

The Effect of Communicative Language Teaching in Test Preparation Course on TOEIC Score of EFL Business English Students

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Abstract—A high-stake standardized test (e.g., TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS) is one of essential indicators in determining students' English proficiency especially in the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Direct test preparation method is prevalent in test preparation course; however, negative washback could occur. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can be effective teaching method which can diminish the negative washback and also increase both proficiency and test score. The purposes of this study were 1) to examine the effect of CLT on students' TOEIC score and 2) to explore students' attitude towards the use CLT in test preparation course. The sample was 68 Business English students selected by purposive sampling divided into experimental group and control group. The instruments were pre-test, the official TOEIC score and semi-structured interview. The data were analysed by using mean, standard deviation, t-test and content analysis. The results revealed that the official TOEIC score of the experimental group was significantly higher than the control group which indicated that CLT in test preparation course yielded a positive effect on improving students' TOEIC score.

Index Terms—Communicative Language Teaching, Test Preparation Course, TOEIC Score

I. INTRODUCTION

In the university context in many Asian countries, assessing students' English proficiency by using international standardized tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS is prevalent (Harada, 2016; Sawchuk, 2013). Students need to pass the set score in order to graduate and the score can be used as an indicator of their English proficiency. Thus, the majority of the students prepare for the test by taking a test preparation course whether offered by the university or other tutoring institutions.

As one of the world's leading tests, Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) which is a multiple-choice standardized English proficiency test developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) is intentionally used to measure everyday English listening and reading skills required for working in an international environment of non-native speakers. The test score can be used to determine and qualify communication proficiency of the test takers in business context. The TOEIC listening and reading test comprises two main sections, listening and reading, in which the contents of the test simulate real-life situations relevant to the international workplace (Educational Testing Service, 2019b). In Listening Comprehension section, the test takers have to answer the questions based on the recordings. This part of the test measures how well the test takers understand spoken English as in the real workplace they might have to deal with various types of face-to-face communication, meetings, telephoning and videoconferencing. For Reading Comprehension section, the test takers need to have necessary knowledge in using proper English in terms of grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension skill which is essential for working in a global workplace which includes email, reports and business correspondence. As can be seen, the purpose of TOEIC is to measure the test takers' English proficiency in the real-life situation. Thus, the test takers must be equipped with proper communicative listening and reading skills in order to get a high score.

In Thailand, TOEIC is one of the tests that are said to be standardized and can be used as a benchmark for assessing individual English skill (Apichatrojanakul, 2011). Having a good TOEIC score is beneficial for the new graduates as it is considered to be a *ticket* for getting a good position and also to get a higher salary. The importance of good English skill is also emphasized by the announcement of Ministry of Education (2017) on Thai Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (TQF 1) that English and Business English major students must equip with English proficiency level at C1 (Proficient User) according to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

TABLE 1
CORRELATION TABLE OF TOEIC SCORES AND THE CEFR LEVELS

Total minimum scores	CEFR Levels	
945	C1	Proficient user – Effective Operational Proficiency
785	B2	Independent user – Vantage
550	B1	Independent user – Threshold
225	A2	Basic user – Waystage
120	A1	Basic user - Breakthrough

Source: Educational Testing Service (2016)

From Table 1, it can be seen that in order to respond to the announcement, English and Business English major students must achieve minimum 945 out of 990. However, this regulation seems to be difficult to achieve as the average score of Thai TOEIC test takers in 2018 was only 485 which meant that their English proficiency was between A2-B1 according to CEFR level.

