A Weakness in English Language Learners' Approach to TOEFL Independent Speaking Paired-Choice Response Tasks

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Abstract

The learning objectives for the TOEFL iBT independent speaking tasks, as described by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the inclusion of a paired-response task indicate that an essential skill to be tested in the iBT is the ability to verbally compare and contrast. Anecdotal evidence suggests that language learners are poor at using the key grammatical structures used to compare and contrast effectively. By recording and analyzing both native speakers' and English language learners' attempts to address TOEFL iBT speaking task topics, this study seeks to identify how native speakers approach such tasks, and whether language learners approach the same tasks in the same way. Results show that an inability to use key grammatical structures when comparing and contrasting is less of an issue than lack of awareness of what the speaking task requires. This directly affects how instruction relating to paired-choice speaking tasks should be structured.

The advent of the new TOEFL iBT (Internet-based test) into Japan in the autumn of 2006 presented TOEFL instructors with a radically altered test that included, for the first time, numerous speaking tasks. These were divided into two broad groups: integrated and independent speaking. The independent speaking tasks fell into the two categories of "free response" and "paired-choice response," and it is with the latter of these that this paper is concerned. In the paired-choice response, the examinees are given two choices, one of which they have to support or explain a preference for. At a workshop held to introduce the new testing regime in early 2005, the instructional materials provided, produced by the ETS (ETS, 2004, p. 4), stated that the learning objectives of the independent speaking tasks include:

- Express and justify likes, dislikes, values, preferences
- Take a position and defend it
- Make a recommendation and justify it

All three of these learning objectives, in the context of the paired-choice response, seem to indicate a need for examinees to show competence in comparing and contrasting the choices offered. In a TOEFL class which dealt with the new iBT at a Japanese university, it became apparent that the students were not displaying what a TOEFL instructor would consider a necessary level of competence in this area. Students addressed this type of speaking task by simply concentrating on one side of the argument and extolling its virtues. This was a very

circumspect approach to a task which seemed designed to elicit an answer featuring comparison and contrast. The instructor's discussions with colleagues revealed that some had noticed this, but many had not.

Still convinced that students preparing for the TOEFL test were unable to competently compare and contrast, the instructor spent considerable time and effort designing courseware and exercises specifically targeting this perceived weakness. Due to time constraints, it seemed more productive to devote resources to creating a "solution" rather than investigating the proposition. However, Chapelle's (1998, p. 21) diagrammatic representation of one approach to research did seem to be highly relevant to the situation. Chapelle's diagram could be adapted to find out how accurate this perception of students' weakness was and if the materials developed had been effective (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Adapted from Chapelle (1998).

The focus of interest was encapsulated in two questions:

- Are Japanese learners burdened by a weakness in the use of the language needed to compare and contrast?
- If so, could this be alleviated by the course materials designed?

After some consideration, it seemed that a third, better question might be, "Do they actually need such language when addressing a TOEFL paired-choice response type task?" The investigative direction of the research was based entirely on the premise that native speakers would attempt a TOEFL paired-choice response task in a particular way and would use quite specific language forms. The premise arose from the instructor's past experience and feeling. Such a feeling, itself, is not unusual; one description of the teacher as researcher claims "teachers' theory is more likely to consist of their personal constructs, assumptions and beliefs, all of which will be an amalgam of many factors – experience, value systems, training, reading, other people and so on" (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 99). This led to a fourth question coming to the fore, "Would native-speakers of English speak as it was felt they would, if they addressed a TOEFL paired-choice response task?" Although it seemed unlikely, the possibility existed that native speakers would approach the TOEFL paired-choice response task in a similar way to Japanese learners of English, and if this were so, then there would be no need to proceed further and the course materials created could be consigned to the dustbin of history.

