then, a teacher could use presentation software during a mock test to 'enforce' the strategy of utilizing the silent period for reading the upcoming question, by removing the preceding question from the students' view and effectively prohibit them from seeing it. Rather than giving the students a printed page containing all the questions, the teacher could display and hide the question text strictly according to what stage of the audio they were at. Controlling which question items the students could see, it was hypothesized, would likely focus students' attention even more firmly on reading for the upcoming question, and result in even stronger gains than only teaching the strategy but giving students the freedom to take advantage of it or not.

Research Questions

The research questions were clarified thus:

- 1) Will candidates perform better in a practice test of Part III of TOEIC Bridge after being taught to utilize each period of silence between audio passages to read only the question for the upcoming audio passage, rather than remaining focused for too long on reading and answering the question for the preceding audio passage?
- 2) Having been taught the strategy, will candidates perform better if, during the silent period, they are actually prevented from reading the question for the preceding audio passage, and are instead only allowed to see the question for the upcoming audio passage? In other words, will 'enforcing' the strategy have a beneficial effect?

Method

Participants

The sample was made up of 148 first-year university students who were preparing to take the TOEIC Bridge test. The students varied in levels of English proficiency and were members of ten separate classes being taught by two teachers.

Design

Materials

Presentation materials were produced using Keynote presentation software for the purpose of introducing students to Part III. It consisted of around 25 slides, with audio passages embedded, and took about 15 minutes to present. For all students, in experimental and control groups, this was comprised of a demonstration of the part's structure and format, the length and speed of the audio passages, the multiple-choice nature of the question items, and its timing and pace. During the reading time, students were encouraged to identify and select 'key' words in the questions, to be specifically listened for later. A number of 'key' words were suggested by way of underlines appearing on the slides. Sample items from Barron's TOEIC Bridge Test (Lougheed, 2010) were used in the presentation.

The two experimental groups, in addition to the demonstration mentioned above, were also introduced to the test-taking strategy. In this version of the presentation the students were implored to "Read the question first. Find the keywords, THEN listen." One slide sequence asked students to mentally re-frame the test items, and to think of each one as starting at the end of the preceding audio, rather than at the beginning when each test question is announced with its question number. Another slide implored students several times: "When the speaking stops, start reading the next question."

At one point, the value of reading the questions in advance of the audio passage was demonstrated by actually disallowing any reading until after the audio had stopped, and challenging students to answer the question with reference only to their immediate memory of the audio—something which even a native speaker would not find easy. This was done in the hope that the students themselves would recognize the value of the strategy being taught.

In another section of the experimental groups' presentation, by displaying the script text after listening to audio passages, the students were shown, visually, that the answer to the question may come at the beginning, middle, or end of the talk; that it may be surrounded by convincing distractors relating to incorrect answer options; and, once again, that by reading the question before listening, one can confidently discard irrelevant information when something specific is being sought out. Students were also instructed to begin reading the next question as soon as they were confident they'd identified the correct answer, without waiting for the audio to end. The strategy of maximizing reading time, then, was emphasized in several ways.

Care was taken to make sure that the students in each group were given a comparable exposure to practice items.

Administration

The experiment called for three groups, one control group and two experimental groups.

Group A (n=51) was the control group, and would receive the explanatory introduction to the section, but not receive instruction in the test strategy. Groups B (n=52) and C (n=45) were to receive the explanatory introduction and the strategy instruction, but be post-tested differently.

Before any instruction had taken place, to establish a baseline score and to control for rehearsal benefit, the members of all three groups were given a full 15-item Part III practice test. All of the students in all three groups did an identical test. It was carried out in much the same way as a regular TOEIC Bridge test, i.e., with each student being given a printed copy of the questions, and an answer sheet on which they selected a, b, c, or d for each question. The audio was played directly from a CD as it would be in a regular test, with no interference from the teacher. The answer sheets were collected and scores were recorded. What happened in the subsequent lesson varied for each group.

