

# Implementation of an Elite Sophomore English Class at a University in Taiwan

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## Abstract

As globalization spreads and the demand for English proficiency from the business sector increases, higher education in Taiwan has followed a variety of approaches in reforming its English curriculum. Establishing graduation thresholds and obtaining certificates of English proficiency tests are goals set for students by most local universities. In order to achieve these goals, ability-grouping of courses for freshman and sophomore English is commonly practiced. At the researcher's university, an elite sophomore English class was created for non-English majors in addition to advanced, intermediate, and elementary courses. This study aims to pilot test the effectiveness of promoting students' performance on the TOEIC through the implementation of an elite class. Results showed that participants' TOEIC scores improved significantly. Participants' listening scores improved more than their reading scores. The implications of the ability-grouping teaching and suggestions for further studies are provided.

**Keywords:** ability-grouping courses, sophomore English, TOEIC test.



# 大二英文菁英班實施成效之研究

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## 摘 要

由於全球化的趨勢及業界對英語能力要求的提升，台灣的高等教育採取許多措施來改革英語課程，一般大學及科技大學均採取設立畢業門檻及取得英語證照為目標。為了達到這些目標，大一及大二英文採取能力分班制是普遍的做法。本研究者所任教之台灣中部某科技大學在原有的優班、中班、普班三級之外，新增了菁英班。本研究之目的在於測試大二英文菁英班的實施是否有效提升學生的多益成績。結果顯示學生在多益總分上有顯著進步，聽力部份的分數增加比閱讀部份多，本研究提供分班教學之意涵及對未來研究之建議。

**關鍵詞：**能力分班課程、大二英文、多益成績。



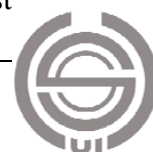
## Introduction

As globalization increases, the importance of English rises. The English proficiency of job applicants is a key point for corporations around the world. Thus, obtaining English proficiency certificates which are recognized worldwide before graduating has become a goal for many college students. Although GEPT (General English Proficiency Test) tests are widely accepted as English proficiency measuring tools in Taiwan, the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) is more frequently administered internationally with more than 4.5 million test-takers every year (Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999; Miyata, 2004, Rogers, 2006). To enhance college students' English proficiency and increase their performance on English proficiency tests, higher education in Taiwan has followed a variety of approaches in reforming its English curriculum.

After the Ministry of Education's request for technological and vocational universities and colleges to establish English thresholds for graduation requirement in 2005, institutions of higher education were forced to reexamine the effectiveness of their English for General Purposes (EGP) curriculum. As most freshman and sophomore English courses failed to interest learners and equip students with the English proficiency workplaces need, educators have sought innovative methods to meet student needs. Among solutions to the ineffectiveness of required English courses, which generally sort learners according to their majors, not according to their English proficiency, ability-grouping teaching has become widely practiced in Taiwan (Chang, Liu, & Chen, 2006; Tsao & Hsu, 2010; Lee, 2012).

Prior to the school year of 2011, freshman and sophomore English courses at a technological university located in central Taiwan were divided into three levels: advanced, intermediate, and elementary. Lee (2012) found out that non-English majors were generally lower in learning motivation and English proficiency than English majors. Though some non-English majors exhibited higher proficiency, the existing levels were not able to differentiate them from advanced-level learners. To enhance their English learning motivation and achieve a higher English proficiency among non-English majors, the school created an elite level for sophomore English starting the fall semester of 2011. Students who are qualified to enter the elite sophomore program obtained certificates of College Student English Proficiency Test (CSEPT) at the CEF/B1 level.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of adding another level, the elite level, to the existing advanced, intermediate, and elementary ability-grouping for sophomore English. In this study, "effectiveness" is defined as "scoring higher on the Test



of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Since the TOEIC test includes a listening comprehension section and a reading section, this study thus examines two research issues: (1) whether participants' TOEIC scores improve significantly at the end of the semester; and (2) whether the listening or reading section shows greater improvement?

## Review of the Literature

English proficiency graduation thresholds are common throughout Taiwan. Universities generally use scores on one of the major international assessment tests or the locally developed General English Proficiency Test (GEPT). Students accept such thresholds. For example, about half of the respondents in Liauh (2010) agreed that the graduation threshold was necessary and had positive attitudes toward threshold tests. In the local higher education system, freshman and sophomore English classes are expected to help students pass these thresholds.