The original two questions were now predicated on the third, and this itself on the fourth. To show that the course materials had been successful in tackling the problem, it was first necessary to demonstrate that there was a problem. This could only be achieved by determining how native speakers approached a TOEFL paired-choice response task. Was it valid to include native speakers of English in the study? It was considered so, as the ultimate aim of the TOEFL test is to prepare students to function in an English-speaking academic environment, and in such an environment the majority of students and professors would be native speakers. It follows that if native speakers displayed an ease at comparing and contrasting that their non-native speaker classmates were unable to match, the latter would be at a disadvantage. Although it seemed likely that native speakers would respond to the TOEFL paired-choice response task by using comparative and contrastive forms, it was not possible to

find any data which stated directly that they did. It therefore became necessary to verify that they, in fact, did so. As such, the final questions which the proposed research would attempt to answer were:

1. Would native speakers of English approach a TOEFL paired-choice response task by directly comparing and contrasting the choices they are given?
2. Do Japanese learners approach a TOEFL paired-choice response task by directly comparing and contrasting the choices they are given?
3. Were the course materials provided effective in helping Japanese learners to approach a TOEFL paired-choice response type task by directly comparing and contrasting the choices they are given?

The three questions were linear in their relationship in that a negative answer to Question 1 would make Question 2 of just passing interest and Question 3 irrelevant. If the answer to both Questions 1 and 2 were affirmative, then Question 3 would probably have to be based on the measuring of very slight incremental increases.

Literature Review

There are innumerable studies into various aspects of the use of comparative adjectives. Graziano-King and Cairns (2005) compared the use of comparative adjectives by English native speaking adults and children. Barcroft (2005, p. 327) investigated whether knowledge of vocabulary or fixed grammatical rules were more important in accurate use of comparative adjectives. Kerr (1984, p. 97) lists comparative adjectives in his study of persistent errors in English by non-native speakers. Dutro and Moran (2002, p. 10), in their work on rethinking English language instruction, include a chart showing use of various comparative forms against students' proficiency levels. This, happily, indicated that the comparative / contrastive statements it was hoped the students would use were well within their capabilities. Krishna Rao, Shafique, Faisal, and Bagais (2006, p. 2) underline the importance of comparing and contrasting as a critical thinking skill when discussing the introduction of such skills into the classroom. Hamman (2002, p. 1) similarly supports the direct teaching of comparing / contrasting when he states that "compare-contrast organization can be one of the most effective strategies in students' learning. Writing research has shown positive results when teachers provide explicit lessons in how to write compare-contrast papers."

Unfortunately, there seemed to be little work directly concerned with the area of investigation in question. On the key issue of whether native speakers of English used comparative and contrastive forms when responding to the kind of questions posed by the TOEFL paired response tasks, or even whether the use of such forms was necessary in the TOEFL test, a literature search proved fruitless. Even the official Educational Testing Service's (2004) own speaking test rubrics were silent. To obtain a high score, they state that a response must demonstrate "effective use of grammar and vocabulary. It exhibits a fairly high degree of automaticity with good control of basic and complex structures" and that "relationships between ideas are clear." There is no specific mention of the need to compare and contrast. Similarly, TOEFL textbooks do not emphasize this skill. A review of four major TOEFL textbooks showed that the general approach to independent speaking tasks is to give students a template on which they can base their speaking task responses, but no differentiation is made in the nature of the two speaking tasks. Indeed, only one textbook even mentions comparing or contrasting, and that only in the passing (ETS, 2007, p.211).

The territory needed to be surveyed appeared to be uncharted. A further approach was made to colleagues who were again canvassed for their views on this topic. Many were supportive of

the central thesis, but not a few were undecided. The collection of data, therefore, commenced with almost no clues as to the direction it would lead to.

Method

All three of the research questions formulated were entirely rooted in the context of the TOEFL paired-choice response task and any research methodology devised could only be pertinent if it took this context into account. Because the TOEFL paired-choice response is a speaking task, then obviously written sources of data would not be of any use. The data to be gathered had to be spoken. A questionnaire could therefore be of little utility, even if it could be designed to indicate a subject's willingness and ability to directly compare and contrast, in that any findings could scarcely be relevant to the rather narrow, focused context of a TOEFL speaking task. In a perfect world, one could simply induce a group of native speakers and Japanese learners to take an actual TOEFL test and then ask ETS to forward the speeches they had made in response to the paired-choice speaking task. That, of course, was not going to happen.

