
Motivation and Activities: Learning from Successful TOEIC Takers

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Abstract

This paper discusses the foreign language learning motivation of university EFL students with an empirical focus on the qualitative content of language learners' motivation and learning activities. It reports on a small-scale study conducted with university-level learners of English as a foreign language in Japan. Using open-ended and semi-structured interview techniques, the study aims to explore the interrelationships of (a) motivation and TOEIC scores, (b) motivation and goals, (c) motivation and career, and (d) motivation and English skills. Analyzing the findings, this paper also discusses the role of TOEIC, and identifies learning activities EFL learners employed. This paper concludes by suggesting the study of motivation and language activities might best be pursued in the context of research on learner autonomy.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we report on a small-scale empirical investigation of foreign language learning motivation and activities in relation to the TOEIC exam. The purposes of this project are to find out the reasons why some students have managed to make a significant improvement in TOEIC scores and to see if there are any learning activities they have participated in that are effective and useful for other students. The project is based on the hypotheses that successful students are highly motivated, goal oriented, career oriented, and well balanced in English skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary.

TOEIC exams are administered at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business (NUCB) in April, June and December every year. All NUCB students majoring in English communication and those non-English communication majors taking a TOEIC preparatory course are required to take two of them held in June and December while the TOEIC exam conducted in April is administered to all NUCB freshmen majoring in English communication. The main purpose of administering TOEIC exams at the university is to give the test-takers some idea of their English proficiency level and encourage them to study English harder. Some benefits are derived from the university if their TOEIC scores reach a certain level: For example, students can apply for a scholarship that enables them to study abroad if they score 500 points or higher. If their TOEIC scores reach 700 points or above, they will be able to apply for another scholarship with monthly funding. Thus, TOEIC is important for most of English communication majors as a measurement of their English abilities and exists as a trigger for the benefits. In fact, TOEIC gives some students a reason to study English harder.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Successful Foreign Language Learners

Many research efforts concentrating on “the good language learner” (Naiman et al. 1978; Rubin 1975) have been made thus far while other researchers have tried to “identify strategies reported by students or observed in language learning situations that appear to contribute to learning” (O’Mally & Charmot 1990: 3). Griffiths (2008) mentions several conditions under which language learners become good ones. Some of the conditions are that language learners need to: (1) be motivated; (2) have a certain learning style; (3) possess a particular type of personality; (4) use certain strategies; (5) have high levels of meta-cognition; (6) demonstrate autonomy; (7) hold certain beliefs about learning; and (8) score fairly highly on components of aptitude.

2.2 A Qualitative Approach to the Study of Motivation

Quantitative social psychology on motivation research has dominated the field of second and foreign language learning while qualitative research studies have been neglected for a long time: however, more qualitative approaches to the study of language learning motivation have recently complemented this long-standing quantitative tradition of research (Ushioda, 2001).

3. Methodology

3.1 Definition of Successful TOEIC Takers in This Study

Successful TOEIC takers in this study are defined as those students whose TOEIC scores are 500 points or above and who have improved their TOEIC scores by 75 points or more over one interval between two consecutive TOEIC tests at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business.

3.2 Subjects of This Study

A sample size of twenty students was chosen for the investigation. Among them, twelve students understood the purpose of this study and granted an interview to the authors of this paper. Twelve was considered an adequate number for the creation of a manageable body of data for detailed descriptive and content analysis. At the same time, the number was sufficiently large enough to allow for coding and quantification of data, tracing of common underlying patterns and making cross-comparisons between learners through the application for basic statistical procedures.

The subjects of this study were the students at NUCB taking English as a foreign language as part of completion of their undergraduate degree program. They had been learning English at middle and high schools for six years before participating in the program. It was hoped that this sample of self-selected students might offer insight into the range of factors perceived to shape and sustain involvement in language learning. English courses that they have taken, are taking, or will take are all run by the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the university.

