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Testing Four Skills in Japan

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Abstract

This paper considers arguments for the testing of spoken language skills in Japan and the contribution the use of such tests might make to language education. The Japanese government, recognising the importance of spontaneous social interaction in English to participation in regional and global communities, mandates the development of all ‘four skills’ (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) in schools. However, university entrance tests continue to emphasize the written language. Because they control access to opportunities, entrance tests tend to dominate teaching and learning. They are widely believed to encourage traditional forms of teaching and to inhibit speaking and listening activities in the classroom. Comprehensive testing of spoken language skills should, in contrast, encourage (or at least not discourage) the teaching and learning of these skills. On the other hand, testing spoken language skills also represents a substantial challenge. New organisational structures are needed to support new testing formats and these will be unfamiliar to all involved, resulting in an increased risk of system failures. Introducing radical change to any educational system is likely to provoke a reaction from those who benefit most from the status quo. For this reason, critics will be ready to exploit any perceived shortcomings to reverse innovative policies. Experience suggests that radical changes in approaches to testing are unlikely to deliver benefits for the education system unless they are well supported by teacher training, new materials and public relations initiatives. The introduction of spoken language tests is no doubt essential to the success of Japan’s language policies, but is not without risk and needs to be carefully integrated with other aspects of the education system.

1. Language policies and purposes in Japan

In October 2015, the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Hakubun Shimomura, responded to an article in the *International New York Times* (2014). He explained that the Japanese government’s education policies were not nationalistic (as the article had suggested), but outward looking and internationalist. As evidence, he noted that in addition to the teaching of Japanese culture to strengthen students’ sense of national identity, the government’s education policies aimed at reforming foreign language education and internationalising Japanese universities.

These three priorities echo similar initiatives in other East Asian countries. South Korea and China also use education to promote national identity. They have both also invested heavily in English language at school and in the internationalisation of Higher Education. Japan introduced mandatory foreign language activities for elementary school children in 2011, South Korea did so in 1997 and China in 2001. Japan’s *Super Global Universities* funding program parallels *Project 985* in China and the *Brain Korea 21* Program. These initiatives aim to propel universities to the top of the world rankings by promoting international research collaboration, increasing the volume of world-class publications and attracting international students by offering academic courses taught in English.

Although policy makers believe that English is essential to the internationalisation of education and to future economic prosperity, the level of English in Japan is popularly perceived to be inadequate. Shimomura expressed the general view that, 'Many Japanese people cannot speak English despite receiving six years of English language education in middle and high school.' The business community is concerned that because of poor levels of English, Japan might be losing ground to its economic rivals in the global marketplace. The Japan Business Federation (*Keidanren*) has been a forceful advocate of reforming language education in the interests of boosting Japan's international competitiveness.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has embarked on an ambitious program of reform to improve the country's practical English language skills. In the established academic tradition, based on historical models both for studying Chinese in Japan (Sasaki 2008) and classical languages in Europe, 'what was demanded of students was not to acquire proficiency in conducting academic work in English *per se* but rather to demonstrate their overall intelligence through grammar and vocabulary learning and translation exercises using English' (Butler 2007, p.131). The main purpose was to foster analytic skills and, ultimately, to select the brightest and best for entry to elite universities. Backing commercial imperative over academic tradition, current policies are intended to develop pupils' ability to use English as a tool for communication. Yet this can hardly be considered a new priority. Spoken interaction in English has been included in the national Courses of Study since the 1970s. The principle of teaching spoken English through English can be found in the English Language Exploratory Committee (ELEC) reforms introduced in the 1950s while Sasaki (2008, p.66) noted that the ability to both understand and use languages was enshrined in policy documents as early as 1901. Unfortunately for successive governments, turning these policy intentions into classroom practice has proved to be an intractable problem. Surveys of teachers and students reveal that classes today continue to be taught in Japanese and to centre on translating written English texts into Japanese (Gorusch 1998, Green 2014).

Like many commentators, Shimomura suggested that university entrance tests have been among the principal barriers to the development of practical English language abilities. He remarked that, 'Although reading, listening, writing, and speaking are the four necessary competencies for English language education, the university entrance exams administered by the National Center for University Entrance Exams to over half a million students around the country each year focus almost exclusively on reading, with slight coverage of listening and almost nothing on writing and speaking.'

