

The multipurpose entrance examination: Beliefs of expatriate ELT faculty

Melodie Cook

University of Niigata Prefecture

Entrance examinations for Japanese universities have come under fire from various sources for having a negative influence on communicative language teaching (Cook, 2010; Sakui, 2004; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004), for being less valid and reliable than they could be (Brown, 2000; Leonard, 1998; Murphey, 2004), and for largely not having been written by experts (Aspinall, 2005). While these criticisms may be valid to some extent, it is important to realize that university entrance exams may only marginally serve pedagogical purposes; their economic, social, and public relations functions may, in some cases, even outweigh educationally-related concerns. This paper presents some initial findings from an exploratory Japan-wide study of tertiary-level, expatriate English teachers' perceptions of entrance examination creation (specifically with regard to the English portion) and results reveal that these tests may be fulfilling more functions than we might at first expect.

日本の大学入試は、「コミュニケーション・ランゲージ・ティーチングに負の影響を持つ」(Cook, 2010; Sakui, 2004; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004)、「妥当性・信頼性に欠ける」(Brown, 2000; Leonard, 1998; Murphey, 2004)、「概して専門家によって作成されていない」(Aspinall, 2005)、など、様々な研究から批判を浴びてきた。これらの批判はある程度妥当かもしれないが、大学入学試験における教育的な目的の役割はごくわずかに過ぎないと認識することが重要である。入試の経済的・社会的・広報的機能が、場合によっては、教育関連の関心を上回ることもさへある。本論では、日本全国の高等教育機関に従事する外国人英語教師の入試問題作成(特に英語の試験)への認識に関する探索的研究から得られた初期の調査結果を提示し、その結果、入試が当初の予想以上に多くの機能を果たす可能性があることを明らかにする。

Many tertiary-level expatriate ELT faculty members in Japan participate, alongside their local colleagues, in entrance examination creation. However, many expatriate teachers express dissatisfaction with their institution's tests, mainly because they believe that these examinations fail to function as language tests should, in other words, to provide pedagogically-useful information. The English portions of entrance examinations have been criticised widely in the literature for a seeming lack of validity and reliability (Brown, 2000; Leonard, 1998; Murphey, 2004), for their influence on how English is taught in Japan, especially to the detriment of communicative language teaching (Cook, 2010; Sakui, 2004; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004), and because they are not constructed by testing experts (Aspinall, 2005).

In general, expatriate ELT faculty members in Japan are likely to come from integrationist academic cultures (Holiday, 1992) which are "skills-based, task-based, participatory, process-oriented, problem-solving, and consultative" (p. 228). In addition, these teachers tend to possess, at the minimum, an MA in TESL and are likely to have taken courses in testing and assessment as part of their graduate school requirements. In graduate school, they may be taught for example, that language tests should serve one of four purposes (Hughes, 2003): to test *proficiency* by measuring people's "ability in a language, regardless of any training they may have had in that language" (p. 11); to evaluate the *achievement* of people or courses, by assessing how they succeed at fulfilling language-course-related objectives; to *diagnose* or identify "learners' strengths and weaknesses... primarily to ascertain what learning still needs to take place" (p. 15); or to *place* candidates, in which case tests "... are intended to provide information that will help place students at the stage (or in the part) of the teaching programme most appropriate to

their abilities” (p. 16). In other words, graduate students are likely to be taught that language tests should serve primarily pedagogical purposes.

