

Validation of the EIKEN Tests in Japanese University's English Foundation Course — A Case Study on Teaching EFL Students at NUIS

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ABSTRACT

In October 2019, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced postponing the scheduled introduction of private-sector English proficiency tests as part of standardized university entrance examinations in the first quarter of 2020 (Kyodo, 2019a). In the original plan, the new test is to replace the current National Center Test for University Admission, jointly administered by the state-affiliated National Center for University Entrance Examinations and universities. While the current standardized entrance exam only evaluates takers' English reading and listening skills, the private-sector test could also evaluate writing and speaking skills in a more comprehensive manner (Kyodo, 2019b). Johnston (2019) pinpoints that criticism about the private-sector test in multiple aspects, the test location, higher fees, and one operator of "Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)" has withdrawn from participation. Finally, the National Association of Upper Secondary School Principals in September requested the cancellation, or at least a revision of the planned introduction of the English proficiency tests in 2020 for the lack of information that MEXT needs to, in fact, take corrective measures.

A researcher has been utilizing the EIKEN Tests (Test in Practical English Proficiency, known as EIKEN below) on university first-year students as a kind of self-learning in the compulsory course at Niigata University of International and Information Studies (known as NUIS below) since 2014. Although the potential value and effectiveness of the test are proved by quantitative findings and analysis of students' results, it still carries meanings to study further about the influences of EIKEN tests on EFL class in Japan. In this paper, the researcher is going to look at some positive reviews from test takers at NUIS, which has been awarded the MEXT Minister Prize for two continuous years the largest number of EIKEN tests' passers. Also, the researcher is going to see the validation of EIKEN Tests among EFL learners in Japan territory educational institutes.

INTRODUCTION

This study reveals the effect and validation of EIKEN for enhancing students' motivation and self-learning ability, and its effectiveness to develop English learners' four balanced skills of the English language. The study is done at NUIS. EIKEN is held three times a year outside the university campus, and students can choose to take the test multiple times.

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The researcher opts for a free online English learning program called “StudyGear for EIKEN” provided by the EIKEN Foundation of Japan (a public-interest incorporated foundation) and the Japan Institute for Educational Measurement, Inc. (JIEM) for test takers to access online as a preparation of the test via devices with Android or iOS (JIEM, 2016).

With the establishment of a new faculty in NUIS in 2014, 126 first-year students were required to take two compulsory CEP (Communicative English Program) courses and a BE (Basic English) course for one year. In the BE course, EIKEN is instructed as one of recommended English tests as TOEIC (Test of English for Int’l Communication) and TEPT (Tourism English Proficiency Test). The aim of this test is to improve fundamental academic skills for EFL students who plan to enter or transfer to universities in English-speaking countries and for EFL learners who want to brush up their four language skills for their future career. The researcher shows positive results of a survey and data from test takers at NUIS which has received the MEXT Minister Prize for the largest number of EIKEN tests’ passers both in 2017 and 2018.

OVERVIEW OF EIKEN AS A PRIVATE-SECTOR TEST

In Japan, EIKEN is one of the most widely recognized and used English-language assessment. It was first administered in 1963 by EIKEN Foundation of Japan, previously called the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), which is widely recognized in social, educational, and employment fields. Also, the test certificate has been used as an admission ticket for studying abroad as it is accepted in approximately 400 colleges, universities, and educational institutes in North American, Australia, New Zealand, Czech Republic, and the United Kingdom (Rryugaku Journal, 2017). EIKEN is held three times a year. According to the *EIKEN BULLETIN 2019*, since the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), a non-profit foundation, launched in Japan in 1963, over 112 million examinees have taken the test. The number of the examinees has been increased along with a significant increase in the younger generations. A survey on *EIKEN BULLETIN 2019* conducted by EIKEN Foundation of Japan shows that the number of Japanese learners has increased from 98,124,785 to 112,258,468 from 2014 to 2018 (See Figure 1 below).

Table 1 shows the total number of applicants in 2018 for EIKEN in Practical English Proficiency, EIKEN Institution Based Assessment, and EIKEN Junior (April 1, 2018 - March 31, 2019). 77% of the total applicants are junior/senior high school students and as many as 11% of them are elementary school students or even younger. Test applicants cover a wide age range from elementary school pupils or younger to working adults.

