

How Do TOEIC® LR Scores Correlate with Real-life Workplace English Skills?

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This is a quick summary of Michihiro Hirai (“author”)’s studies on the correlations between receptive (passive) and productive (active) English skills that were published in several journals and newsletters of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) during the period 2002–2013.

Abstract

In recent years, demand has been increasing to improve the English skills of corporate employees amid the accelerating trend toward the globalization of the Japanese economy and society. In an attempt to meet the demand, quite a few big companies in Japan invested, during the 1990s and early 2000s, significant amounts of their resources on English education. One notable trend during this period was to adopt, as a handy yardstick of employees’ workplace language skills, certain off-the-shelf tests originally designed to evaluate the level of mastery of general English, most notably the TOEIC®. But have these efforts paid off? In pursuit of an answer to this critical question, the author conducted several interrelated studies, in cooperation with the Eiken Foundation of Japan (formerly the Society for Testing English Proficiency, Inc. or STEP for short), focusing on how the scores of the TOEIC Listening and Reading (LR) correlate with the actual English proficiency (especially Speaking and Writing) that is expected of front-line businesspersons.

Conclusions

- (1) It is almost meaningless to use the TOEIC LR scores as a reliable indicator of the test-taker’s productive (speaking and writing) English skills in workplaces.
- (2) The majority of Japanese businesspersons with TOEIC LR scores of 800 or more still do not reach the levels of speaking and writing competency desired in international business settings.

What follows here is a summary of the findings, which were also presented at the JALT PanSIG Conference in June 2012. The [web-]paper version is available for free at the URL below.

<https://www.pansig.org/sites/default/files/pansig2012proceedings.pdf> (pp.118–125)

Note 1) This article presents the author’s personal view rather than Eiken’s official stance.

Note 2) A Japanese version, with the title of “受信型スキルテストで仕事における発信型能力を測れるか?” (“Can we measure productive workplace English skills with receptive skills tests?”), can be found in the 2012–2013 Special Issue of *BULATS 通信* published by the Eiken Foundation of Japan ((公益財団法人)日本英語検定協会) as well as at <http://www.hirai-language.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/BULATS-Tsushin-2012-2013-Special-Issue-pp.2-31.pdf>.

A. Correlations between TOEIC LR Scores and Business English Speaking Skills

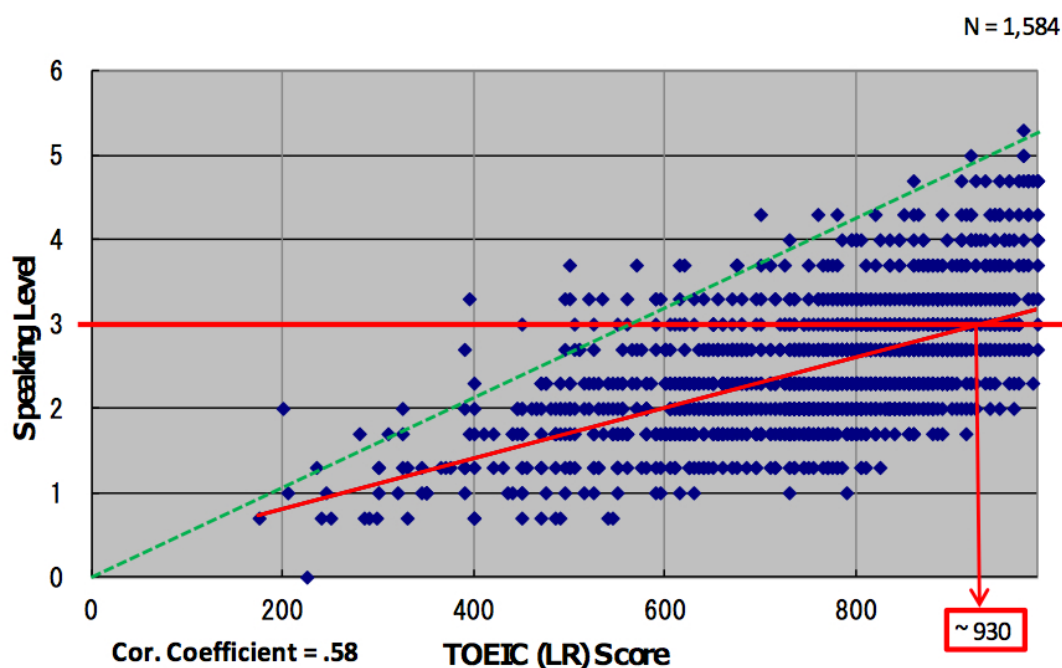


Figure A. Correlation between BULATS Speaking Levels and TOEIC (LR) Scores

For the 1,584 people (predominantly Japanese) who took the BULATS* Speaking Test during the period April 2005–February 2012 and also took the TOEIC LR Test within two years preceding the former, the author plotted their score data on a scattered diagram (Fig. A).

