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A Review of an Enhancement Course for College Students' Standardized English Test

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This study reviews an English enhancement course implemented for medical and nursing college students of 2011 to improve their standardized English test scores. A total of 117 first-year students underwent the pre-test and the post-TOEIC in November 2011. After the pre-test, lectures on listening enhancement strategies and problem solving tactics on reading comprehension were supplemented with 4 times of enhancement-tests. Their pre- and post-TOEIC results were compared to see if such enhancement strategies were effective to improve their TOEIC scores. It was further to investigate, through survey questionnaires, how the subjects felt about a number of pre-test-type TOEIC exercise with what-to-listen and how-to-infer listening strategies and pattern-drill practices for reading comprehension. It was found that the scores of listening comprehension improved significantly for both major students whereas reading scores showed slight decrease among nursing majors. It is concluded that administering numerous pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise is effective for students to improve their listening scores supplemented with listening strategies Also, students' response showed positive toward the enhancement course.

[standardized English test, English enhancement course, listening strategy, pattern-drill problem solving tactics]

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I. INTRODUCTION

When Korean companies recruit entry-level-position employees and/or review candidates for promotion, one of the general qualifications is the scores of the standardized English test. As such phenomenon has persisted for the last several decades, a large number of universities have been implementing graduation requirement including the standardized test such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and TEPS. In other words, university graduates have to obtain certain scores in order to graduate.

The institution where the primary researcher is working also has such graduation requirement for all major students. This study is, however, focused on the first-year medical and nursing students for whom an enhancement course of the standardized English test was implemented during the fall semester, 2011.

Since all the standardized tests comprise listening and reading comprehension, the two skills are mainly studied in this research. As Brown (2001) indicated, listening is essential for effective communication and Morley (2001) stated that it is not a difficult skill to improve in the first language environment. Listening skills are important as these are acquired by receiving language input through listening, supported by Krashen (1981, 1982). It is also claimed by Rost (2001) that any learning cannot occur without understanding input.

As for reading, it is a process that understands meaning of the written symbols in a text. Furthermore, comprehension is from the interaction between the reader and the text. Each reader's comprehension may be different from the writer's intention as their background knowledge for the text is different. Reading comprehension may be varied as individual readers have different culture environment and background knowledge. Aebersold and Field (1997) and Koda (2005) asserted that L2 reading takes a dual language whereas L1 reading presumes a single language involvement during information processing.

Medical students are acknowledged as highly intelligent, strongly motivated, and goal-oriented achievers. At the same time, most of the nursing majors are hard working individuals, aspiring to be professionals; however, their English competence is comparatively lower than that of medical students.

This study examines whether these two groups of different proficiency level students improve their post-TOEIC results after the pre-test and completing 4 more pre-test-type TOEIC exercise, provided with what-to-listen and how-to-infer listening strategies and problem solving pattern-drill reading practices. The survey questionnaires were also administered to learn the subjects' feedback on the enhancement course. Further objectives of the study were to learn whether the subjects were satisfied with a number of pre-test-type TOEIC exercise prior to taking the standardized test, what strategies they utilized throughout the course in order to improve their TOEIC scores, what they felt most

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difficult/comfortable with in the English enhancement course, and what they wanted from the English instructor by analyzing survey questionnaires.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990) defined learning strategies as specific behaviors or thought processes that learners use to improve their target language and these are factors that contribute to the development of learners' communication abilities. Six groups of strategies were then proposed that further divided into two categories of direct and indirect strategies as follows:

1. Direct strategies:
   1) cognitive strategies that are highly helpful for understanding and recalling the language material
   2) memory-related strategies that enable learners to connect one language item or concept with another
   3) compensation strategies that help learners to overcome knowledge gaps and continue to communicate naturally
2. Indirect strategies:
   1) metacognitive strategies that aid learner in regulating and managing the learning process overall
   2) affective strategies that help learners to develop the self-confidence and perseverance necessary for learners to involve actively in language learning
   3) social strategies which aid in increasing interaction and understanding the target culture

It is generally believed that successful language learners use a variety of strategies appropriately and such belief was reported in some studies that students at a higher proficiency level have a tendency to use various strategies more efficiently than those at a lower level according to studies done by Oxford (1993), Green and Oxford (1995), and Lan and Oxford (2003). MacIntyre (1995) also claimed that learners may use strategies which can enable them to communicate more effectively and informatively.