The obvious way to answer the research questions would be to observe the language that native speakers of English and Japanese learners use when approaching a TOEFL paired-response type task. In order to provide data which could be effectively analyzed, the subjects would need to be recorded. Recorded interviews are a proven, reliable method of gathering spoken data, but they can be time-consuming. Fortunately, effective data gathering tools were available in that access already existed to several classes held in a well equipped computer room in which recording individual speeches on a mass basis was entirely possible.

In discussing research, Wallace (1998) suggests researchers "look for ways in which data collection can be made more complementary and less intrusive" (p. 49). He goes on to pose the question, "Is it possible for example to involve learners in data-collection activities which will help them with their learning?" (p. 49). It was possible to do this with the Japanese learners of English who were included in the study and blend data collection into the normal procedures of scheduled classes. Similarly, the act of transcribing the recorded speeches was something that the students did as part of their weekly homework assignment. By transcribing and editing their speeches, the students were able to reflect on the weaknesses in grammar, fluency, and vocabulary that a written transcript of their work revealed. These transcripts were gathered electronically, checked for accuracy, and became an important part of the data-collection process. Gathering data from native speakers had to be done on an individual basis and for this, a hand-held digital voice recorder recording stick was used.

The ninety-four students participating in the study comprised four classes made up of male and female, first-year through fourth year students, all save one of whom were Japanese nationals (the one non-Japanese student was a Korean who had spent considerable time in Japan and could thus be considered a "native" Japanese speaker). Their ITP scores were in the range of 430-543. In order to gather data from them, a series of six speeches was collected at different times over a semester. All speeches were collected in a normal class that met once a week. Speech 1 was collected in the second week of classes, when the students were still "cold" in terms of English, but had assimilated the necessary familiarity with the technology which would be used to record their speeches. Speech 2 was collected in the sixth week of classes, the intervening period having been spent concentrating on the TOEFL speaking free-response task. No work was done on the TOEFL paired-choice response task. Speech 3 was collected on the same day as Speech 2, but after a class discussion of the nature of the TOEFL paired-choice response task. Speech 4 was collected in the ninth week of classes, after studying course materials dedicated to highlighting ways of comparing and contrasting. Speech 5 was collected in the tenth week and Speech 6 in the eleventh week of classes. All speaking tasks were based

on TOEFL speaking paired-choice response questions and the topics were chosen to be easily accessible to students in that they were all related to aspects of students' lives. The speech topics and numbers of speakers are shown in Appendix A, Table A1.

Speech 1 was recorded under near TOEFL test-type conditions: 15 seconds to prepare and 45 seconds to speak. Speeches 2, 3, 4 were recorded after students had discussed their ideas for this topic in pairs. This was to done to minimize the possibility that an inability to generate ideas could markedly affect the language used. Speeches 5 and 6 were recorded under TOEFL test-type conditions, i.e., no discussion beforehand. All speeches were recorded using a software program called Soft Recorder and dispatched electronically to a central collection box accessible to the teacher.

The native speaker aspect of the project was executed in a series of recordings made over a period of weeks whenever opportunity presented itself. All of the native speaker subjects are English teachers at Japanese universities. Though some may feel that using language instructors put a too academic slant on their speeches, this is countered by the fact that the TOEFL test itself is very much a test of English for academic purposes and within the context of both the test and the research project, the use of native speaker English teachers was not deemed inappropriate. Fourteen subjects made a total of 35 speeches on five topics. One speech, on Topic 5, 'Which do you prefer, taking a multiple choice exam or an essay-type exam?' was not made by the native speakers as many of them had never taken a multiple-choice exam and felt unable to address the topic directly from their own experience. All speeches were recorded under TOEFL test-type conditions with the speakers being given a topic and then allowed 15 seconds to marshal their thoughts and 45 seconds to speak. The subjects were not informed of the connection with the TOEFL paired-choice response task nor of the nature of the research. Only two had any experience of teaching TOEFL classes. The speech topics and numbers of speakers are shown in Appendix A, Table A2.

