

# An English Program With TOEIC Goals

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From 2002 to 2006, Aomori Public College (APC) had an English program that emphasized the attainment of goal scores on the TOEIC. Students who could attain the TOEIC goal were rewarded with high grades and course waivers. Students who could not reach the goal were required to continue taking English even in their third and fourth years of college. This report starts with a brief look at course-accreditation through TOEIC scores, which is a current trend in Japan. It then describes the overall structure of the TOEIC-focused English program at APC and gives some of its results.

## Introduction

The TOEIC, that widely used test of English-language proficiency, is distributed by the 国際ビジネスコミュニケーション協会 (English name: Institute for International Business Communication, or IIBC) of Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo. An IIBC executive, Kazuhiko Saito, stated in an interview that "in 1999 the Ministry of Education approved the TOEIC test as a way to obtain university credits" (Chapman, 2004, p. 13). In 2006, IIBC surveyed universities and junior colleges which use the TOEIC. They received valid responses from 306 educational institutions, of which 156 indicated that they consider TOEIC scores when they give course credit to students. In IIBC's (2008) words, "Fifty-one percent of schools responded they utilized TOEIC scores for student accreditation. . . . indicating that one in every two schools utilize TOEIC scores in their credit-granting process" (p. 4).

Without knowing all the details of the IIBC survey, it surely must be true that there are a variety of ways in which these 156 schools "utilize TOEIC scores in their credit-granting

process." Yonesaka (1999) reported that a candidate for a teacher's license in Hokkaido could receive exemption from (or credit for) one part of the multifaceted certification process by submitting a 650 TOEIC score. Similarly, it's natural to think that some university English departments would give the TOEIC IP (Institutional Program version) to their students and then use the scores as one small factor (along with other tests and assignments) to calculate final grades (and thus award course credit). Such practices could be called *weak TOEIC utilization*. In contrast, we might imagine a severe university that would go so far as to absolutely deny graduation to any senior who failed to achieve a set TOEIC score, a practice that would certainly qualify as *strong TOEIC utilization*. Between these two extremes there are doubtlessly other ways that TOEIC scores are used when schools award credits.

The report that follows is a description of one Japanese college's experience in using TOEIC scores for granting credits for English courses. It is intended as a *see* component of the *plan-do-see* approach (Imai, 1997, p. 108).

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In other words, this report looks back at an English program that was planned and implemented, and it offers a tentative evaluation. After a brief account of how this TOEIC-focused English program began, an overview of its course structure is given. This is followed by a presentation of data giving a general indication of students' success in attaining program goals. Finally, there is a brief account of the program's phasing out.

### **Beginning of the TOEIC-Focused English Program**

Curriculum change is a familiar feature of Japanese universities these days (O'Dowd, 2003, p. 23). Like many, Aomori Public College has revised its curriculum to keep up with developments in education and society. During a time when the entire undergraduate curriculum was being revised, it was decided to create an English program that focused on the attainment of specific TOEIC score goals. A certain TOEIC score, referred to in this report as "G," was chosen and announced to the students. This goal was later lowered by 25 points (to G-25) for third- and fourth-year students.

With such score goals in mind, English teachers wrote syllabi, chose textbooks, and taught lessons that were designed to help students get high TOEIC scores. In doing so, they experienced Gates' (1995) truism: "washback from standardized tests is so strong" (p. 101). The TOEIC IP was given three times each year to measure students' progress toward the goal. Those students who attained the goal were rewarded with "A" grades and waivers for certain courses. This meant that they could get credit without actually attending class.

### **Overview of the Required English Courses**

Under this curriculum, which applied to every regular student who entered the college from 2002 through 2005, students had to earn eight credits in foreign language courses in order to graduate. Among the seven required English courses, the eight credits were distributed as Table 1 shows. (The courses for first-year students are at the bottom of the table, and the course for fourth-year students is at the top.)