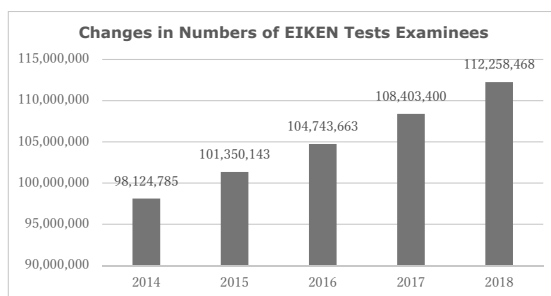


Figure 1: Total number of applicants for EIKEN tests since 1963 (EIKEN 2019b)

	Elementary School or Younger	Junior/Senior High School	University	Others	TOTAL
No. of Applicants (As in 2018)	414,502	2,964,666	76,686	399,214	3,855,068

Table 1: Total number of applicants in 2018 for the EIKEN test in Practical English Proficiency, EIKEN Institution Based Assessment, and EIKEN Junior. (April 1, 2018 - March 31, 2019) taken from Examinees Statistics (EIKEN, 2019b).

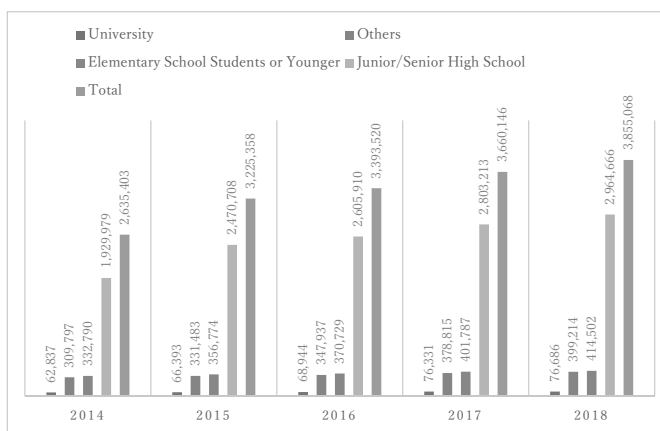


Figure 2: Total number of applicants since 2014 to 2018 for EIKEN in Practical English Proficiency, EIKEN Institution Based Assessment, and EIKEN Junior. taken from Examinees Statistics (EIKEN, 2019b).

Interestingly, Figure 2 indicates the applicants of the tests who include for four sorts of age ranges from primary, secondary, higher education and others such as the working population. They have been increasing for five continuous years since 2014, the exact year when the researcher started to instruct all first-year students EIKEN as a volunteer study at NUIS. EIKEN is taken for various reasons—admission to advanced education, job hunting, and as a subjective indication of the language proficiency. A moderate increase of applicants in five successive year stems from the English Education Reform Plan in 2013, when “Globalization” was officially announced, in which English has become a regular subject in elementary schools. Meanwhile, English classes has been taught in English in senior high schools, followed by

National University Reform Plan on Nov 2013 (Tada, 2016). By the declaration of the Expert Government Panel on Improving English Education in 2014, the Japan Association of National Universities (JANU) adopted its new English proficiency benchmarks for entry into public universities, measuring two additional skills—speaking and writing in 2018 (Tanaka, 2018). The current integrated English exam, which is called the National Center Test for University Admission, mainly measures reading and listening skills merely on computer-read answer sheets. under the 2020 university admission reform, entrance exam-takers will also be required to take private-sector English tests for the assessment of their English skills (MEXT, 2018). Education ministry panel officially approved EIKEN as one of the private English tests for university entrance in 2018, and it promoted both national and private universities to set certain requirements with the test in their admission process. National Center for University Entrance Examinations that administers the entrance exams would have aggregated the scores and provided them to these higher institutes (Kyodo, 2019b).

PRIVATE ENGLISH TEST FOR UNIVERSITY ADMISSION

According to the planned introduction of the private tests in 2020, high school applicants are required to choose and take one of the tests — EIKEN, GTEC/GTEC CBT (Global Test of English Communication), TEAP (Test of English for Academic Purposes), TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC; CAE (Cambridge Assessment English Test). See Figure 3.

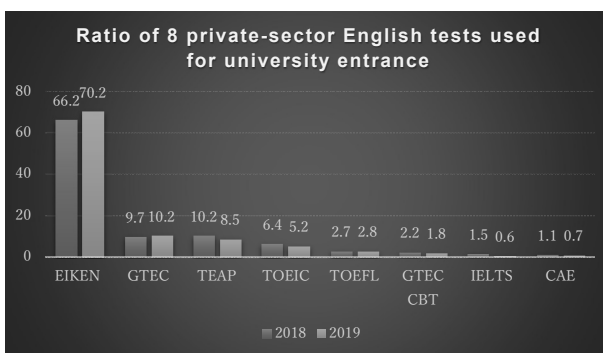


Figure 3: Ratio of 8 private-sector testing used for university entrance by high school applicants (Obunsha Educational Information Center, 2019).

