

Kanazawa University' s TOEIC Test Preparation Courses: An Overview of Classroom Practice

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Kanazawa University's TOEIC Test Preparation Courses:
An Overview of Classroom Practice
金沢大学の TOEIC 準備科目：授業実践の概観

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Abstract

By discussing classroom management techniques as practiced in the TOEIC Test preparation courses of the Kanazawa University Global Standard curriculum, this paper aims to encourage current and future instructors of the courses to reflect on their own methodologies. Topics include ground rules for the classroom, the use of randomizing devices to nominate students, effectively employing random and spontaneous cold-calling, suggestions for using the textbook, and considerations for homework assignments. When relevant to the discussion, reference is made to research literature, teaching blogs, and informal interviews with some members of the current teaching staff.

1. Introduction

Effective classroom management is an essential element of the craft of teaching. Often by trial and error, experienced teachers develop routines and strategies to maximize engagement and facilitate learning, as well as rules and techniques to curb student behaviors that may derail lessons or disrupt planned activities. Particularly in active-learning classrooms, where students are required to follow directions and stay on-task, effective management is essential for maintaining a positive learning environment.

This paper will focus on components of classroom management relevant to the TOEIC Test preparation courses of the Kanazawa University Global Standard curriculum. By describing and reflecting on classroom management practice related to these courses, three goals may be achieved. The first is to build on the general discussion brought forth during the 2019 Faculty Development Seminar at the Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Kanazawa University, which provided an opportunity for sharing active-learning practice among the faculty of the institute's three divisions. An additional objective is to specifically encourage those currently teaching the courses to reflect on their own methodologies and perhaps consider experimenting with new techniques and activities. A final aim is to offer an introduction of the TOEIC course classrooms to future instructors, so that they may organize lesson plans and develop their own classroom practice.

Several topics will be explored: establishing ground rules on the first day of class, the use of class cards (index cards with students' names and information) to develop rapport with students, random and spontaneous cold-calling, suggestions for using the textbook, and ideas for assigning homework.

Additionally, the teaching context is briefly reviewed for those not familiar with the courses. Reference to research literature, teaching blogs, and informal interviews with some members of the current teaching staff (both full-time faculty and adjunct instructors) has been included to add perspective. It is important, however, to clarify that the paper has no intentions of evaluating or questioning the validity of the practice of others.

2. Teaching Context

As part of a standard curriculum implemented in 2016, Kanazawa University's TOEIC Test preparation courses are required for all in-coming first year students. Each of the four courses are completed in 8-week terms, to coincide with the university's quarter system. Approximately 30 students are assigned to each class, after being divided into three groups (high, medium, low) based on their scores of the English section of the standardized university entrance examination (センター試験). This division helps, to some degree, to reduce the variance in proficiency in any given class.

The objectives of the courses are twofold: to improve listening and reading skills, and to familiarize students with test taking tactics for each specific section of the TOEIC Test. The syllabus is structured around a common textbook, *Tactics for the TOEIC Test, Listening and Reading Test, Introductory Course* (Trew, 2013), which emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, and tactics for test items. The textbook also includes access to additional on-line exercises on the publisher's website, which has a registration system that allows for instructors to monitor each student's performance and improvement. A supplemental textbook, 公式 TOEIC Listening & Reading 問題集 2 (Educational Testing Service, 2017) is also used, which offers the most recent official practice tests.

At the end of each of the first three quarters, a standard in-house examination is given to all students. Modeled after authentic tests, these exams are shortened to fit the 90-minute class period. At the end of the fourth quarter, students are required to take an official full-length TOEIC-IP Test, which is administered on campus during a two day period after the end of the course. Scores on each term's test account for 80% of assessment, while the remaining 20% is based on criteria determined by instructors, such as short quizzes, class participation, and homework assignments.

3. Ground rules

Ground rules for classroom behavior provide an essential tool for classroom management and support a positive learning environment. Well planned rules can foster respect for others in the class group, hold students accountable for their behavior, and clarify teacher expectations (Cornell University, 2018). Especially if decided by a democratic process of reaching some consensus among the students, rules can increase the inclusiveness of the community formed in the classroom (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010).

