Which Should Be Dominant in Japan, the TOEFL iBT or the IELTS?

(Course name: What Does a Test Measure?)

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This study compared the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) Internet-based test (iBT) with the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in terms of the contents of the test and scale and history of the test. Although the two tests appear similar as they both have the same four sections (reading, writing, speaking, and listening sections), these two tests do not necessarily measure the same abilities. After the comparison of the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS section by section, we found that the IELTS is better than the TOEFL iBT in the reading, listening, and speaking sections, and that the TOEFL iBT is superior to the IELTS in the writing section. We also found that the TOEFL iBT is much more popular than the IELTS in Japan, although the opposite is true worldwide. We considered why the TOEFL iBT is dominant in Japan and suggested measures to make the IELTS the dominant one in Japan, considering that the IELTS is superior in terms of including tasks that simulate daily life tasks. These measures would increase the number of IELTS test centers, reconsider American-oriented thinking of Japanese people, encourage educational institutions to recommend the IELTS more strongly to students, and decrease the IELTS's test fee.

Key words: test comparison, four-skill tests, worldwide scale, Japanese scale

Introduction

There are many tests in the world, and they measure our abilities. They are put into practice, and their results are used in various situations. For example, when you want to enter a university, you have to take the entrance examination. When you want to join a company, you have to take the employment examination. In both situations, you are able to use your scores in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) Internet-based test (iBT) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS). If your score meets the university's or company's standards, you can enter it.

Globally, the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS are some of the criteria of university entrance examinations and company employment examinations¹⁾. They are very similar, as they both have the same four sections: reading section, writing section, speaking section, and listening section. However, when the Educational Testing Service (ETS) conducted score comparison research between the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS over a sample of 1,153 students who had both TOEFL iBT and IELTS scores, the total test correlation was 0.73²⁾. This means that they do not necessarily measure the same abilities. We wondered what the difference between the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS is and which test is

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better. Among various viewpoints, we compared them in terms of the contents of the test and scale and history of the test.

Research on the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS

1. Comparison of the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS by section

1) Reading section

The TOEFL iBT is composed of four to six academic English passages³⁾. Its format is multiple choice³⁾. Passages of the IELTS are taken from academic textbooks, newspapers, or magazines³⁾. Its formats take on more forms, including short answer, multiple choice, heading matching, True/False/Not Given, completing a summary, locating the information, and others³⁾. In daily life, you often read newspapers and magazines and you use your abilities to solve various types of problems. The IELTS measures such ability better than the TOEFL iBT because its question types vary.

2) Listening section

The format on the TOEFL iBT is all multiple choice and are spoken in a Northern American accent³⁾. The formats on the IELTS are multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, label a diagram, and other formats³⁾. They are spoken in a British accent, Australian accent, Canadian accent, and other accents³⁾. The TOEFL iBT is only related to university life, while the IELTS is related to daily conversation and academics³⁾. When you go to foreign countries, you meet people that speak in different accents, and you need to be able to have daily conversations with them. The IELTS measures such abilities better than the TOEFL iBT.

3) Writing section

The TOEFL iBT and the IELTS both have two tasks³⁾. One of the tasks on the TOEFL iBT is an integrated task that includes listening and reading³⁾. The other task requires test takers to write an essay of 300 words³⁾. The tasks on the IELTS are to write a 150-word essay and a 250-word essay³⁾. In daily life, you need writing skills, listening skills, and reading skills at the same time. The TOEFL iBT measures such abilities better than the IELTS because it has an integrated task.

4) Speaking section

The TOEFL iBT has six tasks³⁾. The first two tasks require test takers to give their opinion or describe something familiar³⁾. The next two tasks are to summarize information from a text and a conversation³⁾. The last two tasks are to summarize information from a short conversation³⁾. You have to speak to a computer when you take the TOEFL iBT³⁾. The IELTS has three sections³⁾. You have to speak with an examiner when you take the IELTS³⁾. First, you give a brief introduction of yourself³⁾. Secondly, you talk for one to two minutes about a given topic³⁾. Lastly, you answer the question your examiner asks about what you said on the given topic³⁾. The skill of talking with people is required in daily life, and the IELTS measures this ability better than the TOEFL iBT.

