

Evaluating Commercial Game System Software

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This paper describes the TOEIC test DS Training software published by Obunsha for the Nintendo DS game system. This paper describes the different features of the software, the advantages and disadvantages of the software and the results of a survey of students' reactions to the software and using the DS as a platform for studying English.

1 . DS Platform Overview

The Nintendo DS is a game platform introduced in 2004. Since then it has proved wildly successful selling more than 25 million units in the United States alone and over 80 million worldwide. While the target of most gaming platforms is teenage boys and young men, the DS appeals to such non-traditional players as women, the middle aged and even the elderly. One of the factors driving the popularity in these new markets is the availability of software that appeals to them. The DS offers cooking software with recipes, SUDOKU, crossword puzzles and a number of educational titles.

In addition to being the home of the DS, Japan is also famous for its dedication to education and educational testing in particular. English and English tests are favorite topics for local publishers and software manufacturers. The Japanese homepage for the DS software lists over 16 titles that deal with English training and education. While IELTS software is not available, several other major tests, including TOEFL, STEP and TOEIC are listed. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) test TOEIC is very popular in the Japanese English testing market with over 1.5 million

people taking it every year.

2. Objectives of the Software

Because of TOEIC's popularity, teachers are often asked to recommend textbooks that will help students improve their scores. The DS offers a new possibility to teachers looking for TOEIC materials. The publishing house of Obunsha has developed a DS version of its TOEIC training materials -TOEIC Test DS Training.

The cover of the Obunsha materials claims that the software is intended for students of English with scores on the TOEIC ranging from 300 - 900. Considering that a score of 300 on the TOEIC represents basically zero proficiency and 990 is the maximum score. This is a considerable range. Still, TOEIC represents itself as a single test suitable for all levels and abilities so in this context, Obunsha can be said to be simply matching its materials to the test.

As appropriate for a test that deals with such a wide range of levels and abilities, the Obunsha software begins with a diagnostic test. The initial test consists of a series of TOEIC style questions for listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Once the students level is determined, the software provides a series of drills. Many of the drills are modeled on TOEIC questions. For listening there are questions about pictures, short conversations, and announcements. Reading questions are grammar exercises and generally short reading passages of a general business type. Translation, interpretation, and explanation of the testing point are provided in pop-up windows in Japanese.

3. Additional Activities

In addition to the TOEIC style questions, the Obunsha software provides a series of drills and activities based on the basic 2,000 English word list. The drills take the form of matching and fill in the blank exercises as well as a number of arcade style games where players choose

the correct answer by blasting it out of the sky. The arcade games while simply dressed up matching exercises offer a welcome break from text-based drills and are more fun than one might originally suppose.

One attractive point about the DS software is that all scores and answers are automatically recorded. Test points that were incorrectly answered earlier are repeated until mastered. Grades are recorded in a graph and students can review their progress. Another good point is that the pronunciation of all target words is recorded and students can listen and practice pronunciation.

3. 2 Advantages

While the Obunsha DS TOEIC training software offers no strikingly original improvements in teaching test taking strategies, there are still reasons for teachers to consider recommending it. The first attractive point is the software's price. The software sells for ¥3,800, around US \$38. While this might seem expensive, it is cheap when compared to textbooks that would cover the same material. The Obunsha software includes over 500 TOEIC questions, equal to five complete tests as well as 8,000 vocabulary problems. To buy a textbook and CDs for the same amount of material would easily cost twice as much. Also, the software can often be found used for less than half the retail price.

Another advantage is the DS's portability. Several PC software titles are available for similar prices, but for students riding the trains, nothing could be more convenient or easier to use than a DS. The DS is about the size of a large cell phone or PDA and easily fits into a backpack or purse. Students can take advantage of few free minutes to improve their vocabulary or TOEIC skills.

4. Student Reactions to the DS Software

In order to gauge students' reactions to the software, I administered a short survey. The survey was split into two parts. The first half of the

survey dealt with the style or form of the DS game system itself and the second half dealt with the content of the Obunsha materials. During the survey, students were presented with a series of statements dealing with TOEIC study and asked to indicate the level to which they agreed with the statements. An answer of 5 indicates strong agreement, 3 shows equanimity towards the statement and an answer of 1 represents strong disagreement. A copy of the survey is below.

