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Four Skills Testing and Positive Washback in Japanese English Education

Robert Russell

Abstract

The proposed introduction of 4 skills English tests for entrance to Japanese universities is discussed along with the likely effects this will have on the level of English language proficiency achieved by the average high school graduate, (positive washback). The concerns expressed by schools, students and parents which have lead to a delay in implementation of the new system are addressed. The 6 tests licensed by the Ministry of Education (MEXT) are identified and there is a discussion of validity with particular reference to the Eiken and IELTS tests. A comparison of the English level in Japan with that of other countries is made and there is a discussion of the likely reasons for the differences. The desirability and possibility of bridging the current gap is also discussed and reference is made to curriculum and methodology changes which might usefully accompany the changes to the test regime to improve washback.

日本の大学受験向けに、4つのスキルを審査する英語試験導入案とこれが平均的な高校卒業者の英語能力レベルに与える影響（プラスの波及効果）について解説する。そして、学校、生徒、および保護者の方々によるシステムに対する懸念から発生した導入遅延について説明する。また、文部科学省（MEXT）によって認可された6つの試験を特定し、特に英検と IELTS 試験の妥当性について詳しく述べる。さらには日本の英語レベルと他の国のレベルを比較したうえで、考えられる違いの理由について論じ、現在における乖離を減らす理想的で現実的な可能性についても議論する。そして、より効果的な波及効果を実現するために、試験の変更を伴う履修過程と方法論の改善の必要性について言及する。

Next year, some 500,000 high school students in Japan will do the National Centre for University Entrance Examinations (DNC) test for university admission. It has been proposed that those doing English should undertake a 4-skills English language test instead of the 2-skills central test that has hitherto been used. If this policy were to be adopted, they would be asked to demonstrate their productive skills in English where previously only their receptive skills (reading and listening) were assessed. Under the proposal, the new testing regime would be optional for the first few years, and at current estimates only 50% of universities would ask for a 4-skills test. In addition, not long before the delivery of this paper at JALT on the 3rd of November 2019, a decision was made to delay the proposed changes for several years. However, the direction of future English language testing has been set and the the Department of Education (MEXT) has instigated the process of accrediting several private English language testing organisations to deliver a 4-skills test. If, as seems likely, the change becomes policy students and schools will be able to choose up to two of six tests, namely, three international ones, IELTS, Cambridge, TOEFL; and three local ones, EIKEN, TEAP and GTEC. Although it is not certain at this stage what effect the proposed MEXT changes would have on either the general level of English proficiency in this country, or the quality of English teaching in high schools and universities, the department's intention in extending the English assessment component to four skills is clear. At the urging of business, notably the Japan Business Federation (Green, 2016), and in the face of the education sector's obvious reluctance, the aim is to improve both the level of English and English language teaching in Japan. In other words, there is an expectation that the new testing regime will result in improved English language proficiency, i.e. *positive washback*. This paper attempts to do three things: clarify what positive and negative washback might mean both generally and in the Japan context, evaluate what criteria might help identify which of the 6 tests is most likely to lead to positive washback and suggest non-test areas of reform which could usefully be pursued alongside the test changes.

A Two Skills or a Four Skills Test and Which One?

Test Options

The main reason for the delay in implementing the 4 skills model is that Japanese universities and high school principals have expressed their concern about the new testing regime. They say the change is creating anxiety among students (and very likely, among teachers). They object to the new testing regime based on the inherent uncertainty involved in the department's plans and claim that no one can reliably compare results between tests and that students don't know enough about the tests to make an informed choice as to which they should attempt (Kakuchi, 2017). Such qualms are reasonable, I think. The people who are teaching to a test, and those taking it, need to know what the test is about and what its purpose is. In the absence of some certainty about such things, there will, of course, be anxiety and this anxiety is likely to distract from attempts to judge which test best facilitates learning in a given context. When you look at the literature, the process of judging what is formally known as *test validity* looks like a pretty arcane science, so it would be understandable if teachers and students alike attempted to simplify matters by focusing on the perceived *difficulty* of different tests. However, validity is the essential question when discussing the washback effect of a test.

