

## **Adapting Classroom Activities to Prepare Students for English Language Tests**

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### **Abstract**

For many EFL students, standardized English language tests are extremely important. They may need them to study, work or live abroad, while a particular score may result in more educational opportunities, or increase the chances of being hired or given a raise. The most significant tests for EFL students in Japan are IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC and Eiken (Baughn, 2021). It is therefore important that language teachers are aware of these tests, are able to advise students on their content and can use activities in the classroom which assist students in preparing for such exams. This paper introduces the key aspects of each of these four tests and looks at how, based on my own experience, certain classroom activities can be adapted to assist students in preparing for such assessments. Specifically, the usefulness of self- and peer-assessment is emphasized, allowing the students themselves to become examiners.

### **Introduction**

All students who choose to study English beyond mandatory education have a reason for doing so. They may wish to make friends from other countries, be able to help foreign visitors or perhaps they simply enjoy using the language. However, for many learners their goals will involve either the desire to spend time abroad, or because a certain level of English language ability will benefit their career. For almost all of these learners, achieving a particular score on an English proficiency test is essential, and thus English language tests “play a dominant role in the world today” (Shohamy, 2007, p. 521).

Given the importance of these tests to so many students, teachers of EFL have a responsibility to be informed of their content. It is true that in higher education the focus internationally has shifted more to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) rather than exclusively preparing students for assessment (Spada, 2007; Brandl, 2021), but these two areas do not need to be mutually exclusive. It is possible to both develop communicative competence while also helping

students to be more “test-ready”. It is argued by some (Miller, 2003; Barnes, 2016) that simply focusing on assisting students with improving their speaking, reading, writing and listening in a general course will naturally result in higher test scores, and it may even have negative effects to focus on test preparation rather than acquiring general language skills. While this may be true to some extent, there are two issues with this argument. First, overall language proficiency does not always mean that a learner will get the score they expect on a test. This is because test-taking is itself a skill, and there is evidence that students gain confidence and can benefit generally by engaging in test preparation (Green, 2007; Pan, 2010). Moreover, tests can vary considerably. For example, students who score highly on the TOEIC listening and reading test, which is the focused more on adults aiming to improve employment opportunities (IIBC, n.d.a), sometimes receive a much lower equivalent score on tests like TOEFL and IELTS, which require all four language skills. Thus, the particularities of each test need to be considered. Second, students often ask their teachers for advice about the tests they wish to take, even if this is not a primary focus of their EFL class. It is the duty of EFL instructors to be able to advise their students appropriately, and this in turn requires knowledge of the most taken English language tests.

This paper first outlines the key features of IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC and Eiken, which are four of the most important and taken tests by students in Japan. Following this the main features of EFL classrooms that I have encountered in higher education in Japan are identified, as well as what aspects are lacking which may be relevant in helping students with English language tests. I have worked full-time at three institutions in Japan and have worked part-time at several universities across the Aichi area, so the experiences mentioned will be based on those encounters. After that, relevant activities which may be integrated into current EFL classrooms in higher education are proposed, with a particular focus on self- and peer-assessment. The proposed activities are based on those I have tested myself in the classroom, but their effectiveness is measured only by personal observations, with no empirical research yet conducted on them. Finally, the paper concludes with the drawbacks of the recommended activities and gives an overall assessment of the role such activities could play in the EFL classroom.

### **Four Key Tests**

Although there are many English language tests, the four chosen for analysis in this paper were selected due to their prevalence in Japan. IELTS and TOEFL are the two most popular

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international standardized English language tests in the country, while TOEIC and Eiken, although less taken internationally, are the two most popular English tests in the country overall, with over six million taking the tests in 2019 (Eiken, 2019; IIBC, 2020).