In short, the assumptions informing the introduction of more balanced 'four skills' tests may be summarised as follows:

- 1) The ability to communicate in English is essential for successful participation in the global economy.
- 2) Other countries in the region have better English language resources than Japan, giving them a competitive advantage – and the proficiency gap is widening.
- 3) Japanese children will develop much better practical English skills if language pedagogy is reformed and English is taught through English.
- 4) Reforms will only take root if the system of entrance examinations is also reformed to give at least equal weight to the spoken language.

Critics have questioned all four of these assumptions. Addressing each in turn, I will briefly outline and comment on some of the reservations that have been expressed.

2. The Need for English

English has a uniquely global status and is increasingly used as a *lingua franca* across Asia and around the world. It is the primary working language of transnational organisations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the International Olympic Committee. It is being adopted as the institutionally approved language of multinational corporations originating in Japan such as Rakuten, Uniqlo and Honda. Graddol (2006) observed that, like information technology, English is now becoming a component of basic skills education in many countries and that its growth seems likely to continue.

Although this would suggest that the Japanese government is justified in prioritising English as an economic imperative, Graddol (2006, p.10) also remarked that there are implications for the nature of the English that is taught. The language is no longer, he suggested, 'English as we have known it, and have taught it in the past as a foreign language. It is a new phenomenon.' Distinctive varieties of Asian English are emerging as English becomes established as a pan-Asian *lingua franca*. Japanese learners are now, it is said, increasingly more likely to use English to communicate with other Asian speakers than with Americans or Australians. Because of this, the literary treasures, cultural trappings and idiomatic complexities of native usage that have been the mainstay of English language teaching are becoming much less relevant. However, observers have noted the discrepancy between English as a practical tool for efficient international communication, occasionally reflected in official Japanese policy statements, and the persistence of the stereotype, enshrined in popular culture, of English as the alien cultural property of exotic, blue-eyed Caucasians (Yano 2008).

One criticism of the priority placed on English has been that it downplays or ignores the value of other languages. If English has become 'a common international language' (MEXT 2002), it is emphatically not the only international language and is very far from universally used and understood: most people in the world have no functional proficiency in English. Graddol (2007, p.118) concluded from his analysis that learning English would not be enough to secure economic success because, paradoxically, the very dominance of English seemed to 'generate an even greater need for other languages.' In the Japanese context, Gottlieb (2011, p.74), citing support from voices in the Japanese business community, argued that the heavy emphasis on teaching English at the expense of regional languages such as Chinese, Korean and Russian might prove costly. She noted that China was Japan's largest trading partner and that a growing proportion of Japan's trade was with other East Asian countries; that most short-term visitors to Japan come from China, Taiwan and Korea; and that a majority of foreign residents in Japan are Chinese or Korean. While the Chinese and South Korean governments have invested relatively heavily in teaching languages other than English (including Japanese), the large numbers of Chinese and Koreans resident in Japan form, as Gottlieb pointed out, a largely untapped, but potentially valuable linguistic and intercultural resource for Japan.

Conversely, a second line of criticism is that for most Japanese, English has little practical value. Yano (2011, p.133) posed the question, 'Do the majority of learners really need to be proficient in English?' and answered himself, 'No, they do not if they remain in Japan, except for those who use English in their work.' Even when travelling outside Japan as tourists to popular destinations such as South Korea, Hawaii or Taiwan, Japanese travellers will find little, if any need to use English. Contrary to the popular image of Japan as a small island

nation with few natural resources, dependent for survival on international trade, its developed internal market means that (unlike in lower-wage economies like the Philippines) most workplaces require little trans-national communication and Japanese predominates. Yamagami and Tollefson (2011) observed that English opens few career opportunities inside Japan and that regular use of English is only required of a relatively small proportion of the population made up of such select groups as employees of international organizations and students who attend universities outside Japan.

