

# A Myth of Influence: Japanese University Entrance Exams and Their Effect on Junior and Senior High School Reading Pedagogy

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In discussions regarding the negative aspects of exam “washback effect,” one example that is invariably mentioned is the exam-pedagogy relationship ostensibly to be found in Japan. Indeed, it is the supposedly powerful influence of the various university exams on junior and senior high school classroom pedagogy and textbook content in Japan that allegedly both perpetuates inadequate teaching methodologies and frustrates all attempts at reform. This paper examines the large body of research that calls into question this traditional conception of a causal relationship between the entrance exams and junior and senior high school foreign language reading pedagogy and textbook content, and hypothesizes as to the possible non-exam-related motivations for the continued use in Japan of seemingly ineffective foreign language reading pedagogy.

本研究では、試験が教授法に及ぼす「望ましくない波及効果」について論じる。日本の大学入学試験が、中学校・高等学校における英語教育の発展にとって障害となっていることが、多くの研究者によって指摘されている。本研究では、中学校・高等学校での英語読解指導方法や検定済教科書を調査し、指摘されているような大学入学試験の波及効果について、その実態の分析を行った。この分析結果をもとに、教授法や教科書のあり方について提案を行う。

This paper asserts a position that many at first glance will consider untenable—that the influence of the various university exams (i.e., both the national entrance exam and the various independently generated and separately administered individual college or faculty exams) on junior and senior high school foreign language pedagogy in Japan has been exaggerated. Furthermore, this paper makes another equally controversial claim—that the content of these exams can neither explain nor justify the extreme inadequacy of the methodology currently used to teach English reading skills in the overwhelming majority of Japan’s junior and senior high schools.

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The received arguments in place against these positions are formidable. Almost all the studies referred to in this paper agree that there are serious problems with English education in Japan; however, the literature to date *never* fails to identify the ostensibly powerful, and allegedly damaging, influence of the entrance exams as a primary cause of these problems. Indeed, advocates of reform (see Brown, 1993; Brown, 1995; Brown & Yamashita, 1995a & b; Ishizuka, 1997; Rohlen, 1983; Shimaoka & Yashiro, 1990; Sturman, 1989; Vanderford, 1997) focus almost exclusively on the supposedly inhibitive effect of these exams in their current form on attempts to improve junior and senior high school teaching methodology and textbook content. Other observers (such as Cutts, 1997; Frost, 1991; and Tsukada, 1991) note in detail the “big business” aspects of the service industry (the so-called “*juku-yobiko*” system) that has grown up around preparing students for these exams, and they discuss at length the implications of the powerful influence that the existence of this industry suggests. Finally, critics such as Hards (1998) and McNabb (1996) take an even more extreme position, holding that the exams are solely responsible for a host of assorted educational problems, and arguing further that they must be done away with entirely.

A key term that many of these writers use in making these observations is “washback effect,” in this case used to refer to the supposed cause-and-effect nature of entrance examinations’ influence on junior and senior high school teaching methodology. The content of these exams, we are told, dictates to a great extent how and what students will be taught up until they graduate from high school. As Brown says in an interview published in *The Language Teacher* (Leonard, 1998),

It definitely goes on. Basically, teachers teach to prepare for particular tests. The same is true for the yobiko and juku [cram schools]. In fact, these schools gain customers by having a proven track record with certain exams. There is a really high anxiety level involved with these exams—studying for them and getting ready for them (p. 26).

Many writers agree with this position. Sturman (1989), for instance, writes, “the final aims of schools is to prepare students for entrance examinations” (p. 76). Tsukada (1991), among others, delineates at length the ways in which this influence has “undesirable effects on curriculum, on foreign language instruction, on family life, and on children’s emotional, physical, and intellectual development” (p. 178) (see also, Frost, 1991, for similar commentary).

