

# 批判を可能性に —中高英語教育における入試の効用—

## Possibility in Criticism: Positive Influence of the Entrance Examination on English Education in Secondary Schools

渡辺 久子 WATANABE, Hisako

● 東洋英和女学院中学部・高等部, 国際基督教大学教育研究所

Toyo Eiwa Jogakuin High School / Institute for Educational Research and Service, International Christian University



**Keywords** 中高英語教育, 大学入試, 英語教育批判

secondary school English education, entrance examination to tertiary education, criticism against English education

### ABSTRACT

日本の英語教育は入試偏重で非効率であると批判されるが、その批判は大学入試研究が不十分なまま為されており、現実を反映しているとは言えない。本小論文では日本の英語教育背景の概要及び大学入試のもつ良い影響が考察される。大学入試の変化に対応するため授業も変わりつつあり、生徒は大学入試のために高いレベルの習得を目指している。大学入試に関する研究が深まれば英語教育の問題解決のヒントが与えられるのではないか。

English education in Japan has been criticized to be ineffective because of the examination oriented classes. However, such criticism does not seem to reflect the reality because the criticism is made without enough study of the entrance examination. In this essay the context of English education in Japan is reviewed and the positive influence of the examination is discussed. The changes of the entrance examination have changed the classes at secondary schools, and the entrance examination motivates students to achieve higher proficiency levels. More studies on the entrance examination can give a clue to the problems English education faces today.

## 1. Introduction

An interesting phenomenon concerning English education in Japan is that every single person seems to have something to criticize about English education. It may be partly because many of Japanese people, all of whom have experience of learning English at school, are not satisfied with their English achievement. The typical criticism usually states that in spite of 10 years of painful learning experience, Japanese do not have good enough a command of English. It is because English education at schools has always been heavily grounded on grammar and translation because of entrance examination to university, and does not provide enough time to practice conversation.

Since I am an in-service teacher of English at a secondary school, I am the one who is criticized for offering useless English classes. However, whenever I meet such criticism, I have a feeling of “Yes, but . . . Surely communication is crucial, but it’s not so simple.” One reason for this feeling is that the claims, made somewhere remote from where actual English lessons take place, do not seem to reflect the reality at school.

The educational policy made by the government or research done in applied linguistics is often inapplicable to the local context. Surely there are many studies on the important role the context plays in the curriculum and syllabus design. Research is also done on the difficulty of implementing a communicative approach into educational environment within certain contexts (Defeng, 1998).

However, a strong element that composes Japanese educational context does not seem to have been paid proper attention to in talking about English education in Japan: the entrance examination to tertiary education. The entrance examination is criticized as the villain that prevents English education from being communicative and effective. However, as some researchers admit,

analysis of the current examination is not conducted enough (Kanatani, 2009). Instead of a detailed study of entrance examination and discussing its influence on education, it has been criticized and regarded as an obstacle in English education in Japan.

Certainly, it has a huge impact on English education at schools. No matter how criticized it is, most students cannot escape the entrance examination if they hope to get tertiary education, and neither can teachers. In this sense, the criticism that if the entrance examination changes, the English education in Japan will change is true. Bearing this in mind, accepting the examination as one important factor in English education in Japan will give us another viewpoint when considering English education at high schools in Japan. In this essay, I give an overview of the context of English education in Japan in terms of entrance examination and reexamine the criticism by pointing out the positive influence of entrance examination, illustrating how it can be a clue to solve problems English education faces today.

## 2. The Context of Japan

One unique context of English education in Japan is that English education has always been discussed together with the entrance examination. The nature and the purposes of English education and the entrance examination have been discussed since the first appearance of English education in the Meiji Era. English education in the beginning was entirely for practical purposes and then the cultural educational purposes increased. Interestingly, the entrance examination has always been criticized in every era and the styles of the entrance examination have changed according to the social demands (Erikawa, 2011). Several educational reforms have been made and in these past few decades English education in secondary education has rapidly shifted

its focus to a more practical purpose, communication.

