

# Impacts of Introducing Four-Skill English Tests into University Entrance Examinations

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From 2020, four skills English tests administered by external testing companies will be introduced as university entrance examinations throughout Japan (MEXT, 2017a). It has been often claimed that the current state of the English entrance examinations has hindered senior high school teachers from conducting communicative language teaching (Nishino, 2008; O'Donnell, 2005; Taguchi, 2005). The objective of introducing four skills English tests is to bring about positive washback effects and change classroom practice by abolishing the Center Test, which currently evaluates only reading and listening skills, and introducing externally available English tests which can evaluate English four skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing and to cultivate senior high school students' communication abilities in this global society as stated by MEXT's 2009 Course of Study. This paper reviews the background of introducing four skills English tests, possible concerns of introducing four skills English tests, and proposals to resolve those concerns.

外部試験機関が実施する4技能英語試験が2020年から日本の大学入試に導入される(文科省、2017a)。現在の英語の入学試験は、高校教師がコミュニカティブな言語指導を行う妨げとなっている、と頻繁に言われている(Nishino, 2008; O'Donnell, 2005; Taguchi, 2005)。4技能英語試験導入の目的は、リーディングとリスニング技能のみを評価する現在のセンター試験を廃止し、リスニング、リーディング、スピーキング、ライティングといった英語の4技能を評価できる外部テストを導入することにより、肯定的なウォッシュバック効果をもたらす、授業実践を変えることである。また、2009年に文科省から発表された学習指導要領で述べられているように、グローバル化社会に対応して、高校生のコミュニケーション能力を育成することも導入の目的の一つである。本論では、4技能英語試験導入の背景、導入により考えられる懸念とその解決策について検討する。

It has been claimed that the current state of the English entrance examinations has hindered senior high school (hereafter SHS) teachers from conducting communicative language teaching (Nishino, 2008; O'Donnell, 2005; Taguchi, 2005). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter MEXT) plans to remedy this problem by introducing externally available tests to evaluate four skills of English, listening, reading, speaking, and writing as university entrance English examinations throughout Japan (2017a). Externally

available four skill English tests (hereafter 4 SETs) were selected in terms of how well they provide a well-balanced evaluation of the four skills of English, their consistency with the Course of Study, and correspondence with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001, hereafter CEFR) (MEXT, 2017b). CEFR is a framework that can be used for syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, and textbooks designed for basic users of language (Level A1) to highly proficient users of language (Level C2) (Council of Europe, 2001). From 2020, the levels of the CEFR will be used in applications of entrance examinations along with results of each test. In 2018, the National Center for University Entrance Examinations (hereafter NCUEE) accredited Cambridge English, EIKEN Tests, GTEC CBT, IELTS, TEAP, TEAP CBT, TOEFL iBT, and TOEIC L&R / TOEIC S&W as 4SETs (2018b). The introduction of 4SETs including a speaking section is expected to bring about positive effects on teaching and learning and to encourage instructors to adopt a more communicative approach to teaching.

Currently, the National Center Test scores reported by the NCUEE are widely used by SHS students when applying to public and private universities. In 2018, 82 national universities, 89 public universities, and 526 private universities used the National Center Test, and 546,712 examinees took its English examination (NCUEE, 2018a). Reflecting MEXT's five-year action plan titled *To Cultivate Japanese with English Ability* (2003), which stressed the need to cultivate English proficiency among Japanese people, the English Test was revised in 2006 by adding a listening section. Although the listening section was added, the focus remains on the reading section. Though the English Test by the NCUEE will be changed in the academic year of 2020, it will not be offered after its implementation in the academic year of 2023. Only 4SETs administered by external testing companies are to be used in place of the NCUEE's English Test from 2024 (MEXT, 2017a).

There has been an increasing demand to reform the National Center Test since the enactment of MEXT's 2009 Course of Study. Its overall English objective is "to develop students' communication abilities such as accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas, etc., deepening their understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages" (MEXT, 2010, p. 1). The importance of evaluating students' ability to communicate across the four skills of English is stated in the five proposals to improve English education for keeping up with the rapid pace of globalization (MEXT, 2014). In order to evaluate whether SHS students have acquired adequate communicative skills, tests that can accurately evaluate proficiency in the four skills of English are expected to be introduced.