3. International comparisons

It is sometimes suggested that difficulty in learning English has become a part of Japanese self-identity (Sergeant 2009). A certain ambivalence in attitudes towards the language has often been noted, with English being depicted both as a source of opportunity and as a threat to Japan's distinctive culture (Reesor 2002). For all that, the assertion that the Japanese are not as proficient in English as their neighbours rests on very flimsy evidence. One source that is routinely cited is TOEFL iBT® test score data (see for example Fukada 2011). Data for 2014 (ETS 2015) showed Japanese test takers scoring 70 on average (the maximum is 120). This is indeed lower than the Chinese (77), Taiwanese (80) and South Korean average scores (84), but might suggest that Japan is performing quite well in relation to its target for high school graduates of a TOEFL iBT score of 60 (MEXT 2014). In reality TOEFL results simply cannot reveal anything meaningful about the general language abilities of learners in different countries. In 2013, the average TOEFL iBT score for test takers from the USA was 87 while it was 94 for Spain. This does not imply that the average Spaniard is able to communicate in English more effectively than the average American. Although Gottlieb (2012, p.66) reported that scores on standardised tests like TOEFL are considered as an objective indicator of Japan's relative standing by MEXT, the test developer, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), makes it very clear that it, 'does not endorse the practice of ranking countries on the basis of TOEFL scores, as this is a misuse of data' (ETS 2015, p.13).

A well-designed comparative survey such as the recent European Survey on Language Competences (Surveylang 2012), involves careful sampling of students at the same stage of education. No such survey has yet been carried out in East Asia and so we have no credible indication of how Japanese learners of English compare with others in the region. Testing agencies do not reveal commercially sensitive details about numbers of test takers, but relatively small numbers of people take TOEFL iBT. Different kinds of people take the test in different countries for different reasons (and these factors all change over time). As South Korea currently sends around 115,000 (3.5%) of its tertiary students to study overseas each year compared with just 30,000 (0.9%) from Japan (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2013), it may be that a higher proportion of Korean test takers have strong incentives to perform well. In any case the abilities of the small number of people who choose to take international language tests are very unlikely to reflect the abilities of a national population.

4. Educational reform and learning outcomes?

It remains to be seen, of course, whether the current initiatives will result in higher levels of English language ability in Japan. Concerns have been raised about the readiness of school teachers to implement reforms. Poor levels of language proficiency among teachers has been one recurrent cause for complaint, with only a quarter of junior high and half of high-school teachers demonstrating the targeted B2 level (MEXT 2012). Sasaki (2008) identified shortages of qualified English speakers as a key reason for the proliferation of the much-

criticised *yakudoku*, translation-based methods. A lack of training in pedagogy has been another worry: English teachers do not feel that they have been adequately trained in the communicative alternative (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009, Nishino, 2011).

With continued investment, proposed targets for teacher language proficiency and plans to increase training opportunities are likely to be beneficial, but other barriers to English language learning success may prove harder to overcome. One is the status of English within Japan, which limits both opportunity and incentive for language learning. As the majority of Japanese citizens have minimal need for English in their daily interactions, school pupils may feel that they have little reason to learn (Nishino and Watanabe, 2008, p.135). Nunan (2003) cautioned that even the increased number of hours dedicated to English in school would be insufficient to develop high levels of proficiency (p.608), shifting the burden onto the shadow educational world of extra-curricular education for those willing and able to invest. Nunan also questioned the popular belief, reflected in MEXT policy, that beginning languages at an earlier age in school could increase ultimate levels of attainment.

5. Examination reform and communicative competence

If the current need for English communication in Japan is rather limited, another source of motivation exerts considerable power: English language tests. For many school pupils, gaining access to a high-ranking university, which involves passing an entrance test featuring English, is their dominant reason for studying the language. Success on these tests can open the door to the best career opportunities. Once in the workplace, English tests such as TOEIC[®] (developed by the US Educational Testing Service for the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry in the 1970s), may serve as gatekeeping devices for recruitment and internal promotion.

Because of this, many believe that the introduction of innovative tests measuring practical English communication skills (in place of traditional tests of reading and written grammar) would revolutionise English language teaching in Japan. Teachers and pupils believe it: Green (2014) surveyed 3,868 high school pupils and 423 teachers. Both groups agreed that four-skills entrance tests would encourage more teaching and learning of the four skills at school. Business leaders believe it: ‘if no changes are made from school entrance screening, being the thing that teachers, parents, and students are most interested in, it will not be possible to avoid traditional exam-oriented English study centered on grammar and translation aimed at passing university entrance exams’ (*Keizai Doyukai* 2013). Government ministers believe it, as shown by Shimomura’s (2015) statement quoted above.