2. Comprehension of the Language

1) Listening Comprehension (L/C) in English

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O'Malley, Chamot and Kupper (1989) stated listening as a process of constructing meanings by using cues from contextual information and existing knowledge like reading. Chiang and Dunkel (1992) indicated that topic familiarity and background knowledge played an important role in listening comprehension in a study done by comparing high-intermediate listening proficiency and low intermediate proficiency Chinese students.

The study done by Chang and Read (2006) examined the effects of four types of listening supports: previewing the test questions, repeating the input, providing background knowledge about the topic, and vocabulary instruction. It was found that the provision of background knowledge enhanced learners overall comprehension, though it was more effective for lower proficiency students than for higher proficiency ones. Another study done by Chang (2007) also investigated the effects of vocabulary preparation prior to a listening comprehension test on L2 learners' listening performance, listening comprehension confidence levels and strategy use. Chang's study found that giving vocabulary knowledge and vocabulary instruction led the learners to focus on local cues more than the global understanding of the listening material.

There have been some criticisms, on the other hand, that English teachers in Korea have tendency to instruct problem solving skills and testing tactics which may have helped students receive high scores on the tests. It was asserted by Jin (2002) that it is doubtful that those instructions have helped enhance students' listening competence. However, it is essential to understand which strategies Korean learners employ for understanding language input that they receive through listening.

2) Reading Comprehension (R/C) in English

Goodman (1967, 1971) asserted that reading entails an interaction between language and thought. It is further explained as a cycle of sampling, predicting, testing, and confirming. Readers utilize strategies that allow them to predict most effectively with access to the fewest number of usable cues. Rosenblatt (1994) indicated that reader and text are involved in a complex nonlinear, recursive, self-correcting transaction.

Activating learners' content schemata has been an aspect of language instruction to enhance comprehension. Graves and Cook (1980) reported that activating learners' prior knowledge and applying it to new input greatly facilitated processing and understanding on reading instruction. Carrell (1987) claimed for positive effects of familiar topics on L2 text comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Similarly, Hsieh (1999) did a study with Chinese college students on the effects of prior vocabulary instruction and cultural background knowledge activation stating that providing background knowledge improved both vocabulary and reading comprehension scores whereas giving vocabulary instruction alone increased only the students' vocabulary scores.

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There have been studies in exploring variables that affect reading comprehension difficult done by Drum, Calfee, and Cook (1981), Embretson and Wetzel (1987), Qian (1999), and Nation (2001) to name a few. Those variables include vocabulary variables, response decision variables, and vocabulary level that affect reading comprehension difficult (Klare, 1984; Graves, 1986; Read, 2000). The vocabulary level has been measured by syllable length, frequency of word usage such as low or high frequency words or type of word whether content or function word (Davey, 1988). According to Qian (1999) and Read (2000), readers' vocabulary knowledge routinely correlate highly with measures of reading comprehension and is often the single best predictor of text comprehension.

The variables influencing item difficulty on the TOEFL reading test was categorized by Freedle and Kostin (1993) into three groups: item variables, text variables and text-by-item overlap variables. Item variables include item type, item stem such as words in stem and negatives in stem, and item's correct option (e.g., answer position, number of words in correct option, number of referentials in correct option); text variables suggested by the researchers were vocabulary, concreteness/abstractness of text, subject matter of text, types of rhetorical organizations, length of text referentials. Text-by-item overlap variables are those related to the relative location of key information as to whether the main idea is in the first sentence, in the middle or at the end of the text. Results of the study indicated text or text-by-item variables to be better predictors of item difficulty than item-related variables (quoted Chon & Shin, 2010).

There have been numerous studies on language learning strategies, listening and reading comprehension and enhancement of comprehension. A particular study on medical and nursing students' perception and their test results of an English enhancement program may contribute to an aspect of ESP amid the nation-wide demand for the standardized English test prevails and the role of such test results can be critical. It may be a worthwhile effort to examine effectiveness of an enhancement course in order to result in the students' better English testing scores.

