

# Impact of TOEIC on English learning: the students' perspectives

Dr. Ha Nguyen

Ho Chi Minh City University of  
Education, Vietnam

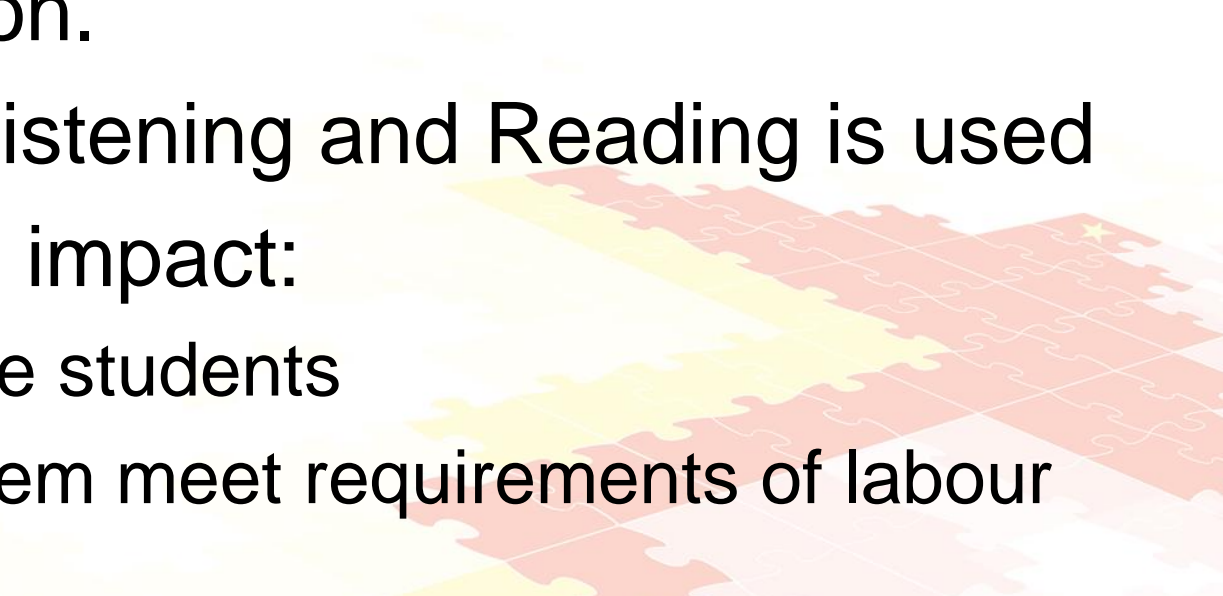


# INTRODUCTION

*“Tests can affect and manipulate educational and political systems, control curricula and redefine knowledge of communities. At the school level, tests are used as disciplinary tools when principals use school-wide exams to drive teachers to teach or when teachers use tests and quizzes to motivate students to learn and impose discipline.” (Shohamy, 2001, p. 18)*

# TOEIC policy in Vietnamese universities

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- Started around 2006
  - Students are required to achieve “TOEIC benchmarks” (400 – 550) before graduation.
  - TOEIC Listening and Reading is used
  - Intended impact:
    - Motivate students
    - Help them meet requirements of labour market
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# Purpose of this study

