

Review Article

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Two Tests, Two Strategies? Rethinking Preparation for TOEIC and TOEFL

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of English proficiency tests in Japanese universities has created an important need to understand how preparation strategies should be adapted to different assessments. This paper comparatively examines preparation for the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), asking whether two substantially different examinations require two different preparation approaches. Drawing on research on language-test preparation, washback, vocabulary demands, and test-taking strategies, the paper considers differences in test purposes, lexical requirements, skill coverage, task formats, and mental processing demands. It pays particular attention to the dominance of TOEIC Listening and Reading (L&R) among Japanese test takers and its focus on receptive skills, in contrast to TOEFL iBT's assessment of reading, listening, speaking, and writing through both independent and integrated tasks. The review suggests that the two examinations share fundamental preparation strategies, including vocabulary development, familiarity with test formats, extensive practice, and time management. However, TOEFL preparation requires greater emphasis on academic vocabulary, productive skills, note-taking, integrated processing, and timed speaking and writing. The paper argues that test preparation should therefore be assessment-specific rather than treated as universally transferable. For Japanese university students, selecting an exam that suits their educational or career goals and aligning preparation strategies with its specific demands may offer a more effective route to high performance.

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Introduction

English proficiency tests serve an increasingly important role in academic mobility, employment, university admission, and professional development. Consequently, preparation for high-pressure language tests has become an important area of research in applied linguistics and language assessment. Yet test preparation is not necessarily neutral. The influence of assessment on teaching and learning, commonly described as washback, has long been recognised as a central concern in language testing research. Alderson and Wall argued that the relationship between tests and classroom practices is considerably more complex than a simple assumption that tests directly determine teaching [1].

Their framework encouraged researchers to examine how test characteristics, teachers, learners, educational contexts, and preparation practices interact.

This issue is particularly relevant when comparing the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Although both are widely used measures of English proficiency, they have traditionally served different purposes and emphasise different communicative demands. TOEIC has been strongly associated with English communication in workplace and occupational contexts, whereas TOEFL has primarily been used to assess

English proficiency for academic study. Such differences raise an important pedagogical question: should learners prepare for these tests in fundamentally different ways?

Early research provides evidence that preparation can substantially shape learning practices. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons in their influential investigation of TOEFL preparation courses, found that the effects of test preparation were more complex than straightforward negative or positive washback accounts suggested. Similarly, research on TOEIC preparation among Japanese university students reported measurable effects of direct test preparation on TOEIC performance [2,3]. Forster and Karn later explored test-taking strategies across TOEIC and TOEFL, showing that some strategies could be shared across the two exams while also pointing out the importance of test-specific preparation [4].

More recent scholarship suggests that this question deserves renewed attention. Im and Cheng in their review of TOEIC, noted that empirical research on TOEIC washback remains relatively limited despite the test's widespread use, particularly in Japan and Korea [5]. More recently, He, Sénécal, Stansfield, and Suvorov conducted a scoping review of 66 studies of second-language test preparation and found a strong concentration of research on international English tests, while also highlighting methodological weaknesses and the need for further research. Their evidence shows

that test preparation should be examined not simply as generic “test-taking skills,” but in relation to the specific characteristics and purposes of individual assessments [6].

Against this background, the present article asks: Two Tests, Two Strategies? It comparatively examines preparation for TOEIC and TOEFL, considering the extent to which strategies such as test familiarity, time management, vocabulary development, receptive-skills practice, productive-skills training, and test-specific coaching should be shared or differentiated. It further considers whether contemporary developments in digital learning and AI-assisted preparation require established approaches to test preparation to be reconsidered.

Discussion

The comparison between TOEIC and TOEFL preparation raises an important question concerning whether English-test preparation can reasonably be treated as a general, transferable activity. For Japanese university students, this question is particularly relevant because TOEIC and TOEFL are both well-known high-stakes assessments, yet they place substantially different demands on candidates. The present discussion suggests that the perception that TOEFL requires considerably more preparation than TOEIC is not simply a matter of individual preference. Rather, it may reflect systematic differences in lexical demands, skill coverage, task complexity, and the cognitive resources required during testing.