Furthermore, both this influence and the so-called “language testing hysteria” (Brown, 1993, 1995) that it engenders are used to support a further assertion, that merely by instituting changes to (or even eliminating) the exams, one will achieve beneficial changes in the educational

system as a whole. Indeed, it is their belief in the strength of this cause-and-effect relationship between exam contents and classroom pedagogy in Japan that enables Vanderford (1997) to assert confidently that if the entrance exams but contained, “a reliable and valid test of oral English, I believe teachers and students [would] follow suit by teaching and studying English in a more communicative way” (p. 23), or allows Brown (1995) to state,

Teachers should also recognize the relationship between the item types used on university entrance examinations and the pedagogical choices that they make in their classrooms. In 1993 and 1994, the private universities predominately used discrete-point receptive items. This means that in effect they were endorsing a discrete-point receptive view of language teaching (p. 97).

and later,

Japanese universities should begin to change their examinations in similar ways so that their washback effect can become a positive and progressive force for change in language teaching in Japan (p. 98).

Again this implies that the contents of these exams are somehow responsible for the pedagogical practices and textbook content in use at the junior and senior high school level throughout Japan.

### Impetus for Writing

The impetus for writing this paper arose out of the author’s first-hand experience with the entrance exam process here in Japan, including three years as a member of the committee for making and grading the English entrance exams (*Eigoka Nyuugaku Shiken I-Inkai*), the committee for deciding the form and content of all entrance exams at the university (*Nyuugakusha Sembatsu Houhou I-Inkai*), and the committee for making the final decisions as to who is to be accepted into the university (*Nyuugaku Shiken I-Inkai*). During this period, the author noted that over 50% of the would-be English and/or Education students did poorly on the English portion of the entrance exam (in this case, “poorly” refers to those scoring less than 60% correct on the test). However, only 20% of the students applying for entry into either of these programs were turned away. This meant that about 30% of the incoming Education and English majors were accepted into the freshman class despite doing poorly on these exams.

Furthermore, although students generally answered grammar questions correctly, questions focusing on listening and reading comprehension skills were either answered incorrectly or were skipped entirely. Certainly, con-

sidering the nature and pervasiveness of the stereotype that “Japanese know grammar, reading and writing but can’t speak” (see Hards, 1998, and Shimaoka & Yashiro, 1990, for instance), one is not surprised to learn that Japanese students did poorly in listening. However, their not being able to understand reading passages with an average Gunning’s Fog Index rating of 11.600<sup>1</sup> after 6 years of English education was another matter. Where were the fruits of the intensive (an average of 3 hours a week in junior high and 6 hours a week in senior high, not including time spent at *juku-yobiko*) reading and grammar-centered “test preparation” that these students supposedly had undergone?

In order to answer the above question, this author examined 51 studies containing analysis of the methods used and the skills taught in English reading classes at the junior and senior high school level. Since many of these studies are written in Japanese, this report will mark the first time that much of this research is made available to non-Japanese readers. The results of these studies were then compared to the reading skills areas evaluated by the various university entrance exams. The results were indeed surprising. There seemed to be little direct evidence of a causal relationship between entrance exam content and either textbook contents or junior and senior high school English reading pedagogy, at least with regards to the teaching of reading skills. This is in direct contradiction to the monolithic block of critical commentary cited above.

This paper presents the results of these studies and analyzes the areas of weakness in Japanese readers of English that these studies have pointed out, and the possible reasons for these weaknesses. Finally, it hypothesizes as to the possible motivations for the continued use in Japan of reading methodology that does not assist, and may in fact impede, the acquisition of English reading skills.

### Review of Research

Far from the test “cart” pulling the educational “horse,” the contents of the various Japanese university entrance exams seem to have had negligible effect on reading textbook content, reading pedagogy, and/or improving overall student capabilities. Reading skills sections of university entrance exams have been analyzed by Brown (1995), Law (1994), Kimura & Visgatis (1996), and Pai (1996), among others, with the following conclusions:

- 1) The reading passages used therein are almost without exception adult level, well-written, grammatically and stylistically correct (see Brown,

1995, pp. 96-97; Law, 1994, p. 96; Kimura & Visgatis, 1996, pp. 86-92; Pai, 1996, p. 153)

- 2) Contextualized, task-based questions (i.e., not just translation or narrow "discrete-item" questions) make up a large portion of these exams, requiring examinees to have the ability to summarize and/or explain difficult areas in the reading passages (see Brown, 1995, pp. 94-95; Law, 1994, p. 96; Kimura & Visgatis, 1996, pp. 86-92; Pai, 1996, p. 153).

