



Difficulties in Test of TOEIC Reading  
Comprehension by the Final Year Students of  
High Quality Classes at Faculty of Mechanical  
Engineering, HaUI

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## DIFFICULTIES IN TEST OF TOEIC READING COMPREHENSION BY THE FINAL YEAR STUDENTS OF HIGH QUALITY CLASSES AT FACULTY OF MECHANICAL ENGINEERING, HaUI

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**Abstract:** TOEIC has been recognized as a golden key to unlock doors of job opportunity for working people. At Hanoi University of Industry (HaUI), TOEIC certificate has become a compulsory requirement for high quality students to be qualified for university degree. After attending the internal TOEIC test held in HaUI in November 2014, the final year students of high quality classes at Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, HaUI shared their great hindrances towards TOEIC reading comprehension. This article explores the students' difficulties in the test of TOEIC reading comprehension and then proposes applicable solutions to the difficulties.

**Keywords:** TOEIC, reading comprehension, difficulties, vocabulary.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is widely regarded as the worldwide standard for measuring English proficiency in the workplace. It can be used for different purposes such as a compulsory condition to graduate schools, an indicator to consider for increasing workers' salary and a good competitive advantage for qualified staff's overseas business trips.

At Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (FME), students of high quality classes are required to get at least 550 TOEIC points before graduating from Hanoi University of Industry. However, after more than three years learning, practicing and attending TOEIC test, as reported by monitors in December 2014, 52 out of 64 final year students of two high quality classes are not qualified for HaUI's internal TOEIC certificate. The students claimed that TOEIC's 7<sup>th</sup> part or reading comprehension was the hardest among parts of the test of TOEIC reading section. Furthermore, there has been a few studies researching

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TOEIC skills such as the paper by Nguyen Thi Yen (2010) on difficulties in teaching TOEIC speaking skills [8] and the research by Nhu Ha Phuong (2012) on the common errors in the TOEC listening test [9], but there has been no paper which explores the difficulties relating to test of TOEIC reading comprehension.

For the two main reasons stated above, it was essential to conduct a study to get insight into difficulties in the test of TOEIC reading comprehension faced by the final year students of high quality classes at FME, HaUI. Accordingly, some feasible recommendations would be made with the purpose of helping the students obtain the higher score in the exam.

## **2. RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **2.1. Research question**

The study was conducted to identify difficulties which the senior high quality students at FME, HaUI encountered in the internal TOEIC test in November 2014. To be specific, the research aimed at answering the research question:

*What are the difficulties encountered by the senior high quality students at FME, HaUI towards part 7 (reading comprehension) of the internal TOEIC test?*

The research question was piloted with 10 final year high quality students at FME, HaUI who failed the internal TOEIC test in November 2014. Based on their answers' analysis, there existed four outstanding problems such as (1) TOEIC vocabulary, (2) reading skills, (3) reading question types and (4) kinds of reading passages faced by the students. Therefore, in the limitation of time, the study focused on investigating these difficulties with larger participants.

### **2.2. Participants and participant selection method**

The number of participants in the study was 30 who had been chosen randomly from 52 seniors of two high quality classes at FME, HaUI who were still not qualified for at least 550 TOEIC points to be capable of graduating at the time of research although they had learned TOEIC for 3.5 years and had already finished TOEIC training program at Hanoi University of Industry.

### **2.3. Data collection instruments and data analysis method**

For the purpose of collecting sufficient, reliable and valid data for the study, questionnaire and interviews were fully employed. Questionnaire was designed with four parts in response to four aspects of research question. After answering questionnaire, one-

third participants were invited to participate in the semi-structured interview for the purpose of getting in-depth information.