### ***IELTS***

The International English Testing System (IELTS) may be the most taken English language test in the world, with over 3.5 million test takers worldwide in 2019 (IELTS, 2019), although it is less popular in Japan than the other tests mentioned. IELTS scores are valid for up to two years, and the test is a recognized means of proving one's English proficiency level in over 11,000 academic and training institutions (IELTS, n.d.). The test has both academic and general versions. The former is far more commonly taken, as it is required for higher education and jobs, while the general test is usually just for those who wish to live abroad. The test itself consists of four sections covering the four main language skills, and lasts approximately three hours. The speaking test is done face-to-face in an interview and discussion style. Scores on the test range from one (the lowest) to nine (the highest). The test is still usually taken on paper, although computer and online versions are becoming more common. It is an expensive test to take, costing over 25,000 yen for Japanese test takers (British Council, n.d.).

### ***TOEFL***

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is, along with IELTS, the foremost English language test worldwide. It has slightly fewer annual test takers than IELTS at over 2.3 million, but it is similarly recognized and accepted by 11,500 institutions and over 160 countries around the world for academic and visa purposes (ETS, n.d.a). The most popular version of TOEFL is iBT, which is the internet-based form of the test. Like IELTS, it tests all four language skills, but they differ in the delivery of the speaking test, which for TOEFL is done via a computer, where the test-taker is given spoken tasks to do. Scores range from 0 to 120 for TOEFL iBT, and it is slightly more expensive than IELTS at around 28,000 yen (ETS, n.d.b).

### ***TOEIC***

Unlike IELTS and TOEFL, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is less utilized internationally, and is instead a test predominantly taken in Japan and South Korea. There are two versions of the test, one of which includes listening and reading while the other is for writing and speaking, but the former is chosen by the vast majority of test takers. All

questions on the TOEIC test are multiple choice, and the highest possible score is 990. Vocabulary knowledge is an especially important part of the TOEIC test, and as such it is commonly required in Japanese companies where an ability to comprehend business English expressions is especially sought after (IIBC, n.d.b). Another reason for the popularity of the test in Japan is its relative affordability in comparison to other English language tests, with the current cost of taking the test at 7,810 yen (IIBC, n.d.c).

### ***STEP Eiken***

While TOEIC has an international presence despite the fact it is only widely used in the East Asia, Eiken (meaning “Test in Practical English Proficiency”) is a purely Japanese test, although it can be used as proof of one’s English level at some institutions internationally (EIKEN, n.d.a). The lower-level tests are commonly taken by Japanese children from elementary school, and the test has seven “steps” (grades) from 5 (the easiest) up to 1 (the most difficult). The higher-level versions of the test – pre-2, 2, pre-1 and 1, are generally taken by those in high school or above. The questions on each grade of Eiken vary, but it is only from Grade Pre-2 that all four skills of writing, speaking, listening and reading are included. Unlike the aforementioned three tests, Eiken has a pass or fail format. The cost of taking the test varies depending on the age and level of the test taker, ranging from 900 yen to as much as 12,600 yen (Eiken, n.d.b)

### ***CEFR***

As English language tests measure their results in different ways, it is difficult to accurately assess the equivalent scores across the four tests mentioned. However, using the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR), a guided estimate can be made. The CEFR is widely used internationally as a measure of language proficiency, and has six levels ranging from A1 (basic user) to C2 (proficient user) (Council of Europe, n.d.). Table 1 (next page) illustrates how IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC and Eiken scores compare across the CEFR levels.

**Table 1**

*Standardized EFL Test Scoring on the CEFR Scale*

<b>CEFR</b>	<b>IELTS</b>	<b>TOEFL (iBT)</b>	<b>TOEIC</b>	<b>Eiken</b>
A1 (Basic user)	2	0-31	120 - 215	5 - 3
A2 (Basic user)	3		220 - 540	Pre-2
B1 (Independent user)	3.5 - 5.5	32 – 59	545 - 775	2
B2 (Independent User)	5.5 - 7	60 - 101	780 - 945	Pre-1
C1 (Proficient User)	7 - 8	102 - 120	950 - 990	1
C2 (Proficient User)	8 - 9			

**What We Do and Do Not Cover in EFL Classrooms**

This section is focused primarily on EFL teaching at the university level. This is because it is only when students move into their late teens that all of the four tests mentioned above become relevant for students. This is also a section which is taken mostly from my own personal experience of teaching at the university level, and so the observations may not be applicable to all those working in other academic institutions. However, since CLT is now accepted as the predominant method of EFL instruction in most higher education settings (Spada, 2007), there are suggestions here which may be more widely applicable.