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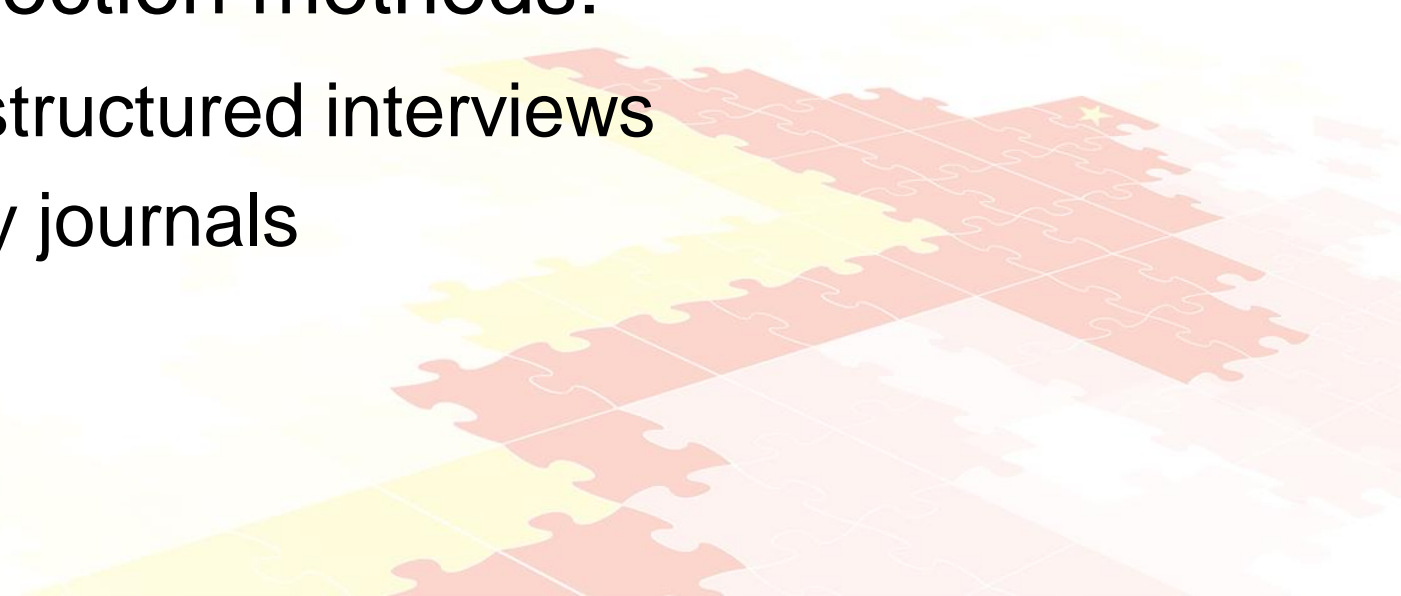
- To get in-depth information on the impact of the TOEIC-as-exit-test on student English learning
- To explain the way the test impact occurs



# METHODOLOGY

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- Multiple case study
- Participants: 12 students at three large universities in Vietnam
- Data collection methods:
  - Semi-structured interviews
  - Weekly journals



# FINDINGS

| Name  | University | Gender | Year at university | Proficiency group as judged by teachers |
|-------|------------|--------|--------------------|---|
| Hoang | A          | Male   | Third              | Top                                     |
| Mai   | A          | Female | Third              | Bottom                                  |
| Cuc   | A          | Female | Third              | Top                                     |
| Khoi  | A          | Male   | Third              | Bottom                                  |
| Huyen | B          | Female | Fourth             | N/a                                     |
| Toan  | B          | Male   | Third              | N/a                                     |
| Thien | B          | Male   | Second             | Top                                     |
| Thanh | B          | Male   | Third              | Bottom                                  |
| Nga   | C          | Female | Third              | Top                                     |
| Huynh | C          | Male   | Third              | Bottom                                  |
| Ngoc  | C          | Female | Third              | Top                                     |
| Luong | C          | Male   | Third              | Bottom                                  |

# A top student - Thien

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## Background

- Second year student
- Le Hong Phong High School (for the gifted)
- Language courses:
  - Doing TOEIC preparation course at university
  - Doing TOEFL preparation course outside university
  - Doing French course outside university
- TOEIC mock test score 680; TOEFL mock test score 60



# English learning experience at school

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- 10-year English program
- High school program focused on vocabulary and grammar, but paid little attention to speaking and, especially, writing
- Extra English classes at language centres
- Level A and level B Vietnam National English Certificates in Grade 8



# Beliefs about language learning

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- Purposes of language learning:  
To communicate, to use English for work  
*“In my opinion, my purpose of English learning is to be able to communicate with people.” (Thien)*  
*“I think my future working environment will be with foreigners, so communicating in English is very important.” (Thien)*
- Most important parts of language learning:  
Listening and vocabulary (they can compensate for gaps in speaking ability when communicating in English)

# Beliefs about language learning

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- Best ways to learn language:

- Be hardworking
- Learn a little bit every day
- Use English for authentic communication

