



Title	Construction of a framework for offering the TOEFL iBT? on campus
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Citation	サイバーメディア・フォーラム. 2016, 17, p. 27-32
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/70409
rights	
Note	

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Construction of a framework for offering the TOEFL iBT® on campus

Junko Takefuta (Cybermedia Center)

1. Introduction

The phrase “global human resources” appears constantly nowadays; however, it has a relatively short history, having become widely used only over the last five years. The Interim Report of the Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development defined the global human resources concept as comprising the following components:

Factor 1: Linguistic and communication skills

Factor 2: Self-direction and positiveness,

encompassing a spirit of challenge, cooperation, and flexibility and a sense of responsibility and mission

Factor 3: Understanding of other cultures and a sense of one’s identity as Japanese

(Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2011, p. 9)

In this context, foreign language proficiency is clearly indispensable to the global human resources concept, although it may be insufficient by itself. Therefore, to nurture these human resources, the same Interim Report recommended a year or more of overseas study.

In 2014, Osaka University was selected to participate in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology’s (MEXT) “Top Global University Project.” Our university began various reform efforts, including increasing the number of our foreign researchers, exchange students, and the number of courses offered in English. As part of the same initiative, considering overseas study, the university aimed at doubling the percentage of students studying abroad from 4 percent to 8 percent by 2020.

Our university has concluded student exchange agreements with 19 schools in English-speaking countries; however, several of those schools require a minimum TOEFL iBT® score of 79 (of a possible 120).

The same 79-point minimum is also a prerequisite for applying to any type of scholarship.

In this report, I will examine the TOEFL—success in which is virtually indispensable for overseas study in English-speaking countries—from multiple angles, and I will examine the construction and significance of a framework for offering the TOEFL iBT on campus.

2. About the TOEFL test

2.1 TOEFL iBT and TOEFL ITP

In this section, I will provide a brief outline of the TOEFL and discuss its credibility and practicality. All over the world, 9,000 educational institutions in 130 countries use the TOEFL as a selection criterion while accepting exchange students (Educational Testing Service, 2015). In fact, all English-speaking universities with which our university has established exchange agreements require submission of a TOEFL or IELTS score (International Student Affairs Division, 2015). Therefore, the TOEFL could be referred to as a necessary checkpoint for those wishing to study in the English-speaking world. Furthermore, given the TOEFL’s high adoption rate worldwide, a high score on this test is a readily acknowledged indicator of the test taker’s English proficiency.

The TOEFL is of two types: the TOEFL Internet-based test (iBT) and the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP). The former is the official TOEFL test, whereas the latter is designed for use by organizations that recycle previous TOEFL paper-based test (PBT) questions. At our university, it has been essential for first-year undergraduate students to attempt the TOEFL ITP almost every year since 2003. The Educational Testing Service (2013) has released a Score Comparison Table that enables the comparison of the two tests. However, TOEFL ITP results are not recognized as

official scores and cannot be used by those wishing to study abroad.

As for the test content, both are billed as “100% academically focused, measuring the kind of English used in academic settings (Educational Testing Service, 2015).” However, the TOEFL iBT is a more comprehensive test as it “measures the ability to communicate by combining, or integrating, all four language skills, that is, listening, reading, speaking, and writing,” whereas the TOEFL PBT comprises only three parts, Listening, Structure and Written Expression, and Reading and does not test “productive skills” such as speaking or writing.

With regard to the reliability of the test, we can consider the standard error of measurement (SEM) as previously released by the ETS. The SEM represents the range of potential deviation from a test taker’s initial score if the same individual, while still possessing the same abilities as in the initial attempt, re-attempted the test; the smaller the standard error, the smaller the expected degree of change between testing instances, thereby indicating that the test is a more reliable assessment of actual ability.

The SEM of the TOEFL iBT (score range 0 to 120) is 5.28. This indicates that a test taker who received a TOEFL iBT score of 70 could expect to attain a score of 64.72 to 75.28 should he or she re-attempt the test before his or her abilities either improved or declined. In addition, the SEM of the TOEFL PBT (score range 310 to 677) is 14. Compared to other tests offered previously such as the G-TELP (SEM 5.8, score range 0 to 100) and the TOEIC Bridge (SEM 8, score range 1 to 180), the TOEFL demonstrates a high degree of reliability.

