

Evaluating the Second Year of a Program that Integrates TOEIC® Speaking and Writing with Small Group Classes

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This article builds upon previous research investigating the integration of TOEIC® Speaking and Writing tests with small group classes (Uenishi et al., 2017; 2018). These classes have been designed to address some of the challenges Hiroshima University faces as one of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology’s designated “Top Global Universities”, particularly in relation to helping students develop the language skills needed in an increasingly globalized world. Started in 2016, the program, known as “HiSPEC”, is an experimental one, designed to boost the English abilities of those students with the best English skills during their first-year studies. The focus is on developing students’ productive abilities, especially their writing skills. The teaching of writing skills in secondary education in Japan has traditionally been neglected, with the emphasis instead being placed on written content (Gosden, 1996). Similarly, Sadoshima (2008) has noted that at the tertiary level the traditional Japanese academic system places little importance on English writing in the curriculum, although it is taught at a rudimentary level.

HiSPEC involves the creation of small-sized classes, with students chosen on the basis of entrance examination results; TOEIC® Speaking and Writing tests have been integrated into the course schedule.

BACKGROUND

HiSPEC 2016 has been well documented in our previous two articles (Uenishi et al., 2017; 2018). Consequently, only a summary is provided here.

The program involves groups of students from four of the university’s faculties: Education, Engineering, Integrated Arts and Sciences, Biological Sciences. Two groups of students are selected from each faculty. In 2016, five instructors were involved, and had the autonomy to teach in their own way. Participating students studied spoken communication in the first semester and writing skills in the second semester. They were given a TOEIC® Speaking and Writing test close to the beginning of the academic year, TOEIC® Speaking near the end of the first semester, and TOEIC® Writing close to the end of the second semester. At the end of the HiSPEC program, feedback was obtained from the students in the form of a questionnaire and instructors also reflected on their own experiences.

Regarding TOEIC® Speaking and Writing results for HiSPEC 2016, the first and second writing test averages showed an improvement, with a *t*-test showing a significant difference. In contrast, the first and second test average scores for the speaking test showed no improvement. These results might be attributed to instructors taking time to adjust to the new program, so that the later course (writing) yielded better results compared to the earlier one (speaking). However, another factor might be the nature of the tests themselves

(Appendix 1). The instructors, a highly-experienced group, found that the style and content of the speaking test did not fit easily with their own aims for students, and was difficult to integrate into their own teaching plans for the speaking skills course. In contrast, the writing test, with its strong focus on email and essay writing, dovetailed with several of the teachers' plans for students, and new teaching materials were developed and circulated within the instructor group.

In terms of reaction to the courses as a whole, students and instructors alike appreciated the smaller size of classes, and instructors generally enjoyed teaching students with higher than average levels of ability.

HiSPEC 2017

The HiSPEC program was continued in 2017, and in this article, we evaluate the results. It should be noted that there were changes to HiSPEC on the basis of the results of 2016, mainly in relation to TOEIC® Speaking and Writing. With its three sets of tests, the 2016 program had been expensive both in relation to cost and instructor time, placing pressure on already busy teachers. There was also the issue of instructor criticism of the TOEIC® Speaking test. Initially, to accommodate both budgets and concerns, the test was not administered in the first semester, and so instructors were relieved of the pressure of preparing students for the speaking test. In the second semester TOEIC® Speaking and Writing were given close to the beginning and the end of the semester, and took place during the writing course. Consequently, students were effectively prepared for the writing test rather than the speaking test.

One reason for implementing the HiSPEC course was to create classes that would enable teachers to more easily respond to the varied needs of individuals in classes with small numbers of students. By creating small-size classes of top-level students, the aim was not only to develop students' English writing ability but also to motivate them into further pursuing their English studies. With the courses, teachers could plan, teach lessons, and evaluate their students in their own way. When assessing students in the writing courses, TOEIC® Writing results were usually taken into consideration.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

As with HiSPEC 2016, a group of five instructors taught HiSPEC courses to eight groups of students from four university faculties (Table 1). As in the two previous articles on HiSPEC, the same method has been used, comparing TOEIC® Speaking and Writing scores, obtaining student feedback, and documenting teacher reflections on the course. Regarding student feedback, the same questions as in 2016 were asked (Figure 1).

