

Getting Started in the E-Learning Classroom
By

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Abstract

E-learning is a relatively new way to teach and help students learn through the use of technology. When using a published e-learning course for the first time to teach a TOEIC class made up of Japanese university students, it was found that the online e-learning course could be administered easily and effectively, despite students having drastically differing levels of English proficiency. In addition, the results of the course-survey showed that students felt they had studied and learned more in the e-learning course than in any of their previous English courses at the university, suggesting that an online e-learning course may have some advantages over the traditional EFL classroom.

1 . Introduction

In techno-savvy Japan, using technology to help students learn seems to make perfect sense. Everywhere you look in Japan, young people are using technology in their daily lives. Smart phones, i-Pods, and portable game consoles, among others, seem to be standard issue among children and young adults. These hi-tech devices play an intricate role in the daily lives of young people in Japan, and kids seem to have no trouble learning how to use them, no matter how impossibly complicated they may seem to us adults. This culture of technology with all its bright colors, high-resolution animation and digital sound is the culture of Japanese youth today. This is what students are used to in their daily lives, and, again, it makes perfect sense to try to package this technology into a form that will capture students' attention and help them learn, preferably while having fun. Some educational companies are already headed in this direction. After-hour Japanese prep schools or jukus have developed educational software that can now be

used on such portable game devices as Play Station Portable 2, making their material not only more accessible but more palatable as well.

University educators have also been trying to find effective ways for utilizing technology in education. In the field of foreign language teaching, Computer Assisted Language Learning or CALL is an organization that has been dedicated to promoting new ways of using technology to enhance the learning of foreign languages. These days, the new buzz-word in CALL is "e-learning," and this new approach to teaching seems to be gaining in popularity with each new academic year. Having some experience with technology and language teaching (see Heil, 2004), I was also very interested in e-learning and thought that my university engineering students might benefit from such a program. At the same time, e-learning interested me for other reasons as well. I was looking for solutions to problems that I was experiencing in my English courses, such as teaching mixed-level classes and getting students to study more outside of class. I thought that e-learning might provide the solutions that I was searching for. Thus, I took the plunge and decided to see with my own eyes what e-learning

had to offer the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. I did this by actually teaching an e-learning course. This paper is about the process of teaching an e-learning course for the first time and how students reacted to the course and the material.

2 . Finding an E-Learning Program

Before you can incorporate e-learning into a course, you first need to see what is available. I think that the best way to see what's out there for language teachers is to go to a large national conference on language teaching. Usually, all the textbook publishers will attend such conferences, showing their wares, including e-learning programs. In my case, I attended the national JALT (Japan Association of Language Teachers) conference and the Japan national CALL conference and was able to see several presentations on published e-learning programs being used in Japan. Of course, at these conferences, you can also attend numerous presentations on how teachers are using e-learning, in all its various forms. Most of the material being used by teachers is self-made, supplemental material used in association with a Learning Management System (LMS), the most popular being Moodle. Generally speaking, these "Moodle" teachers put activities or assignments online that can be accessed through the LMS. A teacher could put a picture or a link to a movie clip up on the LMS and ask students to answer questions about the material. The aim of the activity would be to reinforce whatever might be being taught in class, such as grammar and vocabulary, while increasing the amount of time on task, using the common assumption that if the students are actively using the Target Language (TL) in a meaningful way, they are also learning and acquiring that language. The Moodle teacher may even program a set of questions that, once completed, are automatically graded and recorded, showing a student his/her own progress in the class. Even more impressive, the LMS may also make it possible to compare a student's score with those of others in the course and show that student

just where s/he stands among his/her peers in the course. Such presentations are certainly useful in that they allow teachers to see what is possible with e-learning. However, as mentioned before, much of the e-learning material that teachers are using is self-made and developed specifically for that teacher's particular course, meaning the actual material can't be readily used in another teacher's class, though the concept or principle behind the e-learning material can. In addition, creating these programmed activities is not always as easy as one might think and can definitely be very time-consuming, to say the least. I remember one such teacher at a JALT conference who had just given an excellent presentation about a computer program that he had developed for one of his English courses. When he was asked about how long it had taken him to create the program, he sighed and said that he hadn't seen the sun in over five years. I'm sure that he was half-joking when he said this, but his point was well-taken: Self-made e-learning material can be very time consuming to create, especially if you lack advanced computer skills. For those of us who are not that computer savvy, published e-learning programs are an excellent alternative. This is the path that I decided to take for my class.