Obunsha Educational Information conducted questionnaire surveys from Jan 21 to Feb 28, 2018 and 2019 that include all three testing systems — recommendation exam, admission office exam (AO exam), and general entrance exam. The quantity of responses shows multiple options chosen by high school and graduates’ applicants. A total of 401 respondents out of 697 (58% - 35% males; 65% females) of the online questionnaire called “Daigaku juken passnavi.” They included 19% 1st-year students, 37% 2nd-year, 35% 3rd-year, and 9% others. Figure 3 shows the ratio of eight sorts of private tests which they plan to take — EIKEN, GTEC, TEAP, TOEIC, TOEFL, GTEC CBT, IELTS, and CAE in descending order of the number of applicants-to-be. The most popular test is EIKEN (70.2% in 2019) for two reasons: first, the

test is highly recognized in the educational sector; it is adopted in school as a placement, an achievement, or a progress test. The test is “easily accessible” as there are three chances a year. As Carrigan (2018) and Tanaka (2019) point out, it is a relatively easy option for university entrance because experienced EIKEN takers have a psychological advantage. Second, the ratio of higher institutions, which approve EIKEN as a recommendation exam, admission of office exam (AO exam) and general entrance exam is higher than other private tests. So, it is reasonable for university applicants to choose EIKEN.

THE FRAMEWORK OF CEFR & THE EIKEN CSE SCORE

As illustrated in Figure 4, there are seven defined grades in the test ranging from Grade 5 (complete beginner) to Grade 1 (near native level), with two bridging levels called pre-1st and pre-2nd (EIKEN, 2019c). Each grade is conducted on a pass/fail basis. Test takers at all grades are required to take a first test with two sections, reading and listening. There is an additional writing section for Grade 2 to Grade 1. Candidates on Grade 3 to 1 who passed the first test can progress to a second face-to-face speaking test implemented approximately one month after the first test, while the newly added speaking test for Grade 5 and 4 in 2016 is optional; Grade 5 and 4 takers who wish to have a score on the speaking test can also take a computer-based speaking test via internet accessible devices with Android or iOS.

In 2016, EIKEN Foundation of Japan upgraded EIKEN Common Scale for English 2.0 (CSE) used for all the grades of EIKEN as a universal scale in line with the basic policy of MEXT, which is fully aligned with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (MEXT, 2019). CEFR has an international standardized six-level scale established by Council of Europe in 2001 for indicating learner’s language skills, which has been widely used in more than 500 countries. EIKEN and other major private tests adopt CEFR “in order to evaluate the four language skills of “Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking” appropriately at the university entrance examination, implement the use of qualification tests and certification tests that are conducted by private companies, etc.” (MEXT, 2016). The additional volume to the CEFR 2001, the CEFR-Companion Volume (2018) has updated the 2001 illustrative descriptor scales from 6 levels to 11 levels: Pre-A1, A1, A2, A2 +, B1, B1 +, B2, B2 +, C1, C2; Above C2. The CEFR-CV was evolved the approach of the conventional four language skills and indicates the new scheme including reception (CEFR 4.4.2), Production (CEFR 4.4.1), Interaction (CEFR 4.4.3); Mediation (CEFR 4.4.4). Competence with plurilingual & pluricultural competence (CEFR 6.1.3) (Majima, 2019).

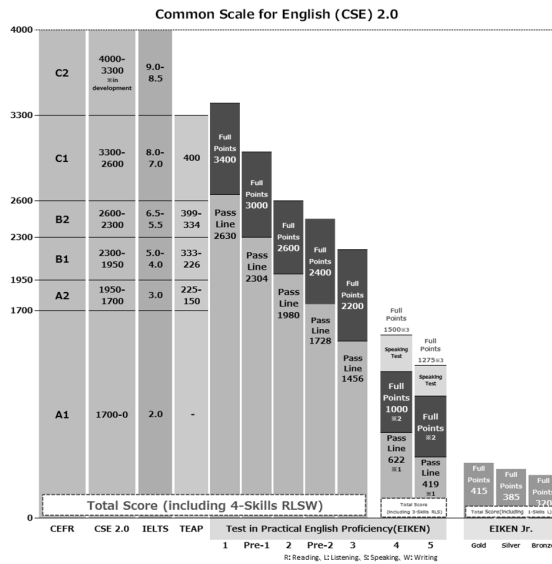


Figure 4: EIKEN CSE Score (EIKEN, 2016a)

※ Common Scale for English 2.0 (CSE) adopted the 2001 illustrative descriptor scales of CEFR from A1 through C2. Speaking, writing, reading; listening are individually evaluated on a 1000-point scale, and CSE indicates 0 through 4000 points in total on each level.