MEXT, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, insists that “globalization extends to various activities of individuals as well as to the business world. Each individual has increasing opportunities to come in contact with the global market and services, and participate in international activities” (MEXT, 2003, para.2), and claims the urgency of learning English as the most important international language of various fields.

From a different standpoint, Nakamura (2004) also insists on the importance of communicative competence of English. He introduces a grief of Funabashi Yoichi, a journalist who attended the World Economic Forum in 2003 and was shocked to see Japanese representatives stay silent in the conference where interpretation was not available, and claims that practical English should be taught from elementary school in order to survive the 21st century.

According to Yamagami and Tollefson (2011), “two competing representations of globalization can be identified: globalization as opportunity, and globalization as threat” (p.17). They claim that globalization can bring benefits if one is successful, but failure to cope with it means that the national identity or security of Japan might be threatened by the influence of globalization.

On the other hand, contrary to the beliefs of the government and business leaders, the perception of English by most people is quite different; it would be nice to have English ability, but it is possible to live without it. Kubota (2011) conducted a research on the amount of English required in the job in a rural area of Japan and found that “those who use English on a regular basis at a more professional level would be 1 or 2%” (p.255). She also found that managers did not consider the employees’ English proficiency level as a crucial factor in promotion. Terasawa (2015), analyzing data taken

from Japanese General Social Surveys in 2006 and 2010, claims that it is only 12.4% of those surveyed that used English in their work in the previous year and that 58.4% never used English even for movies or the Internet. As Yamagami and Tollefson (2011) state, in Japan “the beneficiaries of English language ability are a relatively small number of middle- and upper-middle class individuals” (p.32).

This social tendency is shown in the students’ perception of English use in their future lives. A survey result (MEXT, 2016) shows that 20.6% of third-year high school students do not think they will use English in the future, and 18.8% think English learning is only for the examination, while only 17% of the students hope to achieve higher proficiency levels of English enough to work internationally or to study in universities abroad. MEXT (2016) admits that a lot of students do not feel the necessity of using English in the current social situation.

Terasawa (2015) expresses the situation of English education in Japan as a trilemma, where a difficult choice has to be made among three options, only two of which are possible at the same time. The three options in English education are: English has to be taught to all students in the secondary education, the English taught at school should be practical, and few people need English in Japan as suggested in statistics. According to Terasawa (2015), the claims made on English education choose two of these three options, ignoring or hoping to change the other. One claim, mostly by students, is that though everyone has to take English courses at school, since they do not need to use it in real life, they are not motivated in learning practical English. Another claim by the government and business leaders is that all Japanese need to learn practical English because someday in the future English will probably be necessary to all people even if it is not today. The other claim is that educational system should be

changed in a way that not everyone but only those who need high proficiency of English in their lives study practical English intensively.

With this social educational context in mind, this is where the entrance examination can play a role to realize all three options, if the examination is based on practical English. Since most students have to face the entrance examination, schools need to provide every student with English lessons, the English taught to the students should be suitable to deal with the practical aspects of English, and students feel it necessary to learn English.

The entrance examination has been criticized to be far from measuring the students' ability of practical aspects of English because it focuses too much on grammar and translation with overly difficult vocabulary (Erikawa, 2011). However, in fact, the data cram schools find shows that the current examination is not like what is criticized. Suzuki (2010) points out that English examinations these days, both the National Center Test for University Admissions and others, show more and more influence of other English proficiency tests. Erikawa (2011), analyzing the data collected by Obunsha, reveals that questions that target grammatical knowledge and translation ability take up a very small amount in the test. Kanatani (2009), in addition to pointing out a similar result, further analyzes what grammatical knowledge is targeted in questions and finds that so-called "difficult" grammar points rarely appear in the tests. Kanatani (2009) claims that grammatical knowledge is required for reading and listening comprehension, but is not asked directly.