Some people, however, avoid the TOEFL iBT on practical grounds; the TOEFL PBT has a ¥4,000 test fee and requires approximately 2 hours to complete, whereas the TOEFL iBT comes with a \$230 (≒ ¥25,000) price tag, requires 4.5 hours, and is offered at only a few locations in Osaka Prefecture. Nonetheless, from a global perspective, given the iBT’s high adoption rate, high

reliability, and wide official acceptance, there are clearly significant benefits to obtaining a high TOEFL iBT score. Thus, both tests should be used according to their intended functions and each test taker’s circumstances.

2.2 Osaka University students’ English proficiency levels

The National Center Test for University Admissions introduced an English listening test in the 2006 academic year. The message behind this decision is clear, as stated in the center’s educational guidelines: if a student, along with vocabulary and grammar skills, does not also possess the ability to participate in the exchange of thoughts and information facilitated by spoken language—in other words, if the student is not fundamentally competent in communication—that student cannot study abroad. In addition, there has been a demand for considerable change in how English-language coursework is conducted in Japanese high schools. It is presumed that, owing to these changes, students preparing for university entrance examinations will adjust their study approaches and therefore more students entering our university will have a high degree of listening comprehension.

Against this backdrop, I examined the TOEFL PBT scores obtained by first-year undergraduate students at our university in six different years to determine the changes that have occurred after the establishment of the new National Center Test for University Admissions listening test. The results, shown in Table 1, indicate that students’ average scores have increased since 2003. However, since these fluctuations fall within an SEM of 14, one cannot conclude that the listening skill or overall English proficiency of first-year undergraduate students has greatly improved.

2.3 Conception of overseas study

We also administered a survey questionnaire on overseas study to 91 first-year undergraduates in engineering-related departments in April 2015. The survey was

Table 1

Changes in TOEFL ITP scores among first-year students at Osaka University

Test date	Average TOEFL ITP score	
	Total score	Listening Section score
Sep. 2003	467.5	43.3
July 2004	468.7	43.5
July 2005	474.3	44.5
July 2006	477.5	45.5
Nov. 2012	479.7	47.0
Nov. 2013	490.4	45.9

(Source: Kimura & Mori, 2004–2014)

conducted immediately after matriculation and therefore students provided the responses before they attempted the TOEFL.

Japanese “introversion” is said to have steadily intensified over the past decade, but when asked if they would like to study abroad, a surprising 57 respondents (62.6%) answered affirmatively. However, more than half of these respondents expressed interest only in short-term overseas study; only 28 of the 91 respondents (30.8%) were interested in the “long-term overseas study of roughly one year” recommended by the university and MEXT.

When those who did not want to study abroad were asked to provide reasons for the same, a significant majority of them (65.0%) selected “Because I am not confident in my language skills.” Respondents chose this answer more frequently than any other options, including financial reasons. The reasons frequently cited by introverted students, such as “I’ve never had any interest in studying abroad” or “I can’t see the value in it,” were not obstacles to this survey’s respondents. Furthermore, when asked about the kind of support they required for overseas study, the second most common answer was support in language study, after information for study-abroad preparation. Regarding the kind of information that respondents sought about overseas study, alongside “local security information,” 80.2% wanted to know “how high the required language level was at the

host institution.”

About two months after responding to this questionnaire, the 91 students attempted the TOEFL ITP on campus. When surveyed again after the test, 82.4% answered that “the test was much harder than I imagined” or “I realized my English skills are not where they need to be”; the other 17.6% responded that “as expected, I couldn’t handle it.” In other words, a vast majority of the students had overestimated their English abilities. Incidentally, the average score obtained by these 91 students was 476 points, with the following section-wise breakdown: 44 in Listening, 49 in Structure and Written Expression, and 50 in Reading. Among all the first-year engineering students, only 2.1% scored 550 points or more and only 0.3% scored 600 points or above.

