



Difficulties in the Learning of TOEIC Reading Comprehension at EQuest Academy

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at finding out what problems EQuest Academy (EQ) students had in the learning to prepare for TOEIC reading comprehension. 90 students of TOEIC class and 15 instructors in charge of TOEIC courses were taken data in the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal vocabulary was the biggest hindrance by EQ students in reading comprehension. Therefore, the students had big problems with skills relating to guessing new words in the contexts. Furthermore, complex structures constrained the students to read passages effectively. Based on the results of the study, some suggestions are hopefully made to help students and instructors succeed in the learning and teaching of TOEIC reading comprehension.

Keywords: *Reading comprehension skills, TOEIC*

NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN TRONG VIỆC HỌC PHẦN ĐỌC HIỂU TOEIC TẠI EQUEST ACADEMY

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện để tham dò những khó khăn trong việc học phần đọc hiểu TOEIC của học viên ở EQuest Academy (EQ). Để đạt được mục tiêu trên, bài báo đã khảo sát ý kiến của 90 học viên và 15 giáo viên thông qua phiếu điều tra và phỏng vấn. Kết quả bước đầu cho thấy, từ vựng là mảng khó khăn lớn nhất cho học viên, chính vì vậy năng lực đoán từ vựng trong văn cảnh của học viên còn nhiều hạn chế. Ngoài ra, do không nắm được nhiều cấu trúc ngữ pháp đặc thù trong các bài đọc hiểu cho nên học phần đọc hiểu không đạt được kết quả cao. Trên cơ sở những khó khăn được khám phá, tác giả đã đưa ra những khuyến nghị để nâng cao hiệu quả việc dạy và học đọc hiểu TOEIC.

Từ khóa: *Đọc hiểu, TOEIC*

1. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO EQUEST ACADEMY'S TOEIC READING COMPREHENSION LEARNING

Recently, in Vietnam, learning foreign languages especially English has taken more notice as a result of intense and extensive world economic integration which occurs in a flat and crowded world as the present. Noticeably, in such a competitive global economy, those who achieve an excellent level of using English are highly well-qualified for good jobs. Regarded as the worldwide standard for measuring English proficiency in the workplace, Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) was built for “nonnative-English speakers” (Wilson, 2000, p.1). Educational Testing Service (ETS) built TOEIC from the originally proposed request by Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry (Suzuaki & Daza, 2004, p.16). In the TOEIC Report on Test-takers worldwide, Japan and Korea were two countries which TOEIC test results were the most popularly exploited (63% and 29% respectively) (cited in Suzuki & Daza, 2004, p.16). Because TOEIC has been recognized a leading factor to “*screen employees for overseas business trips or postings; urge workers to make greater efforts to learn English; and assess the effectiveness of company-sponsored English training programs*” (The Daily Yomiuri, 1997, p. 9), TOEIC has become a golden key to unlock doors of job opportunity for working people. To put it another way, the success in the TOEIC test seems to be a mandatory requirement for the majority of successful job applicants.

EQuest Academy (EQ) where the author works as a part-time instructor is one educational organization which highly majors in educating students or workforce to take English standardized tests such as TOEFL iBT (Test Of English as a Foreign Language), IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). Among these training courses, TOEIC course attracts a lot of students from big universities in Hanoi namely Hanoi University of Commerce, Institute of Finance, Hanoi University of Industry or Foreign Trade University to take part in this course.

As the part-time instructor of TOEIC course training in EQ, the author realizes that TOEIC reading comprehension has been a heated topic discussed not only among the teachers in EQuest Academic Department but also TOEIC learners in EQ for a long period of time but there has not been any paper which

synthesizes EQ learners 'difficulties and makes the learning of TOEIC reading comprehension better. Accordingly, it is very necessary and urgent to conduct a study which aims to address the following research question: *What are the difficulties encountered by students at EQuest Academy in the learning to prepare for the TOEIC reading comprehension test?*

2. DIFFICULTIES IN TOEIC READING COMPREHENSION LEARNING AT EQUEST ACADEMY

For the purpose of collecting sufficient, reliable and valid data for the study, two questionnaires were employed, one of which was for the students who had finished TOEIC course and the other one for instructors who specialized in training TOEIC A and TOEIC B course. In order to help participants understand the two questionnaires completely, Vietnamese was preferentially used.