TABLE 2
2018 AVERAGE TOEIC SCORES AMONG ASIAN TEST TAKERS

Country	Average Score (Out of 990)
1. Philippines	713
2. Malaysia	611
3. Myanmar	580
4. Vietnam	490
5. Thailand	485
6. Indonesia	471

Source: Educational Testing Service (2019a)

Specifically, at Business English Program, TOEIC score is also used as an exit test to determine students’ English proficiency level. Preparation for TOEIC is a course offered as a compulsory subject for third year students in order to prepare them for taking the test and be able to achieve a good TOEIC score. As a teacher responsible for this course, finding a suitable and effective teaching method is crucial. Formerly, since academic year 2015, Preparation for TOEIC course has been taught by using direct test preparation method in which the students studied for the test by doing the past or mocking tests as much as possible and emphasized only on what will be in the test (i.e., grammar, vocabulary and so forth). The average TOEIC score of the students from 2015 until 2017 was 344.96 (N=162) which was far behind the goal set by the Ministry of Education. Thus, the effectiveness of this teaching method was questioned. In order to find out whether another teaching method would be more effective, the researcher, as a teacher of this course, interested in implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in test-preparation class; however, there has been very little research of using this teaching method in such class (Case, 2008; Littlewood, 2000, 2011). As a result, this study was conducted based on the following research questions:

- 1) Does CLT affect students’ TOEIC score?
- 2) What are students’ attitudes towards CLT in the test preparation course?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Testing in language learning is one of the assessment methods in measuring language proficiency level of the learners. According to Brown and Abeywickrama (2019), a certain proficiency test can be used to determine learners’ performance and ability in mastering the target language and the test result is normally used as a ‘gatekeeper’ (p.11) in admitting or refusing someone to pass to the next level. In education field, standardized proficiency test (i.e., TOEFL, TOEIC and IELTS) is considered essential in determining whether the learners have reached a specific standard, so the learners need to achieve the score which should be high enough to be accepted by institutions or potential employers. As taking a standardized proficiency test is considered high-stakes, the test users (test takers, students, teachers, employers, policy makers, etc.) are regarded as stakeholders (Hughes & Hughes, 2020). Thus, it can be said that this kind of high-stake test would have an effect on teaching and learning. The effect that the test has on language teaching and learning is regarded as backwash or washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 2014; Hughes & Hughes, 2020).

The concept of backwash of high-stakes standardized test is important in worldwide instructional settings especially the effects of test preparation on instructional contexts (Chen & Liu, 2011; Xiao, 2014; Xie, 2015; Zhan & Andrews, 2014). In the western context, the impact of high-stakes standardized test can obviously be seen from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy which recently become the Common Core Standards in the United States (Gebril & Eid, 2017). According to this policy, every state in America is required to use a high-stakes test in order to ensure the accountability of the students and the teachers to meet the academic standards. Hence, the schools have to set goals and test preparation course for their students in order to comply with the policy (Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Minarechov á 2012). In Asian context, Wang and Brown (2014) study Hong Kong students’ perceptions towards high-stakes standardized test. The students reported that they were responsible for getting a high score on high-stakes standardized test in order to build family reputation and their self-esteem. In addition, Alam et al. (2011) examine the effects of the examination system in Pakistan and found that the pressure from taking the high-stakes standardized test can lead to negative results.

As a result, the implementation of high-stakes standardized test as a measurement of the students' proficiency forces students, teachers and schools to modify their teaching and learning to meet with the test items and content which can narrow down the curriculum.

Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is a standardized proficiency test aimed to measure the ability to communicate in English focusing on two language skills – listening and reading- which are required for working in an international environment of non-native speakers (Educational Testing Service, 2019). Although TOEIC is one of high-stakes tests which emphasizes on, as the name suggested, '*international communication*,' most of the teachers and learners prepare for the test by using direct test preparation method. According to Firestone et al. (2002), in response to the need of the students to gain high scores in the aforementioned standardized tests, teachers or tutors may apply different teaching methods and the most prevalent method for test preparation courses is the direct test preparation method. In implementing a direct test preparation method, the past tests are studied and analyzed. Brown (2006) stated that the majority of the students require studying for the test as they want to be well-prepared and the direct test preparation course offers them with the sense of *TOEIC-ness* (p.1177). They felt that they could pass the test after taking the course. Moreover, according to Robb and Ercanbrack (1999), the test takers usually prepare themselves before taking the test by reviewing the past tests in order to study for what can possibly appear in the test. This preparation for the test emphasizes only some specific topics and vocabulary which the test takers have to memorize in order to be able to gain a high score. In addition, Bessette (2007) also stated that it was beneficial for the test takers to become familiar with test items and format as it helped decrease anxiety and make them feel more confident in taking the test. Another view of direct test preparation method came from Kim (2010) who pointed out that most test preparation courses emphasized on improving score rather than English proficiency. Test-centered approach is implemented as the students sit in class and do the practice tests while the teachers explain the items. Besides, Harada (2016) examined the effects of the TOEIC course at a junior college in Tokyo in three continuous years. The researcher compared two teaching methods: section-balanced and section-focused which were both direct test preparation. It was found that the section-balanced teaching method was more effective than the section-focused one. Moreover, the use of vocabulary tests was essential in improving students' TOEIC score. As TOEIC changed the format and a new question style was used, a new teaching method should be made. Thus, as the test scores are emphasized, direct test preparation for preparing the students to take TOEIC is used by many teachers (Saglam & Farhady, 2019).

However, using a direct test preparation method in a test preparation course could be 'unethical' as it emphasized more on test-taking strategies which could narrow the curriculum (Miller, 2003; Pan, 2010). Brown (2006) suggested that skills-focused general English or business English classes could be as effective at improving TOEIC scores as direct test preparation classes and also other teaching methods, e.g., theme-based instruction (Saglam & Farhady, 2019), metacognitively-based approach (Pan, 2010) and audio-lingual method (Maliwan, 2018) in test preparation class were suggested by several researchers. One of the approaches that need more light to shed on is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which, suggested by Kim (2010), can be implemented in test preparation class to achieve the language teaching goal in terms of students' proficiency development and also boost up the test score. Apichatrojankul (2011) also suggested that there should be some practical ways to teach TOEIC such as creating a balance between the teaching-centered approach and the child-centered approach by using pair work and group activities in teaching plans, using 4-mat approach (communicative approach), pointed out the benefits of getting high scores, or giving positive reinforcement to the students. Regarding section-focused instruction, Nishitani (2006) investigated the effect of test preparation instruction on TOEIC scores which focused on the grammar section. The data were collected from a TOEIC preparation class and a communicative grammar class. Pre- and post-test scores of the two groups were compared. The results suggested that the students from the TOEIC preparation class significantly outperformed the other group. Thus, it can be concluded that the test preparation class benefited students in terms of score improvement especially in the grammar section. It was suggested that further research should examine other settings and focus on other sections of the test.

There is little research on implementing CLT in test preparation courses especially in Thai context and the researcher believes that this approach has a potential to improve students' TOEIC score and also their proficiency. As a consequence, with regards to CLT, this study focuses on section-balanced instruction in which every section was taught equally and interactively. Communicative activities for listening and reading which were relevant to TOEIC were implemented, thus it is hypothesized that the students can learn the language and also receive the higher test score.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This quasi-experimental study employed non-equivalent (Pre-test and Post-test) control-group design in which the experimental group and the control group were purposively selected without randomization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.168). Mixed-methods were adopted by integrating both quantitative and qualitative data.

A. Sample

The sample of this study was 68 third year Business English students who enrolled in 16-week Preparation for TOEIC course in the second semester of academic year 2019 at one local university in Thailand. As the course was offered specifically to Business English students in response to the aforementioned regulations given by Ministry of

Education, the sample was selected by purposive sampling. In order to examine the difference, the sample was divided into two groups: 30 students for the experimental group and 38 students for the control group. In addition, to make sure that they were homogeneous in terms of English proficiency level, their in-house placement test scores were analysed by using independent sample t-test.

TABLE 3
STUDENTS' PLACEMENT TEST SCORES

Groups	N	Mean (\bar{x})	S.D.	t	Sig
Experimental Group	30	30.26	8.83	.310	.87*
Control Group	38	29.57	9.36		

*Statistically significant level of .05

Table 3 indicated that English proficiency level of the sample in experimental and control group was not significantly different at statistical level of .05 which showed that they were at the same English proficiency level. This can ensure the validity of the results.