The HiSPEC Writing courses started in October 2017, and each teacher taught a 90-minute session, once a week over the course of the semester (15 weeks). Speaking skills were taught in the first semester and writing skills were taught in the second semester. The tests taken were the first TOEIC® Speaking and Writing (S&W) test in mid-October, and the second TOEIC® S&W test at the end of January.

Overview of the HiSPEC Schedule and Evaluation of Students

Students took 11 or 12 classes between the two S&W tests. Table 1 shows how the schedule for HiSPEC Writing was organized for the different groupings. In principle, teachers could evaluate their students in their own ways, but they were encouraged to include the results of both TOEIC® Writing Tests in

their student evaluations.

TABLE 1. Scheduling

Class	Instructor	Day	Class	Instructor	Day
Engineering 2	A	Monday	Education 2	C	Friday
Arts and Sciences 1	B	Friday	Education 1	D	Friday
Biological Sciences 2	B	Friday	Engineering 1	A	Friday
Arts and Sciences 2	C	Friday	Biological Sciences 1	E	Friday

METHOD

In keeping with our previous research (Uenishi et al., 2018) on the written component of HiSPEC, we use a mixed method approach, involving a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Our focus is both on teachers through informal feedback, and on students in terms of responses to a questionnaire survey and their TOEIC® S&W test results. We address the following research questions:

- (1) How were teachers affected by the HiSPEC Writing course?
- (2) How were students affected by HiSPEC Writing?
- (3) What effect did HiSPEC Writing have on students' English abilities?

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to evaluate affective aspects such as student satisfaction and perceived effectiveness of the HiSPEC Writing classes, a questionnaire survey (Figure 1) was conducted. Questions 1 to 7 required responses on a 5-point Likert scale, and Question 8 was free description. The questionnaire was administered after the students finished the writing test.

Q1. To what extent could you improve your English language knowledge and skills in this course?
Q2. How satisfied were you with the course?
Q3. How appropriate was the course in terms of difficulty?
Q4. How do you feel about participating in small-size writing classes?
Q5. How appropriate was the class size of the Communication IIA writing class?
Q6. How useful were the course materials in helping you improve your communication skills?
Q7. Has participating in HiSPEC increased your motivation to learn English?
Q8. Please leave any comments you have about the HiSPEC course.

FIGURE 1. Questionnaire Items

As mentioned above, the students were expected to take the two TOEIC® Speaking and Writing tests and answer the questionnaire (Figure 1). There were 71 and 64 students taking the speaking and writing tests in October and January, respectively, with 57 students both answering the questionnaire and taking the speaking and writing tests. To investigate the research questions, the data from these 57 students were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, we examine the research questions and conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Research Question (1): How were teachers affected by HiSPEC Writing?

The overall teacher reaction to the program was very similar to that documented in the previous year. To a certain extent, teachers were liberated from the pressures of preparing students for the TOEIC® Speaking test during their HiSPEC speaking courses. However, TOEIC® Writing had some effect on writing courses, and so we focus on this part of HiSPEC 2017.

Pedagogical Approach to the Writing Classes

Within the system of liberal arts education at Hiroshima University, teachers have autonomy over choice of classroom materials. For the HiSPEC course, teachers followed the same pedagogical approach as for their regular writing classes. The extent to which TOEIC® Writing was integrated into the lessons varied among classes, but most teachers included some specific TOEIC® Writing practice or related activities to prepare their students for the test.