However, in Japan, language tests used as entrance examinations seem to have additional non-pedagogical functions as well. According to literature on entrance examinations in Japan in particular, these tests may also serve social, economic, and political purposes (LoCastro, 1990), demonstrate a university’s status and selectivity (Blumenthal, 1992; LoCastro, 1990; Shimahara, 1978), and indirectly measure students’ diligence (Frost, 1991; LoCastro, 1990) and intelligence (Kariya & Dore, 2006; LoCastro, 1990). It is likely that these purposes are familiar to local (Japanese) ELT faculty, who tend to come from a collectionist academic culture (Holliday, 1992) which is subject-oriented and hierarchical, and who have been raised in Japan and gone through the Japanese educational system. Shimahara (1978), in writing about a much earlier version of the Center Test, stated explicitly that the test “is an arbitrary device for social placement (emphasis mine), rather than a pedagogical instrument” (p. 263). However, how clear is this to expatriate ELT colleagues who haven’t been raised and schooled in Japan? Thus, the research question guiding this particular study was “According to expatriate ELT university faculty members, what

purposes does English on entrance examinations serve?”

Method

Data were collected using snowball sampling (Dornyei, 2003) over a three-month period via online survey and then by follow-up open-ended interviews. The 15 respondents who agreed to participate in a follow-up were interviewed via Skype, telephone, or in person. For this study, Cresswell’s (2009) generic guide for analysis and interpretation was followed. Responses mentioned in this paper were follow-up answers to survey questions Q34: “What do you think the purpose of your university’s English portion of the entrance examination SHOULD BE?” Q35: “What do you think the purpose of your university’s English portion of the entrance examination IS?” Q36: “Do you think the majority of Japanese English-teaching faculty agree with your opinions?” and Q39: “What do you believe would improve the effectiveness of the English portion of your university’s entrance examination?”

Participants

Table 1 provides brief biographical information for those who participated in the follow-up interviews.

Table 1. Biographical information of participants

Pseudonym	Nationality	Highest level of education attained	Years teaching in Japan	Type of university
Austin	British	PhD Linguistics	6-10	Technical College
Cabby	American	MA Education	11-20	Private
Cheryl	American	PhD Applied Linguistics	11-20	Private
David	American	MA TESL	11-20	Private
Debbie	American	PhD Linguistics	30-40	National
Diogenes	American	MA TESOL	31-40	Private
Jack	Australian	M.Ed. Language and Literacy Education	1-5	National
Joe	Canadian	MSc. Applied Linguistics	11-20	National
Mauve	American	MA Comparative Literature and Alternative Education	6-10	Private
Mike	British	MA	11-20	Private
Paul	British	MA Modern Languages	21-30	Private
Phil	American	M.Ed. TESOL	1-5	National
Sam	Canadian	M.Ed. TESOL	1-5	Private
Sarah	British	MSc TESOL	11-20	Private
Steve	American	MA TESOL	1-5	Private

Results

Minority report: Entrance examinations DO serve pedagogical purposes

For a few participants creating the English portion of their institution's entrance examinations, there seemed to be congruence between the kinds of test purposes that are commonly studied at graduate school and the tests created at their institutions. For example, Paul said he believed that questions on his university exam were based on the English textbooks the majority of his institution's applicants were known to have used, because in his case, his institution explicitly knew which high schools' students would be sitting the test. In other words, it seemed to Paul that the test was testing students' achievement. Sarah and Cheryl also felt that their respective institutions strove to ascertain if students had retained what they learned in high school. Sarah said, "... when we did create the test together that was the feeling I got, that they were very carefully checking what the students were supposed to have learned and the test was to show if they had done that." Cheryl also said that most of the test creators were familiar with high school English class' contents and attempted to ensure that at least the vocabulary on the exam was familiar to test takers.

Majority report: Entrance examinations DON'T serve pedagogical purposes

However, the majority of the other respondents explicitly said that they believed their institutions' examinations purposes had no pedagogically-related function. In particular, they said that their exams were not testing proficiency, achievement, or placement.

Not for proficiency

Several participants did not see the entrance examinations at their institutions as proficiency tests. Debbie, for one, felt that her institution's test was "...not about English ability exactly... so the questions are not really designed to see how proficient a person is at English" (according to her definition of "proficiency" which she acknowledged may be different from that of her local colleagues). Cheryl also said that she didn't feel that her institution's test assessed proficiency, although she did think there was an assumption among non-English-teaching faculty, however, that the test did indeed assess it:

I remember that coming up at a meeting where we were, somebody was trying to decide whether to fail someone... and the point was made, "Well, they passed our English exam, so we know they can handle... the curriculum here." And I was thinking, "We don't know any such thing!"