For the semi-structured interview, ten samples were selected from the experimental group according to their official TOEIC score: five from the highest and five from the lowest. The semi-structured interview, which was conducted in Thai, aimed to explore their attitudes towards the use of CLT method in test preparation course.

B. Instruments and Data Collection

In order to examine the effect that CLT method has on the samples' TOEIC score, the instruments used to collect the data were pre-test and the official TOEIC was used as a post-test. The placement test score was also used to ensure that the samples were at the same English proficiency level. TOEIC practice test 1 from Oxford University Press (2007) which was authorized by Educational Testing Service (ETS) was used as the pre-test since it had the same test format and test items as the official TOEIC. Then, a semi-structured interview was implemented at the end of the course to investigate students' view towards the teaching approaches in-depth.

The data were collected during December 2019-March 2020. The pre-test was implemented at the first session of the course and then, after finishing the last session, students took the actual TOEIC from Educational Testing Service (ETS). During the course, the experimental group was taught by CLT using the teaching materials from Cambridge Target Score by Talcott and Tullis (2007) which combined an active communicative approach and offered a variety of activities. The book is divided into 12 units in which listening, grammar, vocabulary, reading and discussion, TOEIC tips and communicative activities are also offered. Speaking activity such as a discussion and a negotiation which allow the students to practice English that they have learnt in each unit were also implemented. Moreover, the students had a chance to interact with others under the situation that they would face in the professional world. Even though TOEIC mainly aims to measure listening and reading skill, balanced attention to the four language skills was emphasized in CLT lesson. The communicative activities included, for example, applying TOEIC vocabulary in making a conversation, discussing and exchanging opinions about the reading passages, preparing for a job interview, participating in a discussion, making a product presentation, attending a meeting, buying and selling, negotiating a contract and taking part in a discussion.

On the other hand, the control group which consisted of 38 students was taught by using direct test preparation in which TOEIC practice tests were used as a teaching material. The items in the test were explained and the techniques in doing the test were emphasized which focused on knowledge about language rather than the ability to use language (Howatt, 2004). Moreover, grammar rules and vocabulary were explained explicitly through translation and the teacher dominated the class. Students were also given the past test and participated in drilling and practice doing the test without any discussion activities. Table 4 showed the comparison of the activities between the two teaching approaches.

TABLE 4
CLT AND DIRECT TEST PREPARATION

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	Direct Test Preparation
Teacher-student interaction in English	Explanation of grammar rules
Activities similar to real-world tasks	Illustration of grammar rules
Constant exposure to new language input	Explanation of texts sentence by sentence
Communication in English among students	Analyzing of sentences in texts
Reading and writing about various topics	Contrastive analysis of Thai and English
Listening and speaking about various topics	Explicit and direct correction of learner errors
Pair and small group work	Teacher-centered instruction
Peer feedback and evaluation	Translation and Grammar exercises

C. Data Analysis

In order to answer research question one, the official TOEIC scores of the sample in the experimental group were compared with those from the pre-test and the official TOEIC scores were also compared between the experimental group and control group to examine the difference. For research question two, a semi-structured interview was implemented at the end of the course to investigate students' view towards the teaching approaches in-depth. Statistics

used to analyze the data were mean (\bar{x}), standard deviation, Paired sample t-test and independent sample t-test. Content analysis was used to analyze the data gained from the interview.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The results from the study can be divided into two parts according to the research questions. In order to examine the effect of CLT on students' TOEIC score, pre-test score and official TOEIC score of the experimental group were compared as illustrated the following table:

TABLE 5
PRE-TEST AND OFFICIAL TOEIC SCORE OF EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Score	N	Mean (\bar{x})	S.D.	t	df	Sig
Pre-test	30	368.33	127.75	3.667	29	.00*
Official TOEIC	30	417.83	116.15			

*Statistically significant level of .05

Table 5 showed that mean score of the official TOEIC ($\bar{x} = 417.83$, S.D. = 116.15) was significantly higher than the pre-test ($\bar{x} = 368.33$, S.D. = 127.75) at statistically significant level of .05. Thus, it can be said that CLT can positively help enhance TOEIC scores of the experimental group.