The question of comparing results of different tests is especially problematic when comparing level-based tests like the Cambridge and Eiken, with tests like IELTS, GTEC and TOEFL iBT which are designed to assess any and all proficiency levels. Just because some of the tasks in the latter tests are necessarily more difficult than in the former, it does not mean that getting a comparable score in each type of test is any more, or less difficult. What may differ between the level-selective and multi-level tests is their effect on classroom practice and student learning behaviour. On this subject there is little consensus, I think. Some believe that the broader the question types and tasks in a test, the more the test reflects real-life language usage, and the more the test motivates a teacher and learner to develop and integrate language skills. Others believe the narrower focus of a level-based test offers a greater incentive to progress at the lower proficiency levels. The one thing that is unarguable, however, is that

4-skills testing should focus students and teachers on integrating the learning of skills.

While results for all types of test will be mapped against the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the different design of the tests makes their relationship to the CEFR approximate at best. Nevertheless, individual universities will nominate which of these tests and what score they accept. They may ask students to also take the university's own in-house test or indeed, as the University of Tokyo has declared, not require a result on one of these tests at all, perhaps relying instead solely on a student's high school subject results (Brasor, 2018). Two things are clear: the status of English language testing in Japan is in a period of some flux, and this uncertainty is causing anxiety.

Test Validity

Washback is about validity, and there are about a dozen different aspects of validity that researchers like to distinguish. However, fundamentally a test is valid if it tests what it says it tests. In other words, if it purports to assess a test taker's ability to, for instance, "deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken" (CEFR Global descriptor of B1 level, see appendix A), then the test items should relate to this use of the language, among other uses. This is the construct and content validity of a test. This degree of validity also determines the face validity and the consequential validity of the test. That is, does the test look like a good test, and does the test encourage the teacher and the learner to achieve success in these terms. This latter aspect of validity, the consequential validity, including instructional validity, is what we mean by washback.

The MEXT curriculum guidelines target a notional CEFR level B1 for high school students, but many universities will accept a more modest A2 level of English. What do these levels mean exactly? A level B1 is, according to the CEFR global descriptor, an *independent user* (IELTS 4.5, TOEFL iBT 42 minimum, Cambridge B1[PET], Eiken 2nd Grade). At this level, a person can "understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations

likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans." This probably describes the most proficient Japanese high school graduates in English. In IELTS, we refer to this level of attainment as *modest*.

More likely, a student graduating from high school will be closer to the A2 level, i.e. a *basic user* (IELTS <4, TOEFL iBT <42, Eiken Pre-Grade 2). That is, this student "can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of their background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need."

Positive Washback

Positive washback will occur if the types of language use just described appear both as a focus for the teacher, and, most importantly, the learner. For the teacher, it will be when classroom practice and tasks reflect what is already in textbooks and the high school curriculum, and there is a balanced use of receptive and productive skills for an ever-widening range of purposes in the target language. For the learner, positive washback from a 4-skills test will likewise be indicated by a focus on both receptive and productive skills for a range of uses. Positive washback will also have occurred if the testing regime leads to a learner's increased motivation and a deeper engagement with the language. As a result of this valid testing regime, the learner will become a better learner and more proficient in the target language.

Ideally, 4-skills testing will promote such washback, but experience tells us that educational outcomes are rarely ideal. As previously mentioned, the current high school curriculum in Japan already specifies outcomes such as those just described at B1 level, but it is widely believed that Japanese high school graduates regularly fail to achieve them.

Is There a Real Need for Change?

