

Does Using *The English Course* Lead to Improvement in Students' Test-taking Skills and Results?

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Abstract

This paper describes the research method and results of a project which evaluated 105 first-year Japanese university English majors enrolled in communicative English speaking and writing classes using *The English Course - Speaking Book 1* and *The English Course - Writing Book 1*. The study was designed to evaluate if and, to what extent, adding integrated and TOEIC-comparable Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) listening, structure and vocabulary activities to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)-based English skills courses, would improve students' test-taking skills and overall test results.

After introducing the philosophy and reasoning behind the creation of the courses and materials, which comprise *The English Course*, the authors will describe and interpret the results of the research project.

One of the biggest areas of debate within the English language teaching community in Japan is the conflict between the need for better communication in English, and the importance given to test scores (particularly the TOEIC test). Whilst the Ministry of Education claims to be encouraging both high schools, colleges and universities to develop and implement more communicative style teaching, educational institutions put great value upon the TOEIC scores that their students attain. In many cases, even though TOEIC is not actually a course on the curriculum, students are forced to take the test regularly and are under a good deal of pressure to achieve excellent results. It is a dilemma for both institutions and instructors when considering curriculums and materials.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is designed to teach people to communicate more competently in the language, i.e., to become better speakers and listeners. It is not designed primarily to focus on building vocabulary and improving grammar skills. Likewise, preparation for tests such as the TOEIC test may well enable students to eradicate grammatical

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errors and build a better understanding of vocabulary, but in most cases, will have little effect on helping students to achieve better fluency and accuracy when speaking the language. Whilst, undertaking any kind of language study, be it communicative-based or centred round grammar and vocabulary, should have an overall impact on a student's language skills; it certainly would not hurt a student's communicative skills to spend time learning structure, and vice versa. The fact remains that, in many cases, students who score well on TOEIC tests can actually be poor speakers of English, and some students who have confidence and speak with relatively good fluency and accuracy, may struggle with grammar and/or vocabulary-based tests. The challenge remains to create courses and materials to fulfil both educational requirements.

Whether one likes it or not, it cannot be denied that the influence of computers on modern day education is growing rapidly and that it is something that is here to stay. This is no less true in the field of language learning than any other area of education. Computer assisted language learning (CALL) is something that universities worldwide are embracing to varying degrees. However, there is great debate among teachers as to if, when, how and how much to incorporate this use of computer technology into the classroom and curriculum. There are some teachers who oppose bringing CALL to the classroom and prefer to rely solely upon traditional methods and materials for their curriculum. On the other hand, there are CALL enthusiasts whose classes are based largely in and around CALL environments and activities. However, with increased spending on state-of-the art computer equipped rooms becoming the norm, the issue is not 'if' or 'when' to utilize CALL, but rather 'how' and 'how much' to utilize it. This is one of the most interesting and difficult challenges facing language teachers and institutions today.

Background of The English Course

In considering how to create a complete and integrated language course, which not only satisfies communicative requirements in the classroom, but also gives students sufficient opportunity to work on improving their grammar, vocabulary and test taking skills, the authors concluded that computer-assisted language learning (CALL) materials and activities would be the most suitable choice for creating a balance between the two requirements (Ireland 2006). With this in mind, the authors are in the process of creating a complete English language course — *The English Course* — which, when complete, will comprise speaking, listening, writing and reading courses at two levels or more. The course currently consists of Speaking Book 1 and Writing Book 1. To achieve the aims above, it was decided that the most successful format would be to create a textbook, (a) DVD(s) and a self-access web site for each component course.

The research goal described in this paper focuses on whether and, if so, to what extent, using the blended learning in *The English Course* helped to improve the TOEIC scores of

students taking both components (Speaking and Writing) of the course. This research was undertaken in the knowledge that *The English Course* was not primarily conceived as a TOEIC enhancement tool.

Design Principles of The English Course

In considering how best to utilize CALL to realize the balance stated above, three major principles were followed.

