

Investing in Their Futures: Highly-motivated Students' Perceptions of TEAP and University Entrance Exams

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This study investigates Japanese high school students' attitudes toward English proficiency tests, specifically the Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) and university entrance examinations. Three rounds of interviews with five highly motivated learners at a prestigious high school were held over a period of 1.5 years. The interviews focused on their beliefs about English and their study methods; their impressions of and study methods for TEAP and other entrance exams; and their post-graduation plans. The interview data reveals students felt studying for TEAP provided an opportunity for authentic language study, which was in line with their high school study and would be useful for their futures. In contrast, they felt other entrance exams often focused on different skills and knowledge, making preparation for them both challenging and frustrating. These academically minded students found studying English merely for university entrance purposes to be demotivating, but a necessary evil to achieving their immediate goals.

本研究は、英語力を測定する試験、具体的には TEAP (英語運用能力測定試験)、及び大学入試に対する日本の高校生の考え方を調査している。1年半にわたって、著名な高校の学生で、かつ非常に学習意欲の高い5名の学習者を対象に3回インタビューを実施した。インタビューは、生徒の英語に対する信念、学習方法に焦点を置いた。また、TEAPに対する印象、TEAPのための勉強方法、その他の入試、卒業後の進路についてであった。インタビューデータは、TEAPのために学習することは、真の言語学習の機会となり、高校での学習からそれるものではないばかりか、将来においても有益であろうと感じていることを示した。対照的に、その他の入試は、しばしば異なるスキルや知識に焦点を置いていて、そのための準備は難しく、また挫折感を抱かせると感じていた。勉強熱心なこれらの生徒は、単に大学入試のための英語学習は動機の低下につながるものと感じている一方で、直近の目標を達成する必要悪であるとも考えていることが分かった。

English-language entrance exams will undergo huge reforms with the end of the Center Test and the introduction of four-skills tests of English by external test providers (see Saito, 2019). The primary reason for these reforms is the Center Test and in-house university entrance exams are insufficiently aligned with the national course of study, which aims to develop communicative competence in the four skills (Yoshida, 2018). The Center Test

primarily assesses reading ability, although listening questions comprise a fifth of the test. Writing and speaking, essential skills for communicative competence, are not directly assessed. In-house developed university entrance exams primarily test reading and writing; few of them test listening skills, and even fewer of them test speaking (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Kikuchi, 2006). This remains the case for mainstream entrance systems for universities in Japan.

This unbalanced study for entrance exams, known as *juken eigo* (entrance exam English), can lead to skewed language proficiency. For instance, Allen (2017) investigated washback to the learner, which is defined as the effect of tests on learning behavior, attitudes, and outcomes. The study revealed that 190 undergraduates at a prestigious university in Tokyo had markedly higher proficiency in receptive skills compared to productive skills when assessed with the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Utilizing extensive survey and interview data, this level of skill difference was identified as almost certainly a result of preparation for the university's entrance exam. Thus, entrance exams can have important consequences for learners' language development.

Although learners are the most important stakeholders (Bailey, 1996), previous washback research in Japan has tended to focus on washback to the teacher. Watanabe (2004), for instance, has shown that exam washback on teaching varies according to teacher beliefs, education and academic background. Watanabe's research highlights two washback maxims: washback is a complex phenomenon, and simply introducing a test will not necessarily change pedagogical or learning processes. Nevertheless, tests *do* have important consequences, and it is crucial to both plan for positive impact when designing tests and to evaluate whether the desired impact has been achieved (Saville, 2010).

With this in mind, Allen and Nagatomo (2019) began a project funded by the Eiken Foundation of Japan (henceforth referred to as Eiken) to investigate washback to the learner from the Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP), which is one of the

ministry-approved tests universities may select for admission purposes. TEAP is a balanced four-skills test developed by Eiken, Sophia University, and the Centre for Research into English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA) in the U.K., and is administered by Eiken. Importantly, it was designed with the specific aim of creating a positive impact on Japan's English education system (Green, 2014). For this reason, we investigated whether TEAP generated its intended impact by researching student learning behavior and perceptions. Ours is one of a number of test validation projects conducted by independent researchers with no affiliation to Eiken (see <<http://www.eiken.or.jp/teap/group/report.html>>).

