

**Comparing TOEIC Books for the New TOEIC Test:
More of the Same or Something Different?**

Peter Lane, Asia University

Abstract

With recent changes to the TOEIC test this year, book publishers are rushing to release updated TOEIC textbooks to take these changes into account so that students are prepared and ready for the new test. Two of the first wave of these newer books released earlier this year are *TOEIC Skills (1-3)* by ABAX Publishing (Graham-Marr et al, 2017) and *Developing TOEIC Skills* by Seed Learning (Jansen & Souza, 2017). With all change comes opportunity to try new things and to experiment with new approaches. Therefore, are these books offering anything new or just more of what has come before? Do they help students prepare for the new features of the TOEIC test? And how can these books be improved to offer even better learning experiences to students in university classrooms? This paper will first look at some of the similarities between the books and then analyze them according to four categories: listening, reading, grammar, and vocabulary. Finally, I will briefly explore the strengths and weaknesses of each book before offering some suggestions, recommendations, and final thoughts.

Similarities between *TOEIC Skills* and *Developing TOEIC Skills*

Besides the titles, there are a few other broad similarities between these two books. Some of the main changes to the TOEIC test include a greater use of natural and authentic English, conversations between 3 people in Part 3 (instead of traditionally just two people), listening questions with graphics or charts in Parts 3 and 4, identifying correct sentences in Part 6, and choosing correct placement of a sentence in Part 7. Both books include practice exercises in each unit to cover these changes and in both books these practice exercises are quite similar. The books also include Part 1 photo exercises, Part 2 question-response exercises, and Part 4 monologue listening exercises. You can download the audio files for both books for free from the website, which is useful if you want to put the audio on your phone or tablet or if you want your students to download the files so that they can practice the listening exercises at home. In *Developing TOEIC Skills*, the practice test is included in the book but the practice tests for *TOEIC Skills* have to be downloaded from the website. Both books continue the move away from more general and increasingly irrelevant topics seen in older books such as *Successful Keys* (restaurants, places, travel) to more business and international topics found in newer versions of the TOEIC test (real estate, conferences, human resources, etc.). Both books do a good job of accounting for the changes being introduced on the TOEIC test and each book has plenty of activities for students to practice these new areas. Aside from the similarities, it is essential to see how the books compare in relation to Listening, Reading, Grammar and Vocabulary.

Categories/Sections

Listening: *TOEIC Skills*

There are more listening exercises in each unit of *TOEIC Skills*, with the first half of each unit dedicated to listening practice. There is also a section in each unit which focuses on phonology in an attempt to help students better understand natural spoken English. This involves students listening to natural English, writing down the sentences, and identifying the stress on the words or letters that are not pronounced or are changed.

Listening: *Developing TOEIC Skills*

There are fewer listening exercises in each unit of *Developing TOEIC Skills*. In addition, each exercise has fewer questions as well. The second half of each unit is organized as a mini test which covers all the sections of the TOEIC test, but as the name implies, the mini test exercises (Reading/Listening sections) are much shorter.

Reading: *TOEIC Skills*

The texts in the reading section are longer than those in *Developing TOEIC Skills*. In class, many students struggled with these reading exercises and because of their length, they were very time-consuming to complete in class.

Reading: *Developing TOEIC Skills*

The reading texts are shorter, hence they are easier to complete and do not take up as much class time. In addition, the incomplete sentences section only contains six exercises per unit compared to 20 exercises from *TOEIC Skills*.

Grammar: *TOEIC Skills*

The grammar approaches of both books are quite different. In *TOEIC Skills*, each unit has 10 sentences which the students have to identify as correct or incorrect and then revise them. This is a useful skill for students to develop but it can also be a very challenging task. While analyzing grammar is a good way to learn it, the high difficulty level of these exercises may cause demotivation and stress rather than a positive learning experience. There are also no grammar explanations in the unit, so for students who do not have a good level of grammar, they are left on their own to figure out what is or what is not correct or what grammar is being taught or tested.