- (1) The most efficient use of CALL activities is to tailor them for use by the teacher inside the classroom and also as a self-study component to be undertaken by students outside of normal classroom time. It was decided that the classroom CALL component would be designed to help facilitate normal communicative activities, i.e., extensive listening and speaking exercises. This was achieved by creating audio/video activities deployed on DVD. An integrated online 'Study Centre' (web site) was created for the self-study component.
- (2) The web site material should be integrated with the content taught in the classroom, and thereby facilitate reinforcement of student understanding of the language structures practiced communicatively in the classroom.
- (3) Where possible, web site content and activities should be designed and formatted to enhance students' test-taking skills, and also replicate the kind of questions and structures tested in the TOEIC test.

Rationale Behind These Three Principles

(1) In the communicative approach versus the grammar /testing-focused approach, and also in terms of most Japanese students' primary needs, the authors of this paper have the opinion that the communicative approach is more useful in meeting most students' primary need for better oral communication skills. The authors of this paper are strong believers in communicative language teaching (CLT) and feel that the need for genuine student interaction between learners in face-to-face communicative tasks cannot be underestimated or replaced. Thus, the authors believe that CALL should be used as an addition to, and in balance with, existing communicative methods.

DVD was chosen for classroom usage for two reasons: Firstly, because the authors believe that conversations should be visual. Seeing the conversations taking place in real-life situations brings a totally different feeling and interest to the subject material. Seeing the characters interact naturally with each other, for example, watching their facial expressions and body language during a conversation, gives the language meaning and context. Secondly, DVD technology offers versatility and flexibility, and with the right expertise and imagination, the range of interesting and stimulating activities that can be created is extremely wide.

(2) The second fundamental principle followed by the authors was that the language learning activities on the web site must be integrated with and based upon the classroom teaching language targets. Though many institutions are now trying to integrate CALL into the curriculum, the materials that are often being used are stand-alone programmes that are not related to any particular course in the curriculum. As a result, the benefit of any activity is greatly reduced.

The authors also felt that by integrating the web site with the classroom material, more in-depth explanation and practice of relevant grammar and vocabulary items would be available to students.

(3) As stated above, creating an integrated online ‘Study Centre’ for each course, allows for much greater practice of grammar structures and vocabulary than would normally be expected in standard communicative classes. By using DVD media and the web site, CALL activities can be used both inside and outside the classroom to give students the opportunity for extensive practice and repeated exposure to language structures. Having such flexibility with the materials also enabled the authors to create activities that are ‘TOEIC-friendly’ in the style of the exercises and target areas. The creation of these CALL-based materials was the most challenging part of building the course, and its effectiveness in improving students’ TOEIC results forms the basis of the research described below.

Creating Appropriate CALL Materials

In considering how to create CALL materials which would fulfil all of the three target requirements stated above, the authors decided to concentrate, where possible, upon two areas: (1) the kind of structural target areas that most commonly appear in the TOEIC test; and (2), the most common kinds of mistakes that lower-intermediate level Japanese students make when communicating in English. This second area was based upon the authors’ extensive experience of teaching in Japan.

Where possible, the authors created TOEIC-comparable listening and writing exercises. Therefore, in addition, students were given valuable experience in the environment and content of TOEIC tests. This was later enhanced through the web site by adding timed quizzes and tests.

The English Course is not only an integration of communicative materials with CALL materials, but also has integration between each component of the course (i.e., *Speaking Book 1* with *Writing Book 1* and vice versa). This allowed the authors to design the CALL materials for different and specific goals in each of the component courses. These can be divided into two main groups of activities: (1) listening quizzes and exercises; and (2) structural explanation quizzes and exercises.

Listening Quizzes and Exercises

Listening exercises were utilized to the greatest degree in conjunction with *Speaking Book 1*. Numerous video and audio clips were created to give students extensive listening and structure exercises to accompany the communicative activities undertaken in class. Listening exercises were built both onto the DVD for classroom and self-study usage and also onto the web site for self-study reinforcement. The majority of DVD-based and online activities were created in the form of gap fill, true/false and multiple-choice exercises. These were supplemented by structure and vocabulary based exercises within the online study centre.