Vocabulary Breadth and Lexical Demands

One particularly important difference concerns vocabulary. It is tempting to state simply that TOEFL has a “more difficult vocabulary” than TOEIC; however, the research backs a more precise interpretation. Kaneko conducted lexical-frequency profiling of several high-stakes English tests used in Japan, including TOEFL and TOEIC, and demonstrated that the vocabulary requirements of these examinations differ according to their linguistic and contextual characteristics. His analysis aimed to establish vocabulary-size targets for Japanese learners and compared both TOEFL and TOEIC [7].

This distinction matters because TOEFL is explicitly designed around academic English. The TOEFL iBT assesses English as it is used in university contexts, and its materials include academic passages, lectures, classroom discussions, and integrated academic tasks. Consequently, successful TOEFL preparation calls for not only recognition of frequently occurring general vocabulary but also familiarity with vocabulary used across academic disciplines.

More recent evidence reinforces this interpretation. Kaneko examined the vocabulary load of TOEFL iBT reading and listening materials and found a striking difference between the two modes: the estimated vocabulary load of the reading corpus differed from that of the listening corpus by approximately 3,000-word families.

The study also identified substantial differences in Academic Word List coverage between the two modalities. This finding is particularly relevant to preparation because it suggests that even within TOEFL, vocabulary preparation cannot necessarily be reduced to memorising a single universal word list [8].

By contrast, research explicitly examining TOEIC vocabulary has identified vocabulary-size targets associated with the receptive demands of the TOEIC Listening and Reading test. Kaneko for example, estimated that learners with approximately 3,000-word families—the level expected of Japanese senior-high-school students—would need an additional approximately 1,000-word

families for listening and 2,000–3,000 for reading to achieve approximately 98% lexical coverage in the TOEIC materials examined. Thus, TOEIC certainly calls for extensive vocabulary knowledge [9]. Nevertheless, TOEFL preparation may feel qualitatively different because learners must meet academic lexical demands while also using vocabulary in speaking and writing.

Four Skills Versus Two-Skill Testing

A second major difference concerns the number and type of skills assessed. The TOEFL iBT is explicitly designed to measure reading, listening, speaking, and writing, with integrated tasks that require candidates to combine multiple skills. The current TOEFL iBT takes approximately two hours and includes Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking sections.

This differs distinctly from the most commonly taken TOEIC examination in Japan, the TOEIC Listening & Reading Test. Importantly, TOEIC L&R assesses only listening and reading, while speaking and writing are assessed separately through TOEIC S&W. Participation levels show the practical significance of this distinction. During FY2025, approximately 1.964 million candidates took TOEIC L&R in Japan, compared with approximately 51,000 candidates for TOEIC S&W. Although S&W participation has grown rapidly, L&R remains far more common.

This difference may influence preparation behaviour. A student preparing for TOEIC L&R can concentrate heavily on receptive skills, including rapid reading, listening comprehension, vocabulary recognition, grammatical processing, and time management. A TOEFL candidate, however, must prepare for productive performance as well. Preparation therefore involves developing the ability to formulate an organised spoken response and produce written academic writing under strict time constraints.

The distinction is not simply quantitative. TOEFL also incorporates integrated tasks, in which candidates must process information through one modality and use it in another. For example, candidates may need to read and listen before producing a spoken or written response. Such tasks increase the processing burden because vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, note-taking, memory, organisation, and production must operate together.

Research with Japanese learners supports the importance of these processing demands. In a qualitative investigation of Japanese English learners, participants reported that TOEFL iBT listening passages were longer and faster than comparable examinations and that they sometimes struggled because they attempted to translate the English into Japanese while simultaneously processing the incoming information. One participant also reported that completing a reading component before an integrated listening task consumed cognitive resources that subsequently affected concentration during listening.

Why TOEFL may feel more demanding even when general English knowledge is strong

These differences help explain an apparent paradox: a learner may possess substantial general English knowledge yet feel that TOEFL requires considerably more effort than TOEIC. The explanation may lie partly in the distinction between knowledge of English and the ability to deploy that knowledge under integrated, time-constrained conditions.

