

# A study of the use of communicative activities in teaching toEIC reading skills

*Dinh Thi Thu Trang\**

*\*Trường ĐHNN, ĐHQG Hà Nội*

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**Abstract:** *With the aim of enhancing students' English proficiency, many universities in Vietnam are adopting TOEIC as a component of tertiary-level exit requirements. However, the process of preparing students for international standardized tests such as TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS have raised concerns over the issues of narrowing the curriculum, overemphasizing test-strategy instruction and mechanical practice putting enormous pressure on both students and instructors (Haladyna et al, 1991; Hamp-Lyons, 1998; Miller, 2003; Noble & Smithbb, 19. The aims of the study are to offer teachers a variety of activities dealing with how to teach the TOEIC® reading test interactively and to clarify whether these activities contribute to the improvement of learners' achievements. The results suggest that the activities not only help TOEIC learners somewhat improve their reading score but also opens ways for teachers to better their lesson plan*

**Keywords:** *TOEIC Reading, communicative activities, teaching TOEIC*

## 1. Introduction

TOEIC Reading skills

According to Hermida. J “Reading is a process shaped partly by the text, partly by the reader’s background, and partly by the situation the reading occurs in (Hunt, 2004, p. 137). Reading an academic text does not simply involve finding information on the text itself. Rather, it is a process of working with the text. When reading an academic text, the reader recreates the meaning of the text, together with the author. In other words, readers negotiate the meaning with the author by applying their prior knowledge to it (Maleki & Heerman, 1992).

The TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test The TOEIC® (Test of English for International Communication) test measures test taker’s communicative ability of everyday English skills with others in business, commerce, and industry (TOEIC Handbook, 2008, p. 2). The reading section includes three parts in the forms of (1) incomplete sentences, (2) text completion, and (3) reading comprehension.

Bottom-up and interactive instructions

Bottom-up instruction refers to those activities that can enrich students’ declarative (Johnson, 1996; Ellis, 1994) or prior knowledge (Anderson, 1980; Sun., et al, 2001) in order to facilitate the occurrence of their procedural knowledge (Johnson, 1996) that underlies spontaneous L2 use. Sun et

al. (2001) summarize the benefits of declarative knowledge by reviewing the related literature. According to them, declarative knowledge: 1) speeds up the learning process, 2) facilitates the transfer of skills, and 3) helps in the communication of knowledge and skills to others (p. 206). In view of these benefits, the aim of bottom-up instruction is to aid students in familiarizing themselves with the fundamental knowledge (e.g. vocabulary, grammar rules, pronunciation rules) they should know in order to participate in future interactive activities. Interactive instruction helps students to make use of their declarative or prior knowledge and then turn that into procedural knowledge. According to Ellis (2003), learners with only declarative knowledge are not able to perform language tasks successfully because they focus merely on rule memorization and fail to communicate in the real world. In other words, interactive activities help students to become “more familiar with, and confident about, the test if they have actually used the language from the test” (Forster & Karn, 1998, p. 46).

Suggested communicative activities in TOEIC Reading lessons

Nation (2007, cited in Hue, 2010) suggests that students will not be able to perform a given task if they do not know enough. Before they practice the listening and reading questions on the TOEIC preparatory material, students should be provided

with worksheets that contain sufficient vocabulary, phrases, and sentence patterns related to the reading tasks, as shown belows. These activities are recommended by Yi-Ching Pan (2010), and Cheng (2009) in New TOEIC.

Identify word families including their parts of speech, suffixes, and affixes.

Enhance students' vocabulary banks by providing them with categories of words based on various topics such as School & Education, Food & Shopping, Health & Sports, Entertainment, and General Business.

Enhance students' grammatical knowledge by providing them with fundamental grammatical rules such as tenses, auxiliaries, gerund, infinite, passive voice, and subjunctives.

Enhance students' systematic knowledge of prepositional phrases such as for the sake of, at least, change in, demand for, alert to, apply for, and end up, and conjunctions such as because, although, and even though.

Table. Interactive Activities for Enhancing Communicative Competence in Reading Tasks on the TOEIC® Test

<i>TOEIC Reading tasks</i>	<i>Communicative activities</i>
Part V: Incomplete sentences	Ask students to form groups of five and give them a list of 50 words. Then ask them to arrange every four words in the same category based on their parts of speech, meanings, prefixes, suffixes, and so on. The group that completes this task first is the winner.
Part VI: Incomplete texts	Ask students to form a group of five and ask them to write a short paragraph that uses the phrases the teacher has provided. 2. The teacher corrects the short paragraph, passes it out to the group and asks them questions about it.
Part VII: Reading comprehension	Ask students to read the articles in the preparatory material and then ask them the following questions: (Adapted from Razenberg, 2003) a. What is the text-type? b. Where is the text used? c. What is the purpose of the text? d. What are the main points? e. Who is the audience? f. What are the meanings of new vocabulary, phrases, and expressions guessed from the context?

