

Implementing an E-learning Program in a Japanese University Class: A Case of ALC NetAcademy Next in a TOEIC Preparation Course

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Introduction

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC®) is a commonly used standardized test in Japan. Many people, including university students, take the test as a way of measuring their English skills and improvements, fulfilling the graduation requirement, and meeting job qualifications (ETS, 2018). Japanese university students perceive TOEIC scores as an essential factor in determining the chance of getting jobs (Caldwell, 2018), and consequently, TOEIC preparation has had a major impact on English teaching and learning in Japanese universities (Takahashi, 2012). Though there are criticisms about measuring university students' English proficiency based on the TOEIC score (Caldwell, 2018), it remains one of the primary sources for determining their English competence. Therefore, it is vital to equip the students with the skills to achieve a satisfactory TOEIC score.

One way to include TOEIC preparation in

curricula is by using e-learning programs (e.g., Stewart, 2019; Tanaka, 2017; Shimada, 2017). E-learning programs can be utilized in different ways for TOEIC preparation; it could be an effective flipped course material (Tanaka, 2017) and a primary learning resource for a CALL course (Stewart, 2019). According to Shimada (2017), the majority of the students in a TOEIC preparation course favored the e-learning program over the paper-based textbook. However, some students preferred the paper-based textbook because they liked taking handwritten notes on the textbook and receiving face-to-face explanation, so he suggests that the balance of materials is essential. Furthermore, students may not be able to make use of an e-learning program unless it is part of the assessment of the course (Fryer, Stewart, Anderson, Bovee & Gibson, 2011). Hence, e-learning programs need to be utilized with caution.

Technology is useful, but Christison and Murray (2014) make it clear that it should be chosen carefully, taking learners' needs into account. We should not forget "the focus is on

teaching and learning, not merely on using technology because it is there” (Christison & Murray, 2014, p. 43). Furthermore, when creating a curriculum, not only the students’ needs but also wants should be considered (Nation & Macalister, 2010). It is essential that there is no mismatch between learners’ views and teacher’s view, and interviews and questionnaires can be used to gather this information. The purpose of this study is to investigate students’ perception of the e-learning program, NetAcademy Next (ALC Press Inc., 2017), and its implementation in a Japanese university TOEIC preparation course.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were the students enrolled in a TOEIC preparation course in a Japanese university located in the west of Tokyo in Japan. The study took place in the spring semester of 2019, and there were 23 students (female: 15, male: 8). The distribution of the students’ year grade was: 8 second-year students, 11 third-year students, and 4 fourth to sixth-year students. The students’ initial TOEIC score ranged from 295 to 825, with 414.5 as the mean score.

Course design

The aim of the course was to increase the students’ TOEIC scores. The course consisted of thirty 90-minute lessons over 15 weeks, and the students sat in randomly assigned groups of four or five, which changed every two weeks. It was an English-only class, and various activities to increase the students’ overall English skills were utilized. The main component of the course was based around

the required textbook, *Tactics for TOEIC Listening and Reading Test* (Trent, 2008). The textbook follows a modular arrangement (Nation & Macalister, 2010) in which the chapter stands alone without following a specific presentation order. There are 28 units, and each unit focuses on the different parts of the TOEIC listening and speaking test. After studying each unit, the students created their own TOEIC-format exercises with their group members based on the knowledge gained from the unit (e.g., the usage of paraphrasing, the distractors using the similar-sounding words, and the distractors using the same word meaning different things). Through this activity, the students put their learned knowledge into practice.

In addition to textbook-based learning, the students took part in the activities listed below throughout the semester.

- Learning vocabulary from TOEIC Service List (Browne & Culligan, 2016) using word cards.
- 4/3/2 (see Nation & Newton, 2008) as a warm-up activity at the beginning of lessons.
- Extensive reading and book-share: the students read a minimum of four graded readers and wrote a book report for each book. They had four book-shares in class, where the students introduced the books they read to their group members.
- Extensive listening and video sharing: The students watched at least two hours of English videos from online streaming websites such as YouTube and English Listening Lesson Library Online (Beuckens, 2016) and filled out the extensive listening log sheet at home. They had four video-shares with their group members in class, where

they explained the contents of the videos and the quotes from the videos.

- English Forum: The students attended at least five English conversation practices offered at the university self-access center conversation lounge.
- NetAcademy Next: The students used the TOEIC e-learning program, which is explained in detail in the following section.