The number of students in the study was 90 who had been chosen randomly from 5 TOEIC preparation classes in EQ. They had learned TOEIC from 2 to 7 months. Some of them were pre-intermediate level of English. Most of the participated students had already attended TOEIC preparation courses while others had already been trained reading skills in TOEIC reading comprehension.

15 instructors were also invited to participate in the survey. The majority of the instructors were very young from 22 to 25 years old. They had already graduated from Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies, Hanoi University, Banking Academy and National University of Education for 1 to 3 years and become EQ instructors for 6 months till 2 years. Before teaching TOEIC, the instructors taught Foundational Academic Course and upgraded their vocabulary, grammar and listening, speaking, reading and writing skill to have high capacity for TOEIC preparation course. 5 of EQ instructors achieved more than 900 points for the real TOEIC exam held in IIG Vietnam, 4 teachers obtained more than 850 points and others were both encouraged and obligated to sit for TOEIC exam to get more than 700 points. In the study, 66.67% instructors were in charge of TOEIC B and 33.33% instructors were training TOEIC A students.

The students' questionnaire included both closed-ended questions and open-ended questions with spaces for clarifying answers or adding additional comments. The questions were related to difficulties encountered by EQ

students in the learning of TOEIC reading comprehension and were categorized to discover the students' areas of difficulties (1), their difficult reading texts (2), their difficulties with reading skills (3), the students' difficulties with the instructors' lectures.

The instructors' questionnaire was similar to the students' one. It also covered closed ended questions and open-ended questions. In fact, the number of questions for the instructors was the same as the quantity of questions for the students but from different perspective because the author would like to collect both the students' and the instructors' viewpoint on each issue.

Like the questionnaires, two separated interview schedules were arranged for both the students and the instructors. Different from the questionnaires, open-ended questions were mainly utilized in the interviews for the purpose of obtaining the in-depth information. Before conducting interviews, a list of questions necessitated to ask was written out. Such prepared questions were expected "to provide the interviewer with a great deal of flexibility while offering the interviewees adequate power and control over the course of the interview" (Vu, 2006, p.35). Accordingly, 15 of 90 students and 8 of 15 instructors were interviewed to further know about their answers. Strategically, the questions in the semi-instructed interview were brought up naturally which helped collect the data efficiently because the interviewees felt relaxed and could answer honestly.

2.1. Areas of difficulties

The most striking problem facing students was vocabulary. More than three quarters students regarded vocabulary as their biggest hindrance. In the interview, instructor 1 in charge of TOEIC A class shared that a large number of students in her class had "*a poor range of vocabulary about economics, technology or travelling although they are economic-majored or technology-majored students*".

Instructor 4 clarified further that the big hindrance was the fact: "*.....learning vocabulary is a complex issue. In my TOEIC A class, I required students to learn TOEIC words of each theme or writing new words with four columns: new word, meaning in English or Vietnamese, its collocation, the sentence where they have found such new word or a new sentence made by themselves. It came as a surprise to me that in the two first week, many students did but in the following lessons, they gradually ignored because of millions of*

reasons such as heavy workload at their school, lack of free time to do or leaving it at home and even “I forget””. Thus, enhancing the students’ vocabulary range is very crucial because according to Beglar and Hunt (2005), vocabulary is the “central component” or “the heart of a language” in getting insight into foreign language.

2.2. Difficult reading texts

It is commonly shared by 66.67% students was their “*difficult reading texts have so many new words*”. Reading comprehension requires test-takers to read a variety of texts which are manuals, reports, forms, notices, advertisements, periodicals, memorandum, letters, news and magazine articles. The students agreed that reading texts which were unfamiliar with the students appeared many unknown words. Manual and memorandum were perceived by the student respondents as the two least prominent forms of reading passages and caused the participants considerable problems while letter was seen as the most frequently-practiced type of reading text among three-fifths students in the study. This was able to be clearly explained by students at Hanoi University of Commerce who attended TOEIC A course: “*In my school, format and some kinds of letters such as thanks-giving letter, refusal letter or asking for information letter were categorized and carefully taught to the second year students. As a result, I got quite familiar with these kinds of letters in TOEIC reading comprehension.*”

Complicated structure is the second factor affecting the students’ ability in reading texts. As Muller (2007) assures, there exist four main text structures in TOEIC reading passages, namely “*problem/solution, general/specific, claim/counterclaim and question/answer*” (p.36). However, one-third students did not seem to have profound insight into reading texts’ structures as Muller depicted, so they could not find the answer to test questions very quickly because they were not conscious of where (at the beginning, middle or end of the passage) they might look for.

