

## THE CORRELATION BETWEEN STUDENTS' ENGLISH LEARNING HABITS AND THEIR TOEIC INSTITUTIONAL TEST SCORES IN STATE POLYTECHNIC OF SRIWIJAYA

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**Abstract:** This study was aimed at discovering if the students' learning habits had a significant correlation as well as gave a significant influence to their TOEIC institutional test scores. One hundred students of State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya, comprising accounting department students, electrical department students and civil engineering students took part as the samples. To estimate the correlation between the variables, a quantitative research method including a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used. The result showed that the correlation between students' learning habits and their TOEIC institutional scores was  $-.093$  with the significant level of  $0.355$  which meant no significant correlation and thus, no influence. As for the mean score of the students' TOEIC test, it reached the number of  $329$  with the maximum score of  $810$  and the minimum  $165$ . The students learning habits were found to be on the positive side and showed the indications of their having established good habits in learning English. Some information about TOEIC as well as the ways to getting good scores in TOEIC test were presented. In addition, the qualitative explanations for the results of the research including the implications of the findings<sup>4</sup> were also provided and discussed in this study.

**Keywords:** English learning habits, TOEIC institutional test, correlation, scores

The average learning hours of the students in State Polytechnic of Sriwijaya, except for the English department, are two hours per week. The first semester is focused on developing students' practical ability like practicing speaking English by having introduction or other oral exercises that aim at improving their speaking skills. The second semester will see the students work on their reading projects in which the development of their reading skills is expected. The third semester is the period for the students to practice sentence building or writing. The fourth semester involves the students in activities like writing formal letters, correspondence, preparing for job interviews and that kind of things which get them prepared for English work situations. The fifth semester students deal with preparation for English proficiency tests which shall measure their English capabilities in the forms of scores which can help them find a good job after they graduate. Surely, these scores will only help when they are good or considered acceptable based on the graded levels of TOEIC scores. However, two hours of English learning per week may not be effective for achieving satisfactory results of TOEIC scores.

### THE TEST OF ENGLISH FOR INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION

TOEIC stands for The Test of English for International Communication. TOEIC test questions are based on real-life work settings in an international environment such as meetings, travel, telephone conversations, etc (English Exam Ltd, 2014, p.1). Therefore, TOEIC is the appropriate test model which suits the polytechnic students the most. The students who get high scores for this test are more likely to get a good job even on an international level. Therefore, hard work is demanded from the students to deserve the good scores. In addition to that, longer hours of studying are needed to make it possible for them to achieve the expected results.

They have to provide themselves with the routine of learning English in their own time outside the school walls in a certain way which shall be different from the way they study English within the campus.

The Education qualification target of State polytechnic of Sriwijaya emphasizes that at least 30% of the students alumnae are to get the TOEIC scores of above 405. It means that the students are required to at least be able to initiate and maintain predictable face-to-face conversations and satisfy limited social demands (Waikato institute of education, 2017, p. 1). To know if our students had the ability, TOEIC test was conducted previously for the freshman students in the state polytechnic of Sriwijaya. However, it was found that the results were mostly unsatisfactory. Only a few students could manage to get themselves out of the trouble of being embarrassed by their TOEIC scores which went down below 405. These few students whose scores rose above 405 might have some tricks off their sleeves to put into use when they were faced with the items in TOEIC test. These tricks could be their way of learning habits which had led them to success.

Learning, as defined by SkillsYouNeed.com (2014, p. 1), is a continuous process that commences at birth and continues until death; it is the process through which we use our experience to deal with new situations and to develop relationships. In line with that *barkeley center for teaching and learning* (2017, p. 1) states that learning is a process that results in a change in knowledge or behavior as a result of experience. This goes to show us that learning does not only take place in a school environment, but also in other places where we shall be able to develop ourselves and improve our knowledge. As for habit, it can be defined as an acquired behavior pattern regularly followed until it has become almost involuntary (Dictionary.com, 2017, p. 1). Thus, learning habit can be inferred as an acquired behavior pattern regularly followed in an attempt to improve one's knowledge.

## **THE PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING**

There are five principles of learning that might generally be applied in any kinds of situation when learning process takes place. Those principles go as follows:

### **1. Learning involves the active construction of meaning by the learner**

The new information students shall receive will definitely be linked to the old one they have already possessed in their memory which create mental models. When the old information is found faulty, the learning of new information will be compromised. Weimer also adds that learning can be thought of as a process of conceptual change in which faulty or incomplete models are repaired. However, fixing faulty mental models is not always an easy thing due to misconceptions the students are still holding even after taking a course.