2.1 Criteria for Selecting a Course

After visiting conferences and seeing what was available, it was time to select a published e-learning course. For me, it was an easy process because I had a very clear idea of what I was looking for from the outset and was knowledgeable about what was possible, technology-wise, with an e-learning program.

First of all, I needed something that I could use in my TOEIC course; basically something that included grammar, listening, and reading. This is an easy requirement to fulfill since there is a lot of TOEIC material out there.

Secondly, I needed something that would help me address the issue of mixed levels, that is, students with varying (if not extreme) degrees of English knowledge and ability, within a single class. This

has always been a difficult obstacle for me to overcome in any of my English classes, especially when the difference in level is quite extreme. These days, a university student's level can range quite dramatically from "false beginner" (practically no working knowledge at all) to advanced, making it virtually impossible to address any one student's particular needs. For example, if I gauge the course to the median level, I risk neglecting the needs of the lower and higher level students. Another issue with mixed levels is that the lower-level students usually don't know the jargon of language learning (e.g. adjective, noun, and verb) in their native tongue nor any of the basic grammatical constructions (e.g. S V O), making it difficult for them to follow along in the class. Again, it becomes difficult to cater to this lower level student because then it forces the teacher to neglect the needs of the middle and higher level students. The reader may ask why such low level students would be taking a TOEIC course in the first place. The answer is simple: to satisfy a requirement for graduation. This is perfectly understandable. Most college graduates have taken courses to satisfy some university/department requirement at one time or another in their college careers despite not having an interest in the actual subject matter. Unfortunately, these students in search of a last-minute English credit for graduation are not usually equipped to learn TOEIC in the traditional sense and lack the fundamentals to participate effectively in a discourse about English language learning and TOEIC. That being said, my university generally doesn't have a policy about dividing students up according to level for any English course, and so it didn't make sense for me to refuse a student in my TOEIC course just because s/he was very poor at English. Thus, my aim for the course was to find an e-learning program that could accommodate mixed levels simultaneously. This was a good idea for another reason as well: Even higher level TOEIC students may have questions about, for example, rudimentary English grammar or may even be intermediate level in one area, e.g. grammar, but only

at the beginner level in another area, e.g. listening. An e-learning TOEIC program that was capable of instruction across all levels would allow for higher level students to go back and review beginner level material and, as a result, refine their knowledge of English something that published TOEIC texts and some TOEIC computer programs in CD form are not capable of providing.

Another area I was hoping e-learning could help improve was individualizing the learning process. More often than not, the speed of a class can be too fast or too slow for a particular student's needs. Some students can quickly pick up a vocabulary word or grammatical point after a few exposures while others need to see and hear whatever is being taught 20 or 30 times before they can start to make sense of it. Naturally, the latter case is not practical for a traditional TOEIC class. Many times, these very slow learners or false beginners have studied English for six or seven years already and still haven't grasped even the most basic grammatical constructions. This is truly very sad, and, in my opinion, these students have experienced failure so often in their English studies that they have completely shut off their own learning processes, chalking it up to an "allergy" to English or just an inability to learn English all together. Such students are easy to lose in a class setting, especially when they get far behind, and this is something that I wanted to avoid at all costs. However, if a student could learn at his/her own pace in a comfortable atmosphere without being reminded of his/her inadequacies, perhaps there would be an opportunity to show the student that learning English (and anything else, for that matter) is not an impossible task.

Another goal for my e-learning TOEIC course was to make learning as easy as possible. When I say "easy," it means the material is broken down and organized according to level and is presented in such a way that will make learning as efficient as possible. I understand that breaking a language down according to level is not as easy as it may sound and

that there is much controversy about a supposed “natural order” (See Krashen, 1981) for learning grammar in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). However, as anyone who has studied a foreign language knows, some grammatical items are easier to grasp than others, and these easier grammatical items are usually taught first. Thus, I was looking for an e-learning program that had graded and organized these grammatical items according to difficulty in a reasonable manner. In addition, it was important that the course material be presented in such a way that it would optimize learning. My hope here was to find an e-learning program that had already broken down the learning process for the student. More often than not, lower level students have poor learning strategies and may not be able to break down the material into a form that optimizes learning for them. If the e-learning program could do all this for the student, it could alleviate the burden of how to organize and study the material for the student. Also, an e-learning program, if done well, may “indirectly” be able to help these students improve their own learning strategies for language study. Of course, being able to study on a familiar platform, like a computer, in the comfort of one’s home may also have its perks for those students who find classroom settings more conducive to creating anxiety than learning.