The third factor resulted in 30% students’ difficulty in reading texts is their length. The interviewed students admitted that the double passages which were longer than single passages did not probably bring the sense of speedy completion because the students were asked to read paired passages including an email and a memo or a form and a fax or a table and a letter or a letter and a letter to answer the five questions for each set of two passages. An experienced

instructor of TOEIC emphasized “*my students usually lack time for about 10 last double passage questions. They are often stressful or nervous to continue reading in a few last minutes. If such 10 last questions are single passages, they may feel motivated to fulfill successfully*”.

2.3. Difficulties with reading skills

Guessing new words in the contexts and summarizing the content of the texts were perceived as two serious problems persisted by approximately one-half students. Regarding guessing new words in the contexts, the results from the interviewed students pointed out that the kind of reading task about choosing the correct synonym for the words at specific line, in specific paragraph in the texts was not trained with sufficient time in the class. The majority of the instructors often asked the students about the answer when predicting a specific word in the context. If there were no answer, the instructors would translate all surrounding words except the being-questioned word. Therefore, the students could find the correct word quickly. This is due to limited time for reading comprehension lessons. Among twelve lessons given for reading skills in the course were three lessons of two hours for training reading comprehension skills. As a result, it was a challenging task for instructors to equip the students with knowledge and all practical skills for TOEIC reading comprehension skills.

In term of summing up the content of the texts, nearly 50% students felt afraid of inference questions such as “Who is likely the intended reader?” or “Who would use the information?” or “Where would you find the product?”. Instructor 7 asserted that he followed the textbook compiled by EQ instructors for TOEIC A and TOEIC B reading course. In both textbooks, there were a few questions relating to the inference ones. Most of questions in the textbooks focused on specific information and main idea of passages. However, instructor 8 commented on the issue that “*collecting the information for inference questions is not difficult as many students may think.*” She explained that in fact they were similar to the specific questions which usually needed specific pieces of information such as who, whom or where. For example “*who might this article be intended for?*” (TOEIC B textbook, unit 12, p.218), the answer might lie in the beginning line, especially correct for advertisements “*this month in Golden Age Magazine we would like to share some tips for making life easier as you get older*” (TOEIC B textbook, unit 12,

p.218). The students in the class of instructor 8 supported that inference questions were not hard for advertisement and announcement because for most of the cases they only needed to read through three first line of advertisement or announcement. On the other hand, the other students in the interview objected that *“for some inference questions, I read the reading passage again and again but I couldn’t find the correct answer.”* For example, *“which of the following is implied by the note?”*, followed by four answer choices which were not mentioned directly in the text but their synonyms or their antonyms or restated sentences often made them tired.

2.4. Difficulties with the teachers’ lectures

26.67% learners found their instructors’ lecture boring and ineffective. As shared by TOEIC A students, they had been trained in the Foundational Academic Courses which aimed at communicative skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing. In such class, the students used to get accustomed to relaxing atmosphere with many funny activities and games designed for remembering communicative new words. Therefore, when they moved to the class orienting to the standardized academic exams, they seemed to feel bored because in TOEIC reading class, almost time was needed for learning vocabulary and tips, there were seldom communicative activities. The learning atmosphere appeared silent and quiet.