In my TOEIC classrooms, ground rules comprise policy taken directly from the standard syllabus, as well as items that I have added on my own, as shown in the Table 1:

Table 1. *List of Ground Rules*

Standard Syllabus (Non-negotiable)	Plagiarism will not be tolerated.
	Lateness will be penalized.
	30 minutes late is regarded as an absence.
	Students absent from three classes will be withdrawn from the course.
Additional Rules (Determined by Instructor)	Absolutely no sleeping.
	No cell phones in class without asking for permission.
	Do not sit in the last two rows.
	Don't chat to your classmate when the teacher is talking.
	We often work in pairs, so sit near others.
	Do not leave the room without telling the instructor.
	You may email the instructor, but only for important matters.
	It is OK to bring something to drink in class, but no eating.
	Please call your instructor and classmates by their first name.

When describing standard syllabus policies, it may be helpful to remind the class that all incoming first-year students must adhere to these non-negotiable rules. This removes the instructor from an authoritative position of the one who decided the rules, and make it easier to reject pleas for leniency by students, as the instructor can, to some degree, pass the blame to the standardized policies. The additional rules generally focus on common-sense issues that students may feel are obvious on the first day. As the term progresses, however, they may attempt to ignore these rules, perhaps based on experience in other classrooms. Regarding sleeping in the classrooms, in some cases, Japanese university students may be employing a coping mechanism to deal with the stress of language anxiety (Kondo & Yang, 2004), perhaps as relied on in high school. I adhere to a zero-tolerance policy and immediately wake sleeping students, which generally seems to be effective after a few warnings are issued. The same stance is taken towards the disruptive behaviors of chatting in class and surfing the internet on cell phones; immediate action seems to send a strong preemptive signal. Moreover, a rule is included to stop students from sitting alone or in the last rows, which is often a tactic to avoid eye contact and hide from the instructor.

Setting a good example with your own professional behavior can also be helpful. If you want students to come on time, be on time yourself. If you want students to respect the 90-minute period, don't leave early or ask students to stay overtime. A final note concerning ground rules: leave some room for flexibility and adjustments, and be careful not to publicly show any frustrations or take any infringements personally.

4. Class Cards and Cold-Calling

Class cards are an indispensable tool for many of my classroom techniques. On the first day of class, each student fills out an index card with the following: name, major, hometown, and five to ten keywords relevant to their personal interests, recreational activities, or hobbies. Key words from past classes, for example, have included animation, jazz, surfing the internet, eating chocolate, cats, super hero movies, taking walks, kendo, cooking, and spy novels.

These cards have three significant benefits. First, they provide a point of departure for personal communication to be woven into classroom discourse by constructing questions around the students' genuine interests. Personalization of language is in line with a humanistic approach to learning and teaching, which often creates positive classroom dynamics, allows for groups to bond faster, and fosters intrinsic motivation associated with authentic communication (Thornbury, 2006). Secondly, the cards can be easily held in one hand, making it possible to move around the room or write on the board and still have access to the cards. Unlike an attendance sheet, the cards may be shuffled or physically separated, which creates a quick and effective way to generate an arbitrary order of names to facilitate the nomination of students to respond to questions. Moreover, cards may be singled out if the teacher wishes to call on a particular student again for a follow-up question. These cards serve as a type of randomizing device, which may also take the form of wooden Popsicle sticks (William, 2007), computer or smartphone apps designed for teachers, or scrambling class registration lists with the Excel software sorting function, as one instructor reported using.

Randomizing devices facilitate the technique of cold-calling. As opposed to asking for volunteers to participate, cold-calling refers to the practice of asking questions to students who have not raised their hand or given any verbal or non-verbal signs that they wish to be called on. With an emphasis on accountability, the technique is a highly effective way to engage students in classroom discourse. Cold-calling is found across a wide pedagogical spectrum. Harvard Business School, for example, recommends instructors to begin lectures with cold-calling to reinforce the need to prepare for class, which is essential for meaningful participation in case study discussion (Harvard University Christensen Center for Teaching & Learning, 2018). Kohn (2016) points out that interns at most American medical schools are often put on the spot during patient rounds with a barrage of cold-calls by their instructors, which at times takes on an intensity akin to hazing. A study of Northeastern University undergraduates by Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt (2012) concluded that cold-calling contributed to an increase in the number of students who voluntarily answer discussion questions.

