

Point-to-Point

Entrance Examinations: Who Needs 'Em?

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As a relative newcomer to university teaching in Japan, I was very interested to read the article by Gary Buck (*JALT Journal* 10 [1 & 2], 15-42) and the response from Vivien Berry (*JALT Journal* 11 [1], 102-104). I read the articles at an extremely apposite time as I was just in the early stages of helping set the English entrance examination for my university, and their articles helped to surface a number of questions I had about what I was actually supposed to be doing. Buck, implicitly and explicitly and Berry, very explicitly, raised some extremely pertinent points about the nature of entrance examinations, questions that had bemused me in both the approach to and tradition of examination setting in my university and, as far as I can see, most other Japanese universities.

Berry expresses concern at being accused of "naivety" and failure to understand "... the special circumstances of testing in Japan" (p. 103). On that score, allow me to make the most of genuine naivety—my experiences to date do not indicate that there is a need to test students here in any way differently from students in other countries. To put it bluntly, I strongly believe, there are no "special circumstances" that can be invoked anywhere when one is dealing with edometrics: students will always differ in ability in a subject, and measurement is measurement. There can, however, be mitigating reasons, as perceived by educationalists, students and the general public, for a particular approach to testing: this is usually bound up with the teaching/testing tradition and how a test should look, in other words, a test's face validity. But face validity is the least important consideration when designing a test that is to be used to make important educational decisions and cannot supersede measurable criteria used in test evaluation (see Harris, 1969, p. 21, for comments on face vs. empirical validity).

I assume what Berry alludes to when she refers to "special

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circumstances," is the tradition here of setting English examinations that have limited or no communicative value and that the examinations contain the type of items that, as Buck (p. 17), quoting Spolsky (1975), says belong to the "pre-scientific" era of language testing. If these are the "special circumstances," then you can count many countries that have English as part of the school or college curriculum as being in this category, although thankfully this seems to be changing. Not that the international status quo in any way exonerates Japanese universities or colleges from culpability in perpetuating an outmoded approach to testing English language skills, the results of which can have a profound effect on the future of those who take them.

I do not propose to comment in detail on the suitability of using this type of test design, as the literature on testing and evaluation gives more than ample commentary on its shortcomings and lack of reliability. However, I would like to comment on the use of translation in English examinations. I have recently completed a study (Shillaw, forthcoming) of the Kyoto Institute of Technology (KIT) English examination which was administered in February 1990 to the present freshman students and other prospective students. In summary, item analysis of the "English grammar" subtest showed a very low test reliability, far below what would normally be expected from an important test such as a university entrance examination. In addition, it was found that when the scores on the grammar subtest were correlated with the scores on the two translation subtests in the examination (English-Japanese, Japanese-English), there was a very low correlation between the three subtests, which suggests a very low overlap in measuring the same factor. This lack of agreement was particularly highlighted by a very low correlation between the two translation subtests, which is very surprising as one would expect them to have a high correlation if they measure the same skill. The conclusion drawn was that the translation subtests lack construct validity (the property of a test to measure only the one factor or construct it is designed to measure) and that they measure very little of the students' English proficiency.

The English entrance examination that I evaluated was, I believe, a fairly typical example of the type of English examinations that are set by many national and private universities throughout

Japan. As part of an ongoing piece of research on the types of items used in university English entrance examinations, I have found of the 26 national and 20 private universities surveyed so far, that the two-thirds to one-third ratio of marks given over to translation items in the 1990 KIT examination, as opposed to the marks for the 13 non-translation items, is not untypical. Thus, if the findings from the KIT study can be extended to other universities, it suggests that their English examinations will fail to demonstrate construct validity and hence will lack statistical reliability.

Turning to the subject of *purpose*, Berry questions the nature of the English examinations set by universities and the purpose for which they are used. She then goes on to talk about the study needs of Japanese university students and the necessity of setting examinations that are appropriate to the objectives of the course of study. I too would ask, what are the English language needs of the vast majority of students in Japan? With the possible exception of English majors and those studying at international universities, I would argue that undergraduate students' need to study through the medium of English is next to zero. So why test it for college entry? The reasons that I have heard mentioned for testing English standards are, one, that it is a compulsory subject in most universities in General Education courses, and two, that as Berry mentions, there is a perception that the competent linguist who graduates from a university gains kudos for his or her alma mater.

Probably there is a third reason for setting English examinations for university entrance: that a good knowledge of English indicates that a student has a "well-rounded" education and that good language skills are some kind of indicator of general intelligence and ability to reason well. This reason, I find, is the supreme irony in English language testing in Japan, as it is the same rationale used by Oxford and Cambridge universities until about 20 years ago for setting compulsory entrance tests in Latin or Greek. These examinations were very little different in composition from English examinations currently