Structural Explanation Quizzes and Exercises

Structural explanation quizzes and exercises were deemed more relevant and appropriate for use in conjunction with *Writing Book 1*. The authors feel that structural accuracy is much more important in written communication than in oral communication. Therefore, whereas in *Speaking Book 1* the classroom emphasis was on explaining grammatical points briefly and then practicing those structures within normal conversation situations, in *Writing Book 1*, much more in-depth explanation of important grammatical points was given in the textbook. These points were then reinforced by sets of TOEIC-style quizzes and exercises on the teacher's DVD and students' web site. Finally, additional TOEIC-style exercises were added to the web site to reinforce the language learned.

The study

The following description and illustrations are intended to show briefly, how students are exposed to various types of TOEIC-friendly material and activities as they use the different parts of each component of *The English Course*.

Speaking Book 1: From Textbook to DVD to Web Site

Unit 1 in the textbook is designed to practice introductions. The two language foci in the unit are: (1) self-introductions and (2) third-party introductions. The extracts (below), illustrate the study process of *The English Course*.

Language focus 1



Here are some ways we introduce ourselves in **formal** situations.

Formal Situations

It's nice to meet you.

It's nice to meet you, too.

I'm pleased to meet you.

I'm pleased to meet you, too.

It's a pleasure to meet you.

It's a pleasure to meet you, too.

I'm delighted to meet you.

Nice to meet you, too.

* These expressions are interchangeable.

How do you do?

How do you do?

*This expression is usually just repeated.

Here are some ways we introduce ourselves in **informal** situations.

Informal Situations

Hi.

Hi.

Hi, I'm Akiko.

Hello, I'm Rie.

By the way, I'm Reiko.

Hi, my name's Mai.

* These expressions are interchangeable

Language focus 2



Here are some ways that we can **formally** introduce people to each other.

Formal

I'd like you to meet...

Mr. Dobbs. (He's) My boss.

I'd like to introduce (you to)...

my colleague, Tony Smith.

Allow me to introduce (you to)...

a friend of mine.

Let me introduce (you to)...

my boss.

Here are some ways that we can **informally** introduce people to each other.

Informal

Kalim, have you met John?

I don't think you two have met. Jim, this is Ian. Ian, this is Jim.

By the way, David, this is Lee. Lee, David.

Steve, this is Shin.

Speaking Book 1 – DVDs 1 & 2

Using DVD technology, five video conversations were created for each unit. These are used with listening comprehension exercises, followed by speaking practice. Each video clip is used for two comprehension exercises. There is one question/answer exercise and one exercise that is true/false, multiple choice or missing information in format. Thus, students undertake extensive TOEIC-style listening exercises with each video.

DVD Video Clips for Unit 1




Speaking Book 1 - Web Site Exercises















Each unit on the web site also includes three additional listening exercises for extra practice. These are created from natural conversations and interviews. In Unit 1, all three of the additional exercises are TOEIC-style multiple-choice exercises.

There are an additional seven exercises in each unit, which are designed to reinforce and give students extensive practice with the grammar points (language taught in the Language Focus sections of the textbook) and vocabulary related to the unit.

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Unit 1 - Introductions

-  Unit 1, Practice quiz 1 - Fill in the missing words
-  Unit 1, Practice quiz 2 - True or False
-  Unit 1, Practice quiz 3 - Multiple choice
-  Unit 1, Practice quiz 4 - Reorder the words
-  Unit 1, Practice quiz 5 - Vocabulary matching
-  Unit 1, Practice quiz 6 - Skeleton sentences
-  Unit 1, Practice quiz 7 - Cloze question
-  Unit 1, Listening quiz 1 - Multiple choice
-  Unit 1, Audio file for extra conversation 1
-  Unit 1, Listening exercise for extra conversation 1
-  Unit 1, Audio file for extra conversation 2
-  Unit 1, Listening exercise for extra conversation 2
-  Unit 1, Finale 1
-  Unit 1, Finale - script template (rtf format)

Writing Book 1 - From Textbook to DVD to Web Site

In Unit 1 of the writing course textbook students are taught about good sentence structure (Figure 1). Later in the unit, they are taught about common mistakes that students make in writing simple sentences (Figure 2).

Figure 1

Simple sentences

A sentence is a group of words that states a complete thought. A sentence is also called an independent clause. Even the simplest sentence must always have a SUBJECT and a VERB. The SUBJECT is a noun or pronoun. Look at the examples.