A final point was to find an e-learning program that was interesting and fun. As I suggested in the Introduction, today’s young people have been raised on a rich diet of surreal colors and sounds. Computer games have become amazing in this respect, and young people are used to this high-quality sound and imagery. Certainly, in this day and age, it can be quite challenging to maintain the student’s attention using just a typical TOEIC textbook in a typical classroom. At least, an e-learning program has the potential to use the same technology used in computer games to attract and maintain the student’s interest. It was my hope that the e-learning program that I eventually selected would be, at least, more interesting than the typical TOEIC textbook.

Of course, one of the fundamental goals of any course is to get students to study enough so that they internalize and are able to use the material that they learn. A once-a-week, 90-minute course doesn’t lead to significant language acquisition unless students study outside of class. This is doubly true for students who learn at a much slower pace than others. If we consider the last two points of “ease of learning” and “interesting and fun,” it was my hope that an e-learning program with these attributes would somehow influence students to spend a little more time on their studies outside of class.



2.2 The Course

After a very short preliminary study with some of my former TOEIC students, I decided on a published online e-learning course for my upcoming TOEIC class. In this case, “online” means that the course can be accessed from any computer at any time from any location by means of the Internet. Upon careful consideration, the online course that I selected was called *Practical English* offered by Really English (<http://www.reallyenglish.com/products/index.html>). I chose this course for the following reasons.

First of all, it taught the three basic areas of the TOEIC exam: listening, reading, and grammar. The teaching methodology also used a bottom-up approach, meaning it would start with single key words or grammar items and then extend

these smaller units into sentences and finally into bigger units, such as passages and dialogs. I liked the bottom-up approach because it started slow and simple, and then gradually grew from there. Students were never overwhelmed with long passages and difficult material.

As is common for TOEIC, the subject matter of the lessons was business-related and/or task-related, e.g. making a reservation for a hotel room or a business flight; leaving and taking messages at a company; and reading business e-mails. For example, in a level-two (the lowest level at the time of the course) grammar lesson on prepositions, the lesson would use the business office and things that are normally found there, such as a desk, a computer, and a copy machine, to teach about prepositions. Students learned valuable business vocabulary while learning how to simply describe the location of something in the office. Overall, the lessons in this program seemed very practical and focused on the varied forms of communication for international business people.

The program also had a placement test at the beginning of the course, and, based on the results, automatically set up a curriculum for each individual student with a detailed lesson plan. Students had the choice of following these computer-generated lesson plans or selecting lessons on their own from any level. I think that this initial testing process was a very nice feature because the program quickly evaluated the student's needs and immediately got the student involved in a course of study designed specifically for that student. The freedom to follow the recommended course of study or not was also a very good feature because it allowed all the students to study whatever they were interested in as well as allowed them to manage themselves. I really wanted students to have a say in their studies and be able to manage themselves. Perhaps, if students had more control over what they studied, they would feel more empowered to study and take a bigger interest in their studies. With *Practical English* and its numerous lessons, students had plenty of leeway

to choose lessons that were more suited for their interests while still meeting their educational needs.

Another good point about *Practical English* was that it automatically quizzed and tested students during and after each lesson. Scores for these quizzes and tests along with the amount of time it took for the student to complete each lesson were immediately recorded online and made available to both the student and teacher. For the teacher, this aspect of the program was very appealing because it made it easier for the teacher to evaluate the progress of the students, which in turn freed the teacher to focus more on the students who needed help the most.

I thought that the way the lessons were organized and presented was also very good. Generally, the lessons were organized according to vocabulary, grammar and task. For vocabulary and grammar, the program taught items from easy to difficult. These items were divided into three levels: two through four (most difficult), with level one (easiest) excluded. (Currently, level one is available.) I also thought that the lessons were well-presented. Each lesson was broken up into a set of three mini-lessons, which would introduce and then review the main items over the set of three lessons. Typically, lessons started with a list of the key vocabulary and grammar items. Then the student was familiarized with the pronunciation and the meaning of these key items. The student next did various exercises and finished the lesson with a quiz or a test. Usually, there were several grammatical points within a lesson, and these grammatical items might have very similar meanings (e.g. "will" and "am going to"; and "should," "have to," and "must"). The exercises were designed to help students understand the subtle differences in meaning between the vocabulary/grammar items, while helping the student understand the mechanics (e.g. word order and proper form of the verb) of using these vocabulary and grammar items within a sentence. These exercises varied from "cloze" exercises to "true and false" to "selecting the correct answer from a list of four or five possible answers."