The table below shows the number of the subjects whose TOEIC scores were 500 points or above, who have improved their TOEIC scores by 75 points or more over one interval between two consecutive TOEIC tests conducted in this university, and who granted the authors of this paper an interview. There were twelve interviewees, consisting of four 4th year students, five 3rd year students, and three 2nd year students in this study.

Table 1: A Number of the Subjects by Year and by Sex

Year of Study	Male	Female	Total
4	2	2	4
3	3	2	5
2	2	1	3
Total	7	5	12

Table 2: The Subjects' TOEIC scores

		June '07	Dec. '07	June '08	Dec. '08	June '09	Abroad
1	4MEH	465	660 (+195)	650 (-10)	785 (+135)	925 (+140)	
2	4MIK	555	FSP*	815 (+260)	830 (+15)	840 (+10)	07fFSP*/ 09fEDHEC*
3	4FNY	355	HK*	575 (+220)	645 (+70)	730 (+85)	07f-08sHK*
4	4FKT			430	405 (-15)	510 (+105)	
5	3MAK		780	690 (-90)	860 (+170)	835 (-25)	
6	3MY Y	365	405 (+40)	560 (+155)	640 (+80)	680 (+40)	
7	3FTR	415	450 (+35)	575 (+125)	FSP*	675 (+100)	08fFSP*
8	3MSS	340	395 (+55)	495 (+100)	520 (+25)	625 (+105)	
9	3FHY	350		445 (+95)	485 (+40)	600 (+115)	
10	2FMM			680	815 (+135)		
11	2MOS			470	470	590 (+120)	
12	2FAR			405	410 (+5)	500 (+90)	

The top column shows the date when each TOEIC exam was administered. The star mark (*) means the time and the name of the scholarship: For example, "07fFSP" means this subject participated in the Frontier Spirit Program (FSP) held in the fall, 2007. With this scholarship program, the students studied English in Manchester, U. K. and experienced an internship in the U. K. for a semester. Through the ED-HEC program, the students were able to choose a business course held mainly in Europe for one or two semesters. HK refers to the students who studied English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for eight months.

The number in the parentheses next to the TOEIC score shows the points that each subject gained (+) or lost (-), in comparison to the previous TOEIC score.

3.3 Hypotheses

Successful foreign language learners share the following characteristics:

3.3.1 High Motivation: HM Factors

Successful foreign language learners are highly motivated to: (1) improve their TOEIC scores; (2) do extra work to improve their TOEIC scores; (3) take TOEIC related courses at NUCB; and (4) study all the courses at NUCB.

3.3.2 Goal Oriented: GO factors

Successful foreign language learners set their goals: That is, they have clear, specific goals about studying for the TOEIC exam such as applying for Frontier Spirit or Global Alliance Programs, studying abroad, or participating in an international volunteer program.

3.3.3 Career Oriented: CO factors

Successful foreign language learners have career goals: (1) they want to get a job that requires their English skills; and (2) they believe that with a high TOEIC score they can get into a company with a high reputation.

3.3.4 Well-balanced English Skills: WES factors

Successful foreign language learners try to improve all of their English skills: (1) they like reading as well as writing; (2) they like listening as well as speaking; and (3) they make an effort to build their vocabulary.

3.4 Instruments

Using open-ended and semi-structured interview techniques, a qualitative research study was conducted among university-level learners of English as a foreign language in Japan.

The main questions asked in Japanese to the subjects are as follows:

(1) *Starting questions:*

- 1.1 How do you feel about TOEIC?
- 1.2 How important is the TOEIC exam for you?

(2) *About HM (High Motivation) Factors*

- 2.1 How interested are you in improving your TOEIC score?
- 2.2 How much motivation do you have for the TOEIC exam?
- 2.3 How much effort do you put into preparing for the TOEIC exam?
- 2.4 Do you do any extra work to improve your TOEIC score?