### **2. Learning facts and learning to do something are two different processes**

This is quite an explanation why students who have already known certain facts still find a hard time to apply those facts to solve a problem. Practice and feedback are very much required to overcome this situation. The students should start to learn problem solving from an easy one while at the same time be taught to know more than whether the answer is right or wrong. Pushing students too hard will not do any good or might even worsen the situation. Learning English,

for instance, should begin with an elementary level and at the same time practice should be given in order to record facts not as facts but as something applicable in real life situations.

**3. Some things that are learned are specific to the domain or context (subject matter or course) in which they are learned, whereas other things are more readily transferred to other domains.**

In learning a language, in this case English, there are cultures involved which are specific to the language being learned. The students will have a lot of trouble to use certain expressions in the right contexts when they have no idea that the culture aspects should be understood beforehand. On the other hand, students will find it easier to learn a new language after they transfer their knowledge on culture to the usage of words or expressions rooted from that particular culture. However, the skill of transferring certain knowledge to another related/unrelated subject or topic lies on the teachers' hands to teach.

**4. Individuals are likely to learn more when they learn with others than when they learn alone.**

Some students are so independent that they show no signs of needing others in their company for learning. However, this individual learning style may need to change its spirit of individualism into something more inclusive. Learning a language requires interaction to express ideas and get feedback or responses from others. In this way, the language will come naturally as a means of communication in spite of being lines of words forcefully put into students' memory.

**5. Meaningful learning is facilitated by articulating explanations, whether to one's self, peers, or teachers.**

Teachers who are good at articulating themselves will bring the message crystal clear to their students' mind without any distortion on the way. This will motivate students to also learn how to express themselves articulately with the right diction and expression. In advanced level of learning a foreign language which discusses figurative language, for instance, a combination of words shall not be translated individually as they may give an entirely different meaning. These combinations of words should be framed as one with one certain meaning that comes with them. (found in Weimer, 2012, pg. 1)

**TOEIC TEST SCORES AND BENEFITS**

**Levels of TOEIC Test Scores**

TOEIC test scores are put into six graded levels as shown in the following table:

<b>Levels of TOEIC Test Scores</b>	
Score level	General Description
<b>905 - 990</b> (91% - 100%)	<b>International Professional Proficiency</b> Able to communicate effectively in any situation
<b>785 - 900</b> (79% - 90%)	<b>Working Proficiency Plus</b> Able to satisfy most work requirements

	with language that is often, but not always, acceptable and effective.
<b>605 - 780</b> (61% - 78%)	<b>Limited Working Proficiency</b> Able to satisfy most social demands and limited work requirements.
<b>405 - 600</b> (41% - 60%)	<b>Elementary Proficiency Plus</b>  Can initiate and maintain predictable face-to-face conversations and satisfy limited social demands.
<b>255 - 400</b> (26% - 40%)	<b>Elementary Proficiency</b>  Speaker has functional, but limited proficiency. Able to maintain very simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics.
<b>10 - 250</b> (0 - 25%)	<b>Basic Proficiency</b>  Able to satisfy immediate survival needs.

(TOEIC-Online-Test.com (2017, p. 1)

### Benefits of Taking TOEIC Test

There are some benefits of taking TOEIC test according to TOEIC-Online-Test.com (2017, p. 1). They are as follows:

#### 1. Personal Advantage

It adds to our confidence in discussions and meetings as we are not merely becoming mute observers. This test boosts our self-esteem and gives us the assurance that we can be just like those confident people who seem to have the power of knowledge of having advanced in their learning. It convinces us that we have an edge over the others as reflected in our level of TOEIC attainment.

#### 2. Academic Advantage

By gaining a good score in the test we are proving ourselves to have got a good command over the English language. Academically, we are likely to gain admission in most universities or educational institutions. TOEIC test has been widely accepted as a standard for fluency in English.

#### 3. Professional Advantage

If we have already been TOEIC certified, a lot of career opportunities are wide open waiting for us. A number of business organizations employ the TOEIC testing system to evaluate their employees and this shall give us the edge over the others in terms of getting recognized, and having chances for professional training and promotions. In business domain, TOEIC has been internationally recognized to measure someone's English proficiency and therefore with TOEIC certificate in our hands, the chances of working in any part of the world are even bigger.