SUBJECT	VERB
Gary	teaches.
We	study.
The snow	is falling.

However, most sentences will also have a COMPLEMENT after the verb. The COMPLEMENT completes the sentence. This could be a noun, a pronoun, an adjective, an adverb or a phrase. Look at the examples.

Gary bought a book.	(noun)
Mr. Smith didn't call me.	(pronoun)
Egypt is wonderful.	(adjective)
She dances beautifully.	(adverb)
His sister lives in a house in New York.	(phrase)

Students then undertake several exercises in both writing correct sentences, and recognizing incorrect sentences. They are then taught the grammatical reasons why many sentences are incorrect.

Figure 2

Understanding structure mistakes

Do you understand why some of the sentences above are wrong? The most common mistakes made in sentence structure are as follows:

- No subject in the sentence (NS)
- No verb in the sentence (NV)
- No subject or verb in the sentence (NS or V)
- Wrong subject in the sentence (WS)
- Subject and verb are in the wrong order (SV order)
- Sentence starts with a conjunction (Con)

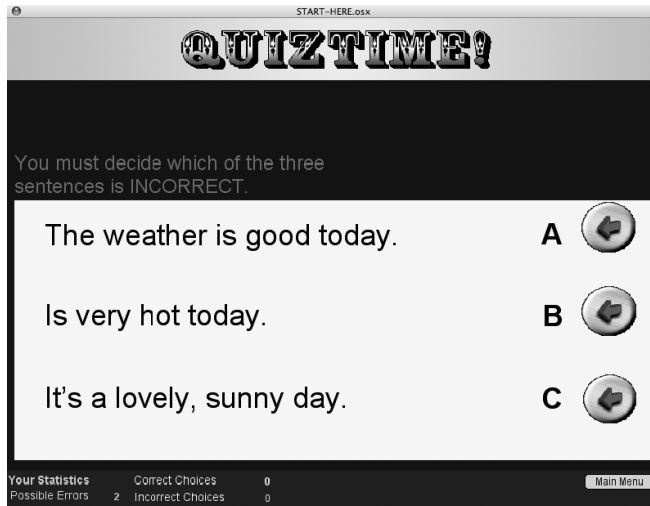
Students are given practice exercises to help them understand the points made above. In order to reinforce this knowledge and to remind students of the grammatical points, two 10-20 item interactive quizzes were added to the DVD for the teacher to use in the classroom. These exercises can alternatively be used as tests. The same activities were also added to the student self-study web site for extra practice. The quizzes are multiple-choice and were designed to be

interactive to make them fun and interesting to use.

Writing Book 1 - DVDs 1 & 2

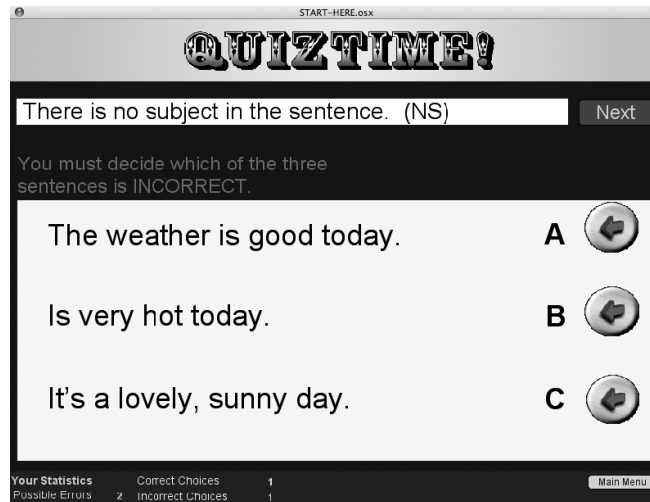
The two quizzes for Unit 1 on the DVDs reinforce the grammatical points taught in Unit 1 of the textbook (above). In Quiz 1 (Figure 3), students must look at three sentences and decide which sentence is incorrect.

Figure 3



After choosing the correct answer, students are given immediate feedback (Figure 4) on the reason why the sentence is incorrect. The authors feel that this is a key feature in assisting students to remember the grammar terms and understand these mistakes.