In order to compare the effect of CLT and direct test preparation on students' TOEIC score, an independent sample t-test was implemented to compare the difference of official TOEIC score between students in control and experimental group. The result can be seen in Table 6 below:

TABLE 6
COMPARISON OF THE OFFICIAL TOEIC SCORE OF THE TWO GROUPS

Groups	N	Mean (\bar{x})	S.D.	t	Sig
Experimental Group	30	417.83	116.150	2.712	.00*
Control Group	38	352.37	82.754		

*Statistically significant level of .05

It can be seen in Table 6 that the official TOEIC score of the students in the experimental group who received CLT method was higher than those in the control group at statistically significant level of .05. Hence, the result from this table indicated that students who were taught with CLT outperformed the students taught with direct test preparation method.

As a consequence, the quantitative data indicated the positive effect that CLT had on students' TOEIC score. The official TOEIC score, which was used as a post-test, of the experimental group significantly increased compared to the pre-test. Likewise, when comparing the official TOEIC score between the experimental group and the control group, the score of the experimental group was significantly higher than the control group. Thus, it can be concluded that CLT helped enhance TOEIC score of the students.

Regarding students' attitudes towards CLT in the test preparation course, the data gained from the semi-structured interview were analyzed by using content analysis. The transcribed data showed that the high score students (HS) had a positive attitude towards the implementation of CLT method in the way that it made the lesson more engaging:

"Communicative Language Teaching method is very interesting and fun. I used to study for the TOEIC by doing past exam items and memorization which is boring."

Furthermore, every respondent from the high score group suggested that CLT promoted an active environment in class which motivated their learning not only for the test but also other skills like speaking and writing:

"I have never taken test preparation course that contained activities like this before. The normal test preparation course I used to take was just sitting at the table and drilling on the test items. I have a chance to speak and express my opinion."

They agreed that CLT provided them a chance to apply the test knowledge in other activities that they can face in their real life:

"The activities like 'preparing for the interview' and 'buying and selling' were not only useful for taking the test but also in my real-life situation."

On the other hand, students from the low score group (LS) seemed not to prefer CLT. A majority of them reported negative attitude towards the use of the approach:

"I just wanted to learn about the rules and the vocabulary from the mock test without doing the activities that were not related to the test"

Likewise, four of them expressed their concern about the test score:

"I just want to know what will be in the test so that I can get a higher score."

In conclusion, from the results, even though the score of the students was significantly improved, attitudes between the two groups of respondents differed. This was quite interesting because they had the same English proficiency level. These issues related to this will be discussed in the following section.

V. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the effect of CLT method on TOEIC test score and to explore students' attitude towards this teaching method. The result of the research revealed that CLT positively affected students' TOEIC score as the experimental group's official TOEIC score was significantly higher than the pre-test and also their official TOEIC score was significantly higher than the control group. The beneficial effect of CLT in test score improvement is consistent with the study of Kim (2010) who observed two test-prep classes in Honolulu which implemented CLT and found that this approach can improve students' proficiency and also boost up the test score. Another study conducted by Pan (2010) also suggested that the utilization of communicative activities rather than "teaching to the test" (p.87) provided a chance for the learners to both learn the language from the test and get a higher test score. In addition, as CLT focused more on students' interaction which provided them more chance to practice English, the students got used to receiving and producing English in the real context which can help improve the overall proficiency (Hu, 2005).