## **METHOD**

Descriptive research design was employed in doing this research. According to Research Guides (2017, p. 1), Descriptive research is used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena and to describe "what exists" with respect to variables or conditions in a situation. There were two variables in this research namely students' English learning habits as a predictor variable and their TOEIC attainment as the criterion variable.

The population was all the third semester students who had joined the institutional TOEIC test in state polytechnic of Sriwijaya in 2017. There were 100 samples taken out of this population from the accounting department, electrical department, and civil engineering department regardless of their TOEIC scores they previously had attained in the second semester.

Questionnaires and TOEIC test results were used as the instruments to obtain the data. The questionnaires were made by the researchers themselves, and therefore, a try-out was conducted to ascertain their validity and reliability by using Pearson Product Moment Coefficient and Cronbach Alpha Technique.

The piloting students were the accounting students of semester three who were not the samples in the research. There were twenty seven of them involved in the piloting project. To make sure that the students understood the questions in the questionnaires, they were presented in Bahasa Indonesia. Each item of the questionnaires had five scales with which the respondents had to respond. The scales comprised favorable statements such as strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree (Malhotra, 2007, pp.185-186) and the results were analyzed by using data classification and analysis of frequency and percentage with Multiply Regression Analysis applied in the process. As for the TOEIC test conducted in state polytechnic of Sriwijaya, it was legal and made by the ETS (Educational Testing Service) itself. Therefore, the test items were considered valid and reliable.

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS**

After the TOEIC scores were analyzed, it was found that students' mean score for TOEIC was 329, while the median pointed to the number 285. The maximum score was quite high with the presentation of the satisfactory number 810. However, it would be too early to take pride in this one particular attainment since it did not represent the capability of the whole students. When the analysis continued to the minimum score, the number 165 was nothing to be shocked at since the mean score itself was not quite a piece of good news. All this indicated that the students' English proficiency was generally below the expected level. It did not even satisfy the standard of Polsri which demanded students to go over the score of 405. In other words, the students in general had functional, but limited proficiency. They were only able to maintain very simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics. This level of proficiency would never bring the students to work in bonafide companies where English was the prime language being used. As for the students' learning habits, the following information had been found:

- The majority of the students (47%) stated that they repeated their lesson outside the school walls. In other words, they read again the lesson materials their lecturer had given them previously in the classroom. If that was the case,

they should have been able to understand English better, and their spirit and activities of reviewing the lesson should have rewarded them with quite satisfactory attainment in forms of high scores of TOEIC. However, that did not seem to be the case. Their TOEIC average score left nothing to write home about. In other words, no body would be proud about and be satisfied with getting scores below 329 after all the hard work they had done.

- Fifty-four students out of 100 agreed that they tried to get further information outside school hours about the lesson their English teacher had explained to them inside the classroom. The other 9 students seemed to be more enthusiastic about doing the exact same thing, searching for more indepth information concerning the lesson brought up and discussed in class. This signaled a good chance of their being able to succeed in getting better scores in their semester test and they probably had done so. However, it did not seem to be reflected on their TOEIC scores after all.
- Even though they had tried to comprehend their lesson spoken out by their lecturer in English, their listening test in TOEIC did not seem to reflect their effort at all. It was more than agreeable that being attentive in class was such a possitive attitude worthy of good reward in form of good, if not most satisfactory, scores. It was very likely that the reward went to the results of their final semester test only. Unfortunately, to have good scores of TOEIC, they needed to do better than that.
- the students presented themselves as a group of very dilligent learners. Not all, but at least almost half of them did. They declared that they read and learned the learning subject before the class began. Their preparation was worth the utmost appreciation but their TOEIC scores did not seem to agree with them.
- The majority expressed their approval of how effective the process of learning would be when audio visual aids were imployed. For instance, they would love it very much when given the chance to watch some sort of movies to illustrate the topic being discussed in the class. A set of sound systems might as well be a support to the progress of their study. However, looking back to the TOEIC mean score, there left us with a frown and a question of whether or not that sort of learning equipments ever existed in their learning environment at all.
- 78% of the students used to do TOEIC practice in the class as one of the learning materials presented by their teacher. That was a good point. Students had to be introduced to TOEIC as early as possible as TOEIC might not be learned overnight before the test began the next day. However, what left us to wonder was that 14% of them were not sure whether they had ever joined TOEIC exercise or not. That was quite an interisting case and arousing curiosity.
- In the listening section of the test, when the students were having trouble to understand a word or a statement, they were inclined to depend on the words of the same sound or almost the same sound to decide their answers. That was something that the students should not have done but they did it anyway because they thought it would help them out. That was the time when pitfall was being set up and they fell right down inside the trap.