Teacher Opinions of HiSPEC

Although there were clear differences in ability within each class, the student level was generally high, and instructors indicated that they enjoyed teaching smaller groups of motivated students. However, the use of TOEIC® Writing as an objective measure drew diverse reactions: While most teachers felt that it was relatively easy to accommodate into their syllabuses, some felt it did not reflect their own aims and plans for a writing course. This resulted in the circulation of instructor-created materials from HiSPEC 2016 among the teaching group. Also, some instructors used computer rooms to give students practice in writing under simulated test conditions.

Research Question (2): How were students affected by HiSPEC Writing?

Quantitative Analysis of Responses to the Questionnaire Survey

Here, the data obtained from questionnaire items one to seven are collated and described, and the descriptions obtained from item eight are discussed. The primary purpose of conducting this analysis was to gain an understanding of the students' satisfaction with the HiSPEC Writing course, as well as the perceived effectiveness of the course. In answering the first question (*To what extent could you improve your English language knowledge and skills in this course?*), 75% of the respondents answered that their English had either improved or greatly improved as a result of the course.

The second question asked participants to rate their satisfaction with HiSPEC Writing. The results showed that 83% of the respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the course, with only two students giving a negative response. The third question required participants to rate the difficulty of the course, and 81% of the respondents answered that it was appropriate. When asked in the fourth question whether they preferred a small number of students for their writing class, as many as 90% stated that they did so.

Regarding the fifth question, 86% of the respondents answered that they were satisfied with the HiSPEC

class size (about 14 students). Interestingly, however, 11% of the students answered that the appropriate class size would be about 18 students rather than 14 students. The responses to Questions 6 and 7 show that 63% of the students agreed that the course materials helped them to improve their communication skills, and that 51% of the participants regarded the study of English more positively than before. However, these figures are lower than those of the previous year; especially, regarding the sixth question, 18% fewer of the students answered in the positive than in HiSPEC 2016 (Uenishi et al., 2018), which implies more of a mismatch between learners' and teachers' expectations than in the previous year.

For the most part, these results show that the majority of the students were satisfied with the course, and that the HiSPEC Writing classes were well-regarded by the students. However, tempering these findings is the fact that students appeared to be considerably less satisfied with the program than they were in the previous year. Specifically, the numerical values of Questions 1, 2, 6, and 7 were much lower than the previous data results (Table 2). We see, though, that regarding Questions 3 to 5, relating to class size and difficulty rather than satisfaction/improvement, the average values of the responses were almost identical to those found in the previous study.

TABLE 2. Rate of Students' Positive Responses to Questionnaire Items (%)

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
2017	90	90	82	87	87	81	58
2018	75	83	81	90	86	63	51

Qualitative Analysis of Students' Comments

Next, the qualitative data obtained from questionnaire item eight (free description) are discussed. Based upon their comments, which were analyzed and then placed into categories, students' overall impressions about the HiSPEC classes are noted. The main comments in the free description were extracted and categorized as shown below (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Free Comments on the Course

No	Item	N
1	Enjoyment of writing class	13
2	Improvement of writing skill	8
3	Satisfaction with small class size	7
4	More enthusiasm for English learning	2
4	Acquisition of writing knowledge	2

The most prevalent comment, given by 13 out of 57 students, was that they found the writing class enjoyable. Following this was the students' feeling that they had improved their writing skills (8 students). These comments are directly related to writing itself, so it is pleasing to learn that a number of students felt they were able to study English writing in an enjoyable way and that their writing skills had improved. Also, seven students described the benefits of small-sized classes; through small classes students could communicate

more easily with the teacher and their peers, which probably led to further motivation in English learning/ writing and enjoyment of English classes. A smaller number (two students) commented on having a greater motivation to learn English, stating that they felt more enthusiastic about studying English than before. Although most of the students' comments were positive, there were some negative comments such as "There was too much homework, compared with other classes" and "I wanted to take the test at a different time."