Some exercises asked students to actually write the answers in the blank, forcing students to spell words correctly. Once a student finished a quiz or test, the program graded the exam and provided a detailed explanation in Japanese of the correct answers. These explanations could be read at the student's own pace. Immediate feedback to exercises, quizzes, and tests helps students understand their mistakes while the material is still fresh in their minds, speeding up and improving the learning process for that student. In addition, the program helped students learn more independently, which is very important in second language acquisition (see Stevick, 1986). Overall, I think that the wide-variety of exercises in each lesson was enough to keep the lessons interesting but yet challenging.

The visual and audio aspects of the program were certainly much better than the typical textbook. Photographs and/or simple color animation were used in all the different lessons, including grammar and reading. The program also used interesting sounds to indicate correct answers during exercises and quizzes. In the preliminary study, my former TOEIC students thought that the animation and use of sounds were very appealing, giving the lessons a computer-game quality. Students also liked being able to control the listening exercises by themselves, allowing them to listen to an exercise over and over again if necessary. In a traditional classroom setting this is not possible. General speaking, the quality of the graphics and animation was certainly impressive but nothing like the quality of today's computer games.

Another interesting feature of the program was that it would automatically keep track of student's progress and send e-mails directly to the students if their progress fell behind the pace of the course parameters, reminding students to study. The instructor could also control the parameters of this feature, as well as set the minimum score for passing each lesson.

The price of the program was ¥6,300 yen for one year with unlimited study, which is two to three

times the expense of a typical university TOEIC textbook. That being said, the amount of material available in the program was probably in excess of twenty TOEIC textbooks. Students could study as many lessons as they liked and could study each lesson as many times as they liked. For the first semester course, the fees were waived by Really English.

3 . Getting the Classroom Ready

Getting the computer classroom ready for your e-learning course is not usually difficult, especially using this particular e-learning program, but there are a few things that need to be prepared beforehand.

A good first move is to go to your university computer center and explain about your e-learning course; what you are trying to do; and even demonstrate the program for the staff so that it is crystal clear the kind of e-learning program that you will be using. I recommend you do this at least six months to a year in advance of the course start date. This will give the computer center plenty of time to budget for any upgrades and do any work necessary to prepare the computers for the course. If you are not the most techno-savvy person in the world, this six-month-plus period will also give you ample time to learn how to use the computer classroom and whatever multimedia system the university has installed. Sometimes, these multimedia systems can be complicated and tricky to figure out for the novice user. However, the most important thing about approaching the computer center early is that it allows you to schedule your computer classroom well in advance and avoid any "last minute" scheduling problems. I work at an engineering university, and naturally there is some competition for the use of such computer rooms, especially during prime teaching hours. I, unfortunately, ran into a scheduling problem that was difficult to resolve, despite all my efforts to avoid this situation from the outset. Sometimes an English elective course may have less priority over the use of a computer classroom than

a required engineering course. In any case, before you go through the trouble of upgrading a classroom for an e-learning course, it is imperative that you first reserve the actual classroom to be used for the course and that everyone involved with scheduling knows exactly what you are trying to do. I cannot stress this point enough.

For the *Practical English* e-learning course, there are generally very few technical issues that need to be addressed. Basically, if you have a recent version of Adobe Flash installed on your computer and headphones, you can use the program without any problems whatsoever. However, in my particular situation, the classroom computers each had a self-cleaning program installed, which prevented any upgrades or changes from being made to the original software. The installed version of Adobe Flash was just too outdated and needed to be upgraded. Once Adobe Flash was upgraded, the e-learning program worked fine. An important point here is that sometimes a computer room is maintained by an outside source and any changes made to the system have to be completed by the managing company. Usually, this process entails a fee and because of budget restraints may require a fair amount of time to get approved. Fortunately for me, the computer room selected for my course was no longer under contract and the changes were done by the computer center staff quickly and easily.

Another problem was that the computers were housed inside a sophisticated auto-locking desk for security reasons, which prevented students from accessing the headphone jacks on the back side of the computers. The computer center ingeniously solved this problem by adding an extension from the back of the computer to the base of the monitor. (In this particular computer room, the monitors automatically folded down inside the computer desks when shut down, making it challenging to add the extensions.) Also, the computer center needed to purchase headphones for each of the computers, which required the standard discussion, planning, and budgeting again a process that required an ample

amount of time.