Grammar: *Developing TOEIC Skills*

In contrast, *Developing TOEIC Skills* includes simple grammar explanations along with practice exercises in each unit. One page explains the grammar in clear English while the other page contains exercises to practice that grammar. The book makes a good attempt to explain grammar using simple English, which is not always the case in other TOEIC textbooks. The

inclusion of the targeted grammar exercises ensures students have practice to deepen their understanding of that particular grammar focus.

Vocabulary: *TOEIC Skills*

TOEIC Skills takes a classic approach to teaching vocabulary. Students have to match new words to definitions or they have to complete sentences with the new words. There is nothing new here that has not been seen or done before.

Vocabulary: *Developing TOEIC Skills*

Developing TOEIC Skills takes a different approach. First, lots of new words are introduced for each unit (around 30). On the first page of each unit, students have to match 15 words to different photographs. On the second page, 15 definitions with example sentences are provided. On the third page, words from the second page are used to do another photo matching activity as well as a sentence completion activity.

Now that we have examined some of the similarities between both books and looked at the different approaches they take to the main areas of the TOEIC test, the following section will explore the strengths and weaknesses of each book for the purposes of classroom teaching.

Strengths: *TOEIC Skills*

Pair Work Activity

One of the best activities included in each unit of the *TOEIC Skills* book is the pair work activity. The pair work activity is a dictation task where students have to dictate five questions or answers to their partner, who listens carefully and writes down the sentences. After matching the questions and responses together, they then take turns to dictate a transcript of a monologue from part 4 of the TOEIC test. Their partner listens and then chooses the correct answer (a, b, c, or d). While dictation is not a new concept in teaching, I feel it works well in a TOEIC class. It is more active for the students than just listening to an audio file and it also personalizes the activity somewhat. It is the students who are speaking and listening to each other instead of just listening to a pre-recorded speaker. One could argue that this activity does not prepare students to listen to the conversations by native speakers on the test and this is a valid criticism. However, the

activity breaks the monotony of only listening to audio files all semester and it gets the students more involved in their learning. It also allows students to control the pace of the activity. Many students struggle with the listening sections on the TOEIC test so this activity gives them the chance to slow things down or to repeat a sentence or passage a second time. When so much TOEIC practice is passive, it is a good idea to include more active and student-centered activities.

Let's Talk Activity

The book also includes speaking activities for students in each unit. Some of the speaking activities involve asking personal questions about the topic or doing an information gap fill activity where students have to ask each other for information about a chart or diagram. As with the pair work activity, this introduces a more active and engaging task for each unit.

Materials/Activities

TOEIC Skills includes a lot of exercises in every unit for the listening and reading section of the TOEIC test. This could be seen as a strength since it provides the teacher with a lot of exercises to use if necessary. At the same time, one could argue that there are too many exercises in each unit. While most teachers will like to get through around one unit per week so that they have some extra time to focus on other activities or tasks (10 units over a 14 week course), I was never able to do all the activities in a unit in one week.

Strengths: *Developing TOEIC Skills*

Mini Test Section

The mini tests work well in the classroom. There are fewer exercises compared to *TOEIC Skills* but the mini tests are easier to do during one class period. By focusing on fewer exercises, the task becomes more achievable and hence more enjoyable. The mini tests provide important practice time for all parts of the TOEIC test without overwhelming the students. It also allows the teacher to cover a variety of different question types within one class instead of doing all the listening exercises in one class and then all of the reading exercises in another class. In this respect, it provides more variety to the students. As teachers, we know that 'less is more' and the mini tests follow this approach.

Strategies

Each unit includes a listening strategy and a reading strategy to develop students' test taking skills and techniques. First, the skill is explained in simple language after which exercises are provided to practice that particular skill. For example, one listening strategy involves listening to similar information and using key words in the question to identify which similar answer is correct. Including strategies and skills in a TOEIC book has two main benefits. First, teachers cannot teach students all of the grammar and vocabulary that may or may not appear on the TOEIC test. Teaching students skills and strategies which they can use to learn more by themselves or which benefit them when taking the test is a better approach to preparing students for the TOEIC test. Second, focused and discreet skill practice helps students develop individual skills first which they can combine together at a later date. Breaking general listening and reading skills down into smaller and more manageable skills gives students the opportunity to practice individual skills and to build on their successes to improve their overall major skills. Without breaking down certain skills, they can be very hard to teach effectively. The simple parts add up to the whole.