Rather than grammatical knowledge and translation, reading skills are more required in recent examination. According to the analysis done by Yoyogi Seminar in 2017, in both the National Center Test for University Admissions and examinations for private universities, students are required to read about 3000 words and more, 60-80

words per minute. The question types vary including a summary of a paragraph and ordering of sentences, but extremely complex grammatical knowledge is not necessary to solve them. Rather, the examinations require both top-down and bottom-up reading strategies.

In addition to reading, other skills, especially listening and writing, appear more and more in the tests. The listening test was first introduced in the National Center Test in 2006, and some private universities have followed. Writing is also required in more and more examinations, and sometimes students are asked to integrate their reading and writing skills, such as writing an essay on the reading passages or referring to data on a graph (Yoyogi Seminar, 2017).

Furthermore, in addition to the current examination system, other English proficiency tests, such as TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, Eiken test (Test in Practical English Proficiency), TEAP (Test of English for Academic Purposes), etc., are used for examinations in more and more universities. Currently, these tests are used to give applicants an additional chance in the traditional examinations, but it has been decided that by 2024 they are going to replace the National Center Test completely (Negishi, 2017). This means all students who apply to public universities are required to be prepared for these English proficiency tests and that English classes at school will be required to deal with the change.

### 3. Examination and Criticisms

Since schools have to be very sensitive to the change of the entrance examination, the "Yes, but" feelings occur when I hear criticisms while dealing with the change of the trend towards communicative direction. One of the "Yes, but" feelings is about the criticism against grammar and translation focus. MEXT claims that in spite of the encouragement to focus more on communication, traditional ways of

English teaching still seems to be practiced today, emphasizing the aim of English education is to improve communicative competence (MEXT, 2011).

Yes, communicative competence is important, but this criticism does not sound realistic; we cannot spend a lot of time on grammar and translation if we try to follow the trend of the entrance examination. In fact, a survey where 81 thousand third-year students at 500 high schools participated (MEXT, 2016) shows that 83.3% of high school teachers make lesson plans focusing on language activities. In another survey where 3390 public high schools participated (MEXT, 2017), 45% of high school teachers say they use English in more than half of their classes. Even though the surveys do not reveal what “language activities” or “use of English” actually mean, they at least show teachers realize the importance of using the language.

The influence of the entrance examination can be seen especially in reading skills. 67.5% of the students answered that they learned to use several reading strategies according to the purpose of reading (MEXT, 2016). High school teachers include various reading activities in lessons, encouraged by cram schools such as Yoyogi Seminar.

Yoyogi Seminar (2017) also makes suggestions for writing. In addition to encouraging students to pay attention to accuracy and the organization of the writing, exercises to integrate skills are also recommended since some examinations require this to the applicants. The amount of integrated writing activities was still small (42.5%) in the MEXT (2017) survey, but it will probably keep increasing from now on.

These figures show that the actual classes are not as grammar-translation centered as widely believed. Instead, what the MEXT survey (2016) reveals is that it is speaking activities that lack in English classes. Even though language activities are said to

be a focus of classes by many teachers, not many of them, 30%, say they have speaking activities, such as speech, presentation, debates, and discussion. On the other hand, it seems to the government that language activities mainly mean speaking and listening activities. In the same survey, the language activity is defined as activities such as speech, presentation, debate, or discussion. In other words, what is meant by “not being communicative” to the government is inadequate speaking activities. Even if other skills, reading, listening, and writing, are taught in a communicative way, the impression that English classes are not communicative comes from the fact that speaking is not taught enough.

The current situation of entrance examination can explain this result. Since few universities include a speaking test in the examination, speaking activities have the least focus in class. This does not mean speaking is not important, but it is a matter of choice among various focuses in the limited time given to each class. However, with the increase of speaking test in the future, English classes at school are very likely to, perhaps will have to, include more speaking activities in order to get students ready for such examinations.

