

Point to Point

TESTING LISTENING IN ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS

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In his paper, *Testing Listening Comprehension in Japanese University Entrance Examinations* (*JALT Journal* 10[1 & 2], 15-42), Gary Buck defines his purpose as twofold: first, to examine the major issues involved in testing listening comprehension, and second, to stimulate discussion of the issues amongst language teachers and testers. That he has succeeded in his second purpose is evidenced by this response. As to this first purpose, he has indeed presented a cogent and concise explication of current theoretical views as to the nature of the listening process. I will argue, however, that despite his concern with the "washback" effect on classroom language teaching, Buck's paper in fact puts the cart before the horse by not addressing the most fundamental question of all: "What is the rationale behind the English language component of Japanese university entrance tests?"

In two statements which I find profoundly disturbing, Buck writes: "Recently a number of universities, including Tokyo University, have added an English listening test to their other entrance examinations. Many other colleges are likely to follow this lead and include listening tests in their own entrance examinations." (p. 15) And: "The new trend towards including a listening comprehension section ... seems to offer an opportunity to make examinations which test 'real' English ..." (p. 18). I find these statements disturbing because there is no discussion of *why* this innovation has taken place and *why* these other institutions are likely to play "follow my leader."

Why has Tokyo University added a listening test? Why should other universities and colleges automatically follow suit? Why the assumption that a listening test is the only way to test "real" English? (What is "real" English anyway?) Until these questions have been satisfactorily answered, it seems to me premature to proceed with a discussion of actual listening content.

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The central issue at stake here is one which Buck touches on in the specific area of listening but which may be better addressed in a more general way. It is that of *purpose*. It is not sufficient to talk about a purpose for listening. What must be questioned is the purpose of the test *as a whole*. There is of course a glib and easy answer, that is to select students based on a rank order according to perceived English language ability. But what kind of English language ability do Japanese universities require of their students? Is it based on the language ability students themselves need? For example, are students required to take any English medium courses? If so, what is required of them in an operational sense? Do they have to read academic textbooks, journals, papers, etc.? Must they attend lectures and/or seminars given in English? Do they need to be able to research, write and present papers in English? If the answer is affirmative, then it is possible to construct tests, including listening tests, where the content reflects the skills required (cf. McEldowney, 1976; Carroll, 1978; Weir, 1983). Whatever the test medium involved, be it reading, writing, listening or speaking—although most probably it would need to be to some extent an integrated skills test—it would of necessity involve the use of real English in a specific context. I would hasten to add that tests of this nature could not necessarily “be put together quickly by a committee of teachers with little specialized training in Educational Measurement...” (p. 17)

If, on the other hand, there is no academic purpose specified in the rationale for the test (which is probably the case in the vast majority of Japanese universities), what then is required of students in terms of language ability? Is there, for example, a prevailing view that the most linguistically proficient students are, by definition, most likely to reflect credit on the university to the outside world? (This is a view alluded to by Buck in his statement: “...a test should look difficult, to give the impression that the college has a very high standard.”) If that is the case, why not simply require all student applicants to take, for example, the TOEFL, or some other, externally validated proficiency test? This would at least enable some uniformity of measurement and interpretation of scores. It would obviate the need for multiple versions of hastily written, non-prettested, non-validated entrance tests which may, or may not, be testing language proficiency. It would also, of course, allow serious comparisons to be made between university admissions standards.

It is too easy to accept the constraints on entrance examinations outlined by Buck. Doubtless I will be accused of naivety and lack of understanding of the special circumstances of testing in Japan. However, as language

testers, it is our duty not to accept constraints—placed upon us by institutions—which have a detrimental effect on test development. It is incumbent upon us to question, time and time again if need be, the entire process of language testing. How can there be any moral justification in accepting test constraints when the results of these tests will be used to make decisions which will crucially affect people's lives?

By introducing a listening component to its entrance examination, Tokyo University has proved that changes in language testing are possible. I submit that what is needed now is not just a change of test format but a complete rethinking of the language components of entrance examinations. Each university should develop its own rationale as to the purpose of its language tests. Trends should not necessarily be followed merely because they emanate from major universities. What is relevant in terms of language needs for a student in a specific faculty in Tokyo University may have little or no relevance to a student in another faculty, let alone a student in a different university.

Buck has taken a major step forward for test development in Japan by critically examining the theoretical basis for the content of an individual component in a language test. How much more major that step would be if such an examination could be applied not only to one component but to the language test-making process in Japanese universities as a whole. And how much more seriously we could then begin to consider the washback effect of test content on classroom language teaching.

References

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