Descriptive statistics method was employed to analyze the data. Moreover, the information collected from the interview was made use to compare and contrast with the data achieved from the questionnaire.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1. Difficulties in vocabulary

As illustrated in table 1, vocabulary is one of the participants' striking problems. Noticeably, 83,33% participants regarded *vocabulary about economics* as their biggest hindrance while more than half respondents showed their difficulties in *vocabulary about health*. It can be inferred that vocabulary about economics and health caused the participants considerable hindrances. The technology-majored respondents might not get used to reading passages of mergers, invoices and clinics. Furthermore, the large proportion of interviewed participants admitted that they had a poor range of TOEIC vocabulary because of two main reasons. Firstly, their general English vocabulary was not extensive. It was contrary to the researcher's prediction that the participants attending TOEIC internal test after more than three years had a great amount of popularly-used basic vocabulary. Secondly, they did not have strategies about topic-oriented vocabulary learning and practiced readings with such vocabulary. In a nutshell, the participants are advised to improve basic vocabulary range before spending time on vocabulary about economics and health.

**Table 1:** *Difficulties in vocabulary*

No.	Problems with	Number of students	Percentage (%)
1	Vocabulary about technology	7	23,33
2	Vocabulary about economics	25	83,33
3	Vocabulary about travel	5	16,67
4	Vocabulary about health	17	56,67
5	Vocabulary about entertainment	4	13,33
6	Vocabulary about dining out	5	16,67
7	Vocabulary about personnel	7	23,33
8	Vocabulary about housing	6	20
9	Vocabulary about offices	6	20

### 3.2. Difficulties in reading skills

Regarding the reading skills, the outstanding thing should be noted here was that *guessing new word in vocabulary question* was perceived as the most serious problem persisted by approximately one-half respondents. It was shared by the interviewees that choosing the correct synonym for the word mentioned at specific line and in specific paragraph of texts was not a piece of cake when they attended the test. The reason probably resulted from having shortage of time necessitated for rereading the sentence which includes the given word until it is understood so as to make sense of the word mentioned in the question.

While *skimming skill* and *scanning skill* were shown to be less challenging, more than 40% respondents admitted their difficulties in *inferring skill* towards the inference questions, namely “who is likely the intended reader?” or “who would use the information?” or “where would you find the product?”. It can be concluded that the respondents were skillful at finding the correct answers from factual questions when the language of the text matches the required information. However, they were less capable of drawing inferences because they had limited ability of connecting information among sentences. Moreover, they spent too much time achieving the targeted answer due to their comparatively low reading rate. Therefore, the students in the study need to be trained with guessing new word in vocabulary question; inferring skill with the enhancement of fast reading skill and the improvement of making inferences.

**Table 2:** *Difficulties in reading skills*

No.	Problems with	Number of students	Percentage (%)
1	Skimming the text for general information	11	36,67
2	Scanning the text for specific information	9	30
3	Guessing new word in the vocabulary question	14	46,67
4	Inferring skill for inference question	13	43,33

### 3.3. Difficulties in reading question types

The statistics have shown the participants had problem with the majority of reading question types. “*NOT/TRUE*” and “*synonym questions*” were rated as the hardest kinds of question for the respondents in the study while *information questions* seemed not to cause

the participants much trouble. Interviewees clarified the reason that in order to answer one NOT/TRUE question, it took time three times as much as they spent on one information question. For synonym questions, the participants' obstacle was likely due to their study skills. When they practiced outside the test room, they focused on learning a few popular meanings of each word. Rarely had they found or collected the words or phrases which are similar or have the closest meaning. These findings figured out that the participants need to be supplied with exercise of developing synonymous vocabulary range and techniques to deal with "NOT/TRUE" questions with the shorter time.

**Table 3:** *Difficulties in reading question types*

No.	Problems with	Number of students	Percentage (%)
1	Information questions (Wh_questions)	7	22,33
2	NOT/TRUE questions	19	63,33
3	Inference questions	16	53,33
4	Synonym questions	19	63,33

### 3.4. Difficulties in kinds of reading passages

It is clear from statistics of questionnaire that double passages were considered to be harder than single passages by 76,67% participants. When interviewed, they explained about advantages of single passages that it didn't take much time to read each advertisement, form, letter, e-mail, fax, memorandum, table, index, chart, instruction, or notice separately. However, these students in favor of single ones stated that they used to lack time for the last ten questions of double passages in the exam. Therefore, it was very significant for the participants to learn how to manage time for each question as well as how to fulfill the reading passages with the allowed time.