(3) *About GO (Goal Oriented) Factors:*

- 3.1 Do you have any specific goals for improving your TOEIC score? Why do you want to improve your TOEIC score?

(4) *About CO (Career Oriented) Factors:*

- 4.1 Do you have any specific career goal?
- 4.2 Do you want to use English in your career?
- 4.3 How important do you think English is in achieving your career goal?

(5) *About WES (Well-balanced English Skill) Factors:*

- 5.1 What are the most difficult parts of the TOEIC exam for you? Listening / Reading / Grammar / Vocabulary?
- 5.2 Do you make an effort to overcome your English skills' weaknesses? If "yes," then what do you do?

3.5 Procedure

The authors of this paper interviewed all of the students who met the criteria; therefore, these students had, (1) TOEIC scores of 500 points or higher; (2) a TOEIC score improvement of 75 points or more over one interval between two consecutive TOEIC tests conducted at this university; and (3) agreed to an interview conducted by the authors of this paper.

For the purpose of this research project, we defined and selected successful TOEIC takers and interviewed them in person for between 30 minutes and two hours over the period of January through May in 2010. The data has been analyzed descriptively.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Starting Questions

4.1.1 The Subjects' Feelings about the TOEIC Exam

There were mixed feelings about the TOEIC exam among the twelve subjects: four subjects said that they liked the TOEIC exam very much; five said that they did not have any feelings about the TOEIC exam; and two subjects whose TOEIC scores were about 500 mentioned that they did not like the TOEIC exam very much. Interestingly enough, the subject with the highest TOEIC score said that he hated it (Table 3).

4.1.2 Importance of the TOEIC Exam

All subjects found the TOEIC exam important: Seven subjects thought the TOEIC exam was very important and five mentioned the TOEIC exam was rather important. Especially, the top five subjects whose scores were higher than 700 thought that the TOEIC exam was very important for them. No subjects said that TOEIC was unimportant (Table 3).

4.2 HM (High Motivation) Factors

4.2.1 Interest in improving TOEIC Scores

Again, all subjects said they were interested in improving their TOEIC scores: Eleven were enthusiastic about it while the subject with the lowest score was not so enthusiastic (Table 3).

4.2.2 Motivation for the TOEIC Exam

All subjects did their homework for the TOEIC preparatory course: five of them said that they always did their homework; and seven did it most of the time (Table 3). Besides the class and SAC work, all of them also mentioned that they did some extra work to improve their TOEIC scores by themselves.

Table 3: The Subjects' Best TOEIC Scores and Answers to the Questions (1)

No			4.1.1	4.1.2	4.2.1	4.2.2
	Subject	Best Score	Do you like the TOEIC exam?	Is the TOEIC exam important?	Do you want to improve your TOEIC score?	Did you do your homework for TOEIC related classes?
1	4MEH	925	No	Yes, very much	Yes, very much	Yes, mostly
2	3MAK	860	Yes	Yes, very much	Yes, very much	Yes, always
3	4MIK	840	--*	Yes, very much	Yes, very much	Yes, always
4	2FMM	815	Yes	Yes, very much	Yes, very much	Yes, mostly
5	4FNY	730	--*	Yes, very much	Yes, very much	Yes, mostly
6	3MY Y	680	Yes	Yes	Yes, very much	Yes, mostly
7	3FTR	675	--*	Yes	Yes, very much	Yes, always
8	3MSS	625	--*	Yes	Yes, very much	Yes, mostly
9	3FHY	600	Yes	Yes, very much	Yes, very much	Yes, always
10	2MOS	590	--*	Yes	Yes, very much	Yes, mostly
11	4FKT	510	Not much	Yes, very much	Yes, very much	Yes, mostly
12	2FAR	500	Not much	Yes	Yes	Yes, always

* The subject did not have any like-dislike feelings about the TOEIC exam.