2. Comparison of the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS overall

In the reading section, listening section, and speaking section, we decided that the IELTS is better than the TOEFL iBT, and the TOEFL iBT is superior to the IELTS in the writing section. Overall, we came to the conclusion that the IELTS is better than the TOEFL iBT in terms of the contents of the test, particularly the tasks that are able to measure our English ability in daily life.

The TOEFL iBT and the IELTS on a worldwide scale and Japanese scale

1. Worldwide scale

On a global scale, the TOEFL iBT is taken in 165 countries at about 4,500 test centers⁴⁾. The IELTS is taken in more than 130 countries and more than 800 test centers⁴⁾. More than 0.7 million people take the TOEFL iBT per year⁴⁾, and about 2.5 million people take the IELTS per year⁵⁾.

2. Japanese scale

In Japan, there are more than 100 TOEFL iBT test centers, but only 2 IELTS test centers. The TOEFL iBT is offered 30 to 40 times per year, but the IELTS, only 26 times⁵⁾. Additionally, 202 Japanese universities use TOEFL scores, and only 10 Japanese universities use IELTS scores as a standard for entrance exams⁵⁾. About 350 universities encourage their students to take the TOEFL,

but only 46 universities (including Juntendo) encourage their students to take the IELTS.

In 1987, the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP) was introduced to Japan, and the TOEFL soon became popular⁵⁾. Eight years later, in 1995, the IELTS was introduced to Japan⁶⁾.

Based on these facts and backgrounds, the TOEFL is much more popular than the IELTS in Japan, although this situation is the opposite of the world as a whole. We considered why the TOEFL is dominant in Japan and came up with several ideas on how to make the IELTS the dominant one, considering that the IELTS is superior in terms of including tasks that simulate daily life tasks.

The dominant test in Japan: until now and going forward

1. The reasons that the TOEFL iBT is dominant in Japan

There are five important reasons.

- 1) The TOEFL was introduced to Japan earlier than the IELTS.
- 2) There are more TOEFL iBT test centers than IELTS test centers in Japan.
- 3) There are more Japanese universities that use TOEFL scores than use IELTS scores as a standard for entrance exams.
- 4) Japanese students who study abroad in the United States are six times more numerous than students who study abroad in the United Kingdom. Generally, American universities require a TOEFL iBT score and British universities require an IELTS score, so more students have to take the TOEFL iBT than the IELTS⁴⁾.
- 5) It becomes clearer how well you can do in English when you take the TOEFL iBT rather than the IELTS, because the TOEFL iBT marks its examination on a 120-point scale, but the IELTS evaluates test takers' English skills according to a 9-grade system^{6) 7)}.

2. How to spread the IELTS in Japan

First, we should increase the number of IELTS test centers. As we mentioned above, while the TOEFL iBT has more than 100 test centers, the IELTS only has 2 test centers in Japan. As the number of IELTS test centers increases, the test centers would be able to cope with more people,

which would make it easier for us to take the IELTS. This may lead to a situation where the IELTS becomes better known. Second, we may need to reconsider the American-oriented thinking of Japanese people. It is known that Japan was under American occupation and that Japan has mainly traded with the U.S. after World War II, and so it is understandable for Japanese people to have American-oriented thinking. However, we believe that this can be changed. For example, the government or communities hold events that are related to foreign countries besides the U.S. These can attract the interest of Japanese people, lead to the dissolution of American-oriented thinking, and eventually make more people take the IELTS. Third, educational institutions should recommend the IELTS more strongly to students. We need to let them know that the IELTS has been spreading rapidly in the world, and even American universities have begun to adjust to this trend and use IELTS scores as the standard. That is why we think that more Japanese educational institutions should start spreading the IELTS. Fourth, the IELTS should cut down its test fee. Its current fee is 25,300 yen. This is too expensive to let you take the test when you want to.

While we believe that the four changes are viable, some may argue that it is difficult to realize all the recommendations, stating, for example, that the reduction of the IELTS test fee may make it difficult to maintain the current test format, particularly the face-to-face interview format in the speaking section. While we admit that there may be other crucial factors to be considered, we argue that if we could make these four changes materialize, the IELTS would be the dominant test in Japan. Consequently, it would become easier for Japanese people to access international universities and companies, leading to global success for Japanese people.

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