In other words, in order to be prepared for these exams, university-bound high school students would need both to have learned "to read relatively difficult university level passages with good comprehension" (Brown, 1995, p. 96), and to have developed the "rapid structural and lexical recognition skills" (Law, 1994, p. 98) necessary to answer the "integrative" (i.e., reading comprehension) questions that come with such passages (see also Kimura & Visgatis, 1996, pp. 86-92; Pai, 1996, p. 153).

Certainly, mastering the above skills would not be an easy proposition even if the six years and almost one thousand hours of language instruction that college-bound Japanese students typically receive was really the reading- and grammar-centered test preparation that it is held to be. However, analyses of teaching materials and observational studies of classroom methodology conducted by Gorsuch (1998); Hino, (1988); Jannuzi, (1994); Kimura & Visgatis, (1996); Kitao & Kitao (1989, 1995); Kitao, Kitao, Nozawa & Yamamoto (1985); Kitao and Yoshida, (1985); Law, (1994); Mulvey, (1998); Nishijima, (1995); Pai, (1996); Saeki, (1992); Takefuta, (1982); Tanaka, (1985); H. Yoshida, (1985); S. Yoshida, (1985); and Yoshida & Kitao, (1986), among others, raise serious questions about the nature and content of the supposed "test preparation" that Japanese students are being made to undergo.

First, there appears to be little correlation between the reading materials used at the junior and senior high school level and the contents of the various university entrance exams. Kimura & Visgatis (1996), for instance, conducted both Flesch-Kincaid and Gunning-Fog grade level analyses of the contents of several textbooks and entrance examinations, finding the reading difficulty of the entrance exam materials to be:

three or more grade levels above the materials they have been exposed to. . . . This is even more striking after considering that students using textbooks are free to read the passages at home, consult reference works (i.e. dictionaries), and are not subject to the rigorous time constraints found under examination conditions (p. 90).

Pai (1996) comes to similar conclusions, noting that many junior and senior high school textbook reading passages are “full of grammar, spelling, syntactical and stylistic mistakes,” and commenting that, outside of those attending college-prep classes at elite high schools (which also use old entrance exams), most Japanese students will receive “no exposure to adult level, well-written, and error-free reading passages before sitting for an university entrance exam” (p. 153; see also Law 1994). Furthermore, Kimura & Visgatis (1996) also assert the following,

[I]t might be assumed that students are faced with progressively more difficult reading materials as they proceed through the high school curriculum, thus being amply prepared for the difficult reading passages found on entrance examinations. Unfortunately, this is not borne out by the textbook materials. Examination of the difficulty patterns of textbook reading passages shows that the highest average Flesch-Kincaid reading level does not appear in the last third of any of the textbooks, and only two of the textbooks have the most difficult Gunning-Fog result in the final third. If the chapters of the books are used sequentially, students will not be facing the most difficult passages at the end of their high school tenure (p. 90).

The citations above raise two important considerations. If the purpose of secondary-level education in Japan is to prepare students for the university entrance examinations, one would expect textbook content to reflect what is actually on these exams. Furthermore, one would expect textbooks to be designed with progressively increasing difficulty levels in order to slowly acclimate students to the skill-levels needed to succeed on these exams. However, the textbooks are not designed this way, and especially considering the three grade-level difference between textbook and test contents, one is forced to at least question the nature of the “test” preparation that is going on in these classrooms. In other words, where is the exam “washback effect” in an educational system where the contents of the textbooks bear so little relevance to the tests themselves?

Moreover, while effective classroom methodology could go a long way toward making up for any deficiencies in textbook content, there is much evidence to suggest that the methodology being used in Japan’s junior and senior high schools is not effective. As noted above, the reading passages on entrance exams are generally native-speaker level in complexity, with the relevant questions that the students must answer most often integrative/comprehension in nature, i.e., ones that demand advanced structural and lexical recognition skills. Regarding the teaching of such skills to ESL/EFL students, while the issues involved remain somewhat controversial (see Gu, 1996, pp. 11-12), a majority of researchers, including Carrell (1987), Carrell & Eisterhold (1983), Grabe

(1991), Rumelhart (1977, 1980), and Sanford & Garrod (1981), have long argued that “both top-down and bottom-up strategies operating interactively” are necessary for students to be successful (Carrell, 1987, p. 24). Hence, an effective methodology, especially one with the averred goal of preparing students to read and respond to the native speaker-level passages used on entrance exams, would seemingly be one that attempted to provide students with both bottom-up and top-down strategies. These include strategies for analyzing the words and sentences in the text itself (such as guessing from context or skimming) and for making use of students’ own experiences (i.e. their cultural and linguistic background knowledge) to illuminate those areas of meaning left indecipherable by bottom-up processing alone.

