
Reviews of Books

Tomoko Yabukoshi & Braven Smillie. *Upward Listening for the TOEIC Test*. Tokyo: Kinseido, 2011. 48p ISBN978-4-7647-3921-5, ¥1,300.

Teaching a new course involves so much preparation. One of the most important decisions to make in designing a new course is a selection of a textbook. I recently had an opportunity to teach a five-day intensive course called “Listening Review for TOEIC.” The textbook I chose for this course is tilted *Upward Listening for the TOEIC Test*. The target TOEIC score of the textbook is 400–500. It is very rare that I find a TOEIC textbook I really like, but I must say this textbook was a perfect choice for this particular intensive TOEIC listening review course. It allowed me to accomplish everything I had intended for the course.

Because the TOEIC test includes four listening parts (Parts 1–4), *Upward Listening for the TOEIC Test* covers these four parts. It has 24 units, 6 units for each part. One of the characteristics of this textbook is that each unit deals with only one part. Thus, the textbook is organized as follows: Units 1–6 (Part 1), Units 7–12 (Part 2), Units 13–18 (Part 3), and Units 19–24 (Part 4). Each unit starts with a “Strategy” section, followed by two sections of practice questions: “Check it Out” section and “Let’s Try” section. At the end of each part, that is, in Units 6, 12, 18, and 24, summary practices are provided.

The strategies introduced in the “Strategy” sections are the ones frequently mentioned in most TOEIC textbooks. In Part 1, paying attention to “people,” “things” and “places” in pictures is suggested. Part 2 strategies include looking at different types of questions (WH-, *yes/no*, and negation questions) and permission/requests/invitations/suggestions. Part 3 discusses recognizing patterns of conversation, reading the questions first and expecting what to focus on, analyzing question types, and paying attention to rephrasing. In Part 4, in addition to some of the strategies mentioned in Part 3, it is recommended that students use background knowledge regarding weather forecasts and airport/airplane announcements.

As one can see from this, there is nothing particularly new about the strategies explained in this textbook. However, reviewing these strategies was very beneficial for the purpose of the short-term review course. The students taking the intensive course were all familiar with TOEIC, but a quick review of the strategies was a good reminder. Because each unit deals with one specific strategy, it helped the students to focus their attention and practice on one strategy at a time. Furthermore, the students seemed to find the units on weather forecasts and airport/airplane announcements from Part 4 difficult but very valuable. These types of announcements are frequently used in TOEIC, but many Japanese students are not familiar with the contents, vocabulary, and patterns of announcements. Familiarizing students with the features of commonly used contexts is an effective strategy for Part 4.

Following the strategy section are two sections of practice questions: “Check it Out” and “Let’s Try.” The

“Check it Out” section reinforces the strategies explained in each unit, and it incorporates different activities commonly used in listening practices, such as pair discussion, gap-fill, and dictation. This section serves as effective warm-up activities as well as practice of the strategies explained in that unit, providing a smooth transition from the “Check it Out” section to the “Let’s Try” section. Summary practices (Units 6, 12, 18, and 24) integrate all the strategies introduced in each part.

As to the level of the practice questions, some of the questions are difficult and challenging. For example, some Part 2 questions are tricky because they use homophones, synonyms, and rephrasing, and students often have difficulties answering these questions. Part 2 questions are short, so teachers tend to think this part is not as difficult as longer passages of Part 3 and Part 4. However, this section actually requires much scaffolding and repetitive listening practice for beginning and low-intermediate students. Considering the level and nature of real TOEIC questions, it is not only good but also necessary to make students work on some challenging questions. More reinforcement of listening practice and vocabulary review are obviously necessary for these challenging questions, but as long as adequate scaffolding is provided, the level of the questions are appropriate for the target audience.

Upward Listening for the TOEIC Test also comes with useful accompanying materials. The student book includes the self-study audio CD, which only consists of the listening practices of the “Check it Out” questions. The accompanying materials include two class audio CDs and the teacher’s manual. The class audio CDs contain all practice questions in the textbook, both the “Check it Out” questions and the “Let’s Try” questions. The teacher’s manual comes with the answers, answer explanations, scripts, and Japanese translation of the scripts. Additionally, the teacher’s manual includes vocabulary quizzes (one quiz per unit), a 30-question practice test, and the answer keys to the vocabulary quizzes and the practice test. A separate audio CD for the practice test is also provided.

The vocabulary quizzes in the accompanying materials use the sentence-level vocabulary examples taken from the listening practices. This type of sentence-level, context-based vocabulary review creates meaningful vocabulary learning for students. In the intensive course, I used the accompanying vocabulary quizzes as a reference and created my own vocabulary quizzes, but having sample vocabulary quizzes on hand was helpful and timesaving. Moreover, the accompanying practice test, which consists of 30 questions (four Part 1 questions, eight Part 2 questions, nine Part 3 questions, and nine Part 4 questions) can be used for extra practice or a quiz, or it can even be incorporated into a larger, more full-scale TOEIC-like listening assessment.

This textbook thus turned out to be a good choice for the particular intensive listening review course I taught; on the other hand, whether it is suitable for a semester-long course or not is another question. In a semester-long course, weekly practice on different sections of the TOEIC becomes important and necessary, but *Upward Listening for the TOEIC Test* deals with only one part in each unit. Even for the intensive course, I rearranged listening practices in such way that the students worked on different parts every day. This kind of rearrangement of lesson sequence makes lesson planning more complicated, and it will be even harder for a semester-long course because adaptation of another textbook on grammar and reading will become necessary.

Textbook selection is obviously related to many factors. Many professionals recommend using official TOEIC guidebooks consisting of past tests for TOEIC preparation courses. This may be an effective approach for advanced learners who can manage working on test-like practice questions. However, lower-

level learners need more scaffolding from instructors, and they seem to learn much better when topics, test-taking strategies, vocabulary, and grammar points are presented in a more organized fashion targeting at one feature at a time. Textbooks consisting of practice tests often give low-level learners an impression that multiple topics, strategies, and grammar points are presented in a more or less haphazard way, which causes confusion. I prefer using topic-oriented textbooks for semester-long TOEIC preparation courses because they accommodate topic-based listening, reading, and vocabulary practices as well as feature-specific grammar review, both of which are essential for lower-level learners. TOEIC textbook publishing has become a big moneymaking industry of its own as the popularity of TOEIC has been increasing worldwide. Teachers face difficult decisions to make in choosing appropriate textbooks from a large selection of books available in the market, and students' levels, focus skill areas, and course lengths are all important factors for our textbook selection and designing of TOEIC preparation courses.

Upward Listening for the TOEIC Test is an excellent intermediate-level class material particularly for a short-term course. The book accomplishes a review of the commonly used strategies and intensive listening practices in a focused manner as well as sentence-level, context-based vocabulary learning for the four listening parts. I highly recommend this textbook for intermediate-level, intensive TOEIC listening review courses.

Yuri Kusuyama