

# **Promoting Government Employees' English Proficiency through a TOEIC Training Course— A Case Study of Pingtung County**

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## **Abstract**

In the past few years, the Taiwan government has encouraged government employees to increase their English competence for enhanced internationalization. Moreover, getting an English certificate is a criterion for a promotion for many government employees. Therefore, it seems necessary for many government employees to improve their English proficiency. The purpose of this study was to increase government employees' English proficiency through a TOEIC training course. The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is a test of English proficiency used as a standard for establishing workplace English writing skills and spoken English proficiency for non-native English speakers. The researchers used two mock tests of the TOEIC as the research instrument. The subjects of this project were 25 government employees in Pingtung County. First, the subjects took the first mock test of TOEIC as the pretest. Then, the researchers analyzed the pretest and found that the subjects' average listening score was 94; the average reading score was 125, and the total was 219, which was well below 350—the criterion for passing. Next, the researchers provided the subjects with a 60-hour TOEIC training course (2-hours per week). After the training course, the subjects took the second mock test of TOEIC as the post-test. Then the researchers analyzed the post-test and found that the subjects' average listening score and writing score were 158 and 259, respectively, and the total was 417, which was significantly higher than the 350 needed to pass. In other words, the TOEIC training course effectively improved the subjects' English proficiency. Finally, the researchers provide some implications for future studies and some recommendations for English instructors and learners.

**Key words: Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), English proficiency**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

English is a global communication tool; therefore, many non-English speaking countries, such as Thailand, Japan, and South Korea, make English learning a priority to ensure national competitiveness. Taiwan also pays much attention to English learning. For example, English teaching in elementary school began in 2001, and getting English certificates has become a standard to access a government employee's work efficiency. In order to coordinate with the government policy, many government units need to provide a way for employees to improve their English proficiency through an English training course. The government units in Pingtung County are no exception.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **I. What is the TOEIC test?**

"TOEIC" stands for the Test of English for International Communication. The TOEIC test is produced by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) of Princeton, New Jersey, USA. The TOEIC was first given in Japan in 1979 and in Korea in 1982. Now it is given all over the world. The TOEIC is an English language proficiency test for people whose native language is not English. TOEIC scores indicate how well people can communicate in English with others in the global workplace. The test does not require specialized knowledge or vocabulary; it measures only the kind of English used in everyday activities. The TOEIC is a test designed to measure how well test takers understand the English that is used in international work and business situations. The TOEIC is the world's leading test of English language proficiency in a workplace context.

The TOEIC is a 2-hour multiple-choice test consisting of 200 questions divided into 100 questions each in listening comprehension and in reading comprehension. All of the items are multiple-choice questions with three or four possible answers. The listening section tests the ability to understand spoken English. The reading section tests the knowledge of grammar and usage and the ability to read and understand short passages. Each candidate receives independent scores for written and listening comprehension on a scale from 5 to 495 points. The total score adds up to a scale from 10 to 990 points. The TOEIC certificate exists in five colors, corresponding to achieved results: orange (10-215), brown (220-465), green (470-725), blue (730-855), and gold (860-990).

### **II. Why do people take the TOEIC?**

Rogers (2006) showed that many businesses require people to take the TOEIC before hiring them, before giving them promotions, or before allowing them to travel

overseas. People who work for large international corporations, for airlines, for hotels, for banks, and for government organizations take the TOEIC. Occupations of test takers include managers, marketing experts, sales representatives, technicians, customer service workers, flight attendants, and hotel employees. In fact, almost anyone whose first language is not English can benefit from taking the TOEIC.

Bagnell et al. (2007) indicated that the TOEIC test is a way to prove one's proficiency in English. The test is an assessment of what is known and of an ability to use English in the working world. Those looking for a job where English is a necessity are likely to need to take the TOEIC test. According to the ETS, more than two million people take the TOEIC every year, with over 8,000 companies worldwide using the TOEIC to determine an employee's English ability. Based on the information from the ETS website, more than five million TOEIC tests were administered in 2008. And, for 30 years, TOEIC test scores have helped thousands of corporations, educational institutions and governments throughout the world recruit, hire and promote the most qualified candidates.