NetAcademy Next

NetAcademy Next (ALC Press Inc., 2019) was used to facilitate the students' TOEIC practice outside the class. The completion of the TOEIC 730 course in the program was 20 percent of the course assessment. In the beginning, the students were instructed on how to access the program from their computer and smartphones. They also received a tentative assignment schedule (Table 1). Because the students in the previous semester had had difficulty following the strict study plan due to their busy schedules, it was decided that the students were to be checked on their progress only every two or three weeks. The students were left responsible for finishing all the assigned units by the 'checkpoint.' For instance, instead of checking the progress every class, the teacher checked if the students finished all the units from Full-size mock test 1 to Stage 2 on 5/30.

Table 1. Tentative schedule given to the students

Date	Unit
5/6	Full-size mock test 1
5/9	Stage 1
5/13	Half-size mock test 1
5/16	Review 1, 2, 3
5/23	Review 4, 5
5/30	Stage 2
Checkpoint	
6/6	Half-size mock test 2

When they studied using NetAcademy Next, the students were advised to keep records of learning, such as vocabulary, grammar points, tips, and strategies in their notebook. Bringing these notes to class, the students shared and taught each other what they had learned from the program. This group sharing occurred about every two weeks, and it provided the opportunity for the students to output what they had learned. Nation (2007) advocates the balance of learning opportunities using the principle called the four strands. It categorizes each learning activity in four different strands: meaning focused input, meaning focused output, language focused learning, and fluency development. NetAcademy Next includes all the strands except meaning focused output. Therefore, the sharing activity was added to compensate for the lack of this strand. This sharing time was also used for the students to ask the teacher questions regarding NetAcademy Next content.

Data collection

To investigate the students' perception of NetAcademy Next, and its implementation in class, the students were asked to answer some open-ended questions at the end of the semester, using Google Form (see Appendix A). The original questionnaire was in Japanese to avoid misunderstanding, and the students were free to answer in Japanese or English. After the semester was over, and the grades had been posted, the students' responses were analyzed and coded into themes.

Results and discussion

Students' use of the online program

The responses for Questions 1, 2, and 3 (see Appendix A) were explored to understand the students' use of NetAcademy Next. It appeared that the students used the program in various places and timing (Table 2). The most common places mentioned by the students were at home and the university, and they also made use of commuting time. Some mentioned that they used the program on day-off and small pockets of time, such as when drying hair. Four students mentioned using the program every day while four other students used it once or twice a week. The rest of the students varied in frequency, such as four times a week, three times a week, on the weekend, and only before the 'checkpoint.' Due to the nature of the open-ended questions, the students mentioned more than one place and timing. Likewise, some students did not mention anything about frequency.

Students' perception of NetAcademy Next

The students' perception of the program was generally positive. Twenty-one students recommended the program because of the usefulness of the answer key with detailed explanations in the program, the amount of

practice they could receive, and its convenience. The most frequent feedback was the usefulness of the detailed explanations in Japanese on the exercises. For example, six students mentioned that they learned a significant number of tips and strategies directly useful for taking TOEIC, and three mentioned a favorable attitude towards the depth of explanations. Secondly, the students were satisfied with the amount of practice in the program. Four students mentioned the practicality of the exercises similar to the real TOEIC. They pointed out the effectiveness of familiarizing themselves with the test format and fast listening questions. Lastly, the students were positive about the accessibility and the segmentations of the units. Because they were able to access the program from their smartphones, and the study units were broken into smaller units, the students were able to study a small portion at a time in different places. Despite this convenience, however, it must be noted that one student thought opening and logging into the program by itself was troublesome. Two students did not recommend NetAcademy Next. One mentioned that it was easier to concentrate when the materials were paper-based, and the other revealed a difficulty accessing the contents without the computer and Wi-Fi connection.

Table 2. The use of the program

When / where	# of students	Frequency	# of students
At home	9	Everyday	4
In-between classes at the university	7	1-2 times a week	4
During the commute	5	4 times a week	1
On day off	3	3 times a week	1
Pocket of time	1	On weekends	1
		Only before the 'checkpoint'	1

Students' perception of teacher monitoring

The preference of the frequency of the teacher checking their progress was mixed. Fourteen students showed a positive attitude towards being checked every two to three weeks. "Because the students have different commitments outside of this course, it was good that we had less checkpoints." The students appreciated the flexibility of the schedule while still having a mandatory deadline that motivated them to complete the NetAcademy Next course. On the other hand, seven students preferred more frequent teacher checks. One student answered: "Without being pushed and forced, I would become lazy. I know it was my fault that I could not keep my motivation to study on my own, but I needed more frequent deadlines."

