



Not guilty as charged:

*Do the
university
entrance exams
in Japan affect
what is taught?*

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Like the sustained sounds of monks chanting in temples during Buddhist ceremonies, the sound of many teachers and students blaming entrance examinations for the failures in English language education can be heard in Japan. In the jargon of language education this is called 'negative washback'. While these accusations may have been justified in the past, recent demographic and economic changes have relieved the exams of this burden of guilt.

The reduced relevance of the exams now largely pre-

vents them from having either a negative or positive influence. However, the same conditions that have reduced the influence of the exams may make it possible for the Ministry of Education to take more control of the admissions process. Younger teachers with training in current EFL methodology will begin replacing teachers who are either unable or unwilling to change. The elimination of most of the individually administered entrance examinations and a strengthening of the role and influence of the National

**Help your students
talk more**

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**Making a folder with
your students**

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**Quicken the pace
of your classes**

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Departments:

*Vocabulary, Tech Talk, Junior & Senior High
School, Activities, and 'In My Humble Opinion.'*

Centre test could promote changes that would improve the quality of English language learning and teaching in Japan.

Some background

An examination system has been present in Japan since the 19th century. Since then, testing has become a cultural institution (Yoshida, 1996, February 12). Beginning in high school, students begin taking mock exams based on the test administered by the National University Entrance Examination Centre, an agency affiliated with the Ministry of Education (known in Japan as *Monbukagakusho*). Students are given standard deviation scores, known as *hensachi*, based on their performance in these tests. Universities and individual departments within them are then ranked based on the average *hensachi* of students who successfully gain acceptance (Mamoru, 2001). This has led many to see the university entrance exam system as monolithic. However, along with the National Centre test, there are hundreds of separate examinations administered by various universities and departments within universities. These examinations are often an enormous source of income, especially for the highest-ranking universities. Furthermore, universities in Japan enjoy a high degree of autonomy in constructing and evaluating such exams.

Criticisms of the Entrance Exams

Up until now, the debate regarding the entrance examinations has centred on issues of 'measurement versus culture'. With respect to issues of measurement, the entrance examinations have been criticised for uncertain item quality, little or no systematic revision, questionable reliability and questionable validity (see Brown, 1995; Brown and Yamashita, 1995; Brown and Yamashita 1995a, Leonard 1998; Murphey, 2001 among others). Brown (1995a) contends that norm-referenced tests are best suited to testing proficiency. The university entrance exams in Japan appear to be proficiency tests, but there does not always appear to be a clear distinction between norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests. This makes the purpose of the tests unclear and therefore of questionable validity (Brown, 1995).

The above criticisms have been countered with charges that they did not take the Japanese perspective into consideration. Fundamental issues, such as fairness and privacy, are treated differently in Japan and, while reforms such as piloting test questions might improve the reliability and validity of the tests, the adverse consequences to Japanese society would outweigh the benefits (see Hood, 2001; Stapleton, 1996; Yoshida, 1996, January 15; Yoshida, 1996, February 12, for a sample of the range of opinions). However, despite the differences of opinion among experts and researchers, all agree that students' primary motivation for studying English is the entrance examinations. This is the so-called washback effect, and it is largely viewed as negative in nature in its impact on how English is taught and learned in Japan at the secondary levels. It has been repeatedly argued over a considerable period of time that, if the exams change, the way English education is delivered will change as well.

Putting washback in doubt

Is there any strongly probative evidence that a washback effect exists? Brown (1997, p.77) concludes that, while the literature supports the notion that washback exists in various places and various ways, much more research needs to be done in order to ascertain a clearer picture. Brown's survey of the literature on washback has found little overlap among the researchers with regard to the factors that promote washback. The following factors that Brown identified have particular relevance to the discussion that will follow: the prestige or status of the test; the perception of the importance of the test; the degree to which the test has a monopoly on assessment; uses to which the scores will be put; the transparency of the information provided by the test to teachers, students, and parents; the match of the test to current teaching practices; the extent to which teachers and materials writers think about appropriate methods of test preparation; the extent to which teachers and materials writers are willing and able to change; the nature of the test and the utility of the test and its results (Brown, 1999, pp.7,8).

The weight of the entrance examinations in university entrance procedures

One commonly held belief is that the entrance examinations are the sole criteria for university entrance and chances for success in life hinge on admission to prestigious universities, compelling Japanese parents and their children to expend vast amounts of time and money on preparing for them (see Brown, 1995b; Murphey, 2000 among others). The truth of this assertion has recently been questioned. Mulvey (2001) is a particularly illuminating study that counters the commonly held beliefs. Mulvey's synthesis and analysis of the research includes a large amount of Japanese sources which show that the importance of the entrance examinations has been exaggerated and accounts of negative washback often fail to take into account recent economic and demographic changes that have caused changes in the university admissions process.