Figure 4













In Quiz 2 for Unit 1, students are given an incorrect sentence and then have to choose for themselves why the sentence is incorrect.

As already mentioned, students are also able to practice these quizzes online.

Writing Book Web Site Exercises

Along with the two quizzes above, there is also a video or slideshow activity to act as stimulus for the final writing assignment in each unit.

There are six additional exercises in each unit, which are designed to reinforce and give students extensive practice with the grammar points, topic areas and vocabulary related to the unit.

- 1** **Unit 1 - Getting Started**
-  Unit 1, Practice exercise 1 - Fill in the missing words
-  Unit 1, Practice exercise 2 - True or False
-  Unit 1, Practice exercise 3 - Multiple choice
-  Unit 1, Practice exercise 4 - Reorder the words
-  Unit 1, Practice exercise 5 - Cloze quiz
-  Unit 1, Practice exercise 6 - Vocabulary matching
-  Unit 1, Finale slideshow
-  Unit 1, Finale writing assignment
-  Unit 1, Quiz 1
-  Unit 1, Quiz 2

The Research Project

As stated in the abstract to this paper, a research project was designed to evaluate if and, to what degree, the TOEIC-friendly CALL activities described above, would improve students TOEIC scores.

Students and Their Learning Environment

The 105 students who were studied for this project were enrolled in two separate classes *Speaking Book 1* in one class and *Writing Book 1* in the other class. Almost all of the students were first-year students, studying a variety of disciplines, none of which was English as a major. All of the students were taking mandatory courses at a large, private university in Tokyo, Japan. The classes were nominally streamed but, in reality, consisted of students of mixed English ability. As will be seen in more detail below, almost all of the students could be categorised as being at false-beginner or lower intermediate level. In TOEIC terms, these students would be at the Brown level, (a score between 220 – 465). Classes were also co-educational and met once a week for a ninety-minute session. Students were not enrolled in any other communicative-based

English classes and were not taking any formal TOEIC-related classes at the university. It is not clear how many of the students were engaged in TOEIC-related classes formally or informally outside of the university. Most of the students had a computer and access to the Internet at home.

Evaluation Method

The evaluation method was straightforward. Students took a mock, mini TOEIC test on three occasions, as follows: (1) at the outset of the first semester of the course, before any session using *The English Course*; (2) at the end of the first semester, having completed the first four units of *Speaking Book 1* and the first six units of *Writing Book 1*; (3) at the beginning of the second semester, before resuming sessions using *The English Course*. A fourth mock test is planned for the end of the second semester, hopefully after students have completed the remaining units of both books. As the TOEIC test is lengthy (taking over two hours to complete), edited versions of the test were used, so that each test could be completed in one class session. To this end, each section of the test was halved in length. Each student's scores were then doubled for the purpose of ascertaining where that student would be placed on the TOEIC 'Can-Do' table if the student had taken the full test. Each of the tests was created using items modelled from mock tests in several of the many TOEIC practice publications available in Japan. The following table (Table 1) shows the breakdown by section, question type, time allotment and number of items of a full TOEIC test and of the mini mock TOEIC tests.

Table 1

	FULL TOEIC TEST		MOCK 10 TOEIC TEST
SECTION I-LISTENING		(45 minutes)	(22 minutes)
Part 1	Photographs 4 choices	10 items	5 items
Part 2	Question & Response 3 choices	30 items	15 items
Part 3	Short Conversation 4 choices	30 items(10 × 3)	15 items(5 × 3)
Part 4	Short Talks 4 choices	30 items(10 × 3)	15 items(5 × 3)
SECTION II-READING		(75 minutes)	(38 minutes)
Part 5	Incomplete Sentences 4 choices	40 items	20 items
Part 6	Error Recognition 4 choices	20 items	10 items
Part 7	Reading Comprehension 4 choices	40 items	20 items

Results

Table 2 shows the results of the ninety-four students who completed all three of the mini mock TOEIC tests. The scores of eleven students have been omitted because these students missed one or more of the class sessions when the tests were administered. The table shows the Listening section score, reading section score and total score for each of the tests. The three columns on the right side of the table show the change in scores expressed in percentage form. The first percentage shows the difference between test one and test two scores. The second percentage shows the difference between test two and test three scores. The final percentage shows the difference between test one and test three scores. The bottom row of the table shows the average score for each sections of the test and the average total score for each test. It also shows the average percentage range.