One important aspect about the headphones was that some students didn't want to use headphones that had been used by other students. This is a reasonable concern, especially if one thinks about the possible outbreak of a flu virus, which Japan experienced back in 2009. I think that one way to resolve this problem is to just ask students to bring their own headphones, which shouldn't be a problem since most students carry headphones with their portable digital music devices.

4 . Teaching the Course

With any new course, it will likely take several semesters of teaching to figure out the best possible way to manage and teach the course. An e-learning course is no different. However, the type of challenges presented in an e-learning course may be uniquely different from those presented in the typical EFL class.

For *Practical English*, in order to use the online program on the first day of class, the students need to be registered with the publisher. This takes time to organize - approximately 4-7 days. For my university, we have a guidance week before regular classes begin, during which time teachers can explain about a course and, in my case, demonstrate the online program to the students. During this guidance period, I would make a list of students who had a firm commitment to taking the course, and then I registered these students with the company as soon as I possibly could, typically that same day or the following morning. Students need to provide their names, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses for this registration process. For the non-Japanese English teachers, this process has to be done in Japanese with Kanji and Furigana for all the names. To avoid a lot of extra work, it's important that students write the complete spelling for both their first and last names with all the extended vowels included when registering for the class. Sometimes students write their names in English a little differently from the actual pronunciation,

making it difficult to find the correct Kanji for their names on the application form. E-mail addresses also have to be written precisely so that there are no mistakes.

Once a student is officially registered, that student will receive an e-mail directly from the company with his or her user name and password. Students need this information to use the program. However, sometimes students don't get registered properly or forget to bring their log-on information to class on the first day, especially if they use a home e-mail address instead of a cell phone address. The good thing about *Practical English* is that the publisher also forwards an e-mail to the instructor with the log-on information for each student. It is a good idea to print out these e-mails in advance and bring them to class. If a student has no log-on information, s/he will not be able to use the program during class. For students, who have not been registered because, for example, an e-mail was incorrectly entered, it is possible for the teacher to call up the company and have an emergency registration done during class time. Really English was quite cooperative in this respect.

Another important point was payment. Generally, the company allowed the students to try out the course without payment during the first two or three weeks of the semester to give students the opportunity to see if they wanted to take the course or not. During this initial three week period, the company would send a bill for each student to the instructor who would then pass it on to the students in class. This bill could then be paid at any convenience store in Japan. If a student hadn't paid his/her bill by the fifth or sixth week, the student was taken off the system after consultation with the instructor. There were a few cases in which students came for two or three lessons and then stopped coming for several weeks for various reasons, e.g. job hunting. These students didn't receive their bill and, as a result, weren't able to pay. At that point it became unclear whether a particular student was still in the course or not. This caused some concern about payment,

but the company was always quite cooperative in working out any problems. It should be pointed out here that many students thought the ¥6,300 user fee for the course was excessively high since it was only a semester course. I tried to get Really English to change the course price to a six month program at half price, which they did at first. However, this half-year system didn't work out for them for various reasons and was discontinued, with only the one-year program remaining available.

Once students successfully logged onto the program for the first time, students were automatically directed to a three-part (listening, grammar, and reading) placement test. These tests can usually be completed within an hour. I recommend that students start with the reading exam first while they are still fresh, since this seems to be the most difficult part of the exam for them. During this initial first class period, the teacher will have to walk around the class and assist any students who may be having problems understanding how to use the program. Generally speaking, though, most students can complete the exams on their own without any assistance.

As mentioned before, after students receive a score for the three exams, the program would then automatically generate a curriculum for that student's particular needs with recommended lessons in each of the three areas. Students can follow these recommendations or choose freely among the list of lessons in the three areas of study. The course has over 300 lessons. It should be pointed out that many of the students, especially at the lower end, thought that the computer-generated curriculum was too difficult and chose to select their own lessons based on level and subject matter.

As for teaching the course, in the beginning stages, I let students do the lessons on their own. I walked around the room and monitored them closely, making sure that the students were making progress. I also would answer specific questions about grammar or about any of the exercises that the students couldn't understand. Higher level students often challenged

some of their incorrect answers on lesson tests. This made for very lively debates about many of the lessons. For the lower level students, especially in the beginning stages of the course, understanding the organization of the lessons was the main problem. Many of these lower level students didn't realize that it was absolutely crucial to grasp what the main points of each lesson were first, that these main points would come up over and over again throughout the set of three lessons. These students would often go through a lesson and have no idea what was being taught. They would just click away at answers without any direction. Once a student was able to follow the organization and the main teaching points of a lesson, s/he did much, much better and was then able to study on his/her own.