III. METHOD

1. Subjects

During the fall semester of 2011, 47 first-year medical students participated in the English enhancement course by registering for Practical English, a 3-credit-hour course that met 3 hours a week for 15 weeks. The 71 first-year nursing students in the primary researcher's another English enhancement course that was conducted 2 hours a week for 15 weeks, were also the subjects of the study. One nursing student dropped out of school

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after the pre-test so the total subjects were 117.

Both groups were administered the pre-test and 4 more pre-test-type TOEIC exercise, supplemented with listening strategy lectures including explanation on new vocabulary, hard-to-understand-pronunciation, and not-sure-of-the-meaning phrases from the exercise. For reading comprehension, pattern drill practices were exercised for better understanding and speed reading practices within allocated time of 75 minutes for 100 reading questions were emphasized for the subjects to get familiarized with types of test questions and finish them in time.

Medical students are considered upper intermediate level with adequate comprehension ability of English-only classes. Obtaining at least a minimum passing score from the standardized English test is a major concern for all the students, especially for medical major since they have to repeat another year if they do not pass. However, for nursing majors, the policy is relatively lenient. They can substitute the requirement for taking a 90-hour-course during either summer or winter vacation of their junior year. As it is a pay-if-you-want-to-take course, most students prefer obtaining at least a minimum passing score although about 30% of the nursing majors expressed they gave up on English before they entered university.

As shown in the next table, the total subjects for this research were 117 first-year students of medical (47) and nursing (70) majors. The ratios of male and female medical and nursing students were 64%:36% and 14%:86%, respectively. Since female students were predominant among nursing major, the gender difference of their performance was not a consideration for further analysis. Table 1 shows the number of both genders in medical and nursing subjects.

TABLE 1

Number of Male & Female Students

Major	Male	Female
Medical	30(64%)	17(36%)
Nursing	10(14%)	60(86%)
Total	40(34%)	77(66%)

2. Data Analysis Procedure

The mean scores of listening and reading comprehension from the pre-test and 4 more pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise were calculated and compared to see how much progress was made. These scores were then compared with the results of the post-TOEIC, which

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both groups participated at the end of November 2011, to learn if the subjects actually improved as a result of a number of pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise and enhancement lectures after each test. Listening enhancement strategies included preview the test questions, repeat the input, vocabulary instruction, what-to-listen, how-to-infer, and simultaneous pattern drills of listening and question reading for listening comprehension sections 3 and 4. At the end of the course, questionnaires were administered to learn about whether they were satisfied with additional pre-test-type TOEIC exercise prior to the standardized test, what strategies they utilized to improve their TOEIC results and what skills they felt most difficult/comfortable throughout the English enhancement course. The results of the questionnaires were also analyzed and the survey questionnaires are listed in the appendix.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results in Test Scores

Following tables show mean scores of listening and reading comprehension sections and the total mean scores of the pre-test, second and fourth pre-test-type-TOEIC results. There were substantial level differences of 301 points in the two groups' total mean scores of the pre-test, 755 points for medical, categorized as upper-intermediate proficiency level and 454 points for nursing majors, beginner level.

TABLE 2

Medical & Nursing Students' Pre-TOEIC Scores

Major	L/C	R/C	Total Scores
Medical	347	408	755
Nursing	224	230	454

Upon completing the pre-test, both groups of subjects were supplemented with lectures on what-to-listen for each part of the 4 listening sections and how-to-infer to answer different types of listening questions. Problem-solving tactics were also facilitated for reading comprehension test. Then the next pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise was administered in 2 weeks. The results were similar to those of the pre-test as scores of L/C and R/C were 384 and 386 for medical (total 770) and 236 and 214 for nursing (total 450) respectively.

The results of the two tests revealed slight improvement on listening comprehension of the test. For medical students, the mean scores of the next pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise

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showed 37 points (10%) increase in the L/C from 347 to 384 and 12 points (5%) increase among nursing major from 224 to 236. The what-to-listen and how-to-infer strategies for listening sections of the test seemed to make a difference in the results of the following test. On the other hand, the results of the R/C showed decrease for both medical and nursing subjects. Table 3 shows the results of the 2nd pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise.