Another “Yes, but” feeling is about the issue of achievement level. The criticism claims that the proficiency level of Japanese people is lower than it is hoped to be. Yes, it is true. However, the desired proficiency level is such an ambiguous term that there are gaps regarding the perception of proficiency level among different standpoints, such as between the level the students desire to acquire and the level the government desire, the level of high school textbooks, and the level of entrance examinations. Thus it is not clear what level of English is required to achieve at high school. In the issue of proficiency level as well, entrance examination can play a role to bridge the gaps in terms of motivation and goal setting.

MEXT, driven by a sense of crisis of low proficiency level, published “Regarding the establishment of an action plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English abilities’” in 2003, with a purpose of improving English education in Japan (MEXT, 2003), and in 2011 pointed out the problems the English education faces once again in “the Survey on the five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communication” (MEXT, 2011). It says that students are expected to achieve the proficiency level of CEFR A2/B1, or Eiken Grade Pre-2/2 by the time they complete secondary education.

Actually, the government and business leaders have higher expectations. The government encourages tertiary education institutes to give courses in English so that they can meet the global standard, and some global enterprises have made English the official language at work. For this purpose, MEXT is trying to raise the target proficiency level to be CEFR B1/B2 or Eiken 2/Pre-1 by 2020 (MEXT, 2014).

However, at this moment, there is surely a gap between the current level and the targeted level set by the government. It is reported 36.4% of the third-year students achieved Pre-2 grade at Eiken (MEXT, 2017). As for each skill, MEXT reports that the result of the test that measured English proficiency level of Sr.3 students in 2015 shows more problems in productive skills, speaking and writing, than receptive skills. 87.2% of the students were ranked in A1, including 17.8% who did not answer anything and got 0 score. Regarding writing, 80.4% students were ranked in A1 with 17.6% writing nothing.

These figures show that the Japanese proficiency level of English is lower than expected. Moreover, there is another gap in the perception of the level they hope to attain. As stated in Section 2 of this essay, since many students do not feel the necessity

of using high level English in the future, they are not motivated to achieve higher levels in spite of the encouragement of the government.

In this situation, the entrance examination works as a bridge between the gaps. Even if students are not highly motivated in studying high level English for practical use, the entrance examination becomes the motivation for students to keep studying, which can be seen from the result that 18.8% of the students study English to pass the examination (MEXT, 2016). With this figure added to the 17% who want to use high level English in the future, 35.8% are willing to make efforts to gain high proficiency level of English.

In addition, even though the entrance examination is criticized to be too difficult for high school students, it is almost equivalent to the targeted level that the government hopes for. Torikai (2016) points out that the English level set in the Course of Study is too low for full business use, where 8000 to 10000 word vocabulary size is required. Since 6000 words are said to be the minimum level to enter top universities (Yoyogi Seminar, 2017), the preparation for the entrance examination can be effective to connect both sides.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Even though the entrance examination has been criticized, it is an indispensable element of the educational context in Japan and it should be possible to make more use of it. The analysis of the examinations shows that communicative pedagogies of language learning are effective for the tests, and thus classes are actually changing into the communicative direction. Also the preparation for the entrance examination can motivate students to study high level English and gives them a specific goal of the proficiency level to achieve.

Of course, paying attention to examination is not the sole and comprehensive solution to the



problems facing English education today, nor should examination be the only goal of English education at high schools. It is also true that the entrance examination itself has problems to solve. However, under the situation today, I believe the entrance examination should deserve more than just being treated as an enemy of English education. The studies on the entrance examination tend to be limited in the analysis for effective strategies by cram schools, but various aspects of the entrance examination can be studied, such as the relationship with motivation, teachers' and students' perception, the linguistic value, effective pedagogies to improve communicative competence through examinations, and so on. My hope as an in-service teacher is that research on this field is developed and applied into classes in such a way that entrance examination comes to lie on one same road to the mastery of English.