***What We Do Cover***

My own experiences with English language teaching have mostly seen CLT as the dominant teaching methodology. As CLT focuses heavily on discussion as a means of developing proficiency, talking in pairs and groups is extremely common in the university EFL classrooms I have encountered. Presentations and recorded conversations are, in my experience, two of the most common forms of evaluation when it comes to speaking. The other skills of reading,

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listening and writing are covered to some extent in general English classes in higher education, but English majors are likely to have separate classes which focus on each skill individually as well. For listening, this will often involve hearing a conversation several times, with comprehension questions and discussion questions following. With reading, intensive reading is prevalent at universities, with each text comprehensively covered. Students are often expected to do the reading at home, with class time reserved for comprehension and discussion. Finally, with writing classes students tend to write essays over several drafts. These drafts may include one which receives peer feedback from a classmate, and another which receives teacher feedback. The focus is on producing an accurate and complete final product.

### *What We Do Not Cover*

All of the teaching methods discussed above are valid for assisting students with their English learning, but they do miss out some aspects of English use which are vital when taking English language tests. With speaking practice, I have observed that an interview or task-style of speaking, where students are simply asked questions one after the other or given specific speaking tasks within a set time limit, are relatively rare in university classrooms. Because the discussion-based speaking activities prevalent in CLT emphasize a freer and less structured style of speaking, they differ from what is expected in the speaking sections of tests like IELTS, TOEFL and Eiken. As for listening, test takers are frequently only allowed one or two opportunities to hear the recording, but in university classes students will often have multiple chances to listen. Moreover, the listening sections of tests like IELTS and TOEFL get progressively more difficult as the test continues, something which is rarely replicated in the university EFL classrooms I have come across. With reading, as students usually do their reading tasks at home, they do not have a strict time limit. However, time limits are a key part of English language tests, and it is common for test takers to run out of time in the reading section. The same is true of writing practice, where students at university are given weeks or months to produce finished essay drafts, while they are given minutes or hours to do so during language tests. Lastly, references and citations are commonly required in written essays for university work, but they are not necessary in English language tests.

### **Classroom Activities**

Integrating classroom activities that can assist students with English language tests can be achieved by covering some of the gaps noted above. A key concept that may be beneficial is the idea of making the student the examiner. This is a form of peer- or self-assessment, which has been shown to have great benefits to both student learning and understanding of their own proficiency level (Adachi et al., 2018). There is even some evidence that peer- and self-assessment may result in greater improvements for students than teacher feedback (Bowman, 2017). The following two activities use the concept of making the student into an examiner in order to improve their preparedness for English language tests.

**Activity 1: Speaking Self/Peer Examining.** With this activity, the student takes on the role of examiner to assess the performance of either themselves, their peer or a third party via a video recording. Although peer assessment in speaking activities is common at university level, standardizing the conditions and scoring is not. The student-examiners would be given criteria by which to assess the test taker, and this could follow the conditions of a relevant test such as the IELTS, TOEFL or Eiken speaking tests, all of which have public versions of their evaluation criteria. The students would then give themselves, their classmate or the third party a score along with an explanation as to why their score matches the relevant criteria for that level. Repeating this process over several iterations with the teacher monitoring and giving feedback would result in greater standardization, and this would in turn give students a better idea of their own proficiency level.