However, studies by Gorsuch (1998), Hino (1988); Jannuzi (1994); Kitao & Kitao (1995), Kitao et al. (1985), Kitao and Yoshida (1985), Law, (1994, 1995), Mulvey, (1998), Nishijima (1995), Takefuta (1982), Tanaka (1985), H. Yoshida (1985), S. Yoshida (1985), Yoshida & Kitao (1986), and Yukawa (1994), among others, suggest that the reading pedagogy employed in most Japanese schools is severely deficient in its presentation of both bottom-up and top-down approaches. While the methodology used in Japanese high school classrooms is certainly not identical in all cases, the above studies have identified the following elements as common to the methodology at most schools. First, despite research questioning its effectiveness (see Kitao et al., 1985; Kitao & Kitao, 1995; Kobayashi, 1975; Tanaka, 1985), teacher led and dominated line-by-line translation remains the preferred teaching methodology most students will encounter in the 6 years leading up to their entrance into college (Hino, 1988; Jannuzi, 1994; Kitao et al., 1985; Mulvey, 1998; Robb & Susser, 1989). Second, content-based questions, such as the kind featured on most entrance exams, are rarely used as teaching tools in most junior and senior high school classes, and if they are used (such as at elite college-prep schools where old exams are used to supplement the textbooks), students are rarely given the opportunity to individually negotiate meanings in a particular passage. (Kitao, Kitao, Nozawa, & Yamamoto, 1985). Instead, teachers in many cases literally dictate the correct answers in Japanese to the students, whose role it is to take notes to be regurgitated verbatim on later tests (Gorsuch, 1998, pp. 22-23; Kitao & Kitao, 1995, pp. 147-167; Mulvey, 1998; Saeki, 1992, pp. 18-19). Indeed, in a written survey given in Japanese to incoming freshmen (312 students) at Fukui University over a period of 2 years, 68% said that they had spent less than 2 hours a month reading English passages (in class or out) in junior and senior high school, and a full 72% characterized what “reading” they had done as translation exercises (Mulvey, 1998). Furthermore, an amazing 92% reported having had neither an opportunity

to discuss nor to analyze independently the thematic contents of the passages they did read, stating instead that they were merely dictated answers that they were then expected to memorize for later tests.

One result of the above-described methodology is that, outside of the grammar emphasis, standard reading and comprehension strategies are just not taught at most high schools: skimming and/or guessing from context strategies are neither encouraged nor explained (Kitao, 1979; Kitao, Yoshida & Yoshida, 1986; Kitao & Kitao, 1995, pp. 147-167; Tanaka, 1985); word relationships (such as between synonyms and/or antonyms) are not taught (Kitao, Broderick, Fujiwara, Kitao, & Sackett, 1985; Kitao, Yoshida & Yoshida, 1986), and a significant percentage of students never even learn to use a dictionary effectively by themselves (Kitao et al., 1985; Kitao, Yoshida & Yoshida, 1986); limited English reading practice in junior and senior high school leaves students with difficulties recognizing Roman script (Weaver, 1980) and English sentence word order (Kitao, 1979; Kitao, Yoshida & Yoshida, 1986); and finally, English vocabulary (Kitao & Kitao, 1995, pp. 147-167; Kitao et al., 1985) and reading speed (Yoshida, S., 1985; Yoshida & Kitao, 1986)—even after six years and almost 1,000 hours of study—remain completely inadequate to allow reading comprehension of anything approaching authentic English texts.