Regarding the qualitative result, the attitudes between the two groups of respondents differed. For the high score group, the positive attitudes towards the use of CLT were reported in the way that CLT was engaging and motivating. This result conforms to the study of Kim (2010) that CLT creates a lively and active atmosphere in test preparation class which can be resulted in promoting students' interest and active learning that eventually leads to the improvement in terms of proficiency and test score. Moreover, the finding is also similar to the study of Apichatrojanakul (2011) and Liu (2014) who found that the participants preferred to have group work, discussion and integrated activities in the TOEIC preparation class and also, they would like to practice speaking and writing in class. Furthermore, the high score group opined that CLT gave them a chance to use the language that is similar to the real situation. This is also similar to what Kim (2010) suggested in her study that the teachers should provide students a chance to collaborate and negotiate the knowledge gained from the test preparation class to practice with their peers. This can develop students' proficiency and test score.

Nonetheless, the respondents from the low score group preferred studying with the direct test preparation method. They reported that they were worried about the test score. This could be because TOEIC, which is considered as a high-stake standardized test, is an important indicator for their future. In this research context, they are required to get 945 out of 990 which is very high. This may be a main reason why they preferred to study for the test in order to memorize the elements that were possibly found in the test. According to Kohn (2004), this scoring system creates an authoritarian atmosphere and eventually negative washback and test anxiety are promoted. As Green (2013) suggested, negative washback distorts the curriculum since the teaching and learning focus on testing criteria. This is in line with the study of Bessette (2007) who stated that the majority of the test takers would prefer to become familiar with test items and format as it helps decrease anxiety and make them feel more confident in taking the test. Likewise, Harada (2016) also examined the effects of the TOEIC course on Japanese students by using direct test preparation. It was found that the TOEIC course significantly influenced students' score.

From the result, although CLT proved to be effective in boosting TOEIC scores of the students, other confounding variables may contribute to the diverse attitudes of the students. From the interview, it can be seen that the high score students had a positive attitude while the low score students did not prefer to be taught with CLT. This may be because of the difference in their proficiency level which may affect test anxiety. This issue was also suggested by Culler and Holahan (1980) that poor academic proficiency correlates to test anxiety. Students who have low academic skill tend to have a high test-anxiety as they do not have enough or proper knowledge in taking the test both in terms of test content and test-taking strategies. Moreover, Akram and Mahmood (2010) investigated the relationship between academic achievement and test anxiety of post graduate students and found that test anxiety is one of the factors that contribute to students' underachievement and low performance. Hence, the ability to control test anxiety can be an important element for the student in taking the high-stake standardized test.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATION

The results of this study confirmed that CLT in test preparation class proved to be effective in improving students' TOEIC score. By implementing this approach, students had a chance to practice the things that they learned in the context similar to the test and the real-life situation which resulted in score improvement. Thus, it is clear that communicative test preparation activities integrated in this teaching method should be implemented in test preparation class. By doing so, teachers can prepare the students for the test and student can both achieve their target score and improve their English proficiency. This implication is in line with the recent trends in language assessment, e.g., assessment for learning and assessment-driven learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Wall & Horák, 2011). However, the attitudes of the students towards the implementation of CLT differed according to their gained score. This indicated that test anxiety plays a critical role in affecting test takers' perception and performance. It is recommended that students should participate in a training program in order to know how to deal with factors causing test anxiety. The anxiety may be due to pressure and stress that the students have which could lead to negative attitude towards assessment and instruction. Thus, as test anxiety unexpectedly played a role in this study, further study should consider this and also other influential factors in order to get a well-rounded perspective. Some limitations of this study were given here. As this study was conducted with only a limited number of participants without randomization and was done in one setting,

it was far from generalization. Also, other confounding variables should be concerned, e.g., test anxiety and students' learning style. Students' proficiency should also be examined in more details by using other form of assessment such as speaking and writing test. Besides, questionnaire should be implemented in the future studies in order to investigate overall attitude of the students. Moreover, other high stake standardized tests, e.g., TOEFL and IELTS are also worth exploring. All in all, this study can be used as an alternative guideline for those, teachers and educators, who teach the test preparation course and would like to integrate activities other than drilling and memorizing the test items in order to arouse students' interest and participation.

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