These survey results and TOEFL scores suggest that apprehension about language abilities and lack of self-confidence are major impediments to pursuing overseas study. It is also apparent that university students should be made aware of their current English proficiency level soon after matriculation, or they will waste their time owing to an improper grasp of their skills and inability to set appropriate goals. By realizing that failure to earn a high score on the TOEFL would prevent them from being exchange students and that they would have to study English seriously and determinedly for the next couple of years to achieve their study-abroad goals could help students establish reasonable plans and pathways to achieve eventual TOEFL success.

3. Preparing a framework to offer the TOEFL iBT on campus

English ability, knowledge of a specialized field, motivation, and financial strength are indispensable to successful overseas study. Among these prerequisites, the English instructor’s primary responsibility is to develop students’ English skills so that they meet or exceed the host universities’ required levels (Takefuta, 2013; Yonaha & Takefuta, 2013).

One of the complaints that I, as a university English instructor, frequently hear from my students is “Even if I want to take the TOEFL iBT, there aren’t many test sites, so it’s difficult to get a seat.” When I visited the official TOEFL website and searched for testing locations for a specific date, I found that the closest site available for Osaka residents was in Mie Prefecture, approximately 130 km away, because the test sites in Osaka City were already full. Therefore, drawing on my dual role as both an English faculty member and an administrator of the computer rooms in the university’s Cybermedia Center, I reached out to other faculty members in fall 2014 and aimed to acquire the necessary budget to offer the TOEFL iBT on our campus.

3.1 Benefits of offering the TOEFL iBT on campus

In March 2015, pursuant to the above-mentioned request, a budget was allocated to make the necessary adjustments that would allow students to attempt the TOEFL iBT—a global standard in English language assessment—in our computer rooms, in furtherance of the university’s goal to cultivate global human resources. As already noted, students have had to travel at least to Osaka City and, in worst-case scenarios, more than 100 km to reach an available TOEFL iBT test center. In contrast, attempting the test at one’s own university, in a familiar building and classroom, is less stressful than a first-time visit to an unfamiliar test center, thus it is easier for students to focus on the test itself. Moreover, as a school-based test center, the university reserves the right to offer the official test exclusively to people affiliated with the university, which is another major benefit for our students.

3.2 Obstacles to TOEFL iBT implementation

Although we acquired the budget to set up TOEFL iBT testing, some problems remained. Up until 2013, the university simply provided the testing area and ETS bore sole responsibility for test preparation and administration; however, the main challenge began when

from 2014 onward all matters previously handled by ETS became the responsibility of the testing site. This change in test administration policy constituted a sharp increase in the university’s burden. Now it is essential to have ETS-trained test proctors on hand, manage several computer setup sessions prior to the test, and take responsibility for equipment troubleshooting. Those involved in the testing procedures had to seriously consider how best to structure the test’s administrative framework to handle these various responsibilities.

Second, as ETS did not release the number of people who have registered for the test in advance, it was difficult to estimate the number of test takers on each test day. Therefore, neither was it possible to predict the revenue generated by test takers nor could we know how many proctors should be assigned to the testing area until immediately prior to the test.

3.3 Moving toward TOEFL iBT implementation: Establishing an administrative framework

Our university had previously functioned as a TOEFL iBT test center, but the computer room that had served as the test site upgraded to thin client computers in 2011. According to ETS regulations, the TOEFL iBT cannot be administered on computers with a network-booting OS, such as thin clients, so we had to withdraw as a testing site. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, as of 2014 universities were responsible for all matters pertaining to test implementation and administration, including computer setup, periodic computer checks, and test site management. It appears that the majority of universities withdrew as test sites in response to these changes. The only national university corporation still serving as a test site was Hokkaido University, we therefore decided to learn from that university’s experience while we constructed our own administrative framework.

From our interviews with Hokkaido University staff, we learned that they believed it would be difficult for university faculty to handle both test implementation and

administration alone, so they entrusted this activity to the university consumer cooperative association and worked with the co-op and ETS on administrative issues. After some internal deliberation, we decided to organize our university's framework similarly, based on the collaboration of three departments: the Graduate School of Language and Culture, School of Foreign Studies, and Cybermedia Center. These departments would issue instructions for test-day decisions, testing area arrangements, public relations, and administration, but the actual implementation and administration, including public relations, computer setup, and other related duties, would be entrusted to the co-op.