Not for achievement

Other participants said they felt entrance exams do not assess what is learned in secondary schools. For instance, Jack lamented the lack of relationship between the test and the high school curriculum, in other words, that his institution was not viewing its entrance examination as an achievement test. It seemed to be, in his opinion, constructed by teachers who "...obviously weren't very familiar with what had been going on for the previous five or ten years in the high school curriculum." This sentiment was echoed by Mauve: "Judging from their selection of (entrance examination) texts, that they're asking for the students now, I don't get the impression they have much idea of what goes on in high school." Achievement, according to Mike, is difficult to assess because the levels of language required, in his opinion, of "all universities" are generally beyond the true ability of Japanese high school students:

I think, as far as I can tell, all the universities use reading passages that are way above the reading level of students, right? So, the issue is really how much higher is it than the actual reading level of the students who are taking it. Like, I've heard at __ City University, they use texts of a reading level of 9. That means a native speaker in year 9. Which is massively above... the average Japanese reading level is at about 4 or 5.

This sentiment is echoed by Phil, who related that it would be difficult to assess students' achievement in high school if that curriculum were not sufficiently covered, especially with regard to the higher-ranking universities in Japan. Joe confidently asserted that at his institution at least, achievement or communicative English was definitely not what was being assessed: "It's not for real-world English; it's not an achievement test based on high school English..." Achievement in English did not seem to be the goal at Steve's institution either. "It doesn't really feel like they care too much about how much has actually been retained in regard to English."

Not for placement

A few participants said they felt entrance examinations did not aid in placing students in classes. Jack believed that his institution's test was clearly not for placement, although he felt that "a lot of people make a very foolish assumption" about entrance examinations being so. Joe, too, said explicitly that he felt his institution's test was "not as placement."

Entrance examination purposes

Participants did, however, cite a host of other purposes of entrance examinations at their institutions, such as to see how well students could perform on tests, to reveal students' IQ levels, to provide funding for institutions through test application fees, to stratify students in society, and to promote institutions to the public.

Tests of test-taking skill

Some respondents, such as Phil, felt that entrance examinations were designed to see how well students could perform on tests, likening learning test-taking skills to learning how to dance:

A lot of them (students) will waste a lot of time just studying test-taking skills and ... you really don't want to study something, there's a way to get around through guessing, you can spend a lot of time just figuring out how to do well on the test. You know, think of it as a dance. You don't really have to have a good sense of rhythm if you know which technical movements to do.

Indicators of intellectual ability and/or academic potential

Some respondents felt that entrance exams may be used to demonstrate students' overall intellectual ability and to predict their academic achievement in university. Debbie and Joe, both teaching at highly-ranked tertiary institutions, believed that the purpose of English on their entrance examinations is to determine students' overall intellectual ability as well as their potential to succeed in an academic environment. At Debbie's institution, giving students translation questions was considered the best way by the local members of the English department to determine this:

It's a test of intellectual ability and ... the test has a couple of relatively-long readings ... and the students translate parts of the read-

ing. There's certain elements of the test that have to be translated ... and that's a very typical kind of question on tests. However, if the students can't understand the general, the overall reading itself, they cannot translate very well."

According to her, students' ability to successfully "turn English back into Japanese" is considered to be clearly linked to intellectual prowess. Joe felt that the purpose of his institution's entrance examination was to determine if potential students could "handle academic work in English at the university level":

I would say it's for ... especially a national university ... one of the purposes is to indicate if the students are academically capable. Secondly, it should in some way show that the student is cognitively prepared or able to deal with ... being an academic, being a student at a university, so we want to see that cognitive skills and basic intelligence come through. So it's really ways of showing that you can handle English at an academic tertiary level and that you're prepared for it psychologically.