Since the TOEIC courses focus primarily on correct grammatical form, proper use of lexical items, and comprehension of texts, cold calling most frequently involves display-questions. These types of questions, which the instructor knows the correct answer, are used to confirm that the targeted transfer of knowledge is actually occurring.

From discussion with other instructors who do not cold-call, some seemed to have apprehension due to the potential risk of making students feel awkward by putting them “on the spot”. These concerns are understandable, as specific negative experiences in a social learning environment, such as public embarrassment, may contribute to serious demotivation in language learning (Dornyei, 2001). Several measures may prevent this from occurring. High-frequency cold calling, for example, reduces the feeling of being singled out. In a 90-minute TOEIC class, I usually make 50 to 60 cold-calls, or about two calls per student. Actually, on a few occasions when class cards were misplaced, students felt singled out because they were *not* cold-called. Additionally, providing students with the choice to opt-out is important; let students take a pass or simply admit that they don't know the answer. Finally, cold-calling should be used to create a supportive atmosphere and never in a punitive nature of purposely calling on students who are not paying attention or disengaged from the activity.

In some ways, randomly calling on students contributes to inclusiveness among learners as they gradually understand that the system treats all equally. In some teaching contexts, only calling on volunteers may create divisions based on level of engagement, confidence, proficiency, or motivation. An interesting experiment to try in class is to tell students to raise their hand if they *don't* want to answer the question; this at least shows who is paying attention (Handelsman, 2013). One of the course instructors I spoke with suggested a more intense method of achieving inclusiveness, the *stand-up game* strategy. As demonstrated by Wessling (2016, January 13) on the Teaching Channel blog, this involves the entire class standing up. Students may sit down only after they have answered a question or contributed to the discussion at hand.

5. Using the textbook

With the intention to keep instructors at the same week-to-week pace, the standardized syllabus for all TOEIC courses was designed to follow the 14 units of the textbook (two for each section of the test). Each unit comprises seven to eight activities that focus on specific content: vocabulary, grammar, test-taking tactics, listening to natural pronunciation, and a mini-test of the section covered in the unit.

When using the textbook, there are a few general techniques to consider. One is to instruct students to work in pairs or small groups to discuss each activity together. If conducted in English, this learner-to-learner interaction may foster some negotiation of meaning, clarification, and other communicative strategies that contribute to understanding the link between meaning and form (Long, 1996). Pair or small group work also gives the instructor a chance to help individual students, check for non-participation, and assess common problematic language. Another technique involves writing a few spontaneous conversation questions on the board with embedded language from the activity at hand. For example, after focusing on frequently occurring verb forms, the question *What were you doing when you first learned that you were accepted as a student to this university?* or *What did you think about on your way to school this morning?* calls for use of the sometimes problematic past continuous

tense. An additional technique, applicable when calling on students for the correct answers to the mini-test sections, is to make students justify their answers; instead of a simple reply of *Answer B*, encourage students to reply along the lines of, *I think the answer is 'B' because the word storm in the answer refers to heavy snow in the text*, or even an honest admission of *I ran out of time, so I just guessed*.

When working with the unit's vocabulary sections, I usually follow a specific routine. These sections generally have a group of ten words, which are used to complete gap-fill exercises, much like the following example:

reputation	ingredients	recommend	supplier	passenger
finalize	vehicle	attend	accounting	immediately

Such activities may be extended by asking students put down their pencils for a few minutes while they check for any unfamiliar words. Without using a dictionary, they are instructed to circle any words which are unclear in meaning. The next step is to ask students, in pairs, to verbally *do something* with the words, such as paraphrase the meaning, state an antonym, give an example, or make a sentence to show proper context. During this time, I monitor progress and offer help to those who have circled any words. After a few minutes, a few students are cold called to share their produced language. The next step is to complete the gap-fill exercises in pairs. When calling on students for answers, I often insert spontaneous bonus questions that build on common context or collations of the words. For example, using the word list above: *Which university in Japan has the best reputation? What ingredients do you need to make curry? Where could you most likely see a passenger? What is an example of a vehicle?* This type of activity is relevant to the goals of the class, since the language used in TOEIC Test items are often in a paraphrased form or depend on contextual clues in the text. One final suggestion for vocabulary sections is an easy game that begins by selecting two students and asking them to shut their books. Instead of reading the gap-fill question as they appear in the textbook, just read some of the key content words to prompt an answer. The student who correctly answers first is the winner.