*[We have to be daring] because if we only learn a lot, but we can't **apply what we learn**, then it's useless.... Like when we meet foreigners, we have to pluck up the courage to strike up a conversation with them. (Thien)*

# Beliefs about language learning

- Best way to improve TOEIC scores: Direct test preparation:
  - Do a lot of practice tests
  - Know test structure, format, and tips

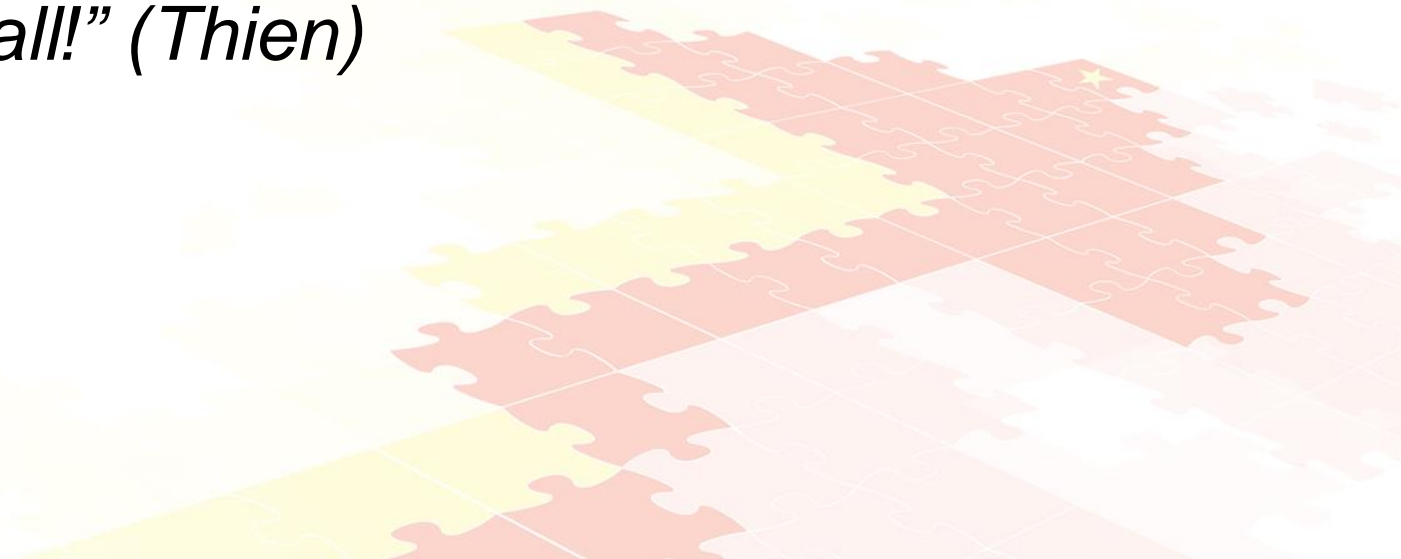
*...when I took the TOEIC test for the first time, I didn't know what TOEIC was. I didn't know what it was like, how many questions it included. I was really dazed. But the second time, I already knew that the reading section had 100 questions, the listening and 100 questions, what this part was about and what the techniques were. So I just did the test. (Thien)*

# Perceptions of TOEIC

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- Skills: Listening and reading
- Format: multiple choice

*“It has two sections – reading and listening, so I think it assesses reading comprehension and listening ability....as for speaking, we don’t speak at all!” (Thien)*



# Perceived impact of TOEIC on learning

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- Minimal impact:  
*“Not yet. I still study in the same way.”*
- No impact on motivation:  
*“It’s always been like that [learning English seriously]”.*
- No stress:  
*“I find it very relaxing because I’m taking this English course [only] to maintain my English level.”*
- Little impact on content of learning
  - Spent a little more time on listening and reading than in high school

# Perceived impact of TOEIC on learning

- Perceived impact on learning activities
  - Direct test preparation
    - Doing mock tests
    - Studying university's TOEIC preparation textbook
    - Using a website to practice TOEIC listening
    - Learning test-taking strategies for the listening skills, but not many
  - Indirect test preparation
    - Watched TV (Disney or Discovery): for fun, TOEIC, TOEFL