In the Course of Study, it is stated that "when taking into consideration the characteristics of each English subject, classes, in principle, should be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English, transforming classes into real communication scenes" (MEXT, 2010, p. 3). Regarding the language policy, some teachers held negative views because the policy would be introduced without changing the university entrance examinations (Glasgow, 2012). University entrance examinations are expected to change to reflect the language policy in class. In 2017, MEXT released findings about English use in classrooms of SHS teachers who were in charge of Oral Communication classes. Among 6,781 English teachers, 2,687, which is about 39%, answered that less than half of their utterances were in English (MEXT, 2017c). The above findings indicate that even five years after the enactment of the 2009 Course of Study in 2013, many SHS teachers are not using a great deal of English in classes.

Possible causes preventing SHS teachers from conducting English classes in English are the teachers' lack of confidence in teaching English in English and students' low English proficiency (Glasgow, 2012; Nagamine, 2013; Saito, 2015). Another reason why the policy has not been fully implemented by SHS teachers is the presence of the current National Center Test. Kanatani (2012) argued that one reason why English classes cannot be conducted in English is that teachers feel pressured to help their students pass entrance examinations. In Saito's 2017 study of SHS teachers' cognition of the English language policy that involved interviews with three SHS teachers, the results showed that all of their classroom practices were influenced by university entrance examinations. One teacher had

to change her classroom practice from communicative teaching to focusing on drill practice in order to prepare students to pass entrance examinations when the students were in the third year of high school. Another teacher shared a similar experience, as he had to change his classroom practice by taking entrance examinations into consideration because his second-year students expected to prepare for the entrance examinations by using controlled activities. Given that some SHS teachers change how they teach English because of the form of university entrance examinations, introducing 4SETs that include a speaking section might create a washback effect. Washback, which is "the extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not necessarily otherwise to" (Messick, 1996, p. 243), can be positive or negative (Alderson & Wall, 1993). One example of positive washback is the inclusion of an oral interview in a final examination in a conversational course (Bachman, 1990) that causes students to engage in communicative practice.

### Washback Effects of High-Stakes Examinations

According to Cheng and Watanabe (2004), high-stakes tests have strong washback effects on teaching and learning. If the tests are changed and bring about beneficial change, it is called positive washback. On the contrary, if contents of tests are based on restricted definitions and they constrain teaching and learning contexts, it can be negative washback (Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011). The current status quo of university entrance examinations has led to situations in which some SHS teachers focus on test preparation for university entrance examinations, an approach to education called "teaching to the test." Teaching to the test involves using materials that mimic the format and cover the same curriculum territory as the test (Smith, 1991).

Both positive and negative washback have been reported for high-stakes tests. Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011) investigated washback effects of the English National Examination on teaching and learning in Indonesia and found negative washback on teachers' methods of instruction because many were teaching to the test to prepare students for the examination. Shohamy (1993) reported positive washback for an oral test introduced in the Israeli educational system in 1986 where teachers spent more time teaching oral language as a result of the test. Shohamy, Donista-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996) later reported positive washback by slightly modifying an oral test, as the modification resulted in more oral teaching activities. On the contrary, a

public examination in Spain, the English Test (ET) of the Spanish University Entrance Examinations (SUEE), which only had a reading section, saw most teachers reducing the amount of time dedicated to oral production (Pizarro, 2009).

### Possible Positive and Negative Washback of Introducing 4SETs

The introduction of 4SETs will likely bring about both positive and negative washback. One possible positive washback is for teachers to change classroom practice focusing more on students' acquiring speaking skills, as a speaking section is included in all of the adopted 4SETs. In fact, one of the 4 SETs, TEAP, was designed to bring about positive washback on classrooms (Green, 2014). Positive washback effects of 4SETs have also been reported. One example is positive washback on students' learning of productive skills by introducing IELTS in a university in Japan (Allen, 2016). Increasing to have a more communicative focus by introducing 4SETs as university entrance examinations can have positive washback effects on high school English teachers' instruction (Hama and Okabe, 2016). Although the 2009 Course of Study states that English classes should be conducted in English to increase opportunities for students to be exposed to English and to change classes into actual communication contexts (MEXT, 2010), the policy has not been fully implemented (MEXT, 2017b). The introduction of 4SETs can encourage SHS teachers to use more English to maximize the students' opportunities to listen to and speak English.