In spite of this apparent consensus, change towards four-skills testing has been both limited and slow. Drastic suggestions for reform have been made, including replacing current tests with an international four skills test such as TOEFL iBT (*Keizai Doyukai* 2013). This would be counter-productive. A test intended for international students studying academic subjects through English on North American campuses is pitched at the wrong level of difficulty and includes content that does not reflect the national Course of Study or the needs and interests of Japanese high school pupils. Practical measures have been much less radical. A Listening sub-test was introduced to the centrally managed Center Test (taken by over half a million high school students annually) in 2006. With the encouragement of MEXT, individual universities do now include components such as Listening, Written Composition and even Speaking on their tests (Sasaki 2008). In another promising development, Sophia University and the Eiken Foundation of Japan recently launched the Test of English for Academic

Purposes (TEAP). This is a four skills test specifically designed for the Japanese context, but the number of universities accepting TEAP results is, as yet, relatively small.

Reasons for the slow pace of change include resistance among educators, learners and others. Universities wish to retain control over their admissions; and the income that entrance examinations bring. The influential industry of cram schools and publishers that has grown up around preparing pupils for examinations may also tend to favour the preservation of established practices (Ross 2008). Many of the university professors who design the tests were trained in the analytic literary academic tradition of English language learning and may react against communicative language approaches, which undermine their expertise. Schoolteachers may lack confidence in their ability to teach English classes through English and may feel poorly equipped to manage opportunities for oral interaction in the classroom. Pupils, coached for success in the current system, may also have reasons to fear the unknown consequences of change.

The greater subjectivity and uncertainty involved in scoring tests of speaking and writing is another source of concern in a system that places a high value on impartiality. Of course, all tests, including those that are objectively scored by machines, involve a degree of subjectivity. Choices about what content to test and which method to use impact test takers in different ways. If examiners are well trained, scores for tests of Writing and Speaking can be very dependable, while current entrance tests have been criticised for their lack of reliability (Brown and Yamashita 1995, Kikuchi 2006). However, setting up effective systems for new and unfamiliar kinds of test requires substantial investment and preparation. If anxiety, resentment and risk of disaster are to be minimised, changes to a testing system that seriously affects the lives of thousands of pupils should only be introduced cautiously and with plenty of notice.

Although the pace is slow, university entrance examinations are changing: gradually, but decisively. Increasingly, they will give greater balance to the four skills. Unfortunately, there remain reasons to doubt whether dramatic improvements in language learning will follow. Experience suggests that testing reforms generally have less effect on teaching than their sponsors intend. Teachers do often change the content of their classes when faced with a new test, but they are not as able or willing to change their methods (Watanabe 1996). Factors other than entrance tests that discourage the teaching of spoken language - large class sizes, reticent students, heavy workloads, entrenched school cultures and limited training – will not disappear.

7. Conclusions

The thoughtful introduction of carefully designed tests that include spoken as well as written language and that involve interaction should benefit language learning in Japan. Such tests would no longer obstruct the use of English in the classroom and would not undermine other reforms envisaged by policy makers. With supportive training initiatives, it is possible that classes could become more enjoyable and intrinsically motivating for both teachers and pupils. On the other hand, when pupils feel no real need to learn a language and are put under pressure to do so in order to pass a test, at least some of the consequences are likely to be negative (even if that test involves the four skills).

Unfortunately, even well designed tests of spoken language can give rise to tedious cramming involving repeated practice of test-like activities. Perhaps we will witness the emergence of a

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spoken form of decontextualized examination English (*juken eigo*) in Japan. In place of lists of obscure words, phrases and grammar rules, this will involve memorised speeches and dialogues based around predicted test tasks and topics.

If well-designed tests are not sure to bring improved learning, poorly made tests are undoubtedly very damaging. They are not only associated with poor teaching, but give unfair results that can penalise successful learners. Beyond changing the content of tests, the current reforms provide a good opportunity to professionalize the practice of language testing in Japan and improve public awareness. This will involve giving more attention to testing in teacher training so that teachers can learn how to use tests more effectively to the benefit of learning.

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