## Notes: Non-TOEIC activities

- Talked to foreigners in the city centre, at a coffee shop

*"I still have to communicate with people. I mean, although I don't study it [in class], I still have to communicate with foreigners."*

# *Results of weekly journal analysis*

Time on spent skills 13.84 hours

Listening 45.16% (for TOEIC, TOEFL, for fun)

Reading 24.6% (for TOEIC, TOEFL)

Speaking 8.45%

Writing 1.81%

Grammar 1.23%

Vocabulary 13.87% (for TOEIC, TOEFL)

Pronunciation 5.42% (for TOEIC, French)

Materials

- 1 TOEIC preparation material
- 2 TOEFL preparation materials
- Others for grammar, speaking, and writing



# Perceived impact of TOEIC on learning

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- Improvement compared to high school:
  - Listening: improved a lot (practiced a lot in class)
  - Reading: improved, but less than listening
  - Speaking: improved a little, but not due to TOEIC
  - Writing: no change

*“It [speaking] is better, but not due to the learning in class” (Thien),*

*“In class, English is not used at all. All the speaking is in Vietnamese. So is writing” (Thien).*

# Summary of case

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- TOEIC may have had minimal impact on Thien's learning.
- Besides TOEIC, Thien reported studying English for other purposes: TOEFL course, communicative ability



# An average student - Toan

## Background

- Year at university: 3th year student at University B
- Family: low income family in a poor suburban district of Ho Chi Minh City
- English courses:
  - Doing a TOEIC preparation course at university
  - Had been taking extra TOEIC preparation courses outside university
- TOEIC mock test score: 325 → 505

# English learning experience at school

- English received very little attention:  
*“It’s only taught for the sake of being taught.... Teachers... like... gave us marks for free” (Toan),*
- Focused on reading, grammar, and vocabulary
- Memorized word lists and grammatical formulas by copying them many times:  
*“The teacher made us write each word ten times to memorize it.... The teacher made us copy down the formulas  $S + V + O$ , then she gave examples, and we copied the formulas five times to remember them” (Toan).*

# Beliefs about language learning

- Purposes of language learning

- Long-term goal: Communicative ability

- “I think today, if we graduate without English, we probably can’t get a job. I’m trying to be able to **communicate** in English. I’ll definitely need it to get a job” (Toan).*

- Short-term objective: TOEIC certificate

- “Now I’m learning to get the TOEIC certificate, to complete the study programme and get a degree in Civil Engineering. After that, I will learn to know, to **communicate** in English. Learning to **communicate** will probably be different from learning for TOEIC” (Toan).*

# Beliefs about language learning

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- Skills university students should learn: listening and speaking
- The best way to learn a language: Use English for real communication

*“The only way to be good at a foreign language is to communicate with foreigners a lot, take part in many clubs, English clubs.” (Toan)*

# Beliefs about language learning

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- Best way to improve TOEIC scores:
  - Practice listening and reading a lot
  - Learn test-taking strategies

*For the listening section, the only way is to practice listening a lot. And we have to know the ways to avoid traps.... And for the reading section, do exercises regularly to get used to the grammar, to memorize the vocabulary, and to do questions fast. Only by practicing a lot can you do that (Toan).*



# Perceptions of TOEIC

- Skills tested:
  - Listening (vocabulary, pronunciation)
  - Reading (grammar, vocabulary)

*For the reading section, we have to learn knowledge about grammar and vocabulary. For the listening section, we need vocabulary, we have to understand the meanings, and... generally, we need to know pronunciation. (Toan)*

- Format: Multiple choice

# Perceived impact of TOEIC on learning

- Impact on motivation: Motivated  
*“It urges me to learn in order to meet the progress requirements of the programme” (Toan).*
- Impact on feelings: Stressed  
*“...it [TOEIC] is as heavy as a second major” (Toan).*  
*“I plough all day” (Toan).*
- Impact on content of learning  
Compared to high school
  - Much more time on listening, vocabulary, and pronunciation
  - A little more time on reading and grammar

# Perceived impact of TOEIC on learning

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- Perceived impact on learning activities
  - Direct test preparation activities: doing mock tests, taking extra TOEIC preparation courses, studying test preparation materials