### **III. The New TOEIC**

A new version of the TOEIC was released in 2006. The changes can be summarized as follows:

- Overall, passages have become longer.
- Part One has fewer questions involving photo descriptions.
- The Listening Section includes speakers of English from Britain, Australia, New Zealand and North America. The ratio is 25% each for American, Canadian, British, and Australian–New Zealand pronunciation. However all the voice actors for the speaking test have lived in the United States for an extended period and have had the edge taken off their regional accents.
- Part Six no longer contains the error-spotting task, which has been criticized as unrealistic in a corporate environment. This part instead adopts the task wherein the test taker fills in the blanks in incomplete sentences.
- Part Seven contains not only single-passage questions but also double-passage questions wherein the test taker has to read and compare the two related passages, such as e-mail correspondence.

According to a survey conducted in 2006 by the Institute for International Business Communication, 56.8% of the respondents who took both the older and the revised versions of the TOEIC in Japan find the latter version more difficult. The lower the score the test taker achieves, the more marked this tendency becomes. As

many as 85.6% of those who earned scores ranging from 10 to 395 points find the revised TOEIC more difficult, while 69.9% of those who earned 400 to 495 points think this way, as do 59.3% of those who earned 500 to 595 points. Among those who achieved 600 to 695 points 58.9% of them agree with these findings, 700 to 795 points 48.6%, 800 to 895 points 47.9%, and 900 to 990 points 39.8%.

#### **IV. Some TOEIC results in 2008**

On October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009, ETS in Taiwan reported the difference of English competence in workplace settings between Taiwan and the rest of the globe in 2008 test results, and showed that the scores of China and Korea TOEIC test-takers were much higher than that of Taiwan TOEIC test-takers. The report indicated that office workers in China and Korea have better English proficiency, and they progress rapidly in English. Moreover, based on the Taiwan TOEIC scores in different occupations, the scores of people who work in government organizations, hospitals, hotels were behind those in the same careers all over the world. Their average TOEIC scores in 2008 were 474, 479, and 482 points, respectively; however, the average TOEIC scores around the world were 612, 555, and 542 points respectively in the same year. In other words, the people working in the service industry have inadequate English competence in Taiwan.

In addition, based on the report of ETS in Taiwan on December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the 2008 TOEIC Score of Taiwan was behind those of China and South Korea (shown as in Table 1). ETS in Taiwan showed that the reason may be in the past, English education, policy, and practice in Taiwan had some negative effects on students' English reading and listening levels. According to the report, most TOEIC test takers in Taiwan earned 200-220 points in reading, and 34.81% of test takers cannot reach 450 points in total; only 0.04% of test takers earned a perfect score, behind Japan and South Korea, 0.07% and 0.22% respectively.

In fact, in the past few years, the TOEIC average scores in Taiwan were between 530 and 550 points which is equivalent to the intermediate level of the GEPT (General English Proficiency Test). Such kind of English performance is behind many Asian countries, such as India, Turkey, the Philippines, China, and Korea. Without a doubt, lower English competence will weaken Taiwan's international competitiveness.

**Table 1 : TOEIC Average Scores of Asian Countries in 2008**

Country	Listening	Reading	Total	Ranking
India	420	388	809	1
The Philippines	402	327	728	2
Malaysia	386	319	705	3
North Korea	387	307	694	4
Turkey	371	306	677	5
China	338	299	636	6
South Korea	323	281	604	7
Taiwan	293	240	533	8
Hong Kong	285	234	519	9
Japan	275	220	495	10
Thailand	282	210	491	11
Saudi Arabia	271	164	435	12
Vietnam	209	200	409	13

Indonesia	158	119	277	14
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Source: <http://toeic.com.tw/>

Furthermore, from the Table 2, the TOEIC score of Taiwan in 2008 was 533 points, behind that of the globe 20 points. Moreover, the listening score of Taiwan was 293 points which was much better than the reading score—240 points. Based on the Table 2, most test takers in Taiwan and the world have inadequate English reading ability, but it was more prevalent in Taiwan.

<b>Table 2 : The comparison of TOEIC score between Taiwan and the world in 2008</b>			
	Listening	Reading	Total
Average Score in the world in 2008	300	253	553
Average Score in Taiwan in 2008	293	240	533
The difference between Taiwan and the globe in 2008 TOEIC Score	-7	-13	-20

Source: <http://toeic.com.tw/>

In addition, according to the Table 3, the top three TOEIC scores of different occupations were from teaching/training, marketing/business, and management. However, most of the people in these categories still earned lower scores than test takers from around the world from other career fields. Therefore, it is an important issue to enhance high-level personnel's English competence.