TABLE 4. Correlative Coefficients (Q1 to Q7)

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
Q1	1	0.58**	-0.04	0.26	-0.06	0.55**	0.44**
Q2		1	-0.12	0.49**	0.22	0.38**	0.58**
Q3			1	-0.24	-0.20	-0.11	-0.34**
Q4				1	0.39**	0.25	0.53**
Q5					1	0.06	0.22
Q6						1	0.49**
Q7							1

In Table 4, when we look at Question 6 (Usefulness of materials in improving English ability), we find a moderate correlation between this question and Question 1. This implies that the materials the teachers made use of in class had a positive influence on the improvement of students' English knowledge and skills, leading to students' satisfaction with the class content. As mentioned in the analysis of Question 6, regarding the improvement of English skills, 63% of the students felt the materials they used in class were either useful or very useful for improving their English ability, including writing skills.

Turning our attention to Question 7, we find a moderate correlation between Questions 1, 2, 4 & 6 and 7. The implication of this is that through their positive attitudes towards English learning in small-sized classes, the students improved both their English knowledge and skills, and felt (very) satisfied with the writing classes.

Research Question (3): How were students' English abilities affected by the HiSPEC course?

Here, the TOEIC® S&W tests are used as an indicator of students' speaking and writing proficiency. Using the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing data collected from the results of the October 2017 and January 2018 tests, comparisons were made using a *t*-test.

TOEIC® Writing Tests Results

Table 5 shows the results of the TOEIC® Writing tests. There was a significant difference between the two tests ($t(56) = 4.272; p < .0001$) and considerable improvement on the TOEIC® Writing scores between October and January. Similar improvement was found in the scores of students taking the previous year's HiSPEC course, and as postulated in Uenishi et al. (2018), there are two possible reasons for this large improvement, in addition to the teachers' enthusiasm, methodology, and use of appropriate teaching materials. First, most students were given opportunities to practice answering the different types of test

questions in class, and they were able to familiarize themselves with the format of the writing test. Second, although further research is needed to verify this, the small class size has probably been a factor. As mentioned in the previous section, 86% of the students answered that the class size was appropriate. The greater number, quality, and depth of interactions possible between the teacher and students in a small-sized class is likely to have contributed significantly to the improvement in the students’ writing skills.

TABLE 5. Results of TOEIC® Writing Tests

	Min.	Mean	Max.	SD
October	70.0	132.3	160.0	21.1
January	110.0	144.2	170.0	19.5

TABLE 6. Results of TOEIC® Speaking Tests

	Min.	Mean	Max.	SD
October	50.0	102.5	160.0	20.0
January	50.0	96.0	140.0	17.7

TOEIC® Speaking Test Results

In contrast to the writing test results, when we look at the TOEIC® Speaking results we find that the average score for the second test was lower than that of the first test (Table 6), although there was no significant difference between the two tests ($t(56) = -2.696$). These results are perhaps unsurprising; although students were provided with opportunities for speaking, the classes were strongly focused on improving writing skills in a short period of time, and we would not necessarily expect much if any effect on speaking scores from writing classes.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we discuss the validity of the speaking and writing tests, teacher and student satisfaction with the HiSPEC course, and the pedagogical implications of our findings.

Validity of TOEIC® Speaking and Writing Tests

The validity of the TOEIC speaking and writing tests – the extent to which these tests provide an accurate measurement of learners’ “real world” speaking and writing skills – has been considered in previous articles (Uenishi et al., 2017; 2018). Much of the focus of a speaking class is on interaction; TOEIC® Speaking, however, is computer-based, and does not involve communicative exchanges between real people. On the other hand, the content of TOEIC® Writing is likely to correspond much more closely with what teachers think is valuable to teach; for example, the opinion essay part of the test involves organizing and communicating an argument, which is an important academic skill. In addition, written communication, where a message is often written and sent, is more suited to computer-based testing. TOEIC® Writing does, therefore, seem to have much greater validity in measuring students’ writing ability than TOEIC® Speaking

does with regard to speaking ability.