In contrast, nearly one-third respondents faced bigger obstacles in single passages in comparison with double ones. One interesting truth was found about good points of double passages that the participants felt it effective to answer five questions for pairs of passages. Additionally, as they experienced in the test, difficult degree of double passages was the same while for the single passages, some first ones were simple but some last ones were confusing. It was clear that if the participants had mastered the format of each group of reading passages, they would have been more skilled and strategic readers.

**Table 4:** *Difficulties in kinds of reading passages*

No.	Aspects	Number of students	Percentage (%)
1	Single passages are more difficult than double ones	7	23,33
2	Double passages are more difficult than single ones	23	76,67
3	Single passages are as difficult as double ones	0	0
4	Single and double passages are not difficult.	0	0

## 4. SUGGESTIONS

Based on the results of the study, the following suggestions could be made.

### 4.1. Vocabulary

Vocabulary is described by Beglar and Hunt [1] as the “central component” or “the heart of a language” in getting insight into foreign language. Therefore, in order to improve basic vocabulary range and get over difficulties in vocabulary about economics and health, the senior students of high quality classes at FME are recommended to follow three basic steps. The first step is to revise and master an enormous amount of popularly-used basic vocabulary as shared by the website *onthitoaic.com* at basic vocabulary category. Secondly, the students need to build TOEIC vocabulary self-study strategies at pre-intermediate level. It is likely that the book 600 essential words for the TOEIC test by Lin Lougheed would be appropriate in the process of building crucial TOEIC vocabulary. Thirdly, when practicing passages in test books, it would be helpful if the students keep writing new words into their vocabulary notebook which is classified into each theme and spend more time on the theme of health and business activities.

In order to obtain higher marks in TOEIC internal test at HaUI, it is very essential for the final year students of high quality classes to enhance the understanding capacity of passages. Nation’s study (1993) could have great sense in this case. In accordance with his advice, the students should be provided with the fact that to improve their achievement dramatically, they need to enrich from 2000 to 5000 words in order to understand from 85% to 95% of the text [7].

### 4.2. Reading skills

When the students have a huge amount of vocabulary as presented above, the students can reduce the difficulties in guessing new word in the vocabulary question. Additionally,

the students can replace the given word in vocabulary question by each word of the answer A, B, C and D. In case, any answer of which meaning is appropriate with the content of the passage seems to be the best choice.

The research's results revealed that the seniors of two high quality classes at FME, HaUI had comparatively slow reading speed. There are two effective ways to help them speed up their reading skill according to Debat (2006, p.13), [3]. The first technique is to practise eyes' movement with a pen. When the pen in the hand moves from the left to the right of texts, the eyes run after the pen. The second technique results from reading keywords aloud that are shown on reading questions for a few seconds, and then quickly identify them in the passages. The kind of exercise is worth training the students in the speedy visual recognition of targeted information positions.

Aiming to improve inferring skill, the researcher suggests that the senior high quality students at FME should get familiar with "top-down" and "bottom-up" reading process which they were hardly trained before the test date. To be specific, as explained in [10], the top-down process focuses on exploiting readers' background knowledge or the previous experiences about the text structure or the subject matter of a text to create frameworks to make sense of new experiences whereas the bottom-up process aims at combining each familiar word, each simple grammatical structure to create the meaning of phrases; then through the understanding of phrases can more complex passage structures be analyzed and interpreted. When top-down and bottom-up strategies are practiced regularly, the inferring skill will be enhanced [4].

### 4.3. Reading questions

Firstly, for purpose of answering "*NOT/TRUE*" questions quickly and effectively, from the researcher's teaching experience, it is advisable for the students to find out the key word(s) in the question and discover where passage's part(s) state(s) about key words or their paraphrased phrases to identify targeted information scope. Afterwards, the students should look at answers A, B, C, D before finding them in a passage. For TRUE question, leave out options which are not included in the passage. For NOT question, leave out options which are included in the passage.