Questions about Format

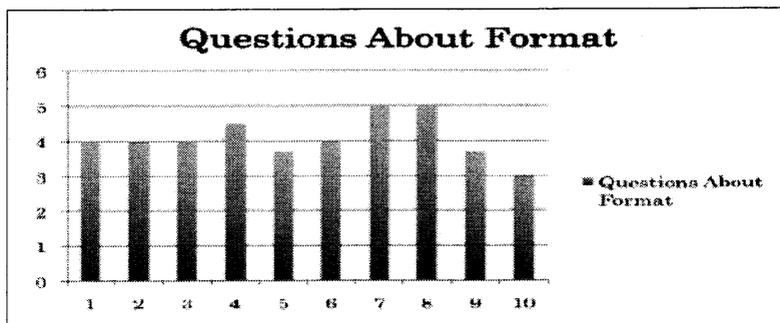
1. The DS software is easy to use. ①②③④⑤
2. The text of the DS is easy to read (see). ①②③④⑤
3. The sound quality of the DS is good. ①②③④⑤
4. The DS is more convenient than a book. ①②③④⑤
5. Using the DS does not feel like studying. ①②③④⑤
6. The DS is cool. ①②③④⑤
7. I like the DS because it grades the quizzes automatically. ①②③④⑤
8. I like the DS because it keeps records automatically. ①②③④⑤
9. I want to study with the DS. ①②③④⑤
10. The DS is a better way to study than a textbook. ①②③④⑤

Questions about Content

1. The DS explanations of vocabulary and grammar are better than the textbook. ①②③④⑤
2. The DS reading material is appropriate to my level. ①②③④⑤
3. The style of the DS questions is better than the textbook. ①②③④⑤
4. The level of the DS listening is appropriate for me. ①②③④⑤
5. I prefer the practice questions of the DS to the questions in the textbook. ①②③④⑤
6. I remember the material studied by DS better than the material studied by textbook. ①②③④⑤
7. The vocabulary on the DS is more useful than the textbook vocabulary. ①②③④⑤
8. The listening questions are better than the listening in the textbook. ①②③④⑤

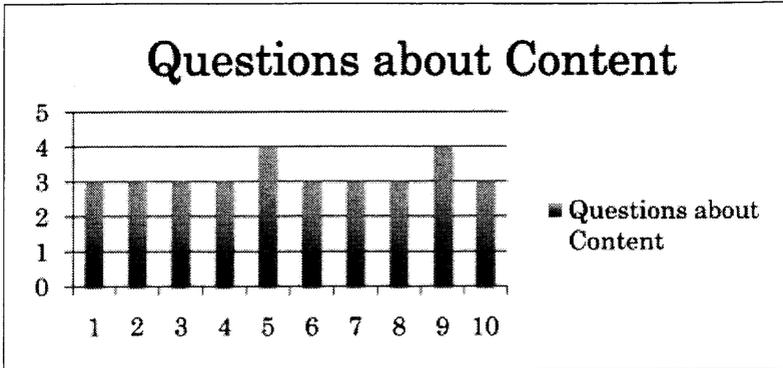
9. Having all levels of material in one package is convenient. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)
10. The DS material is more useful. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)

Students' answers to the first half of the survey are summarized below.



Generally, the DS game system and Obunsha software received high grades for convenience and user friendliness. Students praised the readability of the screen (question 2) and the sound quality (question 3). Students liked the convenience of the self-grading software (question 7), but stopped short of overwhelming endorsing the computer software as a better way to study than a textbook (question 10).

Students were more circumspect in their praise of the content of study provided by the DS software as their answers below reveal. The answers to the questions about content are summarized below.



In only two points (questions 5 and 9) did the students rate the DS superior to traditional textbooks. Students prefer the questions of the DS to textbooks and the convenience of having all levels of material available to them. These two questions may represent more of an overlap with format questions. In all other points of content, students were ambivalent about the superiority of software to traditional textbooks.

9. Conclusion

In short, the range and variety of material, the portability of the DS game system and the attractive price of the software, combine to make the Obunsha TOEIC Test DS Training an attractive product for students and teachers in Japan.

References

- Hampel, R. (1986). *The last citadel*. Boston: Houghton and Mifflin
 Sewell, D. F. (1990). *New tools for new minds* Harvester-Wheat-Sheaf.
 TOEIC test DS training (2007). Obunsha software.