However, the introduction of 4SETs pose some problems because it is unprecedented in English education in Japan. The currently accredited 4SETs, Cambridge English, EIKEN Tests, GTEC CBT, IELTS, TEAP, TEAP CBT, TOEFL iBT, and TOEIC L&R/TOEIC S&W, vary in terms of their contents and level of difficulty. For example, TOEIC focuses on business English, while TOEFL iBT and TEAP are focused on academic English. SHS teachers can be expected to be familiar with several of these tests so that their students can choose appropriate tests for them. However, understanding different test styles and the contents of each test can be challenging given their number. Another concern is that SHS teachers might teach to the test by focusing mainly on techniques and strategies that their students can use to pass the 4SETs. However, currently, the skills required in the speaking sections of 4SETs are limited. For example, expressing opinions is part of the speaking sections of most of the 4SETs, but there is a limitation in communication skills that the speaking sections of 4SETs can cover.

Many characteristics observed in communicative interactions such as multiple turns and turn-taking are not assessed in most of the 4SETs. If teachers focus only on the skills that 4 SETs cover, their students cannot have an opportunity to improve other areas of speaking in classes. Finally, though 4SETs were selected in terms of their consistency with the Course of Study and correspondence with CEFR (MEXT, 2017b), there are issues whether they are consistent with the Course of Study and correspondent with CEFR.

### Encouraging Positive Washback and Discouraging Negative Washback

In order to encourage positive washback, SHS teachers can incorporate some parts of speaking sections of 4SETs. As one example, the speaking sections of 4SETs such as the sections of EIKEN and TEAP include parts in which students have to express their opinions about various topics. These can be used for module speaking activities as pair or group work during classes. SHS teachers play an important role in maximizing positive washback and are thus expected to make an environment in which English is spoken as much as possible in the classroom.

Because some might assume that SHS teachers need to be familiar with all of the adopted 4SETs to help their students prepare for those tests, opportunities for SHS teachers to become familiar with 4SETs should be increased. Detailed information about 4SETs should be easily accessible, so MEXT and the institutions that administer 4SETs should offer as much information as possible in various ways, such as sharing details about 4SETs on the MEXT website and the homepages of the testing institutions. In addition, offering workshops where teachers can learn about the accredited tests may be another solution. Also, SHS teachers can learn about 4SETs from each other by setting up a peer-support system within schools. Teachers can learn from other teachers through talking to them, observing them, and sharing teaching activities (Nishino, 2012). For instance, if there are several English teachers at one school, each teacher can be assigned to a different 4SET to focus on developing expert knowledge of it, and all this knowledge could then be shared amongst the teachers.

It should be acknowledged that there are limitations concerning the contents that can be covered in 4SETs. For example, in the speaking sections of 4SETs, test-takers rarely engage in multiple turns, initiate and end conversations, or use language functions, such as making an invitation, accept-

ing or refusing invitations, showing gratitude, or making apologies. However, these functions are observed in communicative interactions. Although these features of language are not fully covered in 4SETs, they arguably need to be taught and learned in classrooms. These language functions are also mentioned in the new Course of Study as functions that should be dealt with (MEXT, 2018).

## Conclusion

In 2020, university entrance examinations will undergo substantial changes as a result of the introduction of 4SETs that have the potential to change classroom practice by causing greater focus on developing students' English communicative skills. In the past, many measures such as the introduction of the listening section in the National Center Test and the enactment of the language policy of teaching English in English were taken to change classroom practice and cultivate students' English communicative skills. However, the current state of university entrance examinations hindered SHS teachers from conducting communicative language teaching (Nishino, 2008; O'Donnell, 2005; Taguchi, 2005). Though the English language policy stated in MEXT's 2009 Course of Study has not been fully introduced by teachers (MEXT, 2017c), 4SETs that include speaking sections might also change SHS teachers' medium of instruction from Japanese to English as a result of positive washback effects. Teachers' roles are important for its effective introduction of 4 SETs because teachers can determine whether to allow washback to operate (Spratt, 2005). Thus, it is necessary to create opportunities for teachers to learn about 4SETs and their limitations and help them maximize positive washback and minimize negative washback.