Grammar Section

The grammar section involves a simple grammar explanation along with practice exercises. While grammar explanations in most textbooks tend to be quite heavy or difficult to understand, the grammar explanations in *Developing TOEIC Skills* are short and use easy English. The grammar exercises then provide students with opportunities to practice and reinforce the particular grammar point. While no textbook is perfect for every class or learning environment, textbooks can be improved. What are some of the issues with *TOEIC Skills* and *Developing TOEIC Skills* for university classrooms?

Weaknesses: TOEIC Skills

Let's Talk Speaking Activities

Although I liked the inclusion of speaking activities in a TOEIC textbook, these speaking activities were hit and miss. Some of the questions (for example, the real estate unit) feel

contrived or not very interesting. In addition, some of the information gap fill speaking tasks based on charts or graphics are a little complex and could benefit from using more simple information. Finally, while some speaking tasks contain interesting questions which encourage students to practice the target language, they are often too short (five or six questions) and so limited in the amount of language practice they provide students.

Pair Work Dictation Tasks

The students enjoyed and benefited from the dictation tasks at the back of *TOEIC Skills 1* and *TOEIC Skills 2*. The activity uses appropriate level language and lets students interact with the target language from the unit. Unfortunately, the *TOEIC Skills 3* pair work tasks are too difficult. As a result, the students did not enjoy it and hence learning suffered. To counter this, since the units in the different books have the same themes, I used the *TOEIC Skills 2* pair work tasks when teaching with the *TOEIC Skills 3* textbook. The students were able to enjoy the task while still practicing key vocabulary and expressions. Like in any textbook, when tasks are too difficult, no one benefits.

No Skills or Techniques Development

Unlike *Developing TOEIC Skills*, *TOEIC Skills* does not teach students about different TOEIC skills and techniques.

Less is More

The exercises in each unit are too long. Parts 7 of the reading section are too long, as are the complete sentences activity. The listening sections take a lot of time to get through. If a teacher is only using the textbook in class, it is unlikely they will be able to get through each unit every week.

Weaknesses: *TOEIC Skills Development*

Vocabulary Section

I appreciated the attempt by the authors to introduce many new words for each unit as well as the use of images to teach students these words. Images and text are easier to remember

and recall than just text alone and images also help build connections between words and their meaning (Mayer, 2009; Nation, 2008). However, the way the book does this is flawed. The images for the new vocabulary words are unclear. They use the type of photos and images you would typically find if you searched for 'business people' or 'office workers' on Google Images. However, it is not easy to figure out what the images represent or refer to. Even if you already know all of the words, you may still struggle to match them up. This results in an activity which can be both time consuming and frustrating. Using simpler images or icons which are easier to understand would address this problem. On the second page of each unit, vocabulary definitions and examples are presented. Again, learning new words in context and from examples benefits learning (Nation, 2008). However, instead of asking students to choose four to five new words and make their own sentences, the book asks students to read the definition and sample sentence from each word and then think of their own sentence. Without writing something down, it is unlikely students will actually do this task. Finally, the third page of the vocabulary section has a photograph which students have to label. As with the images task, it is not always clear which words match with which part of the photograph. Because of this lack of clarity, the difficulty level for this task increases substantially. Because there is so much cognitive load placed on students (Merriënboer & Sweller, 2005), students struggle with the task and learning suffers.

No Speaking Tasks

There are no speaking tasks in any of the units.

Long Grammar or Skills Explanations

Some of the grammar and skills explanations are a little too long and could benefit from being made shorter (depending on the topic). While the teacher can shorten or further explain these sections in class, students who are using the book for self-study or who are doing this part for homework may find these explanations challenging or time consuming.