TABLE 3

Medical & Nursing Students' 2nd Pre-Test-Type-TOEIC Scores

Major	L/C	R/C	Total Scores
Medical	427	434	861
Nursing	298	279	577

As for the second pre-test-type TOEIC, the subjects were announced that the results would substitute for their mid-term test grade. Such announcement seemed to have played an important role for their score boost as both groups' results indicated much greater improvement from the previous test scores. Improvement of the total mean scores recorded 91 points (43 L/C, 48 R/C) for medical whereas significant increase of 127 points (62 L/C, 65 R/C) for nursing major.

However, the results of the 3rd pre-test-type-TOEIC did not increase as much as shown on the 2nd test, only the slight improvement since the 1st pre-test-type-TOEIC (L/C and R/C of 387, 400 for medical (total 787), 267, 231 for nursing (total 498), respectively). Table 4 shows the results of the final pre-test-type-TOEIC. Since the subjects were greatly encouraged to perform better on the last pre-test-type-TOEIC prior to the standardized TOEIC and reminded again that the scores were to be substituted for their final exam grade, their results seemed to have progressed as they did on the 2nd pre-test-type-TOEIC.

TABLE 4

Medical & Nursing Students' 4th Pre-Test-Type-TOEIC Scores

Major	L/C	R/C	Total Scores
Medical	424	430	854
Nursing	267	275	542

Within a week from the 4th pre-test-type-TOEIC, the subjects participated in the standardized TOEIC as post-test except for six nursing students; therefore, the results are from 47 medical and 64 nursing subjects, shown in Table 5.

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TABLE 5

Medical & Nursing Students' Post-TOEIC Scores

Major	L/C	R/C	Total Scores
Medical	437	417	854
Nursing	293	213	506

For medical students, the results of the post-TOEIC were similar to those of the 2nd and 4th pre-test-type-TOEIC in which the subjects were informed that the results would be substituted for their mid-term and final exam grades. They seemed to utilize the strategies of what-to-listen and how-to-infer to answer listening comprehension questions and how to manage time to allocate 75-minute exam period for 100 reading comprehension questions.

The next table shows the results of both pre- and post-TOEIC to reveal how much both groups improved.

TABLE 6

Medical & Nursing Students' Pre-/Post-TOEIC Scores

Major	L/C	R/C	Total Scores
Medical	347/437	408/417	755/854
Nursing	224/293	230/213	454/506

The results indicate that the subjects' total mean scores improved substantially from the pre-test, 99 points from 755 to 854 for medical and 52 points from 454 to 506 for nursing majors. The listening scores increased by 90 points from 347 to 437 for medical and 69 points from 224 to 293 for nursing major. On the other hand, for reading comprehension, only 9 points increased from 408 to 417 for medical and 17 points deceased among nursing majors from 230 to 213 compared to their first pre-TOEIC scores.

2. Feedback on Survey Questionnaire

The subjects' response on the course was collected through the survey questionnaire. One of each medical and nursing subjects was absent on the day of questionnaire so the total number of response was 115. The 22% and 23% of the medical (10) and nursing (16) students had less than 10 year English studies and over three quarter students (78% medical and 77% nursing) had over 10 years of English studies. Both groups had similar learning period for English studies.

Large number of subjects (87% medical (40) and 80% nursing (56) major) attended English institutes but the tutored ones were 30% of medical (14) and 54% of nursing (37)

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majors. Not much difference was noticed between the two groups' institute and tutor experiences.

Even though a majority of nursing major had over 10 years of English studies and institute and/or tutor experiences, their standardized English test scores were still relatively low compared with those of medical majors.

Among the 46 medical students, 12 of them (26%) studied abroad in the English speaking countries (33% between 2 to 18 years and 67% less than a year) and consequently, they obtained much higher (over 900) results than the rest of the subjects, boosting higher mean scores, whereas no nursing majors had overseas experience.

Over 90% of both groups (98% medical and 91% nursing) were in favor of the English enhancement course rather than letting them study for the standardized test on their own. Only 10% of both groups (7% medical and 13% nursing) preferred self-study for the TOIEC.