## References

- Defeng, L. (1998). "It's always more difficult than you plan and imagine": Teachers' perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 677–703.
- Erikawa, H. (2011). *Juken eigo to Nihonjin: Nyushimondai to sankosho kara miru eigogakushu shi* [A Historical Study of English Learning and Reference Books for Entrance Examination in Japan]. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Kanatani, K. (2009). *Kyokashodakede Nyushiwa Toppa Dekiru* [The Textbook is Enough for English Examination]. Tokyo: Taishukan.
- Kubota, R. (2011). Questioning linguistic instrumentalism: English, neoliberalism, and language tests in Japan. *Linguistics and Education*, 22, 248–260.
- MEXT (2003, March 31). Regarding the establishment of an action plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities'. Retrieved from <http://www.gifu-net.ed.jp/kyoka/eigo/CommunicativeEnglish/Regarding%20the%20Establishment%20of%20an%20Action%20Plan%20to%20Cultivate%20%20A1%20C8Japanese%20with%20English%20Abilities%20A1%20C9.htm>
- MEXT (2011, June 30). Survey on the five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communications. Retrieved from <http://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/elsec/title02/detail02/sdetail02/sdetail02/1374088.htm>
- MEXT (2014, January 23). English education reform plan corresponding to globalization. Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/en/news/topics/detail/\\_\\_\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/23/1343591\\_1.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/en/news/topics/detail/___icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/23/1343591_1.pdf)
- MEXT (2016, December 16). Heisei 27nendo eigokyouiku kaizennotameno eigoryoku chosajigyo (kotogakko) hokokusho [A report of the survey of English ability of high school students to improve English education in Heisei 27]. Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a\\_menu/education/detail/\\_\\_\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2016/12/16/1375533\\_1.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/detail/___icsFiles/afieldfile/2016/12/16/1375533_1.pdf)
- MEXT (2017, April 7). Heisei 28nendo eigokyouiku jisshijokyo chosakekka chuugakukotogakko kankei [The status report of English education in Heisei 28 Jr. & Sr. high school]. Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a\\_menu/education/detail/\\_\\_\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2017/04/07/1384236\\_01\\_1.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/detail/___icsFiles/afieldfile/2017/04/07/1384236_01_1.pdf)
- Nakamura, K. (2004). *Naze 'Eigo'ga Mondainanoka?: Eigo no Seiji, Shakairon* [Why is English a Problem?: The Politics and Sociology in English]. Tokyo: Sangensha.
- Negishi, T. (2017, July 11). Senta-shiken kokei, Eigo, 24nendoni kanzen minkan iko. 4nen wa genkoshiki heiyo [English National Center Test will be completely replaced by other tests operated by private enterprises by 2024 with four-year transition period]. *The Asahi Shimbun*, p. 38
- Suzuki, T. (2010). Daigaku nyushi no kimon, akumon, soshite ryomon towa [Strange questions, bad ones, and good ones in the entrance examination to universities]. *The English Teachers' Magazine*, 59, 20-23.
- Terasawa, T. (2015). *'Nihonjin to Eigo' no Shakaigaku. Naze Eigokyouikuron ha Gokaidarake nanoka* [The Sociology of Japanese English: Why is it that there are Many Misunderstandings in English Education?]. Tokyo: Kenkyusha.
- Torikai, K. (2016). *Hommonono Eigoryoku* [True English Competency]. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Yamagami, M., & Tollefson, J. W. (2011). Elite discourses of globalization in Japan: the role of English. In P. Seargeant (Ed.), *English in Japan in the Era of Globalization*. London: Macmillan.
- Yoyogi Seminar (2017). *Sokei nyushi kenkyukai: Eigo* [Analysis of Entrance Examination of Keio & Waseda: English]. Tokyo: Yoyogi Seminar.