CEFER	EIKEN Grade	LEVEL	Example of recognition and use
C1	Grade 1 2630-3299	Advanced	International admissions to graduate and undergraduate programs; MEXT benchmark for English instructors (Pre-1)
B2	Grade Pre-1 2304-2599		
B1	Grade 2 1980-2299		
A2	Grade Pre-2 1728-1949		
A1	Grade 3 1428-1699	Beginner	MEXT benchmark for junior high school graduates
A1	Grade 4		-
A1	Grade 5		-

Table 2: Overview of CEFER & EIKEN tests and their recognition & use (Obunsha Educational Information Center, 2019)

Table 2 above shows the EIKEN CSE needed to pass the first and second tests on each grade. The Foundation showed the pass line analyzing data from past tests as follows — the pass line & score rate of each grade is 2630 (77.4%) for Grade, 1 2304 (76.8%) for Grade Pre-1st, 1980 (76.2%) for Grade 2, 1728 (72%) for Grade Pre-2nd, and 1456 (66.2%) for Grade 3. Meanwhile, Grades 4 and 5 only measure the first two skills, reading and listening. As shown in Figure 4, the pass line & score rate of Grades 4 & 5 are 622 (62.2%) and 419 (49.2%) respectively.

PASSING CRITERIA OF EIKEN AND THE BALANCED SKILL SET

Before 2016, EIKEN had a point-based system, which was aborted by EIKEN Foundation of Japan and changed to a CSE-score based system aiming to measure the four language skills in a more balanced manner. As shown in Figure 5, the old system did not disclose any passing criteria such as the exact number of correct answers nor the percentage of correct answers needed to pass the test (EIKEN, 2016a). Yet, test takers, who received passing EIKEN CSE scores for example, should have attained correct answers in around 70% of questions in each of four skills on Grade 1 and Pre-1st, which is around 60% for Grade 2-takers. Thus, the CSE-score based system is, obviously, able to measure candidates' language skills more fairly. Furthermore, the criterion of the renewed system is explained as follows (EIKEN, 2016a).

“As EIKEN CSE Scores are calculated using the data received during each test administration and a statistical method called Item Response Theory, it is not possible for examinees to calculate their own EIKEN CSE Score from their correct answers” (In-text: EIKEN, 2016a).

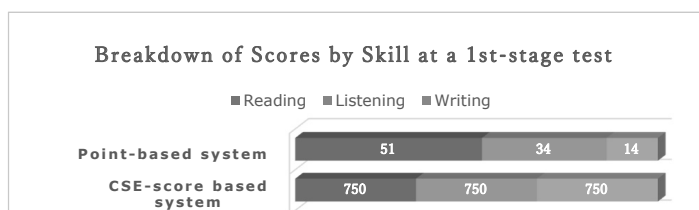


Figure 5: The comparison of breakdown of scores for Grade pre-1st passers in 3 skills between a point-based system prior to the 2016 renewal & a CSE-score based system after the renewal (EIKEN, 2016a).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

According to the above-mentioned information about passing criteria of EIKEN and the balanced skill set, the present study aims to explore how to guide candidates to pass the test, with a special focus on the first-stage test of Grade 2 in terms of three skills—reading, listening, and writing.

Participants in the survey are 68 students from NUIS who have taken any of the three first-stage Grade 2 EIKEN 2019. There were 36 examinees (24 in the first year, 7 in the second year; 2 in the third year) took the test in June 2019; 23 examinees (21 in the first year and 2 in the second year) took it in October 2019; 12 first year students took it in January 2020. They were all Japanese university students from the Faculty of International Studies at NUIS.

Based on score data from EIKEN Foundation of Japan in 2019 (EIKEN, 2019), three kinds of average scores and the ratios who included all examinees at NUIS, passers; all examinees were compared and analyzed in terms of three skills of English proficiency - reading, listening, and writing measured in the first-stage test.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 3-1, the average score and the ratio of thirty-three NUIS students who took the first-stage test in June 2019 have 1,560 points (80%) out of 1,950 points in total, 2.2% higher than the passing points 1,520 (77.9%). A commonality between NUIS students and passers tends to get a higher score in the writing section than in reading and listening. Yet, all examinees score higher in reading section than in listening and writing. The weakest skill for all the Grade-2 test takers is listening.