This article presents a new synthesis of interview data from Allen and Nagatomo (2019). We highlight prominent themes related to language learning, test preparation, and test taking (both regarding TEAP and other entrance exams). Our aim is to give voice to the learners, those with the most to lose or gain, so that they may be heard by language educators in Japan.

Method

Five highly-motivated second-year students from our larger study (N=46) at an academically prestigious all-female high school volunteered to be interviewed three times over an 18-month period. This longitudinal design, which allowed us to gain deeper insight into learners' beliefs surrounding English language testing, was implemented relatively straightforwardly because the school was affiliated with our university. Once ethical approval was obtained, the interviews were conducted in Japanese by a research assistant. The first interview, which took place prior to two brief study sessions in which the TEAP test was introduced, occurred when students were in their second year. The second interview took place after taking the TEAP test eight months later, during the summer of their third year. A final interview was held around the time of graduation, when students' post-graduation plans had been finalized. A content analysis was performed immediately after each interview and themes that identified students' beliefs toward language study and tests were identified. We acknowledge that our interpretation of the interview data may be influenced by our knowledge of the educational context in which the participants study as well as by information obtained by interviewing their teacher as part of our larger study.

Findings and Discussion

The first interview focused on participants' beliefs and methods regarding English language study. All

believed English proficiency would benefit their academic and professional futures. They envisioned themselves as becoming proficient speakers of English and they exposed themselves to authentic English through studying abroad, attending conversation schools, following foreign celebrity websites, messaging friends, listening to music, and reading books. Particularly, they were fully cognizant that English could be socially and financially rewarding.

Classes at their high school, at least as second graders, focused on four-skill proficiency. Students learned how to infer meaning from texts and how to express oral and written opinions. Hoping to enter high-level universities, they believed focusing on practical and communicative aspects of English covered in school was insufficient. Therefore, they also attended cram schools where they studied previous entrance exam questions, learned complicated grammatical patterns, memorized vocabulary, translated between English and Japanese, and took practice tests. Cram school was viewed as a necessary evil, as illustrated by Megumi's comment below:

I go to cram school to compensate for my learning. It's hard, but I often feel studying at cram school is good. To understand the structure of English sentences, Japanese is very important, but I don't want to do that very much. At school we don't do Japanese translation very much, but as a normal entrance examinee, I should study like that as study for the entrance exam.

Megumi continued saying how frustrating this was:

I don't think we can use *juken eigo* for communication and I sometimes feel it is not very meaningful, translating the sentences into Japanese, for instance . . . and I feel demotivated . . . Even if we remember vocabulary in English and Japanese, when we use it, we don't think about whether or not 'to' or 'ing' comes after this verb . . . We remember a lot of complicated vocabulary with the vocabulary book, and when we look at this English word, we know the Japanese. But when we think in Japanese, this word does not come out when we speak. When I'm in that kind of situation, I feel irritated.

Another student, Kimie, attended cram school to compensate for her lack of knowledge *about* English, believing her grammar was "really bad" because she "doesn't know the difference between adjectives and adverbs." Nonetheless, she was a voracious English reader, reporting she "can read English books as [she reads] Japanese books."

1 All names are pseudonyms and all comments have been translated from Japanese.

The second interview focused on students' preparation methods for and impressions of the TEAP and was conducted immediately after the test. In their third year of high school, they were engaged in serious study not only with English but with other academic subjects as well. Unable to devote much time for TEAP study, they still considered it a personal challenge to do well. They purchased self-study books and took practice tests. They felt the TEAP readings and their questions were not overly difficult, so they practiced reading faster in order to complete long passages within the allotted period of time on the test. They also felt confident with TEAP's writing component because they had practiced writing often in their high school classes. For listening and speaking, they adjusted their study methods. For example, Mari said she practiced interviewing her teacher after realizing she would have to ask questions during the test. Kimie and Megumi reported taking notes while listening in order to increase their comprehension of long texts.