Noticeably, more than 23% students acknowledged lack of appeal to the instructors’ unchanged training methods. Students from TOEIC B class informed *“the instructor always starts the lesson with checking homework, giving some brief tips for reading comprehension and asking students to do a variety of reading texts and checking.”*

Moreover, 20% students complained the instructors’ background was not sufficient and their explanation was not clear enough. According to Boldt & Ross (1998, p.3), the background of the instructors is the main factor impacting the success of acquiring the students’ language. Boldt & Ross’s study made sense in this case. The results from the interview showed that some instructors had not taken the real TOEIC tests yet. Thus, they sometimes felt anxious about the students’ questions relating to practical experiences in sitting for real TOEIC reading skill. For some cases, it seemed hard for the instructors to answer explicitly. The students’ frequently asked question could be among prominent topics in TOEIC reading comprehension test (corporate

development, dining out, entertainment, finance and budgeting, general business, health, housing/corporate property, manufacturing, offices, personnel, purchasing, technical areas and travel) which topics had frequently appeared in the TOEIC test? In addition, the students would like to ask the instructors to share such topics with them. If the instructors had not participated in the real test before, they would have felt unconfident to share in details.

The minority of students reported the instructors did not give Vietnamese equivalent for long and difficult words and did not correct reading tasks carefully. 90% TOEIC instructors were highly assessed for providing the Vietnamese equivalent explanations for the complicated new words. Similarly, 87% EQ instructors were strongly praised for correcting the reading tasks carefully. A valid conclusion may be drawn out that the difficulties with the TOEIC trainers hardly originated from their correction techniques.

3. SUGGESTIONS

3.1. For the students

3.1.1. Vocabulary

In the first place, it would be better to provide the learners with a TOEIC vocabulary course before the practice of reading comprehension because the majority of the difficulties encountered by the students in the study resulted from vocabulary. Therefore, in order to improve basic vocabulary range and get over difficulties in vocabulary, the students are recommended to follow two basic steps. The first step is to revise and master an enormous amount of popularly-used basic vocabulary. It is likely that the book 600 essential words for the TOEIC test by Lin Lougheed would be appropriate in the process of building crucial TOEIC vocabulary. Secondly, the students need to build TOEIC vocabulary self-study strategies at pre-intermediate level. When practicing passages in test books, it would be helpful if the students keep writing new words into their vocabulary notebooks which are classified into 10 different kinds of TOEIC reading texts and spend much more time on the reading texts of manual and memorandum which could rarely be seen in learning materials at their universities or their workplace but very popular in TOEIC reading comprehension tests.

In order to obtain higher marks for TOEIC reading comprehension, vocabulary is very essential for the students to enhance the understanding

capacity of passages. In accordance with Nation's study (1993), the students should be provided with the fact that so as to improve their achievement dramatically, they need to enrich from 2000 to 5000 words in order to understand from 85% to 95% of the text. Sharing the same view with Nation (1993), 20% instructors who got more than 900 TOEIC points advised the students to practice 151 frequently-tested nouns, 145 frequently-tested verbs, 122 frequently-tested adjectives and 75 frequently-test adverbs in the TOEIC test from the book "TOEIC training reading comprehension 860" published by Darakwon Inc. Korea, a leading Korean publisher specializing in learning materials of English, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese language. In the interview, the instructors stated that TOEIC training and learning in Korea and Japan had been implemented much sooner than in Vietnam. Therefore, the TOEIC books which had been published by big publishing houses and popularly been accepted as learning materials in Korea and Japan are of great use in Vietnam. From my training experience, mastering 493 frequently-tested nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs listed on the book "TOEIC training reading comprehension 860" is very useful and essential not only for TOEIC A students who target at 450 points after the course but also for TOEIC B students to get more than 700 points. In addition, when the students have 493 frequently-tested vocabulary, the students can reduce the considerable difficulties in guessing new word in the vocabulary question.

3.1.2. Reading skills

The research's results revealed that the students lacked time for TOEIC reading comprehension mock tests due to their comparatively slow reading speed. There are two effective ways to help them speed up their reading skill according to Debat (2006, p.13). The first technique is to practice eyes' movement with a pen. When the pen in the hand moves from the left to the right of texts, the eyes run after the pen. The second technique results from reading keywords aloud that are shown on reading questions for a few seconds, and then quickly identify them in the passages. The kind of exercise is worth training the students in the speedy visual recognition of targeted information positions.