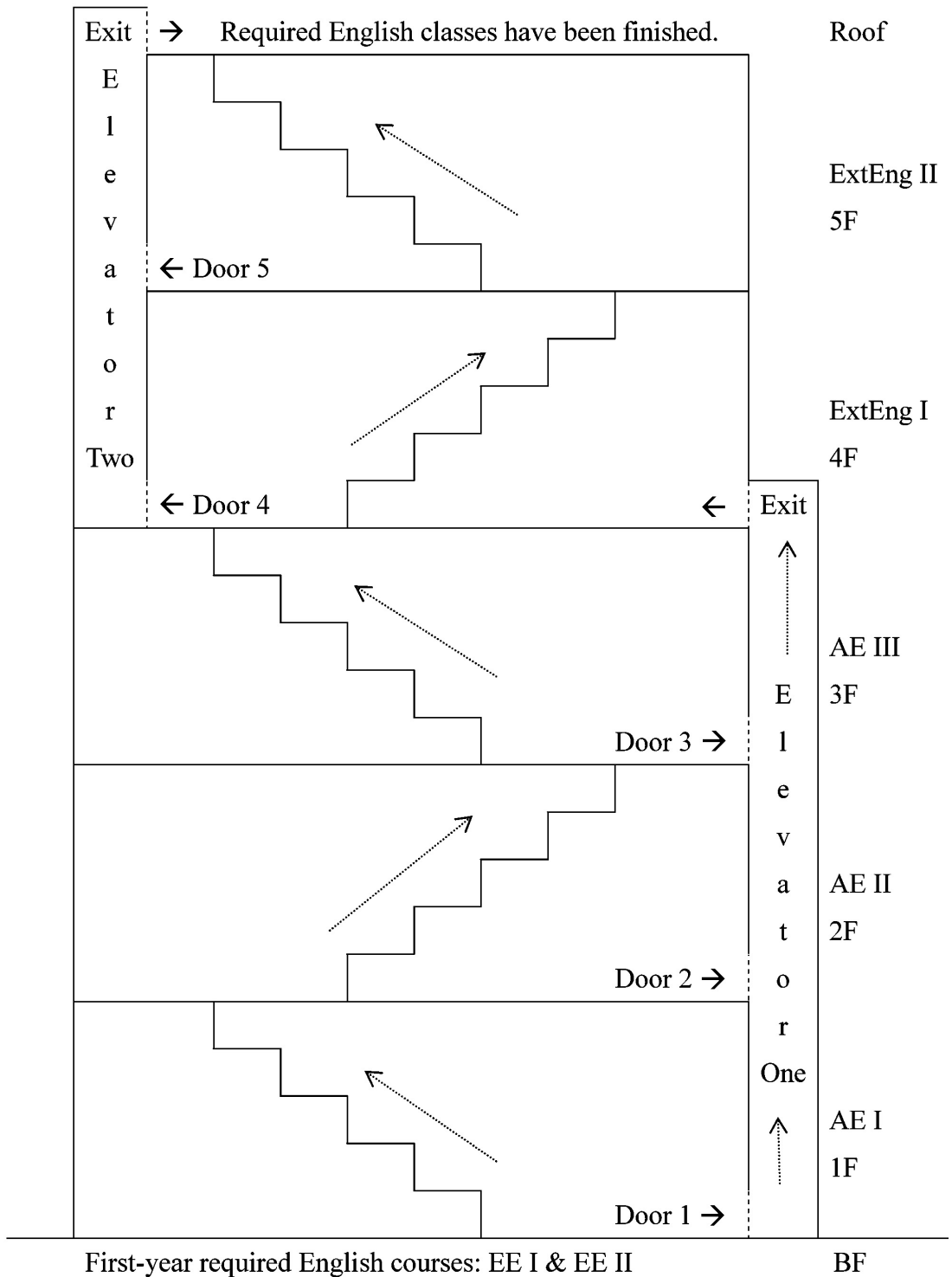
**Table 1.** *Required English courses at APC*

Total =	8.0 credits
5. Extensive English II (ExtEng II)	0.5
4. Extensive English I (ExtEng I)	0.5
3. Active English III (AE III)	1.0
2. Active English II (AE II)	1.0
1. Active English I (AE I)	1.0
ii. Essential English II (EE II)	2.0
i. Essential English I (EE I)	2.0
Course	Credits

All first-year students in the English program had to take the first two courses, EE I and II. That left five required courses to be completed during the second, third, and fourth years. These five courses could be thought of as a five-story building. Students who were finishing their first year of APC were at the bottom (on the ground). They had to get to the top of the building--all the way to the roof--in order to graduate.

There were two ways to go up in this building--the stairs or the elevator. The stairs represented coming to English class every day, doing homework, taking midterm and final exams, and everything else involved in

**Figure 1.** *The seven required English courses shown as a five-story building.*



taking a course. The stairs were the slow, steady, traditional way to go up. There was, however, another way to go up in the building--the elevator. This was a lot quicker and easier than the stairs, but only students who scored high enough on the TOEIC were allowed to take the elevator.

Actually, there were two elevators. Elevator One ran from the ground up to the fourth floor. Students who made the G score at the end of their first year could ride this elevator, which had three doors so that students who scored  $\geq G$  in EE II, AE I, or AE II could get on. Elevator One did not go all the way to the final goal, however. To get to the top of the building, students had to get on Elevator Two or take the stairs. Elevator Two ran from the fourth floor to the roof. Students who made TOEIC  $\geq G-25$  in July of their third year or later could ride this elevator.

Once students were on an elevator, they rode it all the way to the exit, and they received credit (with a grade of "A") for each "floor" (course) that the elevator passed. This five-story building analogy is shown in Figure 1.

At the beginning of their second year, during April, students who made TOEIC  $\geq G$  at the end of their first year could get on the elevator by going through Door 1. Other students had to start "climbing the stairs" (taking AE I). Viewed as a whole, the APC English program offered substantial benefits (in terms of course credits) to students who fulfilled the TOEIC goal, and it illustrates fairly strong TOEIC utilization.

APC's English program attracted the attention of the Institute for International Business Communication (IIBC), the organization which distributes the TOEIC in Japan. In a four-page article devoted to English and Aomori Public College, IIBC (2003) wrote, "2年次以

降の英語科目についてはTOEICスコアによる単位認定がされており、[ . . . ] 3単位が認定されます" (p. 12). IIBC (2004) conveyed the same meaning in their English newsletter: "English courses from the second year on are credit-earning courses linked to TOEIC scores, with students receiving three credits [ . . . ] " (p. 8). These words refer to the three courses AE I, II and III, which are shown in Table 1.