- Based on the data achieved, 22% of the students acknowledged that they had no experience of joining a TOEIC training class. Although that was not necessarily the ultimate cause of their downfall in their previous TOEIC test, taking a TOEIC training class can be a very good idea. Since the more they lacked in the experience of TOEIC practice, the more they went downward to find their scores close to the bottom.

After the analysis was done, the result indicates that the correlation between students' writing interest and their translation ability on Indonesian contextual phrases was  $-.093$  with the significant level of  $0.355$ . Priyatno (2012, p. 59) stated that Correlation Coefficient Value ranges from  $-1$  up to  $1$  or  $0$  up to  $1$ . If the CCV approaches  $1$  or  $-1$ , the correlation between the two variables will be more apparent. However, when the CCV is nearer to  $0$ , the correlation gets weaker. Since  $-.093$  stayed very close to  $0$ , It revealed very weak to almost non-existent correlation between the second semester students' English learning habit (X) and their TOEIC scores (Y). In addition, since the p-value ( $0.355$ ) was bigger than  $0.05$ , the correlation was also not significant. In other words, the p-value was much too high up to reach down below  $0.05$  which was the right level of significance.

Based on the findings above, some interpretations to strengthen value of the study were presented below: First, it is very clear that the majority of the students are having such a big problem with their TOEIC test that the results jump down to the level of embarrassment. It would actually be embarrassing if they were the last semester students but fortunately they are not. They are just starting their second year and still having another two years ahead of them to become the sixth semester students to take their final TOEIC test in state Polytechnic of Sriwijaya. It is wise to say that this test is just an introduction and the results shall not be used to find a job outside their study.

Second, referring to the questionnaire the students have filled out, the information has been found that basically they have good habits of learning English. They love to repeat the lesson and even read it before the class begins. This research was not to find out how they succeeded in their final test but this research has identified their weakness in overcoming TOEIC challenges. Even more surprising is that these good habits of theirs correlate with bad results of their TOEIC test. Something must have gone wrong and the culprit has soon to be discovered. We assume that the English curriculum for first year students are subject to review, to make it more anticipatory towards TOEIC test in the future.

Third, the students stated that they always tried to understand their teacher speaking in English. That is a good thing and appreciation also goes to the lecturer who encourages the students to listen in English. Now let us see how dominant is listening being the test material in TOEIC. This test divides its items into two, namely listening section and reading section equally in portion. Therefore, there is no doubt about the importance of listening skills to get high scores. In the test, it is the native speakers of English the students have to listen to and understand, not the Indonesian people who would naturally speak their own accent. The accents of both sides, native speakers of English and Indonesian persons, are naturally different, making quite an issue and should be taken into consideration for a solution. It is probably too costly to frequently invite native speakers of English to

the class to teach but at least audio visual should be provided. As for as we know, there is no language lab in the departments in which the reserach has been conducted and the English lecturers at times have to ask his students to carry their own speakers from home to the class to be able to listen to the native speakers of English properly, in a tape or cassette.

Fourth, it is found that the students depend on the similarity of sounds to determine their answers in the listening test section. This is the indication that they have no idea of a certain tactic in the listening test. Similar sounds may eventually prove to have a different meaning when it is put in a different context. Therefore, their answers become wrong because of the wrong assumption. To anticipate this from happening again in the future, it is advisable that students learn more of the tactics and techniques to succeed in listening test section.

Fifth, the data also show that students also have TOEIC practice in class provided by their lecturer. The question is how much of their time is dedicated to learning TOEIC and how often they have been exposed to TOEIC. the students (the non-English department students) have only two hours (100 minutes) per meeting in a week to study English classically. The focus of their study is conversation in the first semester and reading in the second semester, which leaves no space for listening and grammar. In other words, listening does not seem to be the compulsory subject to be discussed during these two semesters and grammar may have to be skipped off due to the need for practicality in teaching polytechnic students. This is a pity. Listening and grammar (as found it reading) are supposed to be the core skills students need to excell at in order to accomplish the good scores in TOEIC test.