It can be seen that at the outset (at the time of taking test one), students were generally weaker on the listening section of the test than on the reading section. It can also be seen that this trend continued through tests two and three. Thus, there was no appreciable change in the students' relative strength or weakness between listening and reading over the duration of the research period. However, there was a clear increase in students' total scores. The increase was sufficient to bring the average total score from 360 points, which is well within the TOEIC Elementary level (255-400 points), to 399 points, which is very close to the TOEIC Intermediate level (405-600 points). The total average increase in scores between tests one and three was eleven percent. The most noticeable difference in scores was an average increase of nine percent between tests one and two. There was only an average increase of two percent between tests two and three scores. It should be noted that the average increase between test two and three scores was kept low by twenty students' scores actually falling on test three, while a further nine students' total scores remained unchanged from test two to test three. In contrast, only one student's score had a negative change from test one to test two, and only two students had scores that were unchanged between tests one and two.

Table 2

ID	TEST 1			TEST 2			TEST 3			% CHANGE		
	LSG	RDG	TOT	LSG	RDG	TOT	LSG	RDG	TOT	T1/T2	T2/T3	T1/T3
1	170	200	370	190	210	400	190	215	405	8%	1%	9%
2	170	150	320	190	160	350	200	180	380	9%	9%	19%
3	160	195	355	190	220	410	190	220	410	15%	0%	15%
4	200	135	335	220	155	375	220	165	385	12%	3%	15%
5	210	170	380	215	185	400	225	190	415	5%	4%	9%
7	150	190	340	170	200	370	175	210	385	9%	4%	13%
8	180	200	380	195	210	405	195	220	415	7%	2%	9%
9	175	200	375	190	220	410	200	225	425	9%	4%	13%
10	140	175	315	160	185	345	165	185	350	10%	1%	11%
11	140	160	300	180	200	380	185	210	395	27%	4%	32%
12	190	210	400	210	240	450	215	245	460	13%	2%	15%
13	200	180	380	190	190	380	190	190	380	0%	0%	0%
15	210	175	385	220	190	410	230	200	430	6%	5%	12%
16	190	190	380	195	210	405	195	210	405	7%	0%	7%
17	175	190	365	190	220	410	190	215	405	12%	-1%	11%
20	155	190	345	170	190	360	170	195	365	4%	1%	6%
21	135	165	300	150	170	320	145	170	315	7%	-2%	5%
22	205	215	420	220	230	450	220	240	460	7%	2%	10%
23	145	170	315	160	180	340	165	185	350	8%	3%	11%
24	155	190	345	185	195	380	190	200	390	10%	3%	13%
25	185	185	370	200	210	410	200	220	420	11%	2%	14%
26	190	230	420	210	250	460	210	255	465	10%	1%	11%
27	185	205	390	200	210	410	210	220	430	5%	5%	10%
30	205	140	345	230	165	395	235	160	395	14%	0%	14%
31	155	170	325	165	180	345	165	190	355	6%	3%	9%
32	190	125	315	210	130	340	205	140	345	8%	1%	10%
33	180	150	330	200	175	375	195	170	365	14%	-3%	11%
34	165	140	305	175	150	325	170	150	320	7%	-2%	5%
35	165	160	325	185	165	350	190	175	365	8%	4%	12%
36	210	220	430	225	220	445	225	220	445	3%	0%	3%
37	160	190	350	180	200	380	185	205	390	9%	3%	11%
38	175	195	370	180	210	390	185	210	395	5%	1%	7%
39	230	245	475	245	250	495	255	250	505	4%	2%	6%
40	100	130	230	120	145	265	125	155	280	15%	6%	22%
41	200	170	370	210	180	390	210	185	395	5%	1%	7%
42	180	190	370	195	205	400	195	200	395	8%	-1%	7%
43	170	200	370	180	210	390	185	205	390	5%	0%	5%
44	155	190	345	180	190	370	180	195	375	7%	1%	9%
45	170	160	330	190	175	365	195	165	360	11%	-1%	9%
47	215	150	365	225	160	385	245	190	435	5%	13%	19%
48	170	185	355	180	180	360	180	205	385	1%	7%	8%
49	200	220	420	230	260	490	225	260	485	17%	-1%	15%
51	155	190	345	190	200	390	195	210	405	13%	4%	17%
52	200	205	405	220	205	425	230	210	440	5%	4%	9%
53	180	220	400	190	220	410	190	225	415	3%	1%	4%
54	160	140	300	180	165	345	190	170	360	15%	4%	20%
56	165	200	365	175	210	385	180	215	395	5%	3%	8%
57	125	150	275	135	170	305	145	150	295	11%	-3%	7%
58	180	185	365	175	195	370	175	180	355	1%	-4%	-3%
59	165	185	350	180	210	390	190	215	405	11%	4%	16%

