

How Accurate are TOEIC Scores?

The TOEIC reading and listening exam is the best-known test of business English proficiency in Thailand and is widely used as a measure of English language skill for the workplace.

What's surprising is that many companies that use the TOEIC reading and listening test do not use any other method to test the very different language skills of speaking and writing.

This may be due to the fact that ETS, the producer of the test, claims that the reading & listening test *indirectly* measures both speaking and writing skills.

A 2012 study by Michihiro Hirai of Kanagawa University in Japan compared TOEIC scores of about 1,500 candidates to their scores on the Cambridge English's BULATS speaking and writing tests¹. The BULATS tests require examinees to produce spoken and written English in realistic business contexts (please see the footnote for more details about the tests).

The study found only a 58% correlation between TOEIC scores and business speaking scores, and a 55% correlation between TOEIC scores and business writing scores.

A key finding from this study is that the higher the TOEIC score, the less likely it is to reflect actual speaking or writing ability. This is because **receptive skills** (listening and reading) can continually improve from daily exposure to English. On the other hand, the **productive skills** of speaking and writing are used much less often and so improve more slowly.

It is generally accepted that a high intermediate level of speaking and writing skill (B2 level on the [CEFR scale](#)²) is the minimum required for effective professional communication. This B2 level is approximately 66% of a full score on the BULATS speaking and writing tests. A similar score of 66% on the TOEIC (650 points) is also considered by many companies to be sufficient for effective professional communication.

However, people who score 650 on the TOEIC *do not* usually score B2 on speaking and writing. In the examinees of the Hirai's study with TOEIC scores over 800, only 44% of them scored B2 in speaking, and only 29% scored B2 in writing. Amazingly, even at a full TOEIC score of 990, the average writing score was still below B2 - below the minimum standard for effective professional communication.

The important thing to take away from this study is this: if your employees need to speak and write effectively in professional situations, and you're investing in testing to ensure they have the necessary skills, then you should be **using exams that reliably measure the specific language skills you need**.

For more information about the Cambridge BULATS tests, please visit <http://www.vantage-siam.com/bulats.php>

¹ The Cambridge BULATS (Business Language Testing Service) consists of three online tests: a computer-adaptive reading & listening test, a business speaking test, and a business writing test. The reading/listening test is computer-adaptive, which makes it more accurate with fewer questions than traditional fixed testing methodologies. The speaking test is a 15-minute test consisting of 5 types of realistic speaking tasks. The writing test is a 45-minute test consisting of two types of realistic writing tasks.

² The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) is an international standard of language proficiency which is widely used not only for English but also for other European languages. There are 6 levels (A1 to C2) and come with detailed "Can-Do" descriptors for each level.