The TOEFL Japanese office explicitly emphasises that the examination evaluates not simply how much English candidates

“know,” but whether they can use English across four communicative skills. Moreover, TOEFL candidates must perform without a conventional break between independent receptive and productive demands. Speaking and writing tasks can require candidates to retain, organise, and transform information into a coherent response. This makes memory and processing important, although describing the examination as simply testing “memory” would be too narrow.

Indeed, research on TOEFL iBT perceptions indicates that candidates report difficulty concentrating under severe time constraints and that integrated speaking tasks require them to listen, take notes, organise information, and formulate responses. Malone found that students perceived format and time pressure as important sources of difficulty even when they recognised that the tasks themselves reflected university-level activities. Thus, what may subjectively feel like “having to remember more” can also be conceptualised as greater concurrent processing and production demands [10].

Consequences for Test Preparation

These differences have important consequences for preparation strategies. A preparation program designed primarily around TOEIC L & R may emphasise lexical acquisition, grammatical accuracy, rapid processing, listening discrimination, reading speed, question-type familiarity, and time management. TOEFL preparation requires many of these components but must also develop academic vocabulary, extended listening comprehension, note-taking, spontaneous spoken production, academic writing, and the ability to combine information across skills.

Consequently, transferring a successful TOEIC preparation strategy directly to TOEFL may produce disappointing results. A learner who has developed excellent multiple-choice test-taking strategies may nevertheless experience difficulties when required to transform information from a lecture or reading passage into an organised spoken or written response. Conversely, TOEFL preparation may develop a wider range of communicative abilities than TOEIC L&R directly requires.

This distinction supports the central proposition of the present article: two different tests may require two different preparation philosophies. The question is therefore not whether TOEIC preparation or TOEFL preparation is inherently “better,” but whether preparation is sufficiently aligned with the construct, task demands, lexical environment, and skill profile of the target examination.

At the same time, the comparison should not be interpreted as evidence that TOEIC is simply “easy” and TOEFL is “hard.” TOEIC L&R can impose substantial lexical and time-pressure demands, and its considerable emphasis on rapid receptive processing can make high scores difficult to achieve. The more defensible conclusion is that their difficulty profiles differ. TOEIC L&R concentrates much of its challenge within listening and reading, whereas TOEFL distributes its requirements across four skills and introduces integrated academic processing and production. For Japanese learners who are accustomed to TOEIC L&R as the dominant English test, the transition to TOEFL may therefore represent not simply a higher level of English proficiency yet a qualitatively different preparation task.

This distinction provides a strong rationale for reconsidering the assumption that generic “test preparation strategies” apply equally to all English proficiency examinations. Instead, effective preparation should be assessment-specific, with strategy selection

determined by the linguistic, cognitive, and communicative demands of the target test.

Conclusions

The comparison suggests that TOEIC and TOEFL preparation share several foundational strategies but differ substantially in breadth, depth, and application. Both require systematic vocabulary development, familiarity with question formats, extensive practice, time management, and continual exposure to authentic test materials. Familiarity itself can also produce measurable benefits, making practice tests and timed simulations valuable components of preparation.

Nevertheless, preparation should become increasingly test-specific as students approach their target examination. For TOEIC L&R, which emphasises listening and reading, young Japanese learners should prioritise high-frequency vocabulary, rapid lexical recognition, listening discrimination, reading speed, grammatical accuracy, and efficient multiple-choice decision-making. Current official TOEIC materials similarly emphasise frequent vocabulary, contextualised examples, repeated listening, and regular practice.

TOEFL preparation requires a wider approach. Students should develop academic vocabulary alongside extensive reading and listening, but should also devote substantial time to speaking, writing, note-taking, information integration, and timed production. Memorising vocabulary without practising its active use is therefore unlikely to be sufficient.

For Japanese university students who have not yet chosen an exam, the choice should be based not simply on apparent difficulty but on purpose, strengths, and future educational or occupational requirements. Students seeking an efficient demonstration of receptive English ability may find TOEIC L&R more manageable, whereas students planning international academic study should consider developing the wider skills TOEFL demands. Ultimately, neither examination should be regarded as universally easier or harder: they represent different configurations of English ability and therefore reward different preparation strategies. The most effective advice is consequently simple: choose the target first, diagnose the test’s demands, and prepare specifically for that test rather than treating TOEIC and TOEFL preparation as interchangeable.

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