It is one thing to have a curriculum and it is quite another to effectively teach to it and for learners to embrace it. Having acknowledged the intentions and the difficulties involved, we should thus question whether the system that has served Japan hitherto is deficient to the extent that such a huge effort of reform is justified. The questions we need to ask in this regard are these: Firstly, are English language skills in Japan in fact particularly low? Secondly, if so, is it the previous 2-skills testing regime that accounts for the fact?

Are English Language Skills in Japan in Fact Particularly Low?

We are assured, anecdotally, that university students in Japan, are at the basic A2 level, including those majoring in English literature and English communication. We are told university English classes often have to focus on basic skills such as simple discussions of familiar topics and the writing of simple paragraphs. It is believed that the vast majority of university students in Japan are not equipped to handle content classes in English and that self-confidence is affected with many unable to perform even at this basic level and feeling they have *failed* to learn the language in the previous 7+ years of study). You will know better than I the extent to which this perception is a fair reflection of reality. Nevertheless, the perception is backed up by some data.

The English First English Proficiency Index (see appendix B) is compiled by the English First company based on data from online testing. The data set is extensive, with some 1.3 million test takers in 2017. Japan sits at number 49 out of 85 countries. Japan's English proficiency rates are about the same as Taiwan and China, but well below Vietnam (41) and South Korea (31). The methodology of this survey is admittedly somewhat questionable because those who choose to do the online tests are self-selecting. Nevertheless the results are supported by official IELTS test data (see appendix B) that show Japanese speakers as 37th on a list of 40 first language groups in their performance in the writing and speaking components (and overall score) for the IELTS test. Notably, the relative positions of Vietnam (33) and South Korea (31) are consistent with the EF data.

Is it the Previous 2-Skills Testing Regime that Accounts for the Fact?

From the data already mentioned that suggest speaking and writing scores for Japanese IELTS test takers are among the lowest for all first language groups, it is very easy to conclude that the failure to test for these two skills, and hence not to teach them, have resulted in poor productive skills. However, further analysis of these same data shows us that even for the receptive skills, the Japanese cohort is not strong. Japanese speakers perform third and fifth from the bottom for listening and reading respectively. This is a very important point. If the receptive skills are indeed commensurately as poorly developed as the productive ones, there must be other factors involved in addition to the choice of test.

David Allen from Ochanomizu University in Tokyo has investigated washback from IELTS on uninstructed tertiary students' learning behaviour in Japan (Allen, 2016). Students did an IELTS test at the start of the year and another at the end of the year. The results of his investigation are rather predictable, i.e. after the first test, most students focused more on the productive skills which as a result improved. However, it was clear that these high achieving students were not particularly driven or self-motivated. Most students' extra preparation amounted to no more than 20 hours study over a one-year period. The study concluded that a cause of this seeming lack of personal agency was the lack of easy access to more information about test format, content, assessment criteria, and how to practice. In other words, their progress could have been better with a suitable curriculum be it a taught one or one designed for self-study.

Methodology: Positive and Negative Washback

A few highly able and unusually motivated students notwithstanding, it is self-evident that a deficient curriculum and/or a poor methodology will militate against whatever positive washback effects any testing regime might potentially have. For teachers whose own level of English is not particularly high, and who see their main purpose as ensuring their students perform satisfactorily on a 4-skills English test, the temptation will be to slavishly provide lots of test practice in the hope that their students will at the very least feel comfortable about

the structure and question types contained in the test, and that there will be improvement in general language proficiency in all four macro skills as a by-product of this practice. Many teachers will also revert to a methodology that is comfortable. Watanabe (2004) observed that different teachers preparing students for the same Japanese university exam differed markedly in their methodology. Tony Green (2006), one of the authors of the TEAP test, notes that a teacher's beliefs and professional experiences have more impact on teaching than washback effects from tests. In the same author's TEAP impact study (2014), he stresses the need to educate both teachers and learners about the scope of the test and the assessment criteria in order to achieve more positive washback. His point is that the actual assessment criteria, that is the purpose of the test rather than a simple prediction of content, should be front of mind. The bottom line is that if a test is valid, it will assess the authentic level of a test taker's language proficiency, and good classroom and learner habits will maximise language acquisition along the lines set by the assessment criteria.