3.4 Implementation of the first test

Although our university's discussions with ETS began in April 2015, the administrative framework was established and the working partnership between the co-op and ETS was concluded only by mid-January 2016. The only day on which we could offer the TOEFL iBT, given our university's entrance exam and spring vacation schedules, was February 28, leaving us an extremely slim time margin; we threw ourselves energetically into publicity. We publicized the test through the university website, the academic affairs information system's bulletin board, campus television, the co-op's e-mail newsletter, and each department's faculty meetings. When I announced the details of the test in my English classes, students who wanted to study abroad showed an interest, but some obstacles still persisted, such as that the test date was fast approaching and that test takers were generally required to present a passport as identification.

As this was our first trial in entrusting implementation of the TOEFL iBT to the university co-op, we opened registration only to people affiliated with the university so as to reduce the risk of problems. Therefore, we were concerned about attracting a sufficient number of test takers, but within approximately two weeks, 12 people applied and 10 of

them ultimately attempted the test.

4. Conclusion

As an English instructor at this university, which was selected to participate in MEXT's "Top Global University Project" and which actively encourages students to study abroad, I have examined in this report the construction and implications of a framework allowing us to offer the TOEFL iBT—an almost universal requirement for overseas study—on campus. The development of this plan considered our first-year undergraduates' TOEFL ITP scores, student survey results, and other factors. We found that the major impediments to overseas study were students' general apprehension about their English abilities and their lack of self-confidence. Furthermore, we discovered the importance of making students aware of their actual current English proficiency level soon after matriculation so that they may set realistic goals and prepare effectively.

Given these results, as members of the university's English faculty and administrators of the Cybermedia Center's computer rooms, we made an internal budget request and were allocated a budget in March 2015. This enabled us to make the necessary preparations required to offer the TOEFL iBT in the university's computer rooms, in furtherance of our global human resource development objectives. The first TOEFL iBT test was held on February 28, 2016, and although we had only two weeks to promote the opportunity, 10 people attempted the test on that date. Judging from the feedback of students interested in studying abroad who have spoken with me directly and have asserted that although they were unprepared to attempt the test immediately, they would definitely like to take it this summer or next year, it would appear that we have a considerable number of potential test takers on campus. Considering the above, if we offer the test in summer, when more people are said to attempt the TOEFL, and if we have a significantly longer time available for

promotion, we can expect to draw enough students to fill the available seats rapidly. Since our two computer rooms equipped to offer the TOEFL can accommodate approximately 90 test takers, the potential revenue from testing fees could be sufficient for the co-op tasked with test administration to achieve a profit. Furthermore, in the event of higher demand from our own students, we could choose, as we did this time, to offer registration only to people affiliated with the university. Doing so would further enhance the justification for the university's effort to make its computer rooms available as testing sites.

Yonaha & Takefuta (2013) compared a group of students who had achieved a rather high degree of English proficiency (average TOEIC score of 838) to another group with an average TOEIC score of only 685, finding that the latter group was unable to gain much benefit from study abroad. Moreover, when the latter group returned home from their study abroad, their test scores did not show significant improvement; on the contrary, their scores were even lower than the former group's average score. In other words, to make the most of a student's exchange program experience, it is important (1) to establish the student's English proficiency prior to planning for overseas study and (2) to solidify a sense of purpose regarding what the student intends to do and accomplish in the host nation. I believe that we English instructors must impress upon our students the desire to go overseas along with the importance of devoting a concerted effort to improving their English proficiency beforehand so that they can make the most of their overseas experience. This would represent an important step toward cultivating true global talent.

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- This article is a revised and edited version of the following paper: Takefuta, J. (2016) Construction and significance of a framework for offering the TOEFL iBT® on campus (pp.15-23). In N. Hino (Ed.) *Saishin no eigo kyouiku kenkyu [Latest English education research]*. Osaka: Graduate School of Language and Culture, Osaka University.