It was evident that most of the subjects wanted school to administer pre-test and provide enhancement lectures so they could prepare for the graduation requirement and improve their TOEIC scores. Some nursing subjects were at too-frustratingly-below-average level to follow the enhancement course and they simply wanted to replace the graduation requirement with a 90-hour-English course. Table 7 shows the subjects' satisfaction rate of the pre-test and pre-test-type-TOEIC enhancement tests and lectures.

TABLE 7

Satisfied with the Pre-test & 4 Others?

Major	Yes	No
M(46)	39(85%)	7(15%)
N(69)	48(70%)	21(30%)
Total(115)	87(76%)	28(24%)

Large number of subjects (85% medical and 70% nursing) answered they were satisfied with the pre-test and 4 more times of pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise. Those unsatisfied felt the exercise was too much and preferred 2 or 3 times of exercise whereas one unsatisfied subject of each group preferred over 4 times of exercise. Also large number of subjects (74% medical and 71% nursing) felt they enhanced on each pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise.

Similarly, about three quarters of the subjects felt they improved after each exercise as they were supplemented with listening strategies and pattern-drill exercise practices and got familiarized with types of test questions.

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TABLE 8

Scores Enhanced on the Post-TOEIC?

Major	Yes	No	Not Sure
Medical	39(85%)	4(9%)	3(6%)
Nursing	41(59%)	16(23%)	12(18%)
Total(115)	80(70%)	20(17%)	15(13%)

Most medical majors (85%) felt their scores were enhanced on the post-TOEIC whereas only 59% of nursing majors felt they did. Only 39% of medical and 16% of nursing subjects were satisfied with their post-TOEIC results.

The subjects were mostly unhappy with their post-TOEIC scores since medical students expected over 900 as such scores would open doors to a better internship program after graduation. All 18 medical subjects who responded satisfied with their results obtained 900 points or more. A majority of nursing (84%) students were frustrated with their scores as only 30% of them passed minimum requirement of the TOEIC scores.

The next table shows the type of strategies utilized by the two groups of the subjects.

TABLE 9

Strategies Utilized by Students

Strategies*	Medical	Nursing
Listening tactics	12(26%)	36(52%)
Test practices	19(41%)	18(26%)
Speed reading	1(2%)	6(9%)
Utilizing tactics	17(37%)	36(52%)
All of the above	8(17%)	3(4%)

*Subjects selected more than one category.

Strategies of which medical subjects utilized were what-to-listen tactics (26%), test practices (19%), and utilizing tactics (37%) whereas larger number of nursing subjects was engaged in what-to-listen tactics (52%), test practices (26%), and utilizing tactics (52%).

One hundred percent of medical and 91% of nursing subjects agreed that English is important for their majors. A half of medical and 65% of nursing majors want medical and hospital related English for their college English.

Most medical subjects felt comfortable with English grammar whereas their least confident skill was speaking. Nursing subjects answered listening as their comfortable skill if they had to choose, because they were not confident about their English competence at all. Their least confident skills were all 4 skills (listening, reading, speaking, & writing)

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and grammar. It was noted that some nursing subjects felt dreadful about English study.

The 65% of each medical (30) and nursing (45) subjects wanted their instructor to emphasize on conversational English and 17% of medical (8) and 29% of nursing (20) preferred all skills be emphasized. Most subjects (91% medical, 87% nursing) answered they actively participated in the English enhancement course and they (98% medical, 86% nursing) felt proud as their TOEIC scores improved.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was carried out to see the effectiveness of the English enhancement course that administered the pre-test and 4 more times of pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise before taking the standardized English test on the first-year medical and nursing students. The total mean scores of the pre- and post-TOEIC were compared to see if listening and reading comprehension sections were improved as the enhancement strategies for the test were supplemented after each test. It was further to examine through administering the survey questionnaires what strategies they utilized, what skills they felt difficult/comfortable with, whether they were satisfied with the course and results of the test, and what they expected from their English instructor.

As many recruitment agencies and companies require high scores of the standardized English test upon employment, universities including medical colleges implement graduation requirement of obtaining certain scores of the test. Demand for high scores from the standardized English test is also prevalent in the medical and health care industries.