In general, once students were familiar with the program, they could study on their own, especially higher level students, with no difficulty at all. If students had questions, they could contact me online through e-mail, visit my office, or see me in class each week. In addition, as the semester progressed, I taught a short grammar lesson at the beginning of each class on common errors that students were making in class. Typically, these short lessons were aimed at teaching very rudimentary grammar to accommodate those students who were more of a level-one student than a level-two. If an e-learning lesson was available that supported whatever I was teaching, I would have students do that lesson as well. If not, I would make a worksheet to help reinforce my main teaching points.

For the initial course, I only required that students do at least 25 lessons over the 12-13 week period. Students at the lower end would try to meet this requirement but would rarely make much effort to go beyond this. These students definitely needed a little push to meet the course goals. However, higher level students studied well beyond this number, often doubling or tripling the minimum lesson requirement. One student even studied well over a hundred lessons. I think that the widely varied amounts of lessons completed by students indicate clearly that

students study at various speeds. Certainly, if I taught the class at the regular pace, many students would have been held back. The e-learning program was ideal for allowing students to go at a pace that met their particular needs.

In addition, every week, I would talk to half the students in the class individually about their progress. I would show the students their online results and congratulate them or encourage them to work harder depending on their results. I think that this was a very good approach and really seemed to get students to work harder. This was also the perfect time to push those students who obviously needed a little extrinsic motivation.

5 . Student Reaction

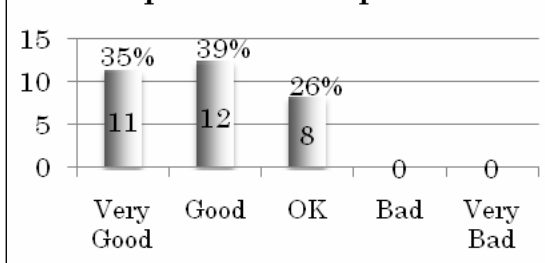
To evaluate student reaction to the e-learning course, a survey was conducted. Students were asked a variety of questions (Appendix 1) to determine their purpose for taking the course; whether they liked the course or not; if they studied more or less in comparison to other English courses; and whether they thought the course was good for preparing for the TOEIC exam. Thirty-one students participated in the survey.

With respect to the purpose for taking the course, ten students (32%) out of 31 said that they took the class specifically to study for the TOEIC exam. Twenty (65%) of the remaining students said that they took the class to get credit for graduation and not specifically to study for the TOEIC exam. However, out of these 20 students, seven said that they were interested in improving their English knowledge, despite taking the class just for credit. One student did not answer this question. These results confirm my assumption that many of the students, like in past classes, were taking the TOEIC course to fulfill a requirement for graduation. That being said, 17 of the 31 students stated a clear interest in learning English.

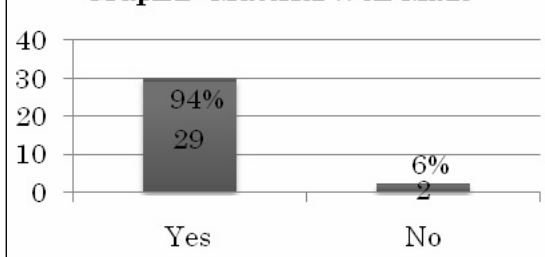
When students were asked about their overall experience in the course, 11 (35%) students thought the course was "very good," 12 (39%) students

thought the course was “good,” and eight (26%) students thought the course was just “OK.” No students gave a negative reply, i.e. “bad” or “very bad,” about the course (See Graph A). To go along with this point, students were asked whether they thought the material was well-made or not. Twenty-nine (94%) students agreed that the material was well-made while only two (6%) thought that it wasn’t (See Graph B). In addition to this, 30 (97%) students out of 31 thought the course was good for preparing for the TOEIC exam (See Graph C). These results combined indicate a very positive overall impression of the course.