Table 3-1. Average scores and the ratios of Grade 2 test-takers in the 1st-stage test in June 2019

	Reading	Listening	Writing	Total
NUIS students	521 (80.1%)	503 (77.4%)	536 (82.5%)	1560 (80%)
Passers	527 (81.07%)	521 (80.2%)	554 (85.2%)	1602 (82.2%)
All examinees	502 (77.2%)	490 (75.4%)	500 (76.9%)	1492 (76.5%)
Pass marks	506.7 (77.9%)	506.7 (77.9%)	506.7 (77.9%)	1520 (77.9%)
Full scores	650	650	650	1950

As shown in Table 3-2 below, the average score and the ratio of twenty-three NUIS students who took the first-stage test in Oct 2019 score 1,626 (83.3%) out of 1,950 in total, and 5.4% higher than 1,520 points of pass marks (77.9%). As the same tendency seen in Table 3-1, a commonality between NUIS students and passers tends to get a higher score in writing section than in reading and listening, while all examinees score higher in reading section than in listening and writing. All the Grade-2 candidates have the weakest performance in the listening test among the three.

Table 3-2. Average scores and the ratios of Grade 2 test-takers in the 1st-stage test in Oct. 2019

	Reading	Listening	Writing	Total
NUIS students	533 (82%)	512 (78.8%)	581 (89.4%)	1626 (83.3%)
Passers	533 (82%)	522 (80.3%)	551 (84.8%)	1606 (82.4%)
All examinees	504 (77.5%)	491 (75.5%)	492 (75.7%)	1487 (76.3%)
Pass marks	506.7 (77.9%)	506.7 (77.9%)	506.7 (77.9%)	1520 (77.9%)
Full scores	650	650	650	1950

There were 12 NUIS first-year students took the first-stage test in January 2020. The average score and the ratio of them show 1,582 (81.1%) out of 1,950 points in total, 3.2% higher than the passing point of 1,520 (77.9%) as shown below. Table 3-3 shows the exact same tendency as in Table 3-1 & 3-2 that listening is the weakest skill among three.

Table 3-3. Average scores and the ratios of Grade 2 test-takers in the 1st-stage test in Jan. 2020

	Reading	Listening	Writing	Total
NUIS students	530 (81.5%)	503 (77.4%)	549 (84.5%)	1582 (81.1%)
Passers	529 (81.4%)	522 (80.3%)	550 (84.6%)	1601 (82.1%)
All examinees	503 (77.4 %)	492 (75.7%)	492 (75.7%)	1487 (76.3%)
Pass marks	506.7 (77.9%)	506.7 (77.9%)	506.7 (77.9%)	1520 (77.9%)
Full scores	650	650	650	1950

Finally, the researcher can also conclude the data above in the following ways—first, the

total average score and the ratios of all NUIS students taken in 2019 were 1,589.3 (81.5%), while those of passers were 1,603.0 (82.2%). The data shows that their difference was within narrow margin. Second, the total means of NUIS students, however, were much higher than those of the passing point 1,520 (77.9%). There are several reasons for more than 90% of Grade-2 NUIS examinees passing the first stage test. The main reason is the sufficient preparation of essay writing. All the first-year students, for example, were given assignment of 20-minute essay writing within 80 - 100 words for six times in about two weeks to reach the pass the writing test, 506.7 (77.9%), which means to take 12 out of 16 points in writing section. Anyone who fails to meet certain level above must rewrite until they can pass by scoring 12 points out 16. As the result, the total average ratio in writing for NUIS students (85.4%) became higher than that of passers (84.8%) and the pass mark (77.9%). Lastly, all the Grade-2 examinees have the commonality that listening tends to be the least proficient among the three skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis indicates a primary limitation in this research that only three skills of English — reading, listening, and writing were measured in the first-stage test. A speaking skill was assessed at the second-stage test done by only passers in the first, and detailed scoring information of the face-to-face speaking test at the second-stage test was not officially publicized in school. Thus, validity of four skill of English for EFL learners has not been fully analyzed.

Lastly, the researcher claims that some concerns and matters shown with making test or score comparisons vary (Taylor, 2004). Regarding the use of common frameworks such as the CEFR to facilitate comparison, Taylor cautions:

There is no doubt that comparative frameworks can serve a useful function for a wide variety of test stakeholders... But we need to understand that they have their limitations, too: they may mask significant differentiating features, they tend to encourage oversimplification and misinterpretation, and there is always a danger that they are adopted as prescriptive rather than informative tools.(Taylor, 2004)

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