Sources of revenue

A large number of expatriate ELT faculty members, such as Diogenes and Phil, said they believed that "the test fee is an important contribution" and "a payoff for the school." Austin, who at the time of this study worked at a lower-ranked technical college, believed that this was the *only* reason for his university's entrance examination, saying that "the kids pay about 10,000 yen or something. I don't know how much it is; they pay a lot to do the test, and they're not being tested." David offered a similar response as well, quoting a similar fee. Mike estimated that between 15,000-20,000 students took his university's test each year at around 25,000 yen per test.

At the other end of the spectrum was Cabby, working at a failing institution he described as "not very competitive." He said that the test fees collected from prospective students hoping to enter the few remaining still-healthy departments at his university helped compensate for those which were ailing, such as the English department:

Now the childhood education department ... the junior-college level of the four-year faculty as well, I think 125 seats is their maximum and they fill up every year. They might turn away

15-25 students each year, and a few of those might end up in the English department, but other than that, there's no department that's hitting the maximum number of seats allowed. And so it's to collect (fees); they'll take anyone now. The test fees are important for the school.

Tools for social stratification

For Mike and Steve, entrance examinations served a primarily gate-keeping function. According to Mike:

... the tests have only one purpose, which is to get students who are at a certain level overall in maths, English, and so on, because they add up the scores together, right? You don't get in based on English. You get in based on three subjects or five subjects. So, it's just to distinguish between them so that, you know, the A ranking university gets the top 5% and then next one down. There's no other function.

Sam echoed this sentiment, using the TOEFL test and its purpose abroad to contrast the situation in Japanese universities as well as the use of language tests in Japan as gate-keeping tools by employers:

This other thing, too, is entrance exams for foreign universities are, at least... recently, they're supposed to determine whether students are able to do the kind of tasks they would be doing if they entered the university, right? And that's what the new TOEFL's supposed to be doing, testing the ability to do university work, right? But for university entrance exams in Japan, I don't think it's that at all. ... and you have English exams for companies, for jobs where the person will never be required to use it. It's just a way to separate people.

Tools for public relations

Interestingly, the most commonly-cited purpose mentioned by respondents was that entrance exams were generally used to promote their institutions. Some participants said that because of a decline in applicants, almost any prospective student who took the entrance examination would be guaranteed a seat at the school. In other words, these institutions did not face a problem of selecting, but rather attracting prospective students. "Did they really need an examination?" I asked. According to Jack, "If the university doesn't have a test, it can't call itself a university."

Cheryl said that she'd heard from some people at her institution that "We don't actually need the test, but we have to have one for PR purposes." Similarly, Austin told me that at his former failing institution there really was no selectivity, so the test day was used as a time for test interviewers to "tell the students all the good points about the school." Paul, more intimately connected with the PR process at his institution, said he believed that the test's purpose was to communicate with potential students:

I've always seen that the test needs to communicate with its target audience and that's where the *akahon* (Red Book containing past tests) became so important because the target audience became the *jukus* (cram schools) and the high school teachers who would advise students to come to our school.

As a response to falling enrolment numbers and a corresponding decline in ability levels, his institution decided to change its focus in order to attract larger numbers of potential students:

Our primary consideration was not, "Is this the right level of difficulty for students coming to take the test?" because then we would have set a test that was so ridiculously easy that we would do nothing for the reputation of the school. Our consideration was "how does this look in the *akahon*?" and then we'll find a way to admit people.

This might explain why Diogenes felt prevented from introducing questions on his university's examination which he felt would truly reflect the actual ability of the usual applicants to his institution. When he "submitted some easier questions that [he] thought reflected the abilities of the students ... that didn't work." Thus, perhaps one of the most important functions of entrance examinations is to promote the image of the school.

Conclusion

As this exploratory study seems to indicate, expatriate ELT university faculty seem to understand, as literature on entrance examinations in Japan suggests, that entrance examinations at Japanese universities serve a myriad of purposes, many of them unrelated to pedagogy. One purpose, to promote the image of the university, appears to stand out as one of the primary reasons why these examinations exist, even at universities that may, in reality, not require them.