Graph A: Overall Experience



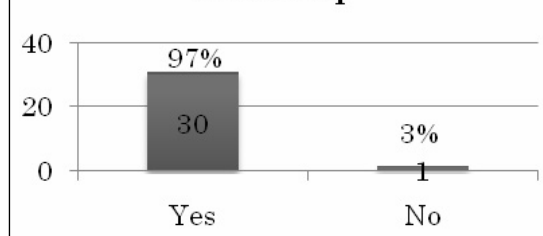
Graph B: Material Well-Made



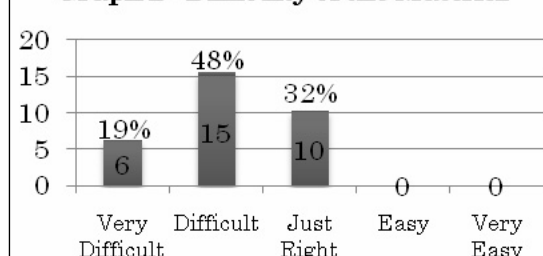
Students were also asked about the difficulty of the content. Six (19%) students thought that it was “very difficult;” 15 (48%) thought that it was “difficult;” and ten (32%) thought that it was “just right.” No students said that the material was “easy” or “too easy” (See Graph D). Here, we can see that 21 (68%) students thought that it was “too difficult” or “difficult.” This is understandable as the course had no level-one for the lower level/false

beginner students. However, after consulting with the publisher, a level-one was finally added in April of 2010.

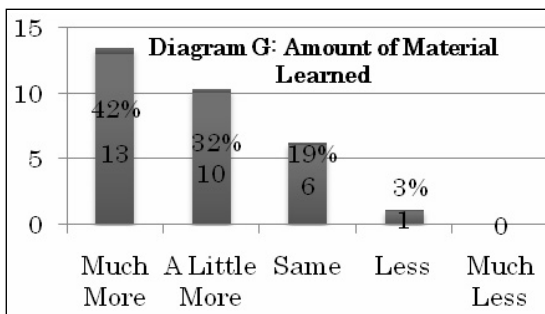
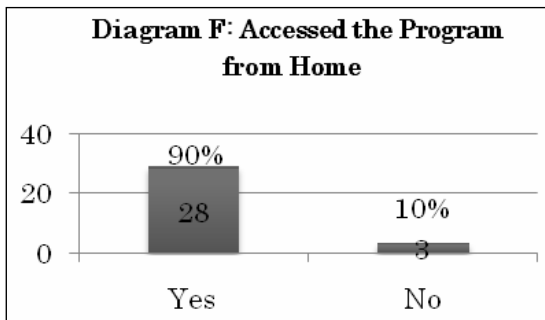
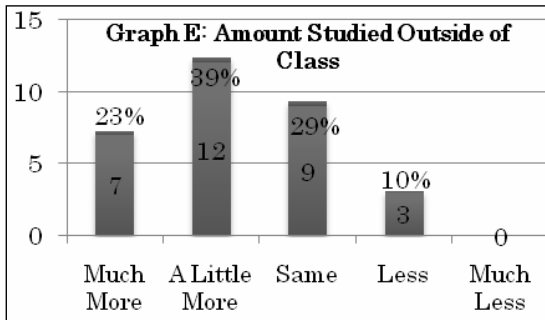
Graph C: Material Good for TOEIC Prep



Graph D: Difficulty of the Material



When students were asked about the amount of time they studied outside of class, seven (23%) answered that they “studied much more than usual,” 12 (39%) said that they studied “a little more than usual,” nine (29%) answered that they studied “about the same,” and three (10%) said that they studied “less than usual.” No students said that they studied “much less” (See Graph E). Of these 31 students, 28 (90%) said that they accessed the program from home (See Diagram F). With respect to the amount of material learned in this course compared to other English courses, 13 (42%) students said that they learned “much more,” ten (32%) said “a little more,” six (19%) said “about the same,” and one (3%) answered “less.” No students answered “much less,” and one student refrained from answering this question (See Diagram G).



I think that the above results clearly show that students are studying and learning more in the e-learning course than they normally would with a conventional English course. Of course, perhaps it is not fair to compare an e-learning TOEIC course with, for example, an English conversation course. They are obviously very different courses. In addition, asking students if they studied more or learned more doesn't necessarily mean that they did. Such results are purely subjective and not very scientific. Surely more empirical evidence needs to be collected to clarify these two points. That being said, we cannot

totally disclaim the students' opinions, either. If a student says that he is studying and learning more as well as studying at home, I, as a teacher, tend to think these are very promising results, especially for those students who took the class purely to fulfill a requirement for graduation.