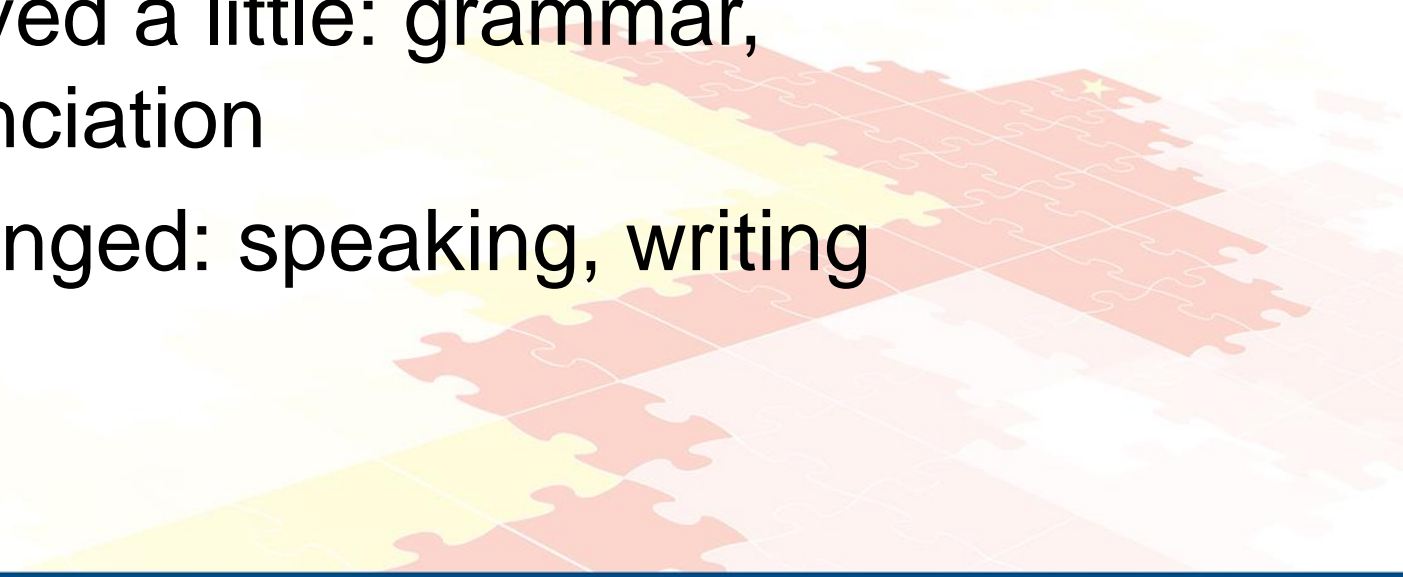
# *Results of weekly journal analysis*

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|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Time on spent skills | 33.17 hours                                   |
| Listening            | 39.19% (No time record for week 3)            |
| Reading              | 30.15%  |
| Grammar              | 21.62%  |
| Vocabulary           | 8-10 words a day (No time record for 3 weeks) |
| Materials            | TOEIC preparation materials only              |

# Perceived impact of TOEIC on learning

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- Impact on achievement: Compared to high school:
    - Improved a lot: listening, reading, vocabulary
    - Improved a little: grammar, pronunciation
    - Unchanged: speaking, writing
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# Perceived impact of TOEIC on learning

- Quality of learning: questionable

*Ha: Do you think you are doing them [reading exercises] better? [Do you] understand more and faster?*

*Toan: That's not reading comprehension. I mainly read... to answer questions only.*

*I use the strategies I've been taught to do exercises quickly and effectively instead of translating sentences. The purpose is to get the most correct answers in the shortest time only. (Toan)*