**Table 3 : The TOEIC scores of different occupations between Taiwan and the globe in 2008**

Position	The globe			Taiwan				Difference
	listening	reading	total	listening	reading	total	Ranking	Total
Teaching/ Training	323	283	606	323	273	596	1	-10
Marketing/ Business	318	273	591	322	271	594	2	+3
Management	328	299	627	288	253	541	3	-86
Professionals	323	292	615	286	248	534	4	-81
Research experts	307	274	581	278	236	514	5	-67
Customer attendants	311	259	570	286	221	507	6	-63
Operators/ Administrators	315	275	590	276	229	506	7	-84

Others	302	260	562	276	221	497	8	-65
Technicians	285	253	538	239	191	430	9	-108

Source: <http://toeic.com.tw/>

In fact, in 2008, the Executive Yuan encouraged universities to set the foreign language test as a threshold of graduation. Over 70% of office workers consider that a person with at least TOEIC-700 can handle a difficult task with great ease in their position. Even 18% of office workers surveyed feel that a person with TOEIC scores of 905-990 has real competitiveness in their jobs.

Moreover, in 2009, 1111 Job Bank conducted a survey to ask working people how they feel about their English abilities. The survey reported that most working people felt they need to improve their English, 48.56% of them feel that their English is poor; 79% of them did not have any English certificate and 20.72% of them consider their English to be extremely poor. However, 44.8% of working people did not have any plan to enhance their English abilities, and even 34.19% of them did not spend any time and money to improve their English, and only 21.25% of them hold English certificates.

## V. Adult Education literature review

Because the subjects of this project are all adults, some literature regarding adult education should be taken into consideration.

### 1. Psychological traits of adult learners

#### (1) More mature in psychical and mental development

Hurlock(1980) showed that maturation was an individual had grown up in size and muscularity. Huang (2000) indicated that maturation included a person's physiology, psychology, emotion, and social behaviors all reach a stable and fixed level. Therefore, mature people can decide their learning objectives and choose their learning needs by themselves.

#### (2) The concept of differentiation

Huang (2000) showed that when individuals become adults, their abilities, interests, and skills are different and multiple. Socially, similar phenomenon appears in the interaction with others. Therefore, it is hard to design a course or learning activity for a big group of adults.

#### (3) The roles of adults

In fact, adults play multiple roles at the same time, such as parents, spouses, employees, or coworkers. In other words, the life of adults is complex and variable,



unlike young people. Therefore, Houle (1961) found that most adults had several kinds of learning motivation simultaneously, including objective-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented motivation. The roles of adults change with their age, family, occupation, and position. At different stages, adults would have different educational needs.

#### **(4) Time perception of adults**

Time is an important factor to have effects on adults' career planning and behavior performance. Adults are different from teenagers in concept of time; adults realize that life is short and attempt to use their time productively; teenagers may use a cumulative view to look upon time. Therefore, adults prefer immediate effective learning activities. On the other hand, Smith (1982) also showed that one major characteristic of adult learning is that they feel time is short and limited. Therefore, adults demand clear learning efficiency, and it is essential to encourage adults to join learning activities.

#### **(5) Variability among adults**

The difference among adults is much more obvious than children or teenagers physically, psychologically, and socially. In other words, individualized teaching and learning will be best for adults. However, it is almost impossible for a teacher to implement individualized teaching. Therefore, when a teacher designs his or her teaching planning for adults, it will be better to meet most learners' learning objectives.

### **2. Learning characteristics of adults**

Huang (2000) indicated that adults have five learning characteristics as follows:

- (1) Clear learning outcomes: adults expect to apply what they learned in the daily life.
- (2) Problem-centered learning framework: Long (1990) showed that most adult education scholars agree that adult learning was problem-oriented. McClusky (1964) also indicated that "problem" was a natural unit of adult learning, and "problem" became a learning incentive, a learning procedure, and a learning content. Therefore, adult educators could try to find the problems bothering adults and use those problems as a guide in learning activities.
- (3) Internalized learning motivation: adults' learning motivation mainly come from individual inner force, including self-promotion, promotion of the quality of life, and the pursuit of self-development. Therefore, adult educators should think about how to evoke adults' intrinsic motivation and engagement in learning, and how to transform intrinsic motivation into extrinsic expectancy motivation.
- (4) Experience as a learning boost or obstruction: adults' experiences are various in quality and quantity; therefore, adult educators should employ multiple teaching materials and methods to meet adults' needs, adjust learners' learning pace, and

pay attention to individual learning style and strategy. Moreover, abundant learning experiences are important resources to learn. When giving new teaching materials to adults, the teacher had better connect teaching materials with adults' previous experiences. Group discussion, role play, and imitation are some suitable ways for adults.