Relying exclusively on the textbook may not be enough for a substantial lesson plan. Speaking to other instructors, all agreed on the necessity of supplemental materials and classroom activities. Producing original worksheets can provide additional grammar practice, increase exposure to vocabulary that is frequently used in test questions, as well as break up the monotony of using the textbook. For worksheets focused on vocabulary, two sources are useful: *COBUILD Key Words for the TOEIC Test* (2012) and the New General Service List Corpus (Brown, Culligan, & Phillips, 2016), which offers a list of 1,200 high frequency words based on a 1.5 million word corpus of TOEIC textbooks, previous tests, and other related sources. A typical worksheet using these sources is included in Appendix A of this paper. It is also possible to use copies of the audio scripts to the

listening sections for class activities by asking students to identify common patterns of distracting answers or to underline text that was paraphrased from key words in the test items.

6. Using Homework Assignments as Classroom Activities

In addition to the on-line exercises previous mention in the course description, I often assign students homework that can also be reviewed or used in classroom activities. One type, assigned about every other week to correspond to the end of each textbook unit, centers on students writing their own TOEIC Test questions (see Appendix B for details). This provides an opportunity to deconstruct the test items and identify common patterns of distracting answer choices. It also creates a ready-made classroom activity, as students can try out their own test item homework with multiple partners in the classroom. Short vocabulary quizzes, written by the students themselves, can also be used in the same manner. Another type of homework assignment calls for students to use the skills from their English for academic purposes courses, which are also required for first-year students. For example, assignments can require producing a summary of reading section texts, writing a well-structured paragraph about which tactics they find most useful, or brainstorming activities, such as: *List 15 possible questions that a hotel guest might ask to the front desk clerk; Name 10 types of documents; or How many problems can you think of that may happen on a business trip?*

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, self-reflection of routine practice in the TOEIC course classroom may help instructors to maintain a positive environment that stays focused on learning objectives. Carefully considered ground rules may curb unwanted behaviors before they becomes disruptive. Using class cards can support positive teacher-student rapport and offer increased opportunities for student engagement. Cold-calling of students, if carried out with respect to learners, can generate meaningful classroom discourse and foster inclusiveness in the classroom. Instructors may also consider developing new activities to extend textbook content, creating original supplemental materials, and experimenting with different types of homework assignments. Classroom practice in the TOEIC courses, however, is by no means limited to these topics. An open invitation is extended to instructors to participate in further discussion, give feedback, and share practical ideas and teaching materials, to ensure that our efforts to improve the TOEIC scores of Kanazawa University students continue to move forward.

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Appendix A: Example of Vocabulary Worksheet

On part 7 of the TOEIC Test, it is important to pick out key words in the questions and then search for related words in the text. For example, if a key word is “training”, finding words like the ones below may help.

Key Word: Training

on-the-job

intern

seminar

Put the words below into suitable categories. There are three words for each box.

corporation
expense account
dollar
logo
architect
resume

application
diplomat
advertise
euro
budget
firm

balance sheet
exchange rate
brochure
shortlist
company
engineer

<u>Key word: organization</u>	<u>Key word: accounting</u>	<u>Key word: currency</u>
<u>Key word: marketing</u>	<u>Key word: professions</u>	<u>Key words: job search</u>

Appendix B: Example of Homework Assignment Explanation

Homework Assignment: Make your own Part 1 listening questions

Please make six of your own listening questions using six different photos. You can use any photo you want by copying and pasting from the internet. Each photo should have four possible answers.

For example:

- A) A man is wearing an expensive necktie.
- B) A man is giving a presentation.
- C) Some people are having a meeting.
- D) A computer is on the cable.



Try to make questions that sound like the ones you would find in a TOEIC test. Use the common distractors that are listed on page 68 of your textbook.

Use two sheets of paper: One with ONLY PHOTOS and one with the answer choices.

Homework should be typed and printed. Put your name on both sheets.

Like this: One sheet with Photos

One sheet with answer choices.