Teacher and Student Satisfaction

Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction for both teachers and students relating to the HiSPEC Writing course. This, we can assume, was in a large part due to small-size classes of students with an aptitude for English, along with the appropriateness of the course content and level of difficulty.

Although responses to TOEIC® S&W varied, teachers were far more resistant to TOEIC® Speaking than TOEIC® Writing; consequently, they were relieved that the speaking test did not constitute part of the HiSPEC Speaking course. Within the teaching group there were sometimes strongly divergent opinions on the value of TOEIC® Writing. However, it was accommodated by most of the teachers for the HiSPEC Writing course.

Implications for Teaching

Clearly, there is an affective factor in the creation of small-sized classes of students with good language skills; teachers and students alike were satisfied with the courses, finding them both enjoyable and motivating.

As mentioned in Results and Analysis, it is interesting to find that while there was no significant difference between the two TOEIC® Speaking test scores, there was a significant difference between the scores of the TOEIC® Writing tests. One possible explanation for the TOEIC® Writing results may be that, with students' limited experience of sending emails and writing essays in English, some good basic instruction and familiarization with the format and content of the writing test is sufficient to lead to higher test scores. Regarding TOEIC® Speaking, to the majority of teachers this seemed incongruous during a course that was oriented towards writing. We have noted that in HiSPEC 2016, its style of questions did not fit with teachers' aims and conceptions of oral communication in English, and they strongly questioned its validity as a measure of English speaking skills. It was generally ignored in 2017, so that teachers could focus on writing skills. The classes show that HiSPEC Writing did not lead to any increased scores for TOEIC® Speaking.

A further issue relates to technology, especially the use of computers for the tests. Students accustomed to keyboard typing in English are likely to have an advantage in computer-based tests, and writing tests especially. Although some students were given practice in this, others were not. Therefore, it is possible that some students' scores may have been affected by their inability to work quickly in English on a computer. To address this problem students should be given sufficient opportunities to use PCs in class and bring their typing skills up to scratch.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have reported on the small-size English writing classes incorporating TOEIC® S&W tests, and investigated the effects of these classes on students' English abilities, especially their writing skills, and their motivation to learn English.

Regarding teacher and student satisfaction, our findings for the course are positive: Most of the students were satisfied with all aspects of the course, including class size, class activities, and materials. There is clearly an affective factor involved in the creation of small classes of motivated students with good language skills. The small class size enabled teachers to get to know their students better, and provide much more

advice and encouragement to individuals, along with more detailed feedback.

Regarding TOEIC® Speaking, given the timing of the tests in HiSPEC 2017, it is not surprising that there was no increase in test scores. Also, several teachers considered its questions to be too contrived, and this was compounded by the requirement of speaking to a computer rather than a human being. In the case of HiSPEC, the TOEIC® Speaking tasks clashed with the values of the HiSPEC teachers, and for most teachers, the students' results did not reflect their English communication skills.

Regarding the TOEIC® Writing test results, a significant difference was found between the results of the two tests. This indicates that it is possible for students to improve their writing ability over a short period of time. Adequate test preparation and/or appropriate learning content may have contributed to this improvement. Consequently, there are implications for future writing courses which incorporate tests such as TOEIC® Writing or use them for assessment.

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APPENDIX 1. The TOEIC® S&W Test

As its name implies, the TOEIC® S&W test consists of two parts: TOEIC® Speaking, and TOEIC® Writing.

TOEIC® Speaking Content

As shown in Table 2, the TOEIC® Speaking Test consists of six sections with 11 questions. The total time allowed for the test is approximately 20 minutes. All the examinee responses are recorded on a computer and scored by multiple evaluators. Students receive scores on a scale ranging from 0 to 200.