- (5) Participating learning activities actively: adults can make decisions by themselves and can be responsible for themselves. In other words, adults take part in a learning activity willingly and spontaneously.

## **METHOD**

### **I. Sample**

The researchers applied convenience sampling. The sample in this study was 25 government employees from a unit of Pingtung County Government. They took part in the TOEIC training program actively after work.

### **II. Measure**

The researchers employed two TOEIC mock tests as the assessment instruments. The first mock TOEIC was taken by all of the 25 participants before the TOEIC training course. After 60-hour listening and reading training course, the same participants took the second mock TOEIC. Then, the researchers calculated the two mock TOEIC tests and made a comparison of the two tests.

### **III. Design**

The researchers designed the TOEIC training course according to the requirement of TOEIC test. Then the researchers gave the participants a two-hour reading and listening training every week. The first hour was a listening training program; the researchers let the participants listen to some short paragraphs, long paragraphs and dialogues. Then the researchers explained the listening course. The second hour was a reading training program; the researchers let the participants read some short and long reading passages; in the reading course, the researchers taught the participants sentence patterns and grammar. At the same time, the researchers gave the participants vocabulary based on different topics, such as general business, office issues, personnel, purchasing, financing and budgeting, management issues, restaurants and events, travel, entertainment, and health.

### **IV. Procedure**

The procedure of the project was pretest→training program→posttest→analysis. In other words, before the TOEIC training program, all of the 25 participants took a mock TOEIC as the pretest. Based on the results of the pretest, the researchers designed a series of listening and reading training courses.

Then all of them took part in the two-hour listening and reading training program after work every week. After 60-hour training program, all the participants took another mock TOEIC as the posttest. Next, the researchers analyzed and compared the pretests and posttests. Finally, the researchers drew a conclusion according to the findings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to the participants' pretests and posttests, the researchers used Table 1 to express participants' test results as shown below.

**Table 1: The Results of Participants' Pretests and Posttests**

Subject No.	Pretest converted score in listening	Pretest converted score in reading	<i>Total of pretests</i>	Posttest converted score in listening	Posttest converted score in reading	<i>Total of posttests</i>
1	75	300	375	105(+30)	380(+80)	485(+110)
2	135	75	210	195(+60)	245(+170)	440(+130)
3	135	75	210	255(+120)	355(+280)	610(+400)
4	105	105	210	135(+30)	340(+235)	475(+265)
5	45	20	65	195(+150)	215(+195)	410(+345)
6	105	325	430	165(+60)	410(+85)	575(+145)
7	135	130	265	225(+90)	215(+80)	440(+175)
8	75	160	235	105(+30)	300(+140)	405(+170)
9	105	160	265	165(+60)	300(+140)	465(+200)
10	75	245	320	105(+30)	355(+110)	460(+140)
11	75	75	150	105(+30)	245(+170)	350(+200)
12	75	75	150	105(+30)	215(+140)	320(+170)
13	45	5	50	105(+60)	185(+180)	290(+240)
14	135	245	380	225(+90)	355(+110)	580(+200)
15	165	50	215	315(+150)	170(+120)	485(+270)
16	45	215	260	105(+60)	270(+55)	375(+115)
17	135	130	265	225(+90)	245(+115)	470(+205)
18	105	130	235	165(+60)	230(+100)	395(+160)
19	75	20	95	105(+30)	170(+150)	275(+180)
20	45	105	150	105(+60)	185(+85)	290(+140)
21	45	130	175	105(+60)	245(+115)	350(+175)