Methods of the study

The subjects who participated in this study consisted of seventy undergraduate students,

majoring in English at one TOEIC Center.73% of the participants were female and the rest were male, ranging from 20 to 24 years old. They were selected from a population of 110 undergraduate students by taking a simulated TOEIC proficiency test (Peterson, 2005). The test consisted of listening, grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, 20 items for each.

This study was conducted over the course of 6 weeks beginning with administration of a sample TOEIC test to select the intermediate level students. The assigned time for this test was 100 minutes. As a result, the researchers selected those students whose language proficiency scores were at most one standard deviation above or below the mean. Based on their scores, the subjects were called for the next phase of the study.

The researcher intends to do experimental research to fulfill her aims. Students will be divided into two groups namely Control group and Experimental group. In the experimental group, the students will be taught using communicative activities in reading lessons. In the control group, they still receive traditional way of teaching reading passage like doing practice tests, checking and explaining the correct answers or reviewing grammar items. After that, the students will be post-tested on the same types used for pre-test.

Results and discussion of the study

As mentioned before, the 70 selected participants were randomly divided into two groups experimental and control. To ensure both groups have the same ability in reading comprehension, they were provided with two reading comprehension passages and were asked to answer the ten questions at the end of each one. The analysis of the results proved that both groups approximately were of the same ability in the stated skill.

Table 1: Statistics of pre-test for experimental and control groups

Code	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error mean
Pretest control	35	4.67	1.589	.410
Pretest experimental	35	4.60	1.639	.423

As it can be induced from the above table, the mean of the scores which were obtained by the students of both groups proves the fact that their initial performances in answering the reading questions were approximately similar, so every change after the period of treatment can be attributed to the use

of communicative activities in experimental group.

The next step was verifying the hypothesis of the study that was investigating the relationship between the provided activities by the teacher and the students' performance in TOEIC reading tests. During a period of six-week course, the researcher attended in both experimental and control groups classes to take the same reading tests. After each session, the participants answered the comprehension questions and finally after six weeks the results of both groups were compared. The data showed in control group there were little change and development in comparison to their pretests, which were taken six weeks ago. On the contrary, the results of the experimental group appeared meaningfully different from the previous ones.

Table 2: Statistics of post-test for experimental and control groups

Code	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
Post control	35	4.53	1.598	.413
Post experimental	35	5.47	.743	.192

According to table two, the difference between the post test of the two groups discloses that the treatment has sharply increased the level of students' achievement on reading comprehension questions. To be sure, that the 1.09 difference of these two means is meaningful and just because of the given treatment, the researcher computed the t-test.

Table 3: Paired Samples Test of the means of the posttest of control and experimental groups

	Paired differences					T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
				Lower	upper			
Pair 1 post control and post experimental	-.933	1.285	.235	-1.413	-.454	-3.979	29	.000

As table three shows, there was significant difference in pretest and posttest ( $p < 0.5$ ). The findings supported the effectiveness of translation when dealing with reading comprehension.

#### Conclusion and suggestions

After eight weeks of instruction, the results showed that there was a significant difference between the students' reading comprehension ability before and after the treatment.

Therefore, it can be concluded that communicative activities had positive effect on the learners' TOEIC achievement at the intermediate level of language proficiency. Using test preparatory materials does not necessarily imply that instructors are teaching to the test; indeed, if their instructors utilize appropriate activities designed specifically for lessons, students can both learn the language from the test and improve their test scores. Students can truly benefit from TOEIC classes. However, students possess a vast array of differing levels of English proficiency, and their learning styles and learning strategies exhibit a similar variety. Because of these differences, when planning the lesson, teachers should select appropriate instruction to suit their students. Vandergrift (2007) recommends that "listening instruction should not be a standalone activity" (p. 197). For example, Brown (1990) proposed an approach that facilitates the enrichment of students' knowledge of phonological rules, as suggested in the bottom-up activities presented in Table 1. As for monitoring, teachers should always check students' awareness of comprehension and task performance (Paulsem & Zimmerman, 1995). The interactive instruction suggested can assist teachers in assessing students' comprehension and difficulties through a variety of communicative activities. As Goh (2000) states, "By concentrating on only those areas that affect their [students'] comprehension most, we [teachers] can use limited teaching time more profitably" (p.69).

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