TOEIC® Speaking Test Content

Task (Number of items)	Response time	General outline of task	Assessment	Scale
Read a text aloud (2)	45 secs. per item (Prep time: 45 secs. per item)	Test-taker reads aloud a short text, such as an announcement or advertisement.	Pronunciation, Intonation and Accent	0-3
Describe a picture (1)	45 secs. (Prep time: 30 secs. per item)	Test-taker gives a verbal description of a photograph.	In addition to everything above, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Cohesion	0-3
Response to questions (3)	15 or 30 secs. (Prep time: none)	Test-taker responds to questions on a commonplace topic, as if responding in an interview.	In addition to everything above, Content validity and Content completeness	0-3
Response to questions using information provided (3)	15 or 30 secs. (Prep time: none)	Test-taker responds to questions based on written information (such as a schedule of events) that appears on the screen.	Everything above	0-3
Propose a solution (1)	60 secs. (Prep time: 30 secs)	Test-taker listens to a voice mail message describing a problem and gives a response. In the response, the test-taker indicates recognition of the problem and proposes a solution.	Everything above	0-5
Express an opinion (1)	60 secs. (Prep time: 15 secs)	Test-taker expresses an opinion about a specific topic and the reasons for that opinion.		0-5

Note: The contents of this table are based on information obtained from the following sites:

<http://www.toeic.or.jp/english/speaking/about/tests.html>

<http://www.toeic.or.jp/sw/about/tests.html>

TOEIC® Writing Content

The TOEIC® Writing is a computer based test and takes approximately one hour. As Table 3 shows, it consists of the following three main sections:

- (1) Students are asked to look at a photograph and write a sentence that includes two words on display just below the picture. Students answer five such items (10 minutes in total).
- (2) Students must read an email and reply to it (two items, 10 minutes each).
- (3) Students must write an opinion essay (one item, 30 minutes).

All the examinee responses are typed on a computer and scored by multiple evaluators. Students receive scores, from 0 to 200.

TOEIC® Writing Test Content

Question	Task	Evaluation Criteria
1 to 5	Write a sentence based on a picture	Grammar Relevance of the sentences to the pictures
6 & 7	Respond to a written request	Quality and variety of sentences Vocabulary Organization
8	Write an opinion essay	Whether opinion is supported with reasons and/or examples Grammar Vocabulary Organization

ABSTRACT

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This article builds upon previous research investigating the integration of the TOEIC® Speaking and Writing test with small group classes. The program, HiSPEC, is designed to raise the English abilities of first-year students with the best English skills in their respective faculties. The focus of the article is on teachers' feedback to the 2017 HiSPEC Writing course, students' responses to a questionnaire survey, and the students' TOEIC® S&W test results.

Our findings show that there was a high level of satisfaction for both teachers and students in relation to the HiSPEC Writing course, and that HiSPEC Writing classes were well-regarded by the students in terms of class size, class activities, and materials. Also, regarding the results of the TOEIC® Writing tests held at the beginning and end of the semester, considerable improvement was found in the students' scores. However, with respect to TOEIC® Speaking test scores, no increase was found.

要 約

TOEIC S&W テストを少人数クラスに統合した 2 年目のプログラムの評価

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本論文は、2年間連続で実施した少人数クラスで行われた TOEIC[®]S&W テストの調査研究の上に、更なる研究を行ったものである。HiSPEC というプログラムは、各学部 1 年時の英語力トップクラスの学生に対して提供されたもので、英語力向上の支援を目的としたものである。本論文の焦点は、HiSPEC ライティング授業に対する教師のフィードバック、アンケート調査に対する学生の反応、及び TOEIC[®]S&W の結果である。

結果として、HiSPEC ライティング授業に関して、教師も学生も高い満足度があり、HiSPEC ライティング授業は学生にとって十分意味あるものであることがわかった。また、10 月と 1 月の間に TOEIC ライティングスコアにかなりの向上が見られた。しかし、TOEIC スピーキングに関しては、その向上は見られなかった。