Sixth, It is evident that 78% of the samples said that they had never joined TOEIC training of any kind. This is probably because they are not the English department students and find no need for such courses. They might have faced the TOEIC test without any idea of what it was and thefore the results were not something to be proud of. TOEIC test is definitely not the same as the ordinary final semester test they have to go through at the end of semester. It is something to be familiaried with and anticipated against that the test can be done with confidence. Still, joining TOEIC classes or regular training program is not the only way to the success. The exposure of the language itself to the students does matter to gain good proficiency in English reflected by the scores of their TOEIC test.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the problems of the study and the findings in the previous chapter, the following conclusions can be drawn:

First, there was no significant correlation between students' learning habits and their TOEIC scores. From the data obtained, it is known that the students' habits of learning are not bad. They show mostly good signs of being good students who obey their teachers and are not in the habits of being lazy. This should have increased their scores but it did not. That was why there was no significant correlation. However, the students are not to be entirely blamed, though. They have just studied in Poltek for less than a year without much experience of dealing with TOEIC exercises. They will still have to face the



international TOEIC test in semester six and those results will actually reflect the quality of their full study in POLSRI.

Second, there was no significant influence of students' English learning habits over students' TOEIC attainment. Student's hard work has made it possible to reach the score of 810. This particular student is able to satisfy most work requirements with language that is often, but not always, acceptable and effective. However, if we have to see the average results, they are not so representable. It means that one student's achievement does not count much for the influence to occur from one factor (x) to the other (y). Therefore, to make it possible for all students to achieve higher test scores, the present Curriculum of English for first and second year semester of the non-English departments should be reviewed and ought to cover more of TOEIC exercises.

Third, the poor average score indicates the students' incompetency in English. This is sad but somehow it is not something to grieve after. Their TOEIC scores may not be useful at the present time since they still have to finish their study within another two years. After two years the scores, however good they can be, will be outdated and obsolete. They shall no longer be useful as the qualification to get a job. What we should anticipate is the TOEIC test that they shall take later in semester six. Then, the results will be useful to apply for a job, if good, and also reflect the quality of state polytechnic of Sriwijaya itself as the educational institution.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

Studying English overnight just to get higher scores in TOEIC does not seem to help much. Some students who have learned English long before they even know TOEIC have better chance of accomplishing more satisfactory results than those who burn the midnight oil just days before the test is administered. This study was expected to reveal the truth about the condition of students' English proficiency and encourage the English lecturers to find the solution to the problems lying in hand. There should be some teaching techniques that improve the quality of students' English proficiency so that the students can increase their TOEIC scores in the sixth semester. The teaching should focus more on reading, grammar, and listening because TOEIC is comprised of those elements the students should master. It is also very suggestible that every English class be provided with audio visual instruments so that listening activity is no longer a scarcity among classroom activities.

Thus, The best possible ways of improving students' TOEIC scores are learning the materials that TOEIC is presenting in the test. These may include listening and reading. To improve listening skills, it is necessary that students be trained to be able to pronounce English words properly including pronouncing the English sounds that do not exist in Bahasa Indonesian. Word stress and intonation should also be included in the learning process as part of pronunciation practice. Once students know and are capable of pronouncing English words and sentences with the right stress and intonation, it is going to be easier for them to understand English spoken by the native speakers of English due to the similarities in sounds, stresses, and intonations that connect them together.

The other way is definitely to have a lot of practice on reading. However, it is not just “reading comprehension” that matters. There are some other elements of reading worthy of our most attention. What we are talking about here is grammar. In reading sections like “incomplete sentences” and “text completion”, a good command of vocabulary really helps to find the answers but vocabulary alone is not enough. Mastery over grammar is quite a necessity to deal with this part of the test. Subject-verb Agreement, Correct Tense, participial Phrases, etc. are the items frequently turning up in the test. Learning all these may not sound so practical for polytechnic students, but when high TOEIC score level is what we are aiming at, we have no choice but to teach them and all the likes of them.

The ways of improving students’ TOEIC scores as discussed above seem such long and winding roads. It makes sense since mastery over a foreign language is a result of lots of repeated practice until it becomes a habit. There are no short-cut ways to mastering a foreign language and therefore we have to benefit from students’ long periods of studying in this polytechnic, six semesters to be exact. We, as lecturers, may insert TOEIC practice items in each semester until they become accustomed to them and get more confident in facing the TOEIC test in the sixth semester.

Some tips and tricks of how to deal with TOEIC test are also very useful for students to know because:

- They help to identify characteristics of wrong answers in the reading comprehensions test.
- They help to direct our attention and what to focus on when faced with photographs in listening test section.
- They help to identify distractors so that they know which not to choose as an answer, etc.

Last but not least, this study is expected to encourage other researchers to continue carrying out this kind research from a different view-point. Hard work and toil deserve a prize. Studying hard is worthy of appreciation, and it could be in the form of high scores, especially TOEIC scores.

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