# Summary of case

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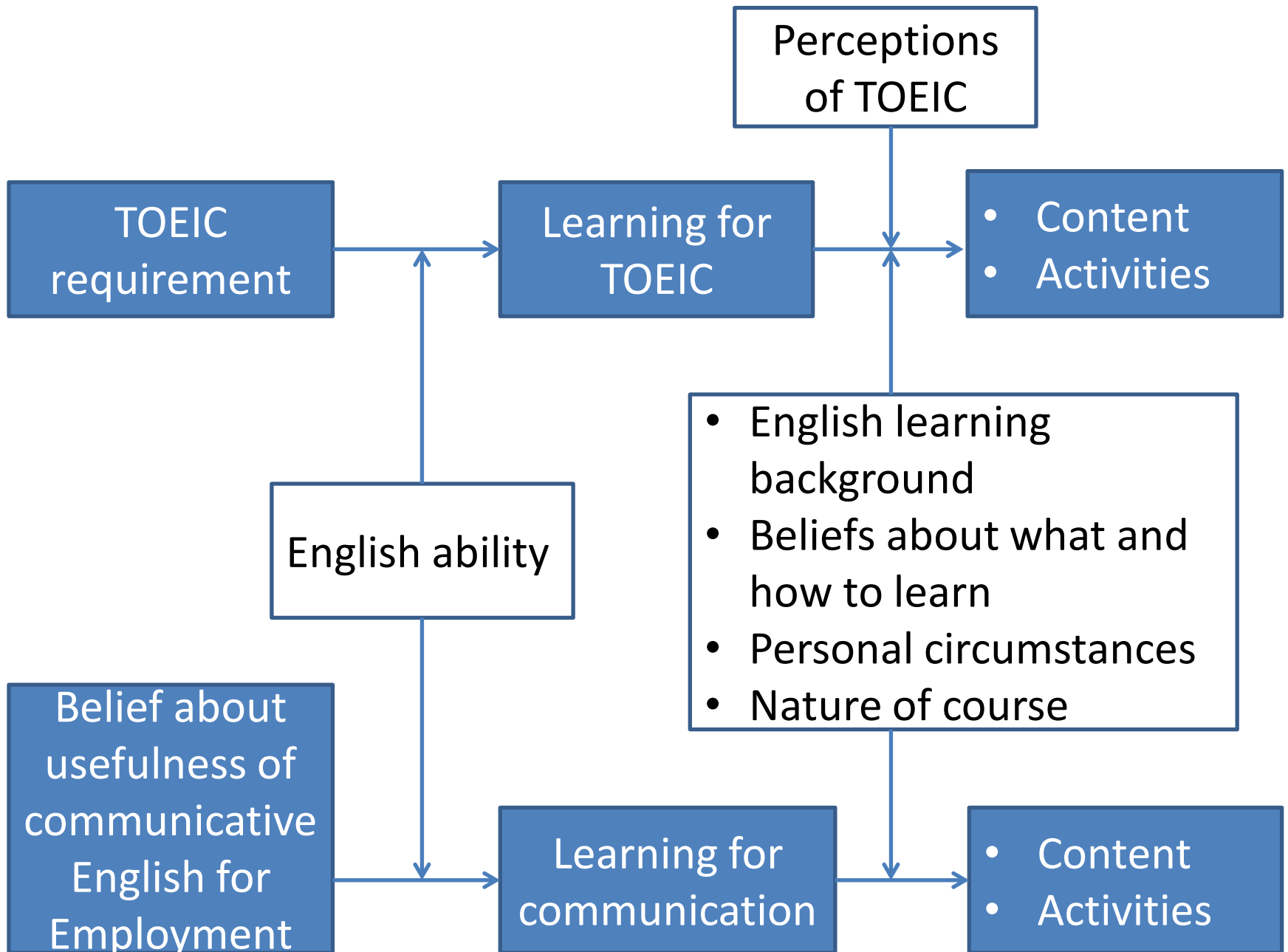
Toan was very test-oriented

- Learned tested skills, test-taking strategies
- Ignored non-tested skills, language use activities
- Learning somehow still superficial, lacked quality
- Some behaviours contradicted beliefs about language learning.