Secondly, to enhance competence in dealing with *synonym questions*, the students had better enlarge synonymous vocabulary range due to practicing exercise "practicing paraphrasing the following sentences by choosing the correct option" designed by David Cho [2].



Last but not least, recommendations by Forster et al are valuable to the students. In the first place, they warn that the passage questions may not impose as the orderly information in the text. The second point is that wrong answers in TOEIC passages may result from choosing too general or too specific answers to the question of main ideas. Finally, in case the exam candidates have no idea for the answer to a specific question, Forster et al. (1997) recommend that it is worthy to mark B or C because answers B and C are the two most popular answers to questions in TOEIC [5].

#### 4.4. Reading passages

The study's findings have showed that the students lacked time for last ten questions due to inefficient time management skill, so students are suggested to wear a watch to control test time. From the researcher's experience in TOEIC test, 28 minutes should be spent on 28 questions of single passages; 20 minutes ought to be taken to answer 20 questions of double ones. It can be inferred that one minute is expected to be enough time to answer one passage question. Therefore, when the students have employed more than four minutes for reading passage of four questions, they are supposed to move to other ones to keep reading in control of time.

Concerning *single passages*, as Muller presents, there exist four main passage structures in TOEIC reading passages, namely problem/solution, general/specific, claim/counterclaim and question/answer [6]. Thus, students are recommended to investigate and remember above passage structures because they could find the answer to test questions of each passage very quickly when they are conscious of where, at the beginning, middle or end of the passage, they may look for.

To read *double passages* fast and effectively, it is consulted by David Cho [2] that the students should get accustomed to format of groups of reading passages: letters/E-mails, announcements, advertisements, articles and forms. I take double passages which are concerned about letters/emails as example. They often contain (1) a passage for conference postponement and another for reply to that request or (2) an email for complaints about a product and a reply to that complaint. When the final year students studying in high quality class of Faculty of Mechanical Engineering are supplied with strategies for (1) and (2) regarding letters/emails, they are more confident in exam.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The paper found the answers to research question relating to difficulties faced by the final year students of high quality classes at FME, HaUI in test of TOEIC reading

comprehension. Due to limited time and small scope, the study was restricted to difficulties in vocabulary, reading skills, reading questions and kinds of reading passages with participation of 30 seniors in questionnaire and 10 participants in the interview. Based on the discovered difficulties, some feasible solutions are recommended to improve TOEIC reading comprehension competence in particular and TOEIC skills in general. Specifically, the seniors of high quality program at FME are recommended to develop clear strategies in vocabulary enhancement; become familiar with “top-down” and “bottom-up” reading process and to master the passages’ structure. Moreover, they should arrange suitable time for each question, each single passage and double one.

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## NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN KHI THI DẠNG BÀI ĐỌC HIỂU TOEIC CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM CUỐI HỆ CHẤT LƯỢNG CAO KHOA CƠ KHÍ, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CÔNG NGHIỆP HÀ NỘI

**Tóm tắt:** TOEIC từ lâu đã được thừa nhận là chiếc chìa khóa vàng giúp người lao động mở cánh cửa việc làm. Ở Trường Đại học Công nghiệp Hà Nội, chứng chỉ TOEIC còn là điều kiện cần đối với sinh viên hệ chất lượng cao để được công nhận tốt nghiệp. Sau khi tham dự bài thi TOEIC nội bộ tháng 11 năm 2014, nhiều sinh viên năm cuối khoa Cơ khí hệ chất lượng cao đã bày tỏ những khó khăn lớn đối với phần thi đọc hiểu. Bài viết này tìm hiểu những khó khăn cơ bản trong phần thi đọc hiểu TOEIC, từ đó khuyến nghị những giải pháp để khắc phục những khó khăn đó.

**Từ khóa:** TOEIC, đọc hiểu, khó khăn, từ vựng