The collected speeches were analyzed for occurrences of what, for the purposes of this paper, have been labeled *comparative statements* and *contrastive statements*. The former consists of any statement using comparative adjectives, comparative adverbs, or comparative noun phrases. The latter consists of any statement which shows a direct contrast by using terms such as *but*, *however*, *whereas*, *while*, *on the other hand*, *in contrast*, or a pair of statements contrasting each other (e.g., "This is cold. That is hot."). The data collected from students was organized in a simple spreadsheet. To see the headings used in the spreadsheet, see Appendix B.

Analysis

Native Speakers

The data collected from native speakers was entered into a spreadsheet which listed number of speakers, number of comparative statements used, number of contrastive statements used, average per speaker, number of speakers not using either form, and number of speakers not using either form, expressed as a percentage of the group. Native speakers' speeches were also analyzed by speech topic and by individual to test the effect of speech topic and individual language preferences on the central question of whether native speakers do approach a TOEFL paired-response type task by directly comparing and contrasting (see Table 1 and Figures 2 & 3).

Table 1***Native Speakers' Use of Comparative and Contrastive Statements***

Speech	1	2	3	4	6	All
Number of speakers	6	11	7	3	8	35
Comparative statements	14	16	13	6	20	69
Contrastive statements	6	4	6	2	7	25
Average per speech comparative + contrastive	3.33	1.82	2.71	2.67	3.38	2.68
Speakers not using	0	3	0	0	0	3
% of speakers not using	0	27.27	0	0	0	8.57

Figure 2. Native speakers' use of comparative and contrastive statements per topic.

On all speeches but one, the average number of comparative / contrastive statements was between 2.5 and 3.5 per speech. When analyzed by individual speaker, the numbers were remarkably similar. Of the 14 native speakers in the survey, only one averaged less than two comparative / contrastive statements per speech, and more than half averaged three or more (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Native speakers' use of comparative and contrastive statements per individual.

All in all, the data seems to support the proposition that native speakers do approach the paired-choice response type tasks by utilizing language forms that directly compare and contrast. Irrespective of whether the data was analyzed on the basis of individual speakers or particular speech topic, most responses fell within the range of 2 to 3.5 comparative or contrastive statements per speech. The answer to Research Question 1 appears to be an affirmative.

Japanese Learners of English

The data collected from the Japanese learners of English was collected on six occasions which comprised three distinct phases:

- Phase 1 - before discussion of the nature of the paired-response task and the need to use comparative and contrastive statements (Speeches 1 and 2).
- Phase 2 - after discussion of the nature of the paired-response task and the need to use comparative and contrastive statements (Speech 3) and after exposure to the course materials designed to facilitate such use (Speech 4).
- Phase 3 – after exposure to course materials and after discussion of the nature of the paired-response task and the need to use comparative and contrastive statements; under test conditions (Speeches 5 and 6).

The raw numbers can be seen in Table 2:

Table 2***Japanese Learners' Use of Comparative and Contrastive Statements***

	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3*	
Exposure to course materials	Before		Before	After	After	
Discussion of nature of speaking task	Before		After	After	After	
Speech number	1	2	3	4	5	6
Number of speakers	52	94	94	66	81	82
Total number of comparative statements	9	27	108	81	54	81
Total number of contrastive statements	15	14	24	37	32	21
Average use per speech (all speeches)	0.46	0.44	1.40	1.79	1.06	1.24
Average use per speech of speakers who used either a comparative or contrastive form	1.20	1.46	1.91	1.93	1.53	1.62
Percentage of speakers not using any comparative or contrastive forms	63.5	70.2	27.7	10.61	33.33	25.61

**Under test conditions*

Speeches 1 and 2, which provided the data for an examination of Research Question 2 ("Do Japanese learners approach a TOEFL paired-choice response task by directly comparing and contrasting the choices they are given?"), although recorded some five weeks apart and with different sized sample groups, showed very similar results. The crucial figure of the number of students using neither form was very high at around two-thirds for each speech topic. Those students that did use comparative / contrastive statements did so at a fairly low rate. These figures were in line with the original "hunch" that led to the investigation: that Japanese students did not approach the TOEFL paired-choice response task in the same way that native speakers did.