On taking notes and group sharing

The students were advised to take notes while reading the answer explanations. They kept records of multiple things, but the most frequently mentioned were: newly learned vocabulary and phrases (nine students), and the tips and strategies on TOEIC test (eight students). Five students also wrote the information highlighted in the answer key. Two students mentioned that they did not take any notes because they were not sure of what to write.

As for sharing their learning with group members, the students' responses mainly included three themes: the opportunity for noticing, the importance of output and learning from others. The most frequent theme in Question 5 (see Appendix A) was that they noticed various things through this activity. For example, nine students noted that it was effective because each student focused on dif-

ferent points, such as different strategies and vocabulary. They could also realize their misunderstandings by sharing and checking in groups. Also, when the students were not able to explain well to others, they noticed that their understanding was not internalized. The second frequent theme was the importance of output. The students thought that by teaching others and explaining in their own words, their understanding became deeper. As a result, they remembered the information and were able to apply it during the TOEIC test. Finally, the students, especially the younger students, mentioned that they appreciated learning from more advanced or older students. One student wrote: "It was difficult to explain in English, but I learned a lot from my group members. For instance, I understood how to use the word 'strategy' in context when I was listening to my group members."

Ideas from the students

As a response to Question 6 (see Appendix A), 11 students shared their ideas on how the teacher could implement the program better. Because the e-learning program was a home assignment, the students did not usually have time to work on it in class; however, four students suggested otherwise. Two students suggested printing out the exercises on paper, especially the reading sections. Another two students suggested acknowledging the hard-working students more explicitly and frequently. Lastly, the minor suggestions included making a paper progress sheet, making 'alliance' groups for accountability, and testing the students using the exercises from the NetAcademy Next.

Suggestions for teachers

The findings described in the previous section have given me an opportunity to contemplate how I could better implement the e-learning program from the subsequent semester. In this section, based on the findings mentioned above, I suggest the following ideas for the successful use of e-learning programs in class. Though this study focused on NetAcademy Next, these suggestions can be applied to many different e-learning programs in various curricula.

Choose the online program that is suitable for the students' environment and needs

Choosing a suitable program is one of the key factors for the successful technology use in class (Christison & Murray, 2014). The students' feedback showed that in determining the effectiveness of the program, they focused on the following factors:

- Each unit was broken into smaller segments, which allowed them to work on the program little by little. This segmentation lets them use the program even in a short time.
- There were in-depth explanations of the exercises in their native language. The additional support in Japanese was helpful, especially because the medium of instruction in class was English. Nation and Macalister (2010) also claim the effectiveness of L1 support.
- The program offered a vast amount of practice, similar to the real TOEIC test.
- The accessibility affected their motivation towards the use of the program. The students who claimed the easiness of logging

in and using the program with their smartphones had a positive attitude towards the program. However, the students who mentioned the issues of Wi-Fi access and logging in were not favorable toward the program.

- The simple layout and features to show their progress were motivating to the students.

Monitor the students effectively

Be mindful that the students have different monitoring preferences. The attitude towards the teacher's monitoring frequency varied. Therefore, it is advisable that the teachers adjust the monitoring style to each student's needs. It is important to communicate with each student and catch the students early if they start to fall behind. If there are students who ask for additional encouragement and being "pushed" to work harder, the teacher should give that encouragement accordingly.

Allow the students to plan their own schedules within the fixed deadlines. Because each university student has a different schedule (e.g., club activities, work, and other class assignments and exams), it is necessary to consider these factors. When doing so, motivated and independent learners can take advantage of this freedom in controlling their schedules. However, others may need more structure. Hence, having a balance of flexibility and control seems essential. While setting the fixed deadlines for all the students, the smaller deadlines can be decided by the individual student. This balance will be likely to make each student accountable and responsible for their consistency (see Appendix B).

Provide an additional paper progress

sheet. The students' schedule mentioned above can be written down on paper (see Appendix B). The benefit of adding the sheet is its tangibility; the students can write, check off the list, and also see the progress anytime without logging in from their smartphone or computer. This progress sheet can also incorporate the places for writing their goal of the semester, how they plan to achieve it, and their target TOEIC score. It may also be helpful to visualize the students' progress using charts and graphs for motivation (Nation & Macalister, 2010). The teacher can have a quick talk with each student over this progress sheet in class.