Table 1 shows the students' scores with their CEFR band equivalents in parentheses (Kaori missed the test due to illness). Despite spending little time preparing specifically for TEAP, the scores indicate very high English proficiency (B1–B2) when compared to typical Japanese high school students (A1–A2) (Negishi, Takada, & Tono, 2012).

The final interview was held after post-graduation plans had been finalized during the spring of their third year. It focused on participants' impressions of entrance exams, and whether or not studying for TEAP had been beneficial for those examinations. As entrance exams were of extreme importance to the participants and strongly guided their study methods, the test that students took and their future plans are shown in Table 2.

With the exception of Megumi, who had gained early admission into a national university through *suisen* (special recommendation exam), all interviewees took multiple exams. Mari failed a *suisen* exam, so she took the same university's traditional exam and passed. Noriko had gained acceptance into a private university, submitting her TEAP scores with her application, but she continued studying until she passed the examination of a national university.

Table 1. TEAP scores

	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking	Total
Kimie	100 (B2)	100 (B2)	76 (B1)	100 (B2)	376
Noriko	81 (B2)	85 (B2)	73 (B1)	95 (B2)	334
Megumi	79 (B2)	75 (B2)	76 (B1)	95 (B2)	325
Mari	75 (B2)	70 (B1)	97 (B2)	73 (B1)	315

Kimie and Kaori failed to gain university admission and would study for one more year.

Table 2. Exams taken and immediate future plans

	Exams taken for admission purposes	What they will do after graduation
Megumi	Center Exam <i>Suisen</i> (special recommendation exam) at national university	Go to national university to study social studies
Mari	<i>Suisen</i> for pharmacy school Center Exam Private university exam	Go to private university to study pharmaceutical science
Noriko	Center Exam Private universities exams National university exam TEAP	Go to national university to study Chinese
Kimie	Center Exam National university exam Private universities exams Medical school exams (private and national)	Study one more year to enter medical school
Kaori	Center Exam National university exam Private universities exams	Study one more year to enter an information science university

We asked if studying for and taking TEAP had helped them on other entrance exams. Overall, they noted that because each university's test differed, they studied accordingly. The perceived usefulness of TEAP depended on if there was overlap with a particular exam. Therefore, no one believed preparing for TEAP's speaking component was helpful because no university exams assessed English speak-

ing. However, the listening test, which was felt to be quite difficult, was noted as helpful, particularly as they found the Center Exam to be much easier in comparison. Studying for TEAP reading helped them increase their reading speed. It also helped them when entrance exams required them to infer meaning through global understanding. Not all universities had an English essay writing component, but for those that did, TEAP writing as well as their high school English classes gave them confidence.

In contrast, when in-house university exams tested *juken eigo* (entrance exam English), the participants admitted having difficulty. Noriko said some exams she had taken included lengthy readings, required fill-in-the-blank answers, and asked for Japanese explanations of English phrases. Understanding the gist was insufficient; she needed precise understanding of English vocabulary to “change words into natural Japanese.” Reordering words into sentences was tricky, and she understood *what was being tested was not her ability to use English, but her knowledge of grammar*. Mari reported encountering similar questions involving long passages, multiple-choice questions concerning difficult grammatical points and Japanese–English translation. In other words, when students were asked to demonstrate *understanding of a reading*, they were confident. However, they struggled when asked to demonstrate *knowledge about English*.