Suggestions/Recommendations

Both of these books contain several good new ideas and approaches. In addition, to be released in time for the new TOEIC test, time must have been limited for the publishers. Here are some suggestions for improving the books in future editions:

1. **More Speaking Tasks:** The speaking tasks should be made longer and there should be more of them. If space is limited, additional speaking questions could be included at the back of the book as a teacher resource.
2. **Dictation Activities:** The dictation activities in Book 3 need to be made simpler. In my class, I also taught students some key expressions for this task such as ‘What is sentence 2?’, ‘Could you repeat that please?’ ‘How do you spell _____?’ These expressions gave students the key language they needed to complete the task more easily.
3. **Simpler Vocabulary Photos:** The photos should be simpler or more icons should be used. The images should promote rather than impede learning.
4. **Learning from Each Book’s Strengths:** For example, *TOEIC Skills* should use shorter listening and reading activities as found in the mini-test section of *Developing TOEIC Skills*. Similarly, *Developing TOEIC Skills* could introduce more dictation or practice tests in their series.
5. **Grammar or Skills Explanations:** These explanations should be shorter where possible. A short Japanese translation should also be included either on the same page or at the back of the book. This translation would help students studying the book independently as well as be a homework option in class.
6. **Extra Materials:** Both books need to provide more materials either at the back of the book or online such as extra speaking activities, extra listening exercises, or extra photo identification tasks. Students who want to do more practice at home should have the chance to do so.
7. **More Online Learning:** The online sections of these TOEIC books continue to follow a 20th century approach to learning where online resources are used only to download audio files or practice tests. This seems like a wasted opportunity. Why not provide more active learning activities such as listening quizzes, photo vocab matching, explainer videos teaching TOEIC skills and techniques, etc.? Because the activities are digital and online, they are not limited by the physical size of a book. They would also help teachers who

would like students to be able to complete interactive tasks for homework or who would like to provide students with the opportunity to study TOEIC on their smartphones or laptops. A TOEIC app could be included to give students a more mobile and engaging learning experience.

Summary

Both books should be applauded for using new activities such as speaking tasks, dictations, mini tests or photo matching exercises. Both books also successfully cover the new areas of the TOEIC test by including new exercises for students. This is a step in the right direction. However, as mentioned above in Suggestions and Recommendations, there is a lot more that could be done. TOEIC books need to start thinking of how they use technology to make TOEIC a more interactive and student-centered learning experience, and extra materials need to be provided so that teachers have more options over what they would like to focus on in class. At the moment, TOEIC book designers are not fully taking advantage of the learning opportunities online learning provides, inside or outside of the classroom. The first publisher to do so effectively will not only be offering something truly different and potentially transformative for learning, but they will be raising the bar for what a TOEIC book can be in the 21st century. Other publications such as the *Pathways* series from National Geographic are already developing more online learning features for their books for use by both teachers and students. The new changes on the TOEIC test are an opportunity for educators, designers, and publishers to develop new learning approaches for students studying for the TOEIC test and to bring TOEIC textbooks into the 21st century.

References

- Graham-Marr, A., Anderson, J., Howser, R., & Sato, R. (2017). *TOEIC Skills 1*. Tokyo and San Francisco: ABAX ELT Publishers.
- Graham-Marr, A., Anderson, J., Howser, R., & Sato, R. (2017). *TOEIC Skills 2*. Tokyo and San Francisco: ABAX ELT Publishers.
- Graham-Marr, A., Anderson, J., Howser, R., & Sato, R. (2017). *TOEIC Skills 3*. Tokyo and San Francisco: ABAX ELT Publishers.
- Janzen, A., & Souza, M. (2017). *Developing TOEIC Skills*. Tokyo: Seed Learning.
- Mayer, R.E. (2009). *Multimedia learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nation, I.S.P. (2008). *Teaching EFL/ESL reading and writing*. Taylor & Francis e-Library: Routledge.
- Van Merriënboer, J. J., & Sweller, J. (2005). Cognitive load theory and complex learning: Recent developments and future directions. *Educational Psychology Review*, 17(2), 147-17.