Most of the research condemning the effects of the examinations has focused on students attempting to enter the most prestigious universities in Japan. These are the students that fret over their *hensachi*. However, the number of students that apply for admission to university only exceeded fifty percent in the last decade. The majority of these students do not apply to the top universities. Nor do all students attend *juku* or *yobiko*, special private prep schools. (Mulvey, 2001; Mamoru, 2001). Furthermore, at public universities at least, the entrance examinations are not the sole admissions criteria. In 1999, nearly 95% of public universities included interviews and essays as part of the entrance criteria. The weight, given the various components of the selection process, depends on the university and within universities department decision-making varies as well. In some cases the English section of the exam is waived. Also, approximately eighty-five percent of the universities in Japan admit up to 30% of their students based on *suisen nyuugaku*—admissions based on a portfolio of achievement and recommendations (Mulvey, p. 14). However, *Monbukagakusho* (2000) discourages widespread

acceptance based on recommendation alone and encourages universities to include TOEFL or Cambridge Proficiency scores as supplementary acceptance criteria. It also recommends that more universities accept the Centre test.

In April 2000, 45.1% of all high school students in Japan went on to study at the tertiary level, with a matriculation rate for actual university and college applicants of approximately 80% (Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications 2001, Ch. 2). By 2010 the matriculation rate could reach upwards toward 100% (Mulvey 2001, p.14) as the number of places for admissions at all universities and colleges exceeds the total number of ALL high school graduates, since high school populations peaked in the early 90s.

One mitigating factor, however, is an increase in immigration. As of May 1st, 1999, 48,246 foreign students were enrolled in Japanese universities and graduate schools. Over 88% of these students are from Asia, the largest number coming from China (Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications 2001, Ch. 15). Counting foreign students in all post-secondary institutions of higher learning, the total population surpassed 95,000 in 2002. Schools facing financial hardship and receiving fewer applicants from the native population are likely to actively seek foreign applicants.

The entrance examinations' effects on learning, teaching methods and materials

Watanabe (1992) found that students who entered university via the entrance exam showed a broader range of language learning strategies than students that entered via recommendation did. However, he was not convinced that factors other than the entrance exam did not affect the students language learning strategies:

"...it might be that the exam students happened to have a higher proficiency and/or a higher motivation than the recommended students, thus resulting in the wider range of strategy use...some research results show that proficiency and motivation influence strategy use. (p. 187)"

Murphey (2001) agrees that recommended students are significantly lower in level than those students that sit the entrance exams. This isn't to say that the students who take the entrance exams are necessarily accomplished learners. There has been a sharp decline in the average scores on the entrance exams, well documented in articles written in Japanese but almost unmentioned in those written in English. Due to the demographic changes mentioned above many universities have begun accepting students who do poorly on the exams. In fact, some universities have had to develop remedial courses for mathematics and Japanese as well as English (Mulvey 2001; Kogun, 1999; Monbukagakusho, 1999).

With regard to teaching, Watanabe (1996) concludes that

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translation-oriented entrance exams induce washback on some teachers but not others. Personal beliefs about pedagogy are significant and may outweigh the influence of the exams.

Other researchers have identified teacher led line-by-line translation as the preferred methodology in language instruction. Content-based questions similar to those found on the entrance examinations are rarely used. Teachers dictate correct answers in Japanese while students take notes. According to Mulvey (1999), reading pedagogy that employs presentation of both top-down and bottom-up comprehension strategies is seldom utilised. Other studies (including Brown, 1995; Guest, 2000; Kimura and Visgatis, 1996) have found that entrance exams have reading levels generally higher than high school textbooks and tasks requiring understanding of cohesion, rhetorical construction and advanced lexical analysis skills.

For one thing, this is because the language of high school texts tends to be both graded (simplified) and with bilingual vocabulary annotated, whereas entrance exams typically have annotations of vocabulary that falls outside of the official vocabulary list for the secondary syllabus. Interestingly, even translation skills demand higher level skills such as awareness of the construction of rhetoric beyond sentence level (Guest, 2000).

Based on the evidence presented above, teachers are not questioning the appropriateness of the methods and materials they use. One

possible reason for this could be that teachers do not recognise the need for teaching more advanced skills. The information provided by the tests is not transparent. On the other hand, since they have access to previous tests and the tests generally follow the same formats from year to year, it is possible that they are either unable or unwilling to change.