* BULATS: Business Language Testing Service, a suite of business language tests closely aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), covering English, German, French, and Spanish. The English tests were developed and administered by Cambridge Assessment (formerly called Cambridge ESOL or UCLES) until 2019. The BULATS English test was phased out (“retired”) and was replaced by Linguaskill (General and Business) as of December 2019.

Figure A reveals the following three important facts worth special attention:

- (1) The correlation between the TOEIC LR scores and the BULATS Speaking levels is rather weak, with the correlation coefficient being .58, much lower than those claimed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS®). This relatively low correlation coefficient can be attributed to the contents of the BULATS texts more heavily oriented to real-life business situations than those in the TOEIC counterparts.
- (2) The majority (56%) of Japanese businesspersons with TOEIC LR scores of 800 or above still find it hard to reach the minimum desirable speaking competence in international business settings, which corresponds to the level so considered according to a major survey and which is indicated by the red horizontal line (Speaking Level 3).
- (3) To reach this minimum desired speaking level, you would need to score 930 in the TOEIC LR on average.

B. Correlations between TOEIC LR Scores and Business English Writing Skills

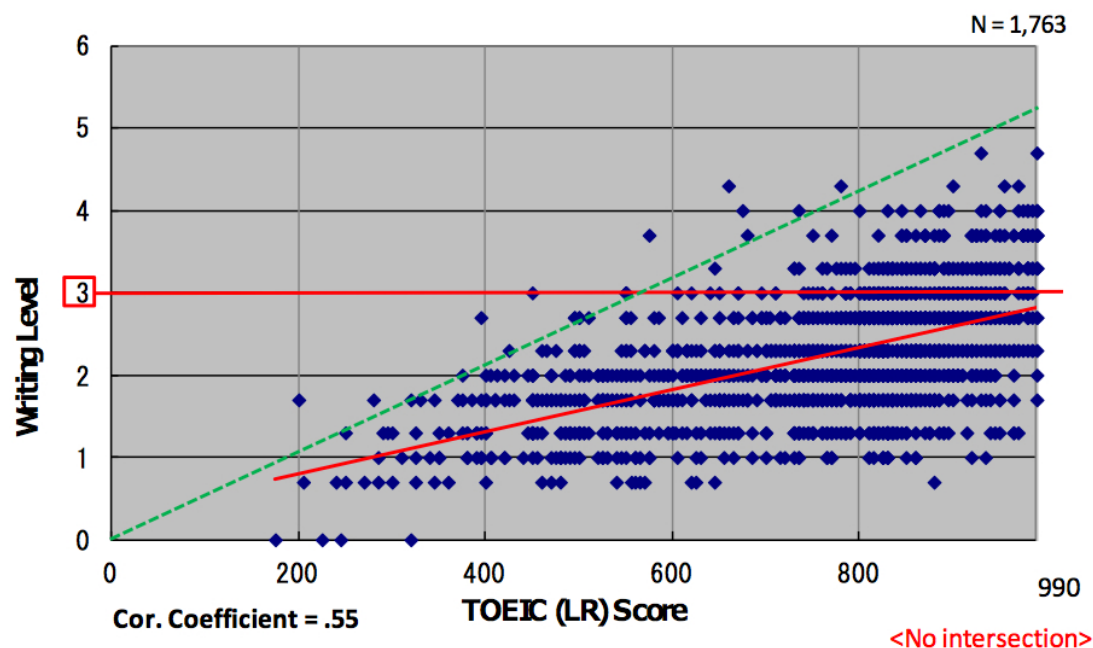


Figure B. Correlation between BULATS Writing Levels and TOEIC (LR) Scores

For the 1,763 people (predominantly Japanese) who took the BULATS* Writing Test during the period April 2005–February 2012 and also took the TOEIC LR Test within two years preceding the former, the author plotted their score data on a scattered diagram (Fig. B).

As with Fig. A, Fig. B reveals the following three important facts worth special attention:

(1) The correlation between the TOEIC LR scores and the BULATS Writing levels is rather weak, with the correlation coefficient being .55, much lower than those claimed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). This relatively low correlation coefficient can be attributed to the contents of the BULATS texts more heavily oriented to real-life business situations than those in the TOEIC counterparts.

(2) More than two-thirds (71%) of Japanese businesspersons with TOEIC LR scores of 800 or above still find it hard to reach the minimum desirable writing competence in international business settings, which corresponds to the level so considered according to a major survey and which is indicated by the red horizontal line (Writing Level 3).

(3) Even if you score 990 (full score) in the TOEIC LR, your probability of reaching this minimum desired level is still less than 50%. (The regression line (slant red line) does not cross the red horizontal Level 3 line within the range.)