Speeches 3 and 4 presented the most interesting statistics of the study. Speech 3 was recorded on the same day as Speech 2, but after a group discussion and then a guided class discussion on the nature of the TOEFL paired-choice response task. The result of this discussion was students' realization of the need to compare and contrast in these tasks. Speech 3 saw a remarkable drop in the proportion of students eschewing comparative / contrastive forms to slightly over one-quarter. The average number of comparative / contrastive forms per student using these forms also increased, almost up to the lower end of the native speakers' usage. Speech 4, recorded after three weeks spent studying the language of comparison and contrast through course materials specially designed for that purpose, showed a further drop in the percentage of students using neither form to just over one-tenth. The average number of comparative / contrastive forms per student using these forms also increased, but very slightly. These figures seem to reveal that the problem is not that Japanese students have difficulty using comparative / contrastive forms, but that they do not realize when to use them. Once the connection between the TOEFL paired-choice response task and comparison / contrast is made, most students seem to have little difficulty in incorporating comparative / contrastive forms into their speeches.

Speeches 5 and 6 were different from Speeches 2, 3 and 4. Before Speeches 2, 3, and 4 were recorded, students discussed their ideas and by default had more time to prepare what they were going to say. Speeches 5 and 6 were recorded under TOEFL test conditions with a preparation time of only fifteen seconds. The proportion of students using neither form increased to a third and to a quarter for Speeches 5 and 6 respectively. The average number of comparative / contrastive forms per student using these forms also declined. Much of this decline can, no doubt, be attributed to the pressure of the test conditions with its concomitant lack of preparation time. However, this pressure notwithstanding, when the all-important statistic, the percentage of students using neither form, is compared to the results from Speeches 1 and 2, we can see that use of comparative / contrastive forms has spread. More than two-thirds of students used these forms in Speeches 5 and 6, whereas less than one-third had in Speeches 1 and 2.

Does this mean that Research Question 3 has been answered affirmatively? Something had obviously changed and the students had become much more open to using comparative / contrastive forms. The results from Speech 3, however, recorded before the use of the course materials, suggest that a simple awareness of the nature of the TOEFL paired-choice response task was of greater importance than the use of the course materials directly targeting the use of comparative and contrastive statements. The course materials may have helped students in developing a more fluent use of comparative / contrastive forms, but may not have been the crucial factor. More research seems to be called for here.

The combined results from the two speeches from each phase were entered into a graph comparing them to native speakers. This visual representation gives us a clear view of the way students' approaches to the TOEFL paired-choice response task changed and how they had started to creep toward a native speaker pattern (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Comparison of Japanese learners' and native speakers' use of comparative / contrastive forms

Conclusion

The investigation into the use of comparative and contrastive statements by both native speakers of English and Japanese learners of English succeeded in establishing fairly concrete answers to the first two research questions posed. Native speakers did indeed approach TOEFL paired-response tasks by making extensive use of the language forms needed to execute the

functions of comparing and contrasting. In contrast, Japanese learners of English showed very little inclination to do so at first. This does not seem to be based on any linguistic weakness on the part of Japanese learners of English, but more on a lack of awareness as to what exactly the expectations are for responses to TOEFL paired-response tasks. When this became clear, the Japanese learners of English quickly approached native speaker norms. The third research question was not adequately answered because of the uncertainty caused by the sudden increase in comparative / contrastive statements which simple awareness of the need to use these forms in such TOEFL tasks engendered.