Top-down processing strategies such as scripts, schemes, and the use of students' background knowledge or experiences also are not addressed. For instance, students are not taught culturally specific, preferred organizational differences (Kitao & Kitao, 1989, 1995). These include differing methods of topical progression and/or rhetorical organization as described in work by Hinds 1983, 1990; Kobayashi, 1984; Mulvey, 1992; Ricento, 1987; and Yutani, 1977, knowledge of which might enable students to better anticipate the topical progression in a particular work. Moreover, most high school teachers are not even aware of the 30+ years of relevant research (Kawasaki, 1998). Strategies for relating pieces of information as a way of increasing reading retention capacity have not found their way into most high school curriculums (Takahashi & Takahashi, 1984). Due to the superficial content of most "comparative cultures" education in Japan, students often never receive the cultural background knowledge necessary to make key connections and recognize implied meanings (Kitao & Kitao, 1989, 1995). Finally, even in many *Japanese* literature classes, with their long tradition of non-text-centered and non-analytical pedagogy (Hatano, 1993; Inoue, 1993; Sakamoto, 1995, p. 261), students rarely practice the kind of "reading for comprehension" skills demanded on the English reading sections of the entrance exams, resulting in students who are unaccustomed to analyzing passages in this way in their own language



being asked to do so (for the entrance exams) in another (Gorsuch, 1998, p. 23; Kitao & Kitao, 1989, 1995).

In other words, researchers have shown that few Japanese students receive adequate bottom-up preparation in reading. Furthermore, even those who do have been found to have extreme difficulties reading authentic texts, both because of their lack of exposure to such texts and because they have not been exposed to the top-down strategies necessary to fully appreciate them. And again, as the ability both to understand and to respond to authentic English texts is one of the ostensible goals of the six years of preparation that Japanese students receive before sitting for the exams, the deficiencies in both top-down or bottom-up preparation that have been delineated throughout this paper must perforce call into question the nature of the relationship between exam content and the “test-centered reading preparation” that Japanese students are supposedly receiving. In other words, where in all the above-documented lack of reading preparation is there evidence of a causal relationship between test and pedagogy in Japan as described by Brown, (1993); Brown, (1995); Brown & Yamashita, (1995a & b); Ishizuka, (1997); McNabb, (1996); Rohlen, (1983); Shimaoka & Yashiro, (1990); and Vanderford, (1997)? Given that it generally produces—and indeed seems almost designed to produce—students with limited context-recognition skills, poor vocabularies, inadequate rhetorical/ schematic preparation, and deficient cultural background knowledge, i.e., just the areas that a truly “test-centered reading curriculum” would seemingly emphasize, it seems safe to say that both the nature and the extent of the exam’s “washback effect” on the educational system in Japan have been exaggerated. At the very least, the above discussion suggests that the relationship between test content and the perpetuation of current pedagogical practices is actually extremely complex and may involve a variety of contributing factors.

While they are careful to place the majority of the blame on exam influence, other researchers have recently begun to search for additional, possibly contributing, factors. For instance, Gorsuch (1998), Hino (1988), Jannuzi (1994), Kitao & Kitao (1995), Kitao et al. (1985), Law (1994, 1995), and Yukawa (1994) suggest that teaching grammar in English reading classes, including the intricacies of *Japanese* grammar, are important classroom goals. Jannuzi (1994), for example, relates this about the large number of reading-centered classes he either observed or participated in during the four years he spent teaching in Japanese high schools:

[T]ranslation was almost always from English into Japanese. If students did undertake translation, it was limited to the translation of sentences disconnected from longer discourse in order to practice grammar points. Students did not translate authentic texts (p. 122).

Hino (1988), Law (1994, 1995), and Gorsuch (1998) report similar findings. Hino writes that the teacher's role in the classroom is to "provide a model translation, and to correct the student's translation" (p. 46), to which Law (1995) adds, "the focus of attention is only initially on the codes of the foreign language; most of the productive energy of the method is directed towards the recoded Japanese version" (p. 216). Gorsuch (1998), finally, writes that the classroom methodology she observed,

appeared to the researcher more as lessons in Japanese than in English. On one hand, these sequences served to help teachers focus students' attention on grammatical differences between English and Japanese. On the other hand, the teachers focused on helping students to think about and create meaningful Japanese, rather than meaningful English (p. 20).

Even more interestingly, Gorsuch (1998) relates that both teachers she observed, when interviewed, admitted that helping students "learn Japanese" is an important part of what they are attempting to achieve through their English reading classes (p. 23), again supporting the conclusions of the other researchers. Indeed, if the above observations are accurate, it would seem that teaching proper Japanese grammar is an important supplementary goal in at least some English classrooms, providing one additional explanation for the oft-observed heavy reliance in this country on line-by-line translation into Japanese as a foreign language instructional tool.