Table 3

ID	TEST 1			TEST 2			TEST 3			% CHANGE		
	LSG	RDG	TOT	LSG	RDG	TOT	LSG	RDG	TOT	T1/T2	T2/T3	T1/T3
60	210	220	430	230	250	480	230	255	485	12%	1%	13%
61	170	200	370	200	230	430	210	250	460	16%	7%	24%
62	170	240	410	185	255	440	185	250	435	7%	-1%	6%
63	215	155	370	220	185	405	225	200	425	9%	5%	5%
64	170	205	375	180	215	395	185	225	410	5%	4%	9%
65	165	195	360	185	210	395	190	205	395	10%	0%	10%
66	180	230	410	190	250	440	200	240	440	7%	0%	7%
67	190	220	410	195	230	425	240	240	480	4%	13%	17%
68	150	180	330	175	195	370	180	195	375	12%	1%	14%
69	175	160	335	180	165	345	175	160	335	3%	-3%	0%
70	170	210	380	180	215	395	170	210	380	4%	-4%	0%
71	200	150	350	220	160	380	230	160	390	9%	3%	11%
72	145	200	345	150	200	350	145	190	335	1%	-4%	-3%
73	165	200	365	185	230	415	190	240	430	14%	4%	18%
74	195	215	410	200	220	420	210	220	430	2%	2%	5%
75	170	195	365	190	200	390	195	210	405	7%	4%	11%
76	200	205	405	230	250	480	235	260	495	19%	3%	22%
77	170	195	365	170	195	365	165	190	355	0%	-3%	-3%
78	180	210	390	200	220	420	205	230	435	8%	4%	12%
79	145	190	335	165	220	385	165	230	395	15%	3%	18%
80	170	155	325	195	170	365	200	180	380	12%	4%	17%
82	180	125	305	195	140	335	190	150	340	10%	1%	11%
83	185	200	385	200	220	420	195	215	410	9%	-2%	6%
84	180	160	340	200	190	390	200	180	380	15%	-3%	12%
85	175	190	365	200	200	400	205	215	420	10%	5%	15%
86	165	190	355	185	220	405	190	225	415	14%	2%	17%
87	195	210	405	205	225	430	210	225	435	6%	1%	7%
88	155	115	270	190	170	360	195	175	370	33%	3%	37%
89	190	140	330	200	155	355	195	155	350	8%	-1%	6%
90	150	180	330	165	190	355	175	190	365	8%	3%	11%
91	155	180	335	170	210	380	175	210	385	13%	1%	15%
92	240	220	460	260	245	505	260	250	510	10%	1%	11%
93	190	300	490	230	310	540	235	320	555	10%	3%	13%
94	170	180	350	165	180	345	160	180	340	-1%	-1%	-3%
95	170	190	360	175	195	370	180	195	375	3%	1%	4%
96	190	150	340	230	180	410	230	190	420	21%	2%	24%
97	160	190	350	170	210	380	170	220	390	9%	3%	11%
98	180	180	360	190	195	385	185	195	380	7%	-1%	6%
99	160	180	340	165	180	345	160	180	340	1%	-1%	0%
100	170	155	325	205	160	365	200	170	370	12%	1%	14%
101	150	150	300	175	180	355	185	190	375	18%	6%	5%
102	180	160	340	200	180	380	200	190	390	12%	3%	15%
103	165	200	365	180	210	390	180	215	395	7%	1%	8%
104	160	200	360	180	220	400	180	220	400	11%	0%	11%
105	180	160	340	200	190	390	205	195	400	15%	3%	18%