However, researchers in Taiwan have found that both students and instructors in technological and vocational universities were not satisfied with their General English curriculum (Chang et al, 2006; Tsao & Hsu, 2010). According to Chang et al (2006), about 50 percent of the 370 students participating in a survey at Yuan Ze University felt that the two-year General English curriculum did not help to improve their English. One of the ways to solve this problem may be through ability-grouping courses that place ESL/EFL learners according to their proficiency levels (Lee, 2009). The findings of Lee (2009) suggest that ability-grouping teaching effectively promoted both learning and teaching. Lee (2012) conducted a research among 107 college students who attended a university in central Taiwan. Half of these participants were English majors and the other half were non-English majors. They were all placed in advanced level of sophomore English class. Questionnaires were administered to investigate their perceptions for sophomore English curriculum and their attitudes toward English learning. Lee (2012) found the students were generally satisfied with the ability-grouping courses for sophomore English. However, non-English majors were more passive in their learning attitudes. Non-English majors did not make as much progress as English majors (Lee, 2012).

Research has shown that preparing students to take a specific test is accepted in real classroom settings (Boldt & Ross, 1998; Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999; Shin & Seong, 2011; Wadden & Hike, 1999). Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) showed that non-English majors improved more significantly in their scores on the reading section of the TOEIC test. For listening skills, many researchers supported the idea of providing effective listening input to



enhance language acquisition and increase learners' exposure to difference accents through audio materials (Harmer, 1998; Thornbury, 2006). However, some researchers questioned the validity of scores gained by using treatments (Smith, 2000; Willis, 2000). Thus, score improvements through TOEIC preparation courses should be interpreted cautiously.

## Method

### Participants

The participants of this study were from the convenient sampling of EFL learners (N = 81), twenty-two males and fifty-nine females, from two elite sophomore English classes taught by the same instructor at a technological university located in central Taiwan. These students were all non-English majors, including business administration, international trade, information science, applied Chinese, food and beverage management, finance and law, tourism, and industrial engineering and management, who obtained certificates of CSEPT at the CEF/B1 level during their freshman year. There were originally 90 students in these two classes, but only 81 of them completed the TOEIC pretest, posttest, and two monthly on-line TOEIC tests. Therefore, data collected from those students who finished all four tasks was considered valid.

### Materials and Procedure

Textbooks used for the elite sophomore English were *English for Life & Work Book 3* published by AMC Group and *Complete Guide for the TOEIC Test* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) published by Heinle. The two-hour weekly class was divided into two parts: the first hour on *English for Life and Work Book 3* with listening and speaking practices and the second hour on TOEIC test-taking skills covered in *Complete Guide for the TOEIC Test* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) with listening and reading practices.

The TOEIC test includes two parts: listening comprehension and reading. There are sentences about photographs, stimuli—response, short conversations, and short talk questions in the listening comprehension section. The reading section includes sentence completion, passage completion, and short passage questions. It takes approximately forty-five minutes to complete the 100 items in the listening section and one hour and fifteen minutes to complete the 100 items in the reading section. A TOEIC pretest which includes 100 listening questions and 100 reading questions was administered in class on the third week of the semester because the class list was finalized that week. Practice Test 1 offered in *Complete Guide for the TOEIC Test* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) was used as the pretest material.



The posttest was administered in class on the sixteenth week of the semester using Practice Test 2 in *Complete Guide for the TOEIC Test* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition) as the testing material. These two practice tests “resemble actual tests in terms of format, content, and level of difficulty” (Rogers, 2006, p. 3).

## Results

### Analysis of TOEIC Pretest and Posttest Overall Scores

Descriptive statistics of the participants’ total TOEIC scores on the pretest and the posttest are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the mean score of the pretest was 440.86 with a SD of 353.44; and the mean score of the posttest was 457.22 with a SD of 105.88. The mean score increased from the pretest to the posttest. A t-test was performed to examine if the difference between the pretest and posttest scores was significant. The result shows that the posttest score was significantly greater than the pretest score ( $p = .000$ ), implying that the participants showed significant improvement in the overall TOEIC scores after the training.

Table 1

#### *Means and Standard Deviations of TOEIC Overall Score*

Test/ (n)	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Pretest (81)	440.86	353.44
Posttest (81)	457.22	105.88

Note:  $\alpha = .05$

### Analysis of TOEIC Pretest and Posttest Listening Section

Descriptive statistics of the participants’ TOEIC listening scores on the pretest and the posttest are shown in Table 2. As can be seen, the mean score of the pretest was 269.01 with a SD of 66.20; and the mean score of the posttest was 280.56 with a SD of 71.38. A t-test was performed to examine if the difference between the pretest and posttest was significant. The result shows that the posttest score was significantly greater than the pretest score ( $p = .000$ ), implying that the participants showed significant improvement in the TOEIC listening scores after the training.



Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations of TOEIC Listening Section*

Test/ (n)	M	SD
Pretest (81)	269.01	66.20
Posttest (81)	280.56	71.38

Note:  $\alpha = .05$

## Analysis of TOEIC Pretest and Posttest Reading Section

Descriptive statistics of the participants' TOEIC reading scores on the pretest and posttest are shown in Table 3. As can be seen, the mean score of the pretest was 171.85 with a SD of 48.80; and the mean score of the posttest was 177.16 with a SD of 57.62. The mean score increased from the pretest to the post test. A t-test was performed to examine if the difference between the pretest and posttest scores was significant. The result shows that the posttest score was significantly greater than the pretest score ( $p = .000$ ), implying that the participants showed significant improvement in the TOEIC reading scores after the training.

Table 3

*Means and Standard Deviations of TOEIC Reading Section*

Test/ (n)	M	SD
Pretest (81)	171.85	48.80
Posttest (81)	177.16	57.62

Note:  $\alpha = .05$

## Discussion

### Discussion of Pretest and Posttest on Overall TOEIC Scores

As shown in Table 1, overall TOEIC posttest scores were only slightly higher than the TOEIC pretest scores, though the difference is still significant. These outcomes revealed that for non-English majors, one semester of TOEIC preparation through focusing on test-taking skills for an hour per week was insufficient to raise their scores to the 500 level. TOEIC 500 was a goal set by the English committee in the beginning of the semester for non-English majors. The difference between the pretest and posttest score was a mere 16.36. There are two probable reasons for these results. First, though placed in the elite group, the non-English majors tend to be more passive in their English learning than their



English-majorpeers (Lee, 2012). Second, outside the EFL environment, non-English majors have more limited exposure to the English language. If the class time is their only opportunity to interact with English, improvement in their TOEIC scores will likely be limited.

## **Discussion of Pretest and Posttest on TOEIC Listening Section**

Participants' listening scores improved significantly (Table 2). The difference between the pretest and the posttest score in the listening section was 11.55. These results revealed that the classroom listening practice and test-taking skill instruction were effective. However, the increase in the listening scores was not very impressive. The statistical results from the listening section may suggest that longer periods of study are necessary to meaningfully elevate EFL learners' test scores.

## **Discussion of Pretest and Posttest on TOEIC Reading Section**

As shown in Table 3, the statistical results of the reading section were significant. The difference between the pretest and posttest reading score was only 5.31. The statistical results appear to show that the test-taking skills covered in the course were not effective. However, after taking a closer look at the answer sheets, it became clear that most of the participants did not finish answering all of the 100 questions in the reading section. This is likely due to the slow reading speed of the participants. These participants had passed the CEF/B1 for the CSEPT but not the B1 level of the TOEIC. As non-English majors, their reading proficiency and speed was generally lower than that of English majors. Since the time allowed for the TOEIC listening section was forty-five minutes, by the time they finished the listening section, they were quite tired. When challenged with another 100 reading questions, most of them could not finish the task at this level. Thus, many questions went unanswered or answers were guessed. This may have lead to lower scores in the reading section of the TOEIC test.

## **Implications and Pedagogical Suggestions**

Based on the results of this study, the elite sophomore English appears to have been effective. Participants improved their overall TOEIC scores as well as both their listening and reading scores. However, the score improvement in each section was only slightly significant. Students actually improved more on their listening proficiency than reading





proficiency. Test-taking skills instruction was meaningful, but enhancement of reading speed should probably be added to the curriculum. Instructors also need to encourage non-English major learners to practice listening and reading outside of the classroom.

## Conclusion

The implementation of the elite sophomore English courses for non-English majors yielded TOEIC score gains for participants. Although the posttest overall scores were higher than the pretest scores, the results were only slightly significant. Participants improved more on their listening proficiency than reading proficiency. The improvement in the listening section was 11.55 points compared to only 5.31 in the reading section. Because many of the participants did not finish all the questions in the reading section, instructors should include reading speed and material focus on reading instruction in addition to the test-taking skills covered in the textbooks. Future studies should involve more non-English majors from more universities and increase the duration of the investigation in order to more robustly understand the effect of ability-grouping sophomore English courses.

## Limitation of the Study

Since the study was only conducted with a small sample and within a short time, its results should not be generalized to larger population and other settings. Further studies could involve more non-English major participants from more schools. The duration of the experiment may also be expanded to investigate long-term results.

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