The study's findings also discovered that nearly 50% students had problems with inference questions. Aiming at improving inferring skill, it is suggested that the students should get familiar with "top-down" and "bottom-up" reading process. To be specific, as explained in Hoang (2010), the top-down

reading process focuses on exploiting readers' background knowledge or the previous experiences about the text structure or the subject matter of a text to create frameworks to make sense of new experiences whereas the bottom-up reading process aims at combining each familiar word, each simple grammatical structure to create the meaning of phrases; then through the understanding of phrases can more complex passage structures be analyzed and interpreted. Top-down reading process would be beneficial for the students of TOEIC B class who are usually experienced in identifying the kind of reading text's structure: problem/solution or general/specific or claim/counterclaim or question/answer whereas bottom-up reading process could be helpful for TOEIC A students who can only understand easy-level vocabulary and can rarely understand difficult, complex and uncommon grammatical constructions.

3.1.3. Reading texts

In the study, the students lacked time for last ten questions due to inefficient time management skill, thus students are suggested to wear a watch to control test time better. The trainees should spend at least 48 minutes for 48 questions of reading comprehension part. 28 minutes ought to be spent on 28 questions of single passages and at least 20 minutes need to be taken to answer 20 questions of double ones. It can be inferred that one minute is expected to be enough time to answer one passage question. It can be understood that when the students have used more than four minutes for reading passage of four questions, they are supposed to have a habit of moving to other ones to keep reading in control of time.

3.2. For the instructors

3.2.1. Attracting the students' attention

Instructors could make the class more appealing by adding some other activities rather than just do and check. It is highly recommended that the TOEIC instructors should change the teaching methods towards TOEIC preparation course. Instead of following grammar-translation approach, sometimes they could use communicative activities, teaching reading skill might be combined with teaching writing and speaking skill. A telling example was when introducing to the students about advertisements of job vacancy; some instructors were able to let the learners become the recruiters who decided how many positions were vacant and gave the requirements of advertised jobs along with supplying the applicants with the contact address.

The students themselves might draft some sentences basing on the a few suggestions made by the teachers such as the field of business, the name of the output product and arranged them into the correct order of advertisement of recruiting.

Secondly, TOEIC students should be inspired by instructors to do their homework in the textbooks but a small amount of exercise instead of a full test for each unit as presented in TOEIC A and TOEIC B course. Because EQ learners were full time students at universities, their time for upgrading TOEIC skills was limited. In order to make the students feel happy with fulfilling their task at home, only a small quantity of exercise corresponding to the classroom lesson's themes can be assigned and a list of books for supplementary learning need to be supplied.

3.2.2. Taking real TOEIC reading test

Instructors should be motivated to improve their background. Some instructors who graduated from University of Languages and International Studies had been trained with English language teaching methodology while other instructors from Banking Academy or Hanoi University had not. Therefore, there exists some differences in training students. To have strong background of TOEIC and effective teaching methodology, TOEIC instructors need to be gathered for sharing practical teaching experiences and help each other deal with the students' difficulties raised in their class. Moreover, TOEIC instructors are highly recommended to take part in instructor training workshop organized by IIG Vietnam which is only organization in Vietnam authorized to provide Test of English for International Communication. In the workshop, EQ instructors can be trained by senior experts from Educational Testing Service which develops, administers and scores more than 50 million tests annually in more than 180 countries, at over 9,000 locations worldwide (IIG, 2020). By entering the workshop can EQ instructors have great opportunities to sit for a real test and have their abilities measured through score report. It was very helpful for TOEIC instructors at EQ to upgrade their training skills and participate in group of skillful TOEIC instructors in Vietnam to train other instructors.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The paper was the initial step in the effort of discovering the answers to the difficulties by EQ students in the learning of TOEIC reading comprehension

to prepare for TOEIC test. The study findings revealed that the students' main problems are related to vocabulary, complex structures of reading texts, low reading speed, lack of effective reading skill training and the instructors' inflexible training method. Due to the limited time, the article does not describe the difficulties of the instructors when they train the students. Based on the study's outcomes, some feasible solutions are recommended to upgrade the training and learning of TOEIC reading comprehension in particular and TOEIC reading test in general.

Hopefully, it would be of great value if further studies can place their investigating focus on the learning of TOEIC vocabulary in preparation for TOEIC reading comprehension which hindered more than three quarters students. In addition, it will be beneficial to do an action research on using top-down and bottom-up reading process to improve the quality of TOEIC reading comprehension. Last but not least, the author strongly hopes that further research could find useful techniques applied by the instructors to make the training of TOEIC reading become effective and exciting.

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