As already suggested, anything that demotivates a student amounts to negative washback. In this regard, it is important to remember that there is a long and inglorious history of exam preparation classes being dull, miserable events. Comparing TOEFL and non-TOEFL classes, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) found that the test preparation classes had more teacher talk and less student talk, less pair work, and, sadly, less laughter. Crucially, they found that there was much more test-taking in the preparation classes. Test practice in itself is not necessarily inimical to learning, but, as Elana Shohamy (1992) observed in her study of diagnostic testing, without detailed and specific information and the giving of meaningful feedback and diagnosis, teachers cannot expect tests to lead to significant and lasting improvement in learning. This of course puts some pressure on a teaching cohort who may feel ill-equipped to give detailed feedback on the writing and speaking performance of their students, as opposed to the feedback on reading and listening exercises which they can extract from an exhaustive list of right answers from a textbook. I will share with you the thoughts of a current Japanese high school teacher (personal communication). She remarks

the textbooks are structured so all four skills are covered and can be taught in the sequence of: listening, reading, understanding the meaning/grammar, discuss, write an essay; but in reality discussing and writing an essay is almost impossible with mid-level students. Discussion is often very inactive or switches over to Japanese. For essay writing plagiarism takes place.

One way to avoid plagiarism is to get students to handwrite essays in class, which is essentially what they have to do with tests like IELTS, but very few teachers are prepared or equipped to do this. It may also be that many teachers don't know how to subordinate the textbooks to the speaking and writing assessment criteria of a test. This points to the need for deeper reforms which go beyond testing to embrace changes to teacher training and the curriculum.

What Kind of Change is Desirable and Possible and Which Test Will Serve it Best?

What then will happen in Japanese high schools if and when the new proposal is put into practice? Schools are expected to teach to the current curriculum and are also directed to teach to a generic test, i.e. to focus on the curriculum, and let the testing look after itself. Nevertheless, it is expected that many schools will recommend one test, for example, local tests like Eiken or GTEC, and teach to it. The question then arises as to whether such tests align sufficiently well with the intended outcomes of the curriculum to be considered valid tests, a quality which is sometimes referred to as *instructional validity*. In other words, is the test testing what is meant to be taught?

Japanese Made English Tests: Eiken for Example

Some of these speaking tests seem to have tasks that are fairly predictable. For example, describing what is happening in a picture. Some of the speaking tests are also relatively short (about 6 minutes). Nor is it always clear what the assessment criteria are. In an example from the Eiken Grade Pre 2 Speaking test (see appendix C) the test taker is asked to firstly, read a short paragraph about shopping at stations. Secondly, answer a comprehension question about the passage.

Thirdly, describe what is happening in two pictures. Finally, answer two questions where he or she is asked to express an opinion on a couple of propositions.

It is not clear from the Eiken website what the assessment criteria are. I gather that examiners undertake a moderation session before the exam and rate model answers. There appears, therefore, to be an implicit *correct* answer for each of the speaking tasks. As far as I can see, the assessment tasks don't very obviously align with the MEXT curriculum or even Eiken's published list of *can do* statements for this grade. Thus what I am suggesting is that a clear understanding of the purpose of assessment is important for positive washback, but that clearly some tests make their purpose clearer than others.

International Tests: the Case for IELTS

I know the IELTS test very well, and I believe that the speaking test asks candidates to show they can do what the MEXT curriculum says they should. In other words, IELTS has a relatively high instructional validity. For a fuller discussion of the relative instructional validity of competing tests see Gary Ockey's (2017) paper on the subject. IELTS publishes comprehensive public versions of both the speaking and writing assessment criteria (see appendix D). These, along with the publicly available examples of rated IELTS speaking and writing performances, are a valuable tool in the hands of well-informed students and teachers alike.