Additional ulterior motives for the continued use of the present methodology have also been suggested. Hino (1988), for instance, asserts that this methodology builds mental discipline in the students. Law (1994) interprets its continued utilization as almost reflecting a xenophobic element in the Japanese national character, arguing that it is a symbol of a Japan's "refusal of direct engagement" with other languages and its unwillingness to deal with the "codes" of a foreign culture without "recoding" them into Japanese (p. 97). Gorsuch (1998) suggests that the need to maintain "control" in the classroom is a prominent motivational force, writing that this pedagogy "affords teachers powerful control over students' language learning activities," and noting, "students were required to translate at nearly every juncture, and their translations were checked, and controlled, by the teachers in and out of class" (p. 27).

Finally, there is one further possibility. Judging by this author's three years of experience as a Literature instructor at the only teacher training program in the prefecture, many would-be Japanese teachers of English appear to receive little exposure to or training in reading pedagogy outside of that described in the preceding sections above. In

other words, could teacher ignorance of possible pedagogical alternatives be an additional contributing factor in the perpetuation of current methodological practices? After all, people have been criticizing English pedagogy in Japan for the same reasons for over 100 years (see Mantanle, 1996), from a time preceding the university entrance exams in their current manifestation.

Certainly, a much broader study would be necessary to establish any of these conclusions as definitive. However, it should be clear from the above hypotheses that other researchers are at least beginning to question the motives behind the pedagogical practices in use at Japanese schools. Indeed, given the apparent irrelevancy of current methodology in assisting students in passing at least the reading sections of the entrance exams, it seems possible to argue that there is at least the chance of strong motivational forces and situational requirements operating here outside of mere "test preparation," ones that have not been fully studied but which may be significant nonetheless.

#### Conclusions and Final Comments

In arguing that the washback effect of the university entrance exams on reading pedagogy has been exaggerated, this author wishes to make clear that he is neither overlooking nor discounting the integral and often negative impact of the exams on the Japanese economy, social and educational system, and family. That there is an "exam hysteria" (Brown 1993, 1995) is self-evident; that a lot of time and especially money is invested in this multi-billion dollar industry is undeniable (Frost, 1991); that the effect on Japanese family life and, in particular, the effect on high school students caught in "exam hell" can be and often is devastating is also unarguable (Tsukada, 1991).

Less apparent, however, is the connection between the reading pedagogy in practice at most junior and senior high schools in Japan and the entrance exams that have supposedly necessitated it. Native-speaker level reading passages and related comprehension and analytical questions are on the entrance exams: Where is the preparation for handling these types of passages and questions? Furthermore, entrance exam questions seem to be becoming progressively more analysis- and comprehension-centered (Brown & Yamashita, 1995a & b; Law, 1994, 1995). At the same time, however, the overall ability of Japanese students to handle such questions or to read authentic English passages seems to actually be *decreasing* (Ishizuka, 1997; Nishijima, 1995; Saeki, 1992, p. 28). Study after study discussed in this paper supports these latter findings. In addition, they point out the probable explanations for this phenomenon: poor bottom-up and

top-down preparation, little to no exposure to extensive reading with authentic English texts, and a lack of opportunities to independently negotiate textual meanings or to attempt to master comprehension questions on their own. Where, then, is the “washback effect” on pedagogy that these exams are supposed to produce?

Is all this simply a problem of the entrance exams being too difficult, as suggested by some writers (see Brown 1993, 1995; Brown & Yamashita, 1995a & b, and Kimura & Vigatis, 1996)? This is a complex question. That the reading sections of many of these exams *are* too difficult for most Japanese students is obvious. Less obvious, however, is whether the skill levels demanded by the exams represent excessive or unreasonable expectations for students with six years and almost one thousand hours of intensive, supposedly reading and grammar-centered, academic preparation. In addition, what is “normal” for the rate of acquisition of L2 reading skills in a non-European EFL population is something which is not established, since little research has been done in this area. For example, studies conducted by Cummins (1981) and Ekstrand (1976, 1978) deal only with children in an ESL environment; Grinder, Otomo & Toyota (1962) looks at the acquisition of EFL *listening* skills in elementary school-age Japanese children; and Collier (1987) and Kuroiwa (1997), the two most relevant studies found and ones whose findings seem to support the argument that Japanese students should be much better prepared than they are, look only at the ESL acquisition rates of students in relation to their length of stay in the country where the L2 is spoken. Hence, even these latter studies are not really applicable to the EFL situation.