Following the presentation that each group was shown, a second test was administered to check for gain. This test was taken from the same test preparation textbook as the pre-test and was deemed to be of equal difficulty and therefore appropriate. For group “A”, the control group, and group “B”, the test was administered once again in line with usual TOEIC Bridge circumstances; i.e., with questions printed on paper and given to each candidate, and the audio CD played from start to finish with no interference by the teacher.

Group “C” was given a test comprising the exact same items as the other groups but administered differently. The candidates were given a paper answer sheet only and did not receive a printed copy of the questions. Rather, Keynote slides were prepared that showed each question text and the four possible answers. This allowed the teacher to fully control what the candidates could see and read, and thus to ‘enforce’ the strategy of only reading the question for the upcoming audio once each audio passage had ended. During the test, within a second or two of each audio passage ending, the teacher would advance to the next slide, which featured the question text for the upcoming question. The silent period was therefore spent with only the question for the upcoming audio visible, and candidates were prevented from reading for the preceding audio. Once again, for all groups, answer sheets were collected and scores were recorded. Pre-test and post-test scores were compared to measure gain.

Results

Each group’s mean pre-test and post-test scores are shown. Group A saw the biggest gains, Group B scores decreased, and Group C scores increased very slightly. One-way ANOVA did not find statistical significance, $F(2, 145) = 2.10, p = .126$. Table 2 shows the results of multiple t -tests, with Bonferroni adjustment. Group A saw an average gain of about 1.05 points out of 15 (7.0%) when compared to Group B, and about 0.41 points (2.73%) when compared to Group C. Group B, however, scored 0.64 points (4.26%) lower than group C. In terms of raw scores, a clear pattern of group A outperforming the others is evident.

Table 1

Pre-test/post-test mean scores

	Pre-test Mean Score	Post-test Mean Score	Gain
Group A	6.20	7.00	0.80
Group B	8.14	7.76	-0.38
Group C	7.75	8.06	0.31

Table 2
Multiple group comparisons

		Mean Difference	S.E.	p
Group A	Group B	1.05	0.52	.13
	Group C	0.41	0.54	1.00
Group B	Group A	-1.05	0.52	.13
	Group C	-0.64	0.54	.70
Group C	Group A	-0.41	0.54	1.00
	Group B	0.64	0.54	.70

Discussion and Conclusion

In terms of research question number one, in which we asked whether candidates would perform better after being taught the test taking strategy, the results indicate that this may not be the case. Group A, the control group that was not taught the test-taking strategy, showed the biggest gain. This essentially means that students who received no instruction on the specific test-taking strategy out-performed students who did.

There are a number of possible explanations for this. One is that the students who received specific instructions were perhaps not given enough time to practice the strategy between the pre- and post-tests. Given more time to internalize the strategy through extensive practice may have produced different results. Another explanation might be that the students, who were at a very beginner-level of language learning, may have been overwhelmed and confused by the test-taking strategy instruction. One last possible explanation, as mentioned above with regards to the Simple View of Reading, is that the students may have lacked efficient decoding skills, which would have hindered their ability to process the combination of written and spoken English that characterizes this part of the test. Future experiments of this nature with mid or high-level learners might produce different results.

In terms of research question two, in which we asked whether enforcing the strategy would have a beneficial effect, it appears that having taught the strategy, enforcing it produced a better result than not enforcing it. However, it should be noted that students who were not taught the strategy outperformed those who were taught and enforced, albeit not to a statistically significant degree.

Definitive conclusions are not possible due to the small sample size and relatively simple design of the experiment, especially with respect to the small number of test items, but the results did run counter to what was expected. At the very least, therefore, we cannot conclude that teaching a test-taking strategy will make a positive difference. This is not to say that teaching test-taking strategies is ill-advised. Rather, that students at this level might actually perform worse on tests when they are asked to utilize test-wisness strategies such as the one taught here and might be better served by being given practice which will develop their decoding skills. Concerning them with test-taking strategies while their reading skills are insufficient might actually hinder their ability to perform well on the test.

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