There are limitations to this approach. As Joo (2016) explains, student-examiners face more challenges than professional examiners as they have “limited proficiency in the language” and “lack of anonymity”. However, there is significant evidence that self- and peer-assessment of one’s speaking can enhance one’s speaking ability (Joo, 2016). Moreover, Huang (2016) found that self- and peer-assessment has “great potential for learning and instruction” (p. 803). It is clear that for the conditions for standardized learner self- and peer-assessment must be thoroughly prepared. According to Joo (2016), these include “the clear provision of task-related criteria, sufficient training, considerations of the learners’ traits and their perception, as well as the strong integration with the curriculum” (p. 80). With these conditions met, it is possible for self- or peer-assessment in a standardized format to be successfully integrated into the language classroom.

**Activity 2: Writing Self/Peer Assessment**

Like the speaking self- and peer-examining just described, this activity would involve assessment of one’s writing not by the teacher, but by the student themselves or a classmate. In contrast to the kind of peer review that is common in universities when students write drafts of their essays, the writing activity would follow the format of the writing section of an English language test. Perhaps the most straightforward to utilize would be that of the Eiken test, as it involves the writing of 120-150 words answering an essay question in 20 minutes. An example a task question is given in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Example Eiken Writing Test: Pre-1 Level*

<p><b>Write 120-150 words on this topic. You have 20 minutes to write your answer.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write an essay on the given topic.</li> <li>• Use TWO of the points below to support your answer.</li> <li>• Structure: introduction, main body, and conclusion</li> <li>• Suggested length: 120-150 words</li> </ul>
<p><b>TOPIC: Agree or Disagree / University education should be free</b></p>
<p><b>POINTS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Getting a job</li> <li>• Student debt</li> <li>• University funding</li> </ul>

Giving a time limit, as well as no time beforehand to research the topic question, would match the conditions one encounters when writing in an English language test. Once the students have finished writing, they would assess their own and each other’s work based on the criteria given by the teacher, which once more could follow one of the publicly available band descriptors from the English language tests already mentioned. The students would thus become more experienced at writing under the pressures of test-like conditions, as well as gaining a greater understanding of their writing proficiency. As with the speaking activity, there have been studies which have suggested standardized self- and peer-assessment of one’s writing can improve the proficiency of learners, such as the one by Mazloomi and Khabri (2018).



## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the different English language tests that Japanese students often take, identified gaps in higher education in terms of preparation for language tests and suggested relevant activities which can aid test preparation. It is not an exaggeration to say that the scores learners achieve on these tests can often determine their futures, so it is vital that language teachers are able to help them to achieve their goals.

Nevertheless, there are drawbacks to focusing students too much on proficiency level via the activities outlined in this paper. First, the students may become demotivated by comparing their own proficiency level to others. Moreover, not all students will require a certain score on English language tests, and may not see the relevance in engaging in activities which focus on preparing them for such exams. Lastly, there is the issue that concentrating too much on one's score may have a negative impact on the more important goal of acquiring language through practice, and that teachers should instead focus on engaging students in the process of acquiring general language skills (Barnes, 2016). However, these problems are not insurmountable. If the activities are made enjoyable and not given the pressure that a real test entails, this may assist with student motivation when they are undertaken. In terms of students comparing themselves to others, this often happens in classes anyway, and can be avoided somewhat in the activities suggested by using videos of third parties and assessing their work rather than using self- or peer-assessment. As for the assertion that the focus should be on acquisition via practice rather than preparing for tests, it is recommended that these activities be incorporated into courses as supplementary tasks, rather than primary aspects of a course. As Wang et al. (2014) put it, "teachers...assimilate more communicative language content into the teaching because of the positive washback from test preparation". Thus, CLT and test preparation can coexist.

The activities outlined in this paper are merely suggestive and although the writer of this paper has used them successfully in class, there is no specific empirical evidence to support their use. Nevertheless, given the importance of English language tests to so many of our students, it is our duty as educators to at the very least be aware of such tests, and if possible, to assist them in achieving whatever score they require to meet their aspirations.

## **BIO DATA**

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Lecturer at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies at the time this symposium took place. He has eleven years of experience in language teaching, and his areas of research interest include corpus linguistics, English language tests and media literacy.

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