Does this lack of relevant research protect Japanese schools from the charge that they are not doing all they can to give students the reading skills necessary to succeed on the entrance exams? Hardly. As the research cited in this paper illustrates, current methods of teaching EFL reading in Japan are grossly inadequate and result in a large number of students who have difficulty understanding texts written in English. These findings of inadequacy are further supported by a comparison of average TOEFL scores between Japan and other Asian countries. Although such a comparison certainly cannot be taken as definitive in itself, the results in this case are suggestive. Despite the fact that Japan spends far more on foreign language education, despite the fact that Japanese students receive on average far more hours of English instruction per week, and despite the equivalent levels of difficulty in moving from the L1 to the L2, Korean, Taiwanese, Chinese, and Thai students all have significantly higher average TOEFL reading scores than their Japanese counterparts: 499 for the Japanese, compared with 519/520/556/520 respectively for the other groups (Ishizuka, 1997; *Keizai doiyukai*,

1998, pp. 206-213; Saeki, 1992, p. 28). Moreover, the traditional rebuttal to such statistics—that only the elite students from the other countries listed take the TOEFL—does not hold up to close examination. Although more Japanese do take the exams, the percentage of the total Japanese population taking the exams is actually *lower* than that of Korea and Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> Hence, it could be just as easily argued that it is the Japanese educational elite that are taking and doing poorly on the exams in high numbers.

Furthermore, it should also be noted that the average TOEFL reading scores of Japanese students have continued to *decrease* steadily over the last 20 years, ironically, while speaking scores have gone up (see Ishizuka, 1997). This is a failure that is occurring despite the presence of adult native speaker-level reading passages on the college entrance exams, the increasing use on the exams of comprehension questions demanding advanced structural and lexical recognition skills, and the reading-centered teaching methodology that this usage ostensibly should have engendered. Again, where is the evidence in this gradual decline of reading skills of either an exam “washback” effect or six years of supposedly intensive “grammar- and reading-centered” test preparation?

Finally, this author noted earlier in this paper that, in his experience, would-be students regularly do poorly on the entrance exams and yet are still accepted into college. Is this experience an aberration? Several commentators (Leonard, 1998; Vanderford, 1997, p. 19) have noted the critical role of recommendations and/or athletic scholarships in the post-secondary school admissions of up to 30% of Japanese students. Furthermore, consider the following. In America, traditionally considered a country with lax admissions standards, 70% of students go on to enter post-secondary/tertiary schools (i.e., either two-year or four-year colleges). In Japan, a country long noted for the strictness of its admissions policies, an almost equal 69% go on to successfully enter post-secondary/tertiary schools (*Keizai doiyukai*, 1998, p. 216). In other words, despite apparently low average skill levels when compared to the demands of the various exams, most Japanese students do manage to go on to post-secondary schools.

In short, the assumption of many of the writers referred to at the beginning of this paper, i.e., the importance of these entrance exams and their supposed “washback effect” on pedagogy in Japan, is actually a somewhat controversial premise worthy of a more open and critical debate. Indeed, as the overall pool of Japanese students attempting to get into post-secondary schools continues to decrease due to a declining birthrate and other demographic forces, it stands to reason that post-secondary programs will be forced to compete more en-

ergetically in order to maintain enrollment at levels sufficient to ensure their economic viability, including, perhaps, a continued relaxation of admission standards. With such motivational forces and situational requirements in mind, it seems clear that the importance of the entrance exams and the relevancy of the preparation that students are receiving for them will become an increasingly controversial issue in the foreseeable future. It is hoped that the research discussed in this paper will help further debate on this issue.

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#### Notes

1. This indicates a readability level approximately equivalent to the U.S. mid-third year level in high school. The author recognizes the limitations of such indexes as measuring devices of passage complexity. However, their use as a means of providing general indications of passage difficulty is long established (see Crystal, 1987; Richards, Platt & Weber, 1985).
2. Based on 1994 statistics [author's note]. See, for instance, Ishizuka (1997).

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