Subjects for this research are such strongly motivated, aspiring individuals that it was assumed that they could utilize their learning strategies once obtained for test purpose and improve their test scores. Upon comparing and analyzing the results of pre-test, 4 more times of pre-test-type-TOEIC exercise and post-test, it was learned that subjects were strongly motivated when the test results were substituted for their mid-term and final exam grade, showing much higher mean scores of listening, reading and the total. For each test, the results were gradually enhanced especially among medical subjects. They utilized most of the strategies learned during the enhancement course, and therefore, showed significant improvement in their post-TOEIC scores. Strategic instructions to listen better with emphasis on the key part of the question and intensive practice for simultaneous listening and reading questions seemed to be effective as the subjects' listening scores marked significant increase of 90 points for medical (347 to 437) and 69 for nursing (224 to 293) students.

However, the results of reading comprehension revealed unexpected outcome. Though

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medical subjects' mean scores increased slightly from 408 to 417, the results of nursing subjects showed contradictory scores, decrease of 17 points from 230 to 213. Enhancement lectures on problem-solving tactics and how-to-manage-time for 100 reading questions in 75 minutes did not seem to result in score increase for entry level learners. There may need more intensive course for grammar explanation, vocabulary improvement, and speed reading practice to assist beginner level learners with better understanding of what is required for the standardized English test.

Listening skill is important and yet, among many learners of English, it is considered a difficult part of language learning. As indicated in the survey results, about 20% of both medical and nursing subjects felt it was the most difficult skill to acquire. However, after two weeks of enhancement lectures on what-to-listen and how-to-infer to answer the listening questions, gradual improvement has been noted in the results. It was found that most of the subjects (100% of medical and 96% of nursing majors) were engaged in listening enhancement tactics, test practices and utilizing strategies learned for better results. As it was already reported by Anderson (1991), medical subjects scored higher increase when encouraged to use as many strategies as possible.

Both medical and nursing subjects preferred English for medical purposes for future use and asked the instructor to emphasize on conversational English so they could utilize what they learned from medical and hospital related English.

There are limitations in this study, though. Since it was done at one university of small sample size, the results are not to be generalized. Using the similar enhancement strategies may not have been suitable for beginner level subjects as their reading scores of the post-test decreased. Beginner level learners might benefit from easy-to-follow, thoroughly explained material rather than the same learning material that was used for upper-intermediate level learners. But as for listening comprehension, English enhancement course can be beneficial for all levels of learners as using as many listening strategies can assist learners to improve their scores of the standardized English test.

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APPENDIX

Survey Questionnaire

1. How long have you been studying English?
2. Have you studies at an English institute?

   Y ____ N ____

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3. Have you been tutored by an English tutor?
   Y ____ N ____
4. Have you been abroad?
   Y ____ N ____ If yes, for how long? _____
5. Do you think school should support for the standardized English test?
   Y ____ N ____
6. Do you think school should let you study for the standardized English test by yourself?
   Y ____ N ____
7. Do you think 5 times of pre-TOEIC-tests are good?
   Y ____ N ____ If not, how many times?
8. Do you feel that you improved for each pre-test?
   Y ____ N ____
9. Did you improve your TOEIC scores through pre-TOEIC-tests?
   Y ____ N ____
10. Are you happy with you TOEIC scores?
    Y ____ N ____
11. What has brought improvement on your scores?
    Effort to listen better ____ Repetitive test practices ____
    Fast reading practices ____ Problem solving tactics ____ All of the above ____
12. Is English important for medical majors?
    Y ____ N ____
13. Should English course be different for medical majors from other majors?
    Y ____ N ____ If not, how
14. What area are you confident with?
    Listening ____ Vocabulary ____ Grammar ____ Speaking ____
    Writing ____ All of the above ____
15. What area are you least confident with?
    Listening ____ Vocabulary ____ Grammar ____ Speaking ____
    Writing ____ All of the above ____
16. What area(s) should your English professor emphasize on?
    Conversation ____ Vocabulary ____ Grammar ____ Culture ____
    Writing ____ All of the above ____
17. Did you participate actively in the English course?
    Y ____ N ____
18. Do higher TOEIC scores boost your self-esteem?
    Y ____ N ____

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Examples in: English
Applicable Language: English
Applicable Levels: Elementary, secondary and college

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