Discussion

There are a number of questions that arise from the results of this research project. Firstly, is there a link between using *The English Course* and the improvement in students' test-taking skills and results? If so, what is the likely cause of the improvement? Thirdly, what can be said of the scale of the improvement in scores? Why is there a marked difference between the percentage change between tests one and two and not between tests two and three? Finally, what might one expect from continuing the research to include a fourth mini mock TOEIC test and a more detailed research method?

Firstly, the authors of this paper consider that, especially in the absence of evidence to the contrary, such as other known factors possibly contributing to an improvement in student performance, the use of *The English Course* does positively affect students' TOEIC test-taking skills and results. The students are not taking courses specifically for the TOEIC within the university and, in fact, do not have other English classes. Yet, the vast majority of the students achieved an improvement in their scores. The fact that some improvements were slight and some were substantial may be attributable solely to the differences in the motivation and consequent effort made between different students.

To address the second question, it is well known that it is difficult to 'teach' the language content of the TOEIC. The language in the TOEIC is general English with an emphasis on language spoken in the workplace. While *The English Course* does contain business-related English, it also contains a variety of English for other situations. It is most likely, that although the language content of *The English Course* is of some benefit to TOEIC candidates, it is more likely that it is the type of activities and the method by which they are made available that are more important factors in the improvement of student skills and scores. *The English Course* makes extensive use of images, audio and video, accents from many different countries, multiple choice questions, listening comprehension and visual observation tasks, error spotting and correcting activities, vocabulary building, grammar structure tasks, and sentence completion exercises. These are also all to be found in the TOEIC.

The scale of the improvement was modest and that was to be expected as the research was short-term, and the students were in their first year and not English majors. They were also inexperienced in taking classes solely with native speakers. More importantly, taking *The English Course* requires students to become technically proficient with using computer technology. The authors believe that students already used to communicative classes with native speakers and with a better understanding of using technology, would show a more dramatic improvement. Moreover, much of the work of *The English Course* is done in self-access mode.

Using *The English Course* is particularly useful in separating motivated, energetic and self-disciplined students from those who are not. If students are unwilling to engage in self-access study, their exposure to the activities that will help them with the TOEIC will be decreased. It is particularly interesting that scores between tests two and three only showed a slight improvement. This corresponds to the students' vacation time, when all but the most self-motivated students would not be using the materials.

Areas for future research

The authors believe that as the research is extended to include scores from a fourth mini mock TOEIC test, the results will show a more pronounced improvement again. It would also be interesting to compare the students' test scores with the extent and frequency of their use of the course's online self-access web site, *The Study Centre*. That was beyond the scope of this paper, but would certainly be of interest in any further research.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the authors created the English language-teaching course and materials called *The English Course* in order to form a balance between (A) the need for communicative language teaching (CLT) in the classroom and (B) the need to improve students' knowledge and ability regarding structure, vocabulary and test-taking skills.

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) activities were chosen as the ideal medium in order to form this balance and, where possible these activities were designed to be TOEIC-comparable.

The research conducted clearly shows that use of *The English Course* does positively affect students' TOEIC test-taking skills and results. Though result improvements were modest, the authors feel that the results are very positive and that further research is warranted.

When considering that the students studied were non-English majors and in their first year of university, the authors strongly believe that further research with second-year English majors with a higher motivation to learn English would produce more impressive overall improvements. This is based on the premise that students already used to communicative classes with native speakers and with a better understanding of using technology would make more use of classroom time, and in particular, be more conscientious in using the course's online self-access web site, *The Study Centre*.

The authors now intend to develop the evaluation method in order to create more relevant data and to understand more clearly to what degree *The English Course* does positively affect students' TOEIC test-taking skills and results.

To this end, further study will involve only English majors who are using the course. A fourth mock test will be given at the end of the second term. Perhaps more importantly, the authors will also gather data on each student's time spent and grades from the course's online self-access web site, *The Study Centre*.

References

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