The following outline of the test gives some context for understanding these assessment criteria. In part 3 of the IELTS test, the discussion part, the test taker is asked a total of 12 questions and the examiner can ask for clarification, justification and elaboration. In addition, the test taker can ask for clarification at any time. It is a true test of a test taker's ability to communicate, I think. All told, a test taker will be asked in addition, some 12 to 15 questions about every day, personal topics in part 1, and be asked to speak on a simple topic for two minutes in part 2 of the test. Note that the discussion in part 3 is a rather sophisticated discussion of more abstract ideas than occurs in the first parts of the test, but leads on from the personalised and specific topic the test taker discussed in part 2. The whole IELTS speaking test takes about 14 min-

utes, which allows a much more thoroughgoing assessment than many other tests. It is also a less predictable test than most, although the purpose is very clear. Further, what is being assessed aligns quite closely with the high school curriculum. Importantly, there are no *correct* answers. If your student can answer coherently and with some fluency, and with some grammatical accuracy and lexical range, they can answer as they like, and expect to score well.

As already mentioned, the importance of detailed and specific feedback on test practice is a necessary requirement for improved learning. The IELTS assessment criteria, when interpreted by a trained teacher with reference to a particular learner's performance, provide a curriculum of sorts. Let's look at them a little more closely. For instance, here are the publicly available assessment criteria that describe *lexical resource* at the band 5 level, plus the two bands above:

7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *uses vocabulary resource flexibly to discuss a variety of topics *uses some less common and idiomatic vocabulary and shows some awareness of style and collocation, with some inappropriate choices *uses paraphrase effectively
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *has a wide enough vocabulary to discuss topics at length and make meaning clear in spite of inappropriacies *generally paraphrases successfully
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *manages to talk about familiar and unfamiliar topics but uses vocabulary with limited flexibility *attempts to use paraphrase with mixed success

One of the teacher's tasks will be to not only ensure that a student learns how to acquire words and phrases, but to have views that can be expressed using these words. This *conceptual enlargement* is a big part of how an IELTS test works, and again, I'd contend that it is much facilitated by an integrated approach to language learning. Helping students access authentic language they read or hear for use in their speaking and writing is what an integrated approach can achieve.

Conclusion

Does an integrated approach in the English classroom suit Japan? Frankly, the integrated classroom puts more demands on both teachers and students, and you

may agree with the unconvinced educators and researchers who influenced MEXT to delay the entrance exam changes that the answer to the question of the suitability of an integrated methodology to Japan is *not quite yet!* Nevertheless, if the MEXT plan to reform English language testing in this country is to have its intended effect, that is, positive washback in the classroom, then the apparently modest (but in reality ambitious) goal of giving every high school student the benefit of appropriately trained teachers teaching a proven integrated curriculum with the end goal of success on a valid four skills test is the bare minimum that must be aspired to.

Note

This text was originally delivered orally at JALT, 2019.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

CEFR Global Descriptors

C2 proficient user	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations
C1 proficient user	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
B2 independent user	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
B1 independent user	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
A2 basic user	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
A1 basic user	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Appendix B***English Level Ranking***

The English First English Proficiency Index can be found at:

<https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/>

IELTS test data can be found at

<https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/test-taker-performance>

Appendix C

The example referred to in the text can be found at

<https://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/downloads/files/Sample-2ji-p2kyu.pdf>

More information and examples from the Eiken Speaking Test can be found at

<https://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/eiken-tests/>

Appendix D

IELTS band descriptors for speaking can be found at

<https://www.ielts.org/-/media/pdfs/speaking-band-descriptors.ashx?la=en>

Appendix E

Other IELTS Resources

<https://ieltsjp.com/study-for-ielts>

<https://www.facebook.com/IELTSOfficial>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/IELTSOfficialTeachingCommunity>

<https://ieltsjp.com/ielts-teacher-training-program/>