22	<b>195</b>	50	<i>245</i>	<b>255(+60)</b>	170(+120)	<i>425(+180)</i>
23	<b>75</b>	50	<i>125</i>	<b>105(+30)</b>	215(+165)	<i>320(+195)</i>
24	<b>45</b>	200	<i>245</i>	<b>105(+60)</b>	300(+100)	<i>405(+160)</i>
25	<b>105</b>	50	<i>155</i>	<b>165(+60)</b>	160(+110)	<i>325(+170)</i>
<b>Average</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>125</b>	<i><b>219</b></i>	<b>158(+64)</b>	<b>259(+134)</b>	<i><b>417(+198)</b></i>

Based on Table 1, there were 25 government employees taking part in the pretests and the posttests. The average listening score of the pretests was 94 points, and reading score 125 points. The average total score of the pretests was 219 points. It was still below the minimum standards of TOEIC test for government employees—350 points. That is to say the participants' English background was weak. Moreover, the researchers found that the participants' listening was much lower than their reading. In other words, the participants not only needed to improve their reading but also needed to enhance their listening abilities. The participants needed to increase their reading abilities, including sentence completion, error identification, and short passages. In addition, they also needed to improve every part of listening, including sentences about photographs, questions/responses, dialogs and short talks.

After analyzing the pretest in detail, the researchers found that the participants' vocabulary was inadequate and they did not have clear concepts regarding sentence patterns. The reasons may be that all of the participants are full-time employees; most of them did not have time to study English regularly or study English on their own since graduation. Under such kind of conditions, they may have forgotten much of the vocabulary, phrases, and grammar they had learned previously. Besides, most of them rarely listen to English radio programs or watch English television shows; therefore, their listening hardly showed any progress. Furthermore, most of them did not read English newspapers or magazines; therefore, their reading ability naturally worsened.

After the 60-hour training program, the participants increased 30-150 points in listening, 55-280 points in reading, and 110-400 points in total. In other words, the training program was effective no matter how poor the participants' English background. On the other hand, the researchers believed that the participants possessed basic knowledge of English. In the pretest, most of the participants underperformed because of memory decay. However, through the training course, most of them remembered much of the English they had learned in prior years. In addition, the researchers taught them some tips for preparing for the TOEIC, including reading strategies and listening strategies. Moreover, most of the participants had the intent of learning more English and getting an English certificate

which is beneficial for their work and career promotion. Nevertheless, it was unfortunate that at times some of the participants could not attend the training program because they had to be away on official business or on an errand. The researchers feel that if all participants could have attended the training program for the full 60 hours, they would have much better performance in the posttest.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

According to the findings, the researchers draw some conclusions. First, the participants increased 30-150 points in the listening portion of the TOEIC after the training program. Second, the participants raised 55-280 points in the reading portion after the training course. Third, the participants added 110-400 points in their total score after the 60-hour training course. Fourth, the participants had high English learning desire during the program. Moreover, the researchers would like to give some implications for English learners and future studies.

Regarding English learners, the researchers suggest that the best way to get a general understanding of English is to use English as much as possible. That is, the best way to increase background knowledge of English is to simply use English whenever feasible. Likewise, the 1111 Job Bank indicates that promoting English proficiency cannot be completed in a short time. Working people should look for suitable ways to improve English, such as going through with the study plan, using English in daily life, and so forth. Some ways English learners can use English are follows:

1. Take English language courses; conversation courses, reading/writing courses, and grammar courses.
2. Look for chances to speak English. Make friends with English-speaking people or join an English club.
3. Read newspapers and magazines in English regularly.
4. Listen to the news in English on the radio or on television.
5. Try to write a daily journal entry in English.
6. Write down new vocabulary on note cards or in a notebook.
7. Listen to songs in English. Try to write down the lyrics.
8. Watch TV shows and movies in English.

In addition, increasing vocabulary is best done through reading rather than trying to memorize long lists of vocabulary items. Learners can remember things more easily when they are presented in ideas and situations rather than in individual bits of information. In addition, pen pals and e-mail buddies can provide a great deal of

writing practice. Writing is a very good way to study a foreign language because learners have to “think” in that language. It is a good review of vocabulary, grammar, and spelling.

With respect to future studies, the researchers suggest that the sample can be much bigger, and the sample can be from different government units or different areas in Taiwan, such northern Taiwan, central Taiwan, or southern Taiwan; then the findings can make a generalization more appropriately. Second, the subjects’ age, education, major course of study, English learning experiences, or English learning hours per week can be taken into consideration as variables in future studies.

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