### **Attainment of TOEIC Goals in the Required English Courses**

When this curriculum began on April 1, 2002, it applied to newly entering first-year students only: upper-level students continued to study under a former curriculum. At the beginning of April 2003, the TOEIC curriculum governed first-year students and second-year students. With the arrival of each new academic year, the curriculum applied to more and more students so that by April 1, 2005, it governed all first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year students. In terms of the building analogy, students on every floor were either climbing the stairs or riding the elevators.

In order to see how students in 2005 were moving upward toward the goal of completing their required English courses, class enrollments at two points during the academic year were examined: July 1, 2005 and January 1, 2006. Tables 2 and 3 show these data.

The right-most column (quotient) shows how many students were climbing the stairs for every one student riding an elevator. The data for the third-year students illustrate some of the characteristics of this program. The English course for third-year students in the spring semester was AE III. Table 2 shows that for third-year students in July, there were 1.66 students climbing the stairs for every student riding the elevator. This means that

**Table 2.** *Students moving up through the English program as of July 1, 2005*

Academic Year and Student Number	TOEIC Score Goal	S (Stairs), Students Who Had Not Attained the Goal (They were climbing stairs.)	E (Elevator), Students Who Had Attained the Goal (They were on an elevator)	Quotient $S \div E$
4th 1020~	G-25	168	102	1.65
3rd 1030~	G	171	103	1.66
2nd 1040~	G	223	68	3.28

**Table 3.** *Students moving up through the English program as of January 1, 2006*

Year	Goal	S (climbing stairs.)	E (on an elevator)	$S \div E$
4th, 1020~	G-25	144	106	1.36
3rd, 1030~	G-25	141	129	1.09
2nd, 1040~	G	216	86	2.51

for every third-year student who had attained the G score goal, there were 1.66 classmates who had not attained that goal. In mid-July, all third-year students were required to sit for another TOEIC. Those who scored  $\geq$  G-25 were allowed to enter a waiver class (Elevator Two). Those who scored  $<$  G-25 were expected to attend the ExtEng I class (climb the stairs). As Table 2 shows, the  $S \div E$  quotient had improved to 1.09 (approaching at 1:1 ratio) for third-year students by January 1, 2006.

Tables 4 and 5 show the subsequent progress of these students, who all had student numbers beginning with 1030. The tables show that during their fourth year, the majority of these students were on Elevator Two by virtue of having attained the G-25 score goal. In fact, by the end of their last semester in college, the  $S \div E$  quotient for these students was 0.76. During the four years when the

TOEIC-focused English program was dominant, no other year's students succeeded so well in reaching the TOEIC goals. It would be interesting to find out why the 1030~ students had better results than other students, but such an investigation is beyond the scope of this brief report.

### **End of the TOEIC-Focused English Program**

On April 1, 2006, Aomori Public College introduced a new curriculum that did not emphasize TOEIC scores. During that year, however, the new curriculum applied to newly entering first-year students only: second-, third-, and fourth-year students were still governed by the TOEIC curriculum, and they continued to progress through the English program by climbing stairs or riding elevators. However, in terms of attaining the TOEIC goals, no year's students succeeded as well as

**Table 4.** *Students moving up through the English program as of July 1, 2006*

Year	Goal	S (climbing stairs.)	E (on an elevator)	S ÷ E
4th, 1030~	G-25	121	153	0.79
3rd, 1040~	G	203	97	2.09
2nd, 1050~	G	236	53	4.45

**Table 5.** *Students moving up through the English program as of January 1, 2007*

Year	Goal	S (climbing stairs.)	E (on an elevator)	S ÷ E
4th, 1030~	G-25	119	156	0.76
3rd, 1040~	G-25	246	56	4.39
2nd, 1050~	G	235	57	4.12

the 1030~ students had. The English program with TOEIC goals continued to be phased out, and by the end of the 2008 academic year, the great focus on TOEIC at Aomori Public College had disappeared.

How should APC's experience with this English program be evaluated? The good points of focusing on a test should not be ignored. As Brown (1996) has written, testing can help "in an unprecedented manner to unify the curriculum and give it a sense of cohesion and purpose" (p. 275). Wada (1999) has translated this as "テストはカリキュラムを統一的に捉えるのに前例がないほど有効であり、カリキュラムに結合性と目的を与えると考えているからである" (p. 314). This English program provided a concrete goal and a clear measure of success (the G score), which were easily understood by high school English teachers and other interested observers. This program may have attracted some college-bound high school graduates who were good at English. Once admitted, many students were no doubt satisfied with

the program. Those who attained the goal and received credit without attending classes were probably satisfied.

However, the program was probably less satisfying for the students who did not reach the TOEIC goals, and they were the overall majority. The failure of so many to attain the goals was disappointing to students and faculty alike. In the end, the leaders of the college wisely decided to discontinue the English program with TOEIC goals.

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