Browne and Wada's (1998) survey of approximately 1200 teachers working in general and vocational high schools in Chiba revealed some interesting differences between the two sets of teachers' backgrounds, in-service training and the influence of the 1994 Ministry Course of Study guidelines on their teaching practices. Teachers at vocational schools tended to be younger, and less experienced, but they attended more in-service training seminars. They often attend training seminars on their own because up until recently in-service training had not been a priority of local governments. Communicative teaching methods were the most popular seminar topic. Vocational schools tended to teach Oral Communication A, a speaking course, while teachers at general high schools were teaching Oral Communication B, a listening course. For both sets of teachers, the largest number received their first degree in English literature and they didn't feel they were adequately prepared to teach following graduation. The smallest number of teachers received their first degree in TESL/TEFL and they felt they were adequately

prepared to teach. Age, experience and training may be having a greater affect on pedagogy than the entrance exams. Teachers entering the field are more able to find employment at vocational schools. They then work their way into the more prestigious general high schools. Once younger teachers with TEFL backgrounds replace older teachers at university track high schools, students may begin receiving instruction in the skills that are necessary for success in the entrance exams. Furthermore, once this happens communicative teaching methods may become more prominent. More studies in this area are clearly necessary, including longitudinal studies covering more extensive populations.

Possibilities

Xiao (2001) reports that passing the Matriculation

English Test (MET) in China was students' most important consideration while studying English, and the test was identified as the single most important influence in resistance to the communicative language teaching syllabus developed by the State Education Development Commission (SEDC).

Teachers in China whose students were going to try for university, like their counterparts in Japan, were using a type of grammar-translation pedagogy and believed communicative methods were unfeasible. The SEDC solved the problem by suggesting that teachers use an eclectic method that suited their situation,

changing the MET so that it assessed all four language skills, made it possible for the teachers to teach to the test, conducted teacher training, and publicised the advantages of communicative language teaching. Because of the changes to the test toward all four skills, in teachers responding to the changes, there was a washback effect.

Several key differences between the Chinese situation and the Japanese situation allowed the Chinese MET to have a washback effect: the Chinese system is highly centralised; the test has a monopoly, and the test scores have real meaning (entrance to university is still very selective). The Chinese government provided training and publicised the benefits of the new teaching methods. The test was tied to the curriculum. Due to the support given to them, teachers are thinking about teaching methods and materials and have become willing to change. In order for this kind of wash back effect to occur in Japan the Japanese government would have to create similar conditions to those that were created in China.

Throughout this paper, the discussion has been about entrance tests rather than a single test. To create positive washback, the Ministry of Education would have to increase the importance of the Centre exam. The elite schools would be unwilling to drop their exams in favour of the Centre test, but the more numerous, lower-ranking schools, vulnerable due to the demographic and economic conditions

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already discussed, could be coaxed to do this. Allowing the individual schools to keep a large portion of the exam fee would help make this possible. The remaining portion could be used to provide teacher training and to analyse the test results. Creating a monopoly will promote conditions allowing test analysis, and it will promote changes that will increase test reliability and validity.

Increasing the importance of the Centre test is not enough.

Lower-ranked schools would still need to admit students who scored poorly on the English sections. To fix the Centre test so that it both has positive washback on high school EFL instruction and placement value for university programs requiring EFL, the following changes would have to be made: The test should include sections testing all four skills, and the test overall should be criterion-referenced. (If issues of reliability for criterion referencing become more difficult, schools and language programs should concentrate on supplementing admissions criteria with alternative assessment tools, as is already the case.) In terms of the test's content validity, its content should reflect the current EFL curriculum of the high schools. Finally, specific universities and their departments should assess student and placement needs for the various programmes requiring EFL and interpret the test scores to serve those needs.

Summary and conclusion

Further reforms to the Centre test and the elimination of most of the individual tests administered independently by universities will create conditions promoting positive washback in Japan. A test perceived to be relevant will affect the way learners learn. As younger teachers enter the field and replace older teachers resistant to change, teaching methodology will have to evolve. One factor that limits possible improvement, however, is that entrance exams and admissions criteria cover more subjects of study than EFL.

Currently the entrance exams do not have the influence to create effective washback on teaching and learning in the high schools. Changing demographics and economic conditions have reduced the exams' relevance to their original purpose (i.e., determining admissions to the next higher level of education). Despite this, they are still used as the scapegoat for deficiencies in the way English language instruction is delivered in Japan. Although their negative influence has waned, a new positive influence is possible. It is time the tests became guilty as charged. ETJ

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