Perhaps expatriate ELT faculty feel critical about the English portion of entrance examinations

because what they have learned about language test development may have focused exclusively on the pedagogical aspects of language testing while ignoring the sociocultural contexts in which language testing takes. Further research needs to be done in order to determine how to incorporate a broader perspective into language testing courses. In any case, it must also be acknowledged that in Japan, as well as in other countries, examinations serve a much wider range of purposes, and whether we agree with them or not, if we hope to introduce improvements or innovations, we would have a better chance of success if we could convince our local ELT colleagues that such improvements would advance the overall reputation of our institutions.

It may also be important for expatriate ELT faculty to more critically think about the kinds of recommendations for test design that they are taught in graduate school, especially if they study at inner circle institutions but work in outer or expanding circle countries (Kachru, 1992). What works in such teachers' home cultures, where most pedagogical recommendations originate, may be applicable only to a limited extent in other settings. However, if expatriate ELT faculty are mindful of the culture in which they live and the purposes to which these tests are ultimately put, and if they keep in mind that any changes they suggest need to take into account the multi-functional nature of entrance examinations in Japan, they may have a greater chance at improving their institution's tests (that is to say making them more pedagogically sound), should not only they, but also local ELT faculty, deem it necessary and worthwhile to do so.

References

- Aspinall, R. (2005). University entrance in Japan. In J. S. Eades, R. Goodman & Y. Hada (Eds.), *The 'big bang' in Japanese higher education* (pp. 199-218). Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.
- Blumenthal, T. (1992). Japan's juken industry. *Asian Survey*, 32(5), 448-460.
- Brown, J. D. (2000). University entrance examinations: Strategies for creating positive washback on English language teaching in Japan. *Shiken: JALT Testing and Evaluation SIG Newsletter*, 3(2), 2-7.
- Cook, M. (2010). Offshore outsourcing in-service teacher education: The long-term effects of a four-month pedagogical program on Japanese teachers of English. *TESL Canada Journal*, 28(1), 60-76.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (3rd ed.). California: SAGE Publications.
- Dornyei, Z. (2003). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administration and processing*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Frost, P. (1991). "Examination hell." In E. R. Beauchamp (Ed.), *Windows on Japanese education* (pp. 291-305). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Holliday, A. (1992). Intercompetence: Sources of conflict between local and expatriate ELT personnel. *System*, 77(2), 223-234.
- Hughes, A. (2003). *Testing for language teachers* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kachru, B. (1992). *The other tongue: English across cultures*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Kariya, T., & Dore, R. (2006). Japan at the meritocracy frontier: From here, where? *The Political Quarterly*, 77, 134-156.
- Leonard, T. J. (1998). Japanese university entrance examinations: An interview with Dr. J.D. Brown (Publication). Retrieved from <jalt-publications.org/old_tlt/files/98/mar/leonard.html>.
- LoCastro, V. (1990). The English in Japanese university entrance examinations: A sociocultural analysis. *World Englishes*, 9(3), 343-354.
- Murphey, T. (2004). Participation, (dis-)identification, and Japanese university entrance exams. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(4), 700-710.
- Sakui, K. (2004). Wearing two pairs of shoes: Language teaching in Japan. *ELT Journal*, 58(2), 155-163.
- Sato, K., & Kleinsasser, R. C. (2004). Beliefs, practices, and interactions of teachers in a Japanese high school English department. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, 97-816.
- Shimahara, N. K. (1978). Socialisation for college entrance examinations in Japan. *Comparative Education*, 14(3), 253-266.

Melodie Cook has been teaching at the tertiary level in Japan for 16 years. Her research interests include language teacher education in Japan, entrance examinations as perceived by non-Japanese language teachers, and the use of supplementary education (cram school) by international families in Japan. She can be contacted at Melodie Cook <cookmelo@unii.ac.jp>.