Give a brief but frequent encouragement in class. As a way of monitoring, the teacher can talk about the program in class. The students can also share their progress with their classmates (e.g., which section they are working on, and how long they have studied so far). The students seem to enjoy this type of conversation because it creates healthy competition with other classmates. Sharing ideas on when they can use the program (e.g., during the TV commercial, in-between classes, or time on the bus) can raise awareness of how to efficiently use their time. Lastly, the teacher can acknowledge and praise the students who have made significant progress in the program.

Make a clear connection between the e-learning program and the class content

Have the students take notes. The students were positive about summarizing and recording the information on the answer explanations because it deepened the learning process. By requiring the students to take notes, it avoids the e-learning program be-

coming a simple receptive practice. One thing to remember, however, is that there were students who were uncertain about what to write. In the beginning, it is important to give guidance on note-taking with examples or a template.

Share the learning with other classmates. Though the sharing activity was initially a way of increasing the meaning focused output (Nation, 2007), for the students, it was also the opportunity to notice various things. They learned from each other, and teaching their group members deepened their understanding.

Make time to work on the program in class, even if it is as short as 5 minutes. By taking the first step in class, the students will likely to continue using the program outside the class. Furthermore, the students were able to receive help on issues of logging in and accessing certain pages. If the time spent troubleshooting in the class is sufficient, the students will be comfortable using it on their own.

Remember that technology is merely one of the choices

Echoing the findings by Shimada (2017), not all students enjoyed e-learning. The students have different learning styles (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), and for some, paper-based exercises can be more motivating. Moreover, the actual TOEIC is administered on paper. Therefore, it is better to mix different types of learning and teaching materials.

Conclusion

This study has explored the students' perception of NetAcademy Next and its imple-

mentation in a Japanese university TOEIC class. Based on the students' feedback, multiple suggestions have been made regarding e-learning program selection, teacher monitoring, and program use in class. While the present study is only based on a small sample size and a simple data collection method, the findings shed light on authentic students' opinions. Implementing an e-learning program seems rather straightforward at a glance; however, it is clear that the teacher has to take multiple factors into consideration if they want to use it effectively as part of the curriculum.

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Appendix A

List of Survey Questions

- Q1. When, where, and how often did you use NetAcademy Next?
- Q2. Do you recommend this e-learning program to the students who will be taking this course in the future?
- Q3. What did you think about having a 'checkpoint' every two to three weeks, in terms of frequency?
- Q4. What did you pay attention to when

taking notes while reading the answer explanations?

- Q5. What did you think of sharing learning with your group members?
- Q6. If you were the instructor of this course, how would you improve the implementation of NetAcademy Next? Please explain in detail if you have any suggestions.

Appendix B

An Example of a Paper-based Progress Sheet

Name: _____

Course: 600 / 730

My reason for studying TOEIC: _____

My goal for this semester: _____

How I can achieve the goal above: _____

Due	NetAcademy Next	Progress
10/14	フルサイズ模擬試験(1)	<input type="checkbox"/> COMPLETE: 正解率 TOTAL ____%
	Stage 1 「狙い目」攻略	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-10 <input type="checkbox"/> 11-20 <input type="checkbox"/> 21-30 <input type="checkbox"/> 31-
10/31	ハーフサイズ模擬試験(1)	<input type="checkbox"/> COMPLETE: 正解率 TOTAL ____%
11/11	ハーフサイズ模擬試験(2)	<input type="checkbox"/> COMPLETE: 正解率 TOTAL ____%
	Stage 2 テスト対策ドリル	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-10 <input type="checkbox"/> 11-20 <input type="checkbox"/> 21-30 <input type="checkbox"/> 31-
11/25	ハーフサイズ模擬試験(3)	<input type="checkbox"/> COMPLETE: 正解率 TOTAL ____%
	レビュー	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-7 <input type="checkbox"/> Mini-Test
12/10	ハーフサイズ模擬試験(4)	<input type="checkbox"/> COMPLETE: 正解率 TOTAL ____%
	Stage 3 英語力 up トレーニング	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-10 <input type="checkbox"/> 11-20 <input type="checkbox"/> 21-30 <input type="checkbox"/> 31-40 <input type="checkbox"/> 41-
12/19	フルサイズ模擬試験(2)	<input type="checkbox"/> COMPLETE: 正解率 TOTAL ____%
12/21	Official TOEIC Test	<input type="checkbox"/> COMPLETE: Target Score ____!!!