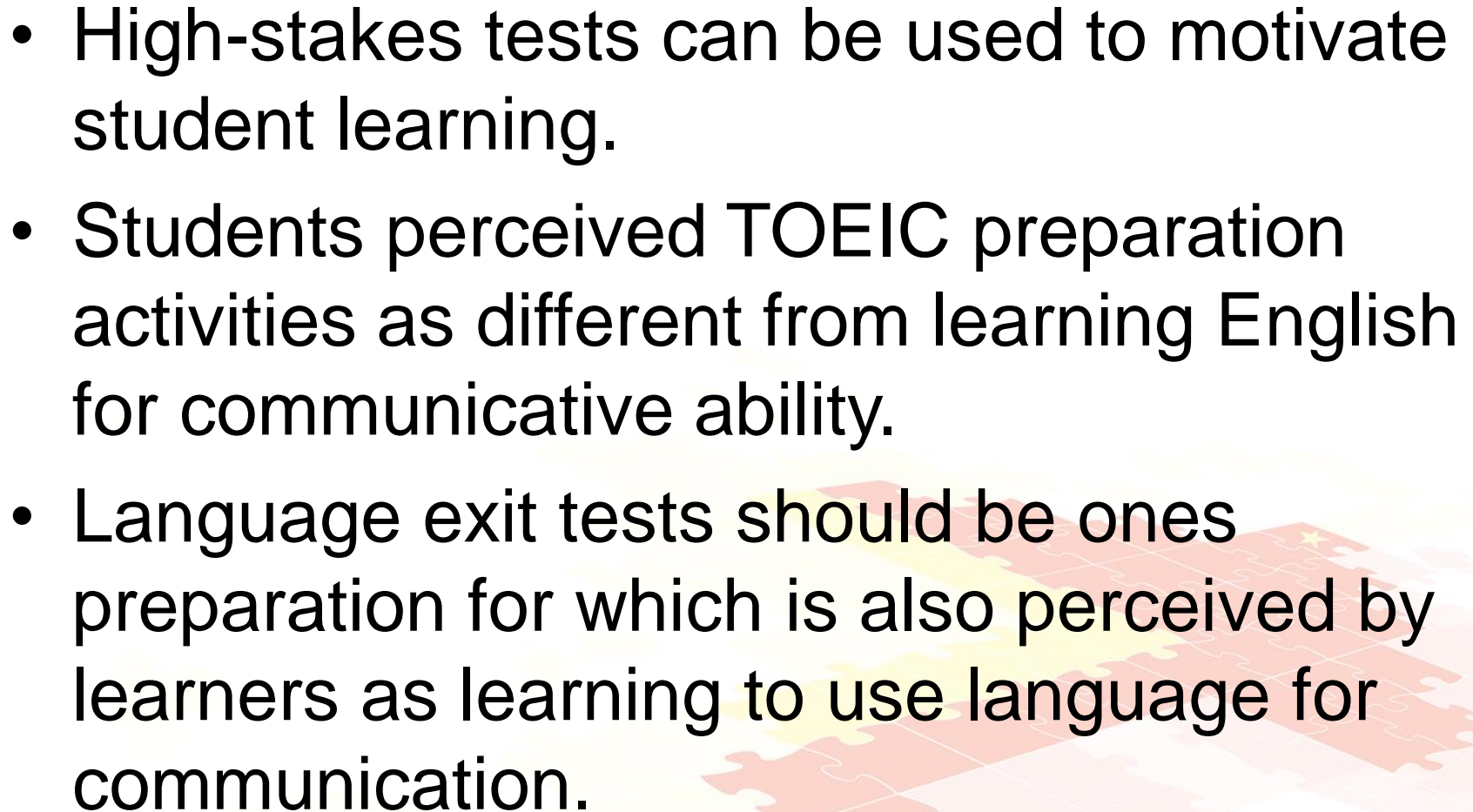
# CONCLUSION

- Test impact could have varied greatly across students' language abilities
  - High ability students: minimal
  - Low ability students: still limited
  - average students: strong impact
- High ability students were likely to have freedom to learn for their ultimate purpose – communicative ability
- Lower ability students may have aimed at short-term purpose more: passing TOEIC and graduating from university. Their behaviors contradicted some of their beliefs about language learning.



# IMPLICATIONS

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- High-stakes tests can be used to motivate student learning.
  - Students perceived TOEIC preparation activities as different from learning English for communicative ability.
  - Language exit tests should be ones preparation for which is also perceived by learners as learning to use language for communication.
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*“If the university abolished the TOEIC test, I wouldn't learn for TOEIC. Instead, I would learn communicative English” (Toan).*



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# Thank you!

## QUESTIONS? COMMENTS?