4.3 GO (Goal Oriented) Factors

Section 4.2.1 notes that all subjects said that they were interested in improving their TOEIC scores. They listed several reasons why they wanted to improve their TOEIC scores. These reasons were divided into three groups: (1) work-related reasons such as (a) to work abroad, (b) to work in a company that requires English, and (c) to get a better job or for job-hunting; (2) English proficiency-related reasons such as (a) to master English, (b) to improve English skills, (c) to check the level of English ability, and (d) to motivate oneself to study English; and (3) other reasons such as (a) to attain their future goals, (b) to study abroad, (c) to contribute to society, (d) to be not a loser, and (e) to travel using English.

Ten out of twelve subjects mentioned one or two work-related reasons. The top reason chosen by five subjects was to check their level of English ability, followed by four subjects' choice that was to work in a company where they can use English. In fact, five subjects stated both a work-related and English proficiency-related reasons. Two subjects whose TOEIC scores were in the 800s did not talk about any English proficiency-related reasons but mentioned two other reasons (Table 4).

4.4 CO (Career Oriented) Factors

Most subjects had clear career goals. Among them, five students wanted to work in a company where they can utilize English and two other subjects were planning to continue their studies abroad or in graduate school. Only one subject had not decided what to do yet (Table 4).

All subjects agreed to use English in the future: eleven of them wanted to use the language as part of their work; three subjects said that they would like to continue studying English as their life's work; and one subject wanted to do so as a hobby.

4.5 WES (Well-balanced English Skills) Factors

Five subjects said that the most difficult part of the TOEIC exam was the vocabulary, while four found grammar the most difficult. Two subjects mentioned that the reading part was the most difficult. No subject said that listening was difficult (Table 4).

Table 4: The Subjects' Best TOEIC Scores and Answers to the Questions (2)

No			4.3	4.4	4.5
	Subject	Best score	Purposes of better TOEIC scores*	Do you have any career goals? Do you want to use English in the future?***	Ranking by most (1) to least (4) difficult skill****
1	4MEH	925	W2, E3, **	Work in a company (Y3)	1V 2R 3G 4L
2	3MAK	860	W1, **, O1/O4	Work in a company (Y3)	1V 2G 3R 4L
3	4MIK	840	W4, **, O1/O3	Work in a company (Y3, 4)	1R 2L 3G 4V
4	2FMM	815	W2, E1, **	Work in a company or study abroad (Y3)	1G 2V 3R 4L
5	4FNY	730	W3, E2/E3, **	Work in a bank (Y1)	1R 2G 3V 4L
6	3MY Y	680	**, E3, **	Study in a graduate school (Y3)	1V 2G 3R 4L
7	3FTR	675	W3, E3, **	Not decided (Y2, 3)	1G 2V 3L 4R
8	3MSS	625	**, E3, **	Work in a company (Y2, 3)	1V 2G 3R 4L
9	3FHY	600	W2, E4, O5	Work in a company (Y2, 3)	1G 2R 3V 4L
10	2MOS	590	W3, **, **	Work as a civil servant (Y3)	1V 2G 3R 4L
11	4FKT	510	W1, **, O2	Work in a company (Y3)	1R 2G 3V 4L
12	2FAR	500	Wc, **, **	Work in a company (Y3)	1G 2R 3V 4L

* The numbers and letters represent each of the following meanings:

(1) Work-related reasons;

W1: to work abroad,

W2: to work in a company where they can use English, and

W3: to get a better job or for job-hunting.

(2) English proficiency-related reasons:

E1: to master English,

E2: to improve English skills,

E3: to check their level of English ability, and

E4: to motivate oneself to study English.

(3) Other reasons;

O1: to attain their future goals,

O2: to study abroad,

O3: to contribute to society,

O4: to be not a loser, and

O5: to travel using English.