Prior to the introduction of 4SETs, recognizing possible problems and solving each problem step by step will be a pressing issue. In fact, Kyoto University announced that submitting scores of 4SETs is not mandatory because 4SETs themselves are not clearly visible and concerns about unforeseen circumstances such as regional and economic circumstances and disasters have remained (Nikkei, 2018). This decision follows Tokyo University's decision not to make 4 SETs mandatory (Tokyo University, 2018). In addition, it is also necessary to analyze and review 4SETs in terms of consistency with the Course of Study. The present Course of Study, which was issued in 2009 and has been enacted in 2013, was used as a reference for selecting the 4SETs; however, a new Course of Study was announced in 2018 and will be enacted in 2022. Whether 4SETs are consistent with the 2009 Course of Study and the

new Course of Study will need to be further investigated.

Regarding 4SETs' correspondence with the CEFR, it is argued that the use of the CFFR is not appropriate (Torikai, 2018). The CEFR itself, which was used as a reference to the new Course of Study and 4SETs, has been revised in the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018) with more emphasis on mediation, the addition of written and online interaction and new descriptors, and revisions to the 2001 CEFR descriptors. At the launching conference of the CEFR Companion Volume held at the Council of Europe in 2018, North (2018) addressed the shift from learning and teaching four skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing to learning and teaching four modes of reception, production, interaction, and mediation because communication is an integral part of tasks where participants engage in the four modes or a combination of two or more of these. Reviewing and reflecting the additions and revisions in the CEFR Companion Volume will be necessary in the future. Addressing the issues and other possible concerns is an urgent matter for the introduction of 4SETs to be implemented effectively so that SHS teachers are encouraged to adopt a more communicative approach and to help SHS students to cultivate the four skills in English communication.

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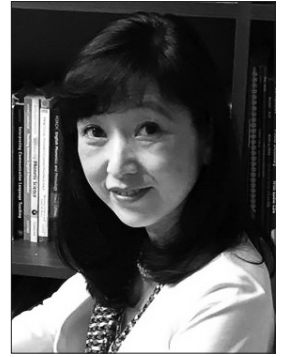
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## [JALT PRACTICE] TLT INTERVIEWS



### Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

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## An Interview with Rod Ellis on Performance-Assisted Learning

David Kluge

Nanzan University

Welcome to *TLT Interviews*! For the March/April issue, we present a very special interview with Rod Ellis, a renowned linguist who received his Doctorate from the University of London and his Master of Education from the University of Bristol. A former professor at Temple University both in Japan and the US, Dr. Ellis has taught in numerous positions in England, Japan, the US, Zambia and New Zealand, and has published extensively. He is presently in the Department of Education at Curtin University in Perth, Australia. He was interviewed by David Kluge.



*Mr. Kluge has been teaching English for over 35 years and currently works at Nanzan University. His research interests include oral interpretation, speech, drama, debate, composition, and materials development. He has co-authored three books on composition with Matthew Taylor (National Geographic Learning) and one book on oral communication (Macmillan Language House). So, without further ado, to the interview!*

**David Kluge:** Hello, Rod. Thank you for agreeing to this interview.

**Rod Ellis:** You're welcome.

*What do you think of a topic of particular interest to me, that is Performance-Assisted Learning — performance activities to help learn, consolidate learning, and evaluate learning across the curriculum?*

It seems to me that one of the essential features of Performance-Assisted Learning activities is that they make the expression of meaning, the conveyance of meaningful messages, primary. They also require learners to make use of whatever linguistic resources they have in order to carry out the performance, right? So, there is potentially a spontaneity, although I think there is a danger that a perfor-