The implications for the teacher are clear. Students need to be informed of the nature of the TOEFL paired-choice response task and the need to use comparative / contrastive forms in addressing this kind of task. In the case of the students surveyed, directly teaching the use of comparative / contrastive statements was less important than making them aware of the need to use such forms. It should be remembered, however, that the sample group had fairly high ITP scores (453-504), which suggests a fairly competent knowledge of English grammar. Classes with lower ITP scores may need some direct instruction in the grammar of comparative and contrastive statements.

Though this lack of understanding of the need to use comparative and contrastive forms, especially in test-taking situations, was identified by data collected from Japanese learners of English, it is not unreasonable to assume that other learners of English may be similarly ignorant of the necessity to use such forms. The mean TOEFL speaking-test scores over the past three years published by the Educational Testing Service show that TOEFL test-takers in countries such as Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam are located in the sixteen to nineteen point band, out of a possible total of thirty. This is much lower than the mean speaking-test scores of test-takers in European countries, whose scores are generally in the mid-twenties and very rarely fall below twenty (ETS, 2008, 2009, 2010). There is clearly much room for improvement in the speaking-test scores of many test-takers in the Asian region.

Although further research is needed to determine whether this perceived weakness in knowing when to use comparative and contrastive forms is peculiar to Japanese learners of English or is a more region-wide phenomenon, the probability that it is not confined to one country should not be discounted. It is important that teachers recognize that such a weakness may exist in their learners' approach to test-taking, and, if it does, take steps to rectify the problem. This might be achieved simply by making students aware of the importance of being able to compare and contrast and encouraging the use of comparative and contrastive forms with which they are already familiar, or it may require targeted instruction in what is an essential academic skill.

Biodata

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Appendix A

Speech Topics and Number of Speakers per Speech

Table A1***Speech Topics, Number of Speakers and When Recorded (Japanese Learners of English)***

Speech	Topic	Number of students	Week
1	Which did you enjoy more, junior high school or high school?	52	1
2	Should first-year university students live in a dormitory or an apartment in town?	94	6
3	Do you prefer sending email or writing a letter?	94	6
4	Which do you think is better, an electronic dictionary or a paper dictionary?	66	9
5	Which do you prefer, taking a multiple choice exam or an essay-type exam?	81	10
6	Do you prefer traveling by train or plane?	82	11
	Total	469	

Table A2***Speech Topics and Number of Speakers (Native Speakers of English)***

Speech	Topic	Number of native speakers
1	Which did you enjoy more, junior high school or high school?	6
2	Should first year university students live in a dormitory or an apartment in town?	11
3	Do you prefer sending email or writing a letter?	7
4	Which do you think is better, an electronic dictionary or a paper dictionary?	3
6	Do you prefer traveling by train or plane?	8
	Total	35

Appendix B
Spreadsheet Headings

When speeches were analyzed, the raw data was entered in a spreadsheet with the following headings:

Class/speech: (Which class and which topic the students spoke on.)
Number of speakers recorded:
Number of comparative statements used correctly: (Although only the attempts to directly compare and contrast were relevant and accuracy was not a focus of investigation, it was equally easy to categorize the instances of use into grammatically correct and incorrect.)
Number of comparative statements used incorrectly: (See above.)
Number of contrastive statements used correctly: (See above.)
Number of contrastive statements used incorrectly: (See above.)
Total comparatives + contrastives: (All attempts to use comparative or contrastive statements, whether accurately or not, were totaled.)
Average use of either comparative or contrastive for class as a whole: (This gave a figure for the average use per student in the class. The figure was unreal, in that no one can make 0.3 of a comparative statement, but it gave a good indicator of the general incidence of use.)
Number of students using: (This gave the number of students who used one or other of the target forms.)
Average use of either comparative or contrastive statements for students using: (This gave a figure for the average use per student of those who had made any comparative or contrastive statements.)
Number of students not using: (This was one of the most important categories in that it indicated the number of students who made no attempt to use either comparative or contrastive statements.)
Percentage of non-users: (This expressed the number of non-users as a percentage of the class.)