6 . General Observations and Thoughts

Contrary to my expectations, using an e-learning course to teach TOEIC was not nearly as difficult as I had first thought. I think that any teacher who knows how to use the basic functions of a computer, e.g. e-mail and surfing the Internet, could teach this e-learning TOEIC program. Also, after the computer room had been initially set up, there were very few technical issues to deal with. In fact, the course made teaching TOEIC so much easier in almost every respect. All the testing, grading, and recording were taken care of by the program, which was a very nice feature and saved the teacher a considerable amount of time. With the exception of the very low level/false beginners, most students were able to learn English at a level and pace that was appropriate for them. Of course, at the beginning, there were some minor problems getting all the students properly registered for the course, but after this initial month, the course was quite easy to administer and manage.

With respect to the students' behavior in class, there were far fewer students who were not engaged in the e-learning lessons compared to my regular English courses. The class was unusually quiet because all the students were focused on their computer screens working on the lessons. Of course, there was the occasional student who dozed off during class, usually after lunch, or was caught surfing the web, but in general most of the students were on task, that is, actively involved in the program. I was definitely impressed by how much more actively involved the students were in their studies during the e-learning class compared to my regular English classes. I really believe that the e-learning program makes excellent use of classroom

time less time on unneeded explanations and more time on task, problem solving, and self-learning.

On the issue of cheating, the answers are given, so if students want to cheat, they can. By looking at the amount of time it took for a student to complete a lesson, you can easily tell if a student was cheating or not. An unusually high score (well-above the students average) would be another indication that a student might be cheating. One way to handle any cheating issues is to have students, under close supervision, re-do a lesson as a kind of test. The results will tell you instantly if the student has been cheating or not. However, for me, the best approach was to just tell students to be honest and go at their own pace, that there was no reason to cheat. I did consult with Really English about the cheating issue and suggested that students be automatically tested after every five lessons. The content of such exams could be generated from the test questions of the last five lessons completed. I think that this type of testing would discourage any cheating and help motivate students to just learn the material from the outset.

Overall, I was very pleased with *Practical English* and recommend it highly. Now that there is a level-one, I think that this course, or, one like it, would also be ideal for remedial English students. I think that if you consider what Krashen (1981) said about affective filters and how students learn best when a ective filters, e.g. anxiety, are at their lowest, an e-learning classroom in which students study at their own pace within their own comfort zone may just be the ideal approach to get remedial students back on track and learning English, again. Certainly, it is an idea that is worth considering.

7 . Conclusion

A published e-learning program was investigated and used to teach my university TOEIC course. I found the online course quite easy to administer and teach. It also allowed for mixed-level students to study within the same course quite easily. According to the course survey, the students indicated that

they thought the material was well-made and that it was useful for preparing for the TOEIC exam. Students also thought that they studied and learned more in the e-learning course than they did in their other English courses at the university. These results suggest that an e-learning course may have some advantages over the traditional EFL classroom. In addition, e-learning may be an excellent way to deal with students in need of remedial English instruction, allowing them to study at their own pace without having to expose their shortcomings among their classmates.

References

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Appendix 1

(Translated into Japanese)

TOEIC E-learning Course Survey

You have completed the first e-learning course at Shonan Institute of Technology. Congratulations!!! To help make the course better, I would like to know your thoughts about the course. Please answer the following questions as best you can.

- 1 . How would you describe your overall experience in this course?
a) very good b) good c) ok
d) bad e) very bad
- 2 . Did you feel the course material was well-made?
a) Yes b) No
- 3 . How would you describe the difficulty of the course?
a) very di cult b) di cult c) just right
d) easy e) very easy

Getting Started in the E-Learning Classroom (David C. Heil)

- 4 . Compared to your other past English courses at the university, how would you describe the amount of material you learned in this course?
- a) learned much more b) learned a little more
 - c) about the same d) less
 - e) much less
- 5 . Did you take this course to prepare yourself for the TOEIC exam?
- a) Yes b) No
- (If " No", why did you take this course? Please explain below.)
- 6 . Do you think this course is good for helping students to prepare for the TOEIC exam?
- a) Yes b) No
- 7 . Compared to your other English courses, how would you describe the amount of time you spent studying outside of class?
- a) spent a lot more time studying
 - b) spent a little more time studying
 - c) spent about the same amount of time studying
 - d) spent less time studying
 - e) spent much less time studying
- 8 . Did you access this course from home?
- a) Yes b) No
- (If " no", why not? Please explain below.)
- 9 . Did you have an opportunity to cheat?
- a) Yes b) No
- 10 . What did you like about the course?
- 11 . What didn't you like about the course?
- Thank you very much for answering this survey.
Please have a wonderful summer vacation!