Kimie, with perfect scores in three out of four of the TEAP components, felt in-house entrance exam questions focused on two aspects: “details” and “overall flow.” While she was confident with those dealing with overall flow, questions focusing on details were challenging. Translation tasks requiring her to “understand the word precisely” were difficult because she was unable to recall words or form new sentences using various grammatical patterns. Thus, she said she selected easier ones, but worried whether this was a good strategy. Unable to enter any of the eight schools she had applied to (including four medical universities) she planned to spend the upcoming year studying at a cram school, where she intended to boost her vocabulary by starting “from the beginning” of an academic vocabulary book.

Several participants wondered if the main purpose of in-house entrance exams was not to determine their English ability, but to test the extent to which they had studied. Some tests seemed to examine content knowledge as well. Kaori, for example, who will study one more year to enter a science university, said, “I had to solve questions about physics which were beyond what we studied in high school and they were written entirely in English.

Some words I didn’t know, but I had to read them anyway.” Likewise, one exam Kimie had taken after being waitlisted at a medical school required her to write a Japanese essay after reading an English article. She said,

I didn’t understand it. Even the first question was about one man’s symptoms. The man’s wife died and he just stayed at home. His symptoms and situation were described and I had to explain the illness. I felt I didn’t know . . . Usually we don’t know the names of illnesses.

While there were mixed feelings considering the TEAP’s usefulness for entrance exams, the participants strongly believed studying for the TEAP raised their actual English abilities, and the skills they had acquired would serve them well in their future academic and professional lives. Importantly, they felt studying for and taking the TEAP during their ‘examination-hell’ year provided the opportunity to return to real English; all participants expressed concerns over losing communicative skills while concentrating on entrance exams. Kimie summed up their feeling: “By doing TEAP . . . I was able to maintain my English proficiency.”

Our participants seemed to agree with the notion of introducing four-skills tests for university entrance exams. Noriko felt emphasis on one aspect of English over others was detrimental: “The best way to measure English proficiency is to do everything: speaking, reading, writing and listening, with a good balance . . . It is hard [to study everything], but I think it is fine to do all four skills.”

However, the participants believed *how* such skills are tested is important. For instance, Noriko took some private university exams that assessed listening but thought some students might be able to “solve those questions,” even if they did not “have any listening abilities at all.” She said studying only to answer test questions was “meaningless.”

In line with Noriko’s criticism, Kimie questioned the type of English assessed. Her comment below will resonate with those who feel there is too much distance between typical *juken eigo* and the ability to use English:

For me, English for the [in-house] exam and English for actual use are completely different. But in the society, communicating with people, talking about everyday issues in English is important. I feel so because my father works as a doctor in an international context. He told me that although people passed the internal exam because of *juken eigo*, many of them couldn’t speak at all when they visited his workplace.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have investigated how highly motivated secondary school students study English for proficiency and for examination purposes. Several key themes emerged: Firstly, focusing on test-oriented study that does not promise future rewards was demotivating. Nonetheless, participants supplemented authentic English study with *juken eigo* to deal with the demands of in-house entrance exams, knowing that having knowledge *about* English (i.e., grammatical manipulations and accurate translations) could determine their success or failure on competitive exams. Secondly, they believed studying four skills, both for exams such as TEAP and in classes, was important for their future and beneficial for their ability to *use* English. Finally, they identified key differences in how TEAP and in-house entrance exams assessed their English abilities.

We want to emphasize that while there are various expert and public opinions on the current entrance exam reforms, these are *learner* views of English learning, tests and test taking. In this time when universities must consider adopting one of a range of four-skills tests (see Koizumi, 2018), we felt it was timely to consider how English tests in Japan affect those who have the most to gain and lose: *the learners*. They are the ones who must prepare for and take these exams, and their lives are affected most by them. They, together with their teachers, must negotiate the conflicting demands of the national curriculum and the entrance exams that they take—the outcome of which will have a tremendous impact on their lives. Yet students' voices are rarely considered in the debate. Therefore, further longitudinal, qualitative research with learners from various academic backgrounds is essential to understand more comprehensively both their learning motivations and perceptions of English exams.

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