** The subject did not mention work-related, English proficiency-related, or other reasons.

*** Y stands for yes. The number means as follows:

1. To continue studying English as a hobby,

2. To continue studying English as their life's work,

3. To use English at work,

4. Others (to exchange ideas and opinions with people all over the world).

**** The letter L stands for listening; R, reading; G, grammar; V, vocabulary.

4.6 Learning Activities

To overcome the difficulties such as vocabulary and grammar, what did the subjects of this study do? As mentioned in the section 4.2.2, besides the class and SAC work, all of the subjects mentioned that they

did some extra work to improve their TOEIC scores on their own. This section focuses on the subjects' individual learning activities. Below is a list of the activities that the subjects of this study mentioned they did outside the class:

4.6.1 Listening Activities

Although most subjects mentioned that listening was the least difficult part of the TOEIC exam, they relied on many audio materials such as DVDs, CDs, and YouTube. The listening activities the subjects listed were as follows: (1) listening to the BBC, CNN, and NHK podcasting news; (2) listening to Western music and learning new vocabulary; (3) listening to TOEIC CDs on the way to school and back home every day; and (4) listening to an NHK English language program and memorizing it.

4.6.2 Visual-based Activities

The subjects of this study also liked using visual-based activities: (1) watching (favorite) DVDs (many times) without subtitles; (2) watching DVDs with English subtitles and looking up unknown words in a dictionary; (3) watching short dramas on YouTube without any subtitles and trying to understand them; and (4) watching CNN or other English news on TV.

4.6.3 Reading Activities

There were also four reading activities the subjects of this study employed: (1) reading English books such as the *Harry Potter* series; (2) subscribing to an English newspaper and reading it; (3) doing the exercises in a reference book; and (4) gathering various information through the Internet.

4.6.4 Speaking Activities

Since institutional TOEIC exams do not measure speaking ability, not many speaking activities were mentioned except these two: (1) debating in English; and (2) talking with teachers in English.

4.6.5 Vocabulary Building Activities

Words used for the TOEIC exam are sometimes technical so they are difficult for those students who have never used English in a workplace. That was why the subjects found the vocabulary difficult. The activities they chose for building vocabulary were: (1) memorizing new words in English textbooks; (2) reading books to find and learn new vocabulary; (3) watching DVDs with English subtitles and looking up unknown words in a dictionary; and (4) listening to Western music and learning the vocabulary.

4.6.6 Grammar Learning Activities

Like the vocabulary, most subjects felt that grammar was difficult. However, they had not found better ways to learn grammar. They just mentioned two ways of learning grammar: (1) memorizing verbs and their usage; and (2) doing the exercises from a reference book.

4.6.7 Other Activities

A couple of subjects asked their classmates or seniors who had obtained good TOEIC scores how they prepared for the TOEIC exam. It was one of the good methods for learning how to prepare for the TOEIC exam and guide them in developing their own activities. Doing the exercises of TOEIC textbooks and reference books was also reported for preparing for the TOEIC exam.

As Table 5 shows, most subjects made an effort to utilize several activities in various fields. One subject covered five out of six areas. No subjects mentioned any writing activities to prepare for the TOEIC exam.

Table 5: The Subjects' Best TOEIC Scores and Learning Activities

No	Subject	Best Score	Ranking by most (1) to least (4) difficult skills	Learning activities the subjects employed to prepare for the TOEIC exam	
1	4MEH	925	1V 2R 3G 4L	W1 L2 O2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Watching favorite DVDs ● Listening to Western music ● Studying with TOEIC reference books
2	3MAK	860	1V 2G 3R 4L	R3 G2 W4 W1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Doing the exercises in a reference book ● Doing the exercises in a reference book ● Watching NHK English news on TV ● Watching favorite DVDs
3	4MIK	840	1R 2L 3G 4V	L1 W2 / V3 R1 S1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listen to the BBC, CNN, and NHK podcasting news ● Watching DVDs with English subtitles and looking up unknown words in a dictionary ● Reading English books ● Debating in English
4	2FMM	815	1G 2V 3R 4L	V2 W1 R4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reading books to build vocabulary ● Watching DVDs many times ● Gathering various information through the Internet
5	4FNY	730	1R 2G 3V 4L	L3 L2 / V4 W2 / V3 W3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listening to TOEIC CDs on the way to school and back home every day ● Listening to Western music and learning the vocabulary ● Watching DVDs with English subtitles and looking up unknown words in a dictionary ● Watching short dramas on YouTube without subtitles and trying to understand them
6	3MYT	680	1V 2G 3R 4L	W3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Watching short dramas on YouTube without subtitles and trying to understand them
7	3FTR	675	1G 2V 3L 4R	W4 R2 V1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Watching CNN or other English news on TV ● Subscribing an English newspaper and reading it ● Memorizing new words in English textbooks
8	3MSS	625	1V 2G 3R 4L	W2 S2 O1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Watching DVDs with English subtitles ● Talking with teachers in English ● Asking those who got better TOEIC scores
9	3 FHY	600	1G 2R 3V 4L	W2 L2 O2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Watching DVDs ● Listening to Western music ● Doing the exercises in TOEIC reference books
10	2MOS	590	1V 2G 3R 4L	L2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listening to Western music
11	4FKT	510	1R 2G 3V 4L	O1 W1 L2 L4 G1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Asking those who got better TOEIC scores and following their advice ● Watching (favorite) DVDs (many times) without subtitles ● Listening to Western music many times ● Listening to an NHK English language program and memorizing it. ● Memorizing some verbs and their usage.
12	2FAR	500	1G 2R 3V 4L	O2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Doing the exercises in TOEIC textbooks and reference books

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The first three hypotheses described in the section 3.3 are mostly demonstrated by the results of this qualitative research. Proficient students meet each of the following conditions: they have (1) high motivation, (2) clear study goals, and (3) career goals. However, the fourth hypothesis that is proficient students try to improve all of their English skills does not seem to be proved in this study. The subjects of this study are likely to prefer auditory or visual-based English input activities in contrast to more production based activities such as writing and speaking. Additionally, some of them had not made sufficient effort to build their vocabulary. A couple of them just relied solely on reference books.

The general results of the study are that all of the students except for one displayed the highest degree of motivation for improving their TOEIC scores and had a desire to use English for their career. Furthermore, all the students reported on extra efforts they made to improve their TOEIC scores.

Successful language learners cannot be distinguished by a single set of learning activities but rather they are identified through their capacity to understand and develop a personal set of effective learning strategies. The subjects of this study have developed or tried to develop their own set of effective learning strategies. In fact, those subjects practicing a variety of learning activities on their own have successfully gained higher scores on the TOEIC exams. Students could benefit if EFL instructors share ideas for effective language learning activities: first, students will choose some of them and then they will develop their own activities later.

Another suggestion given by Dornyei (2010: 257) is the concept of “the ideal L2 self” that “is the central component of a new conceptualization of L2 motivation.” However, it will only be effective if: (1) “the learner has a desired future self-image;” and (2) it is “accompanied by relevant and effective procedural strategies that act as a roadmap towards the goal.” The subjects of this study may have their desired future self-image but it is hard to say that they have had a “roadmap towards their goals.” It remains as a question: how do EFL instructors help students make “effective procedural strategies”? Or do students have to be autonomous and work without their instructors’ assistance.

This paper concludes by suggesting the study of motivation and language learning activities might best be pursued in the context of research on learner autonomy. Autonomous learners are considered to understand the purpose of learning, accept responsibility for their learning and take initiatives in planning and conducting learning activities. What intrigues here is how learner autonomy is related to learner’s motivation. In other words the question is whether high motivation leads one to attain more autonomy, resulting in better achievement of one’s learning goals. Further study should shed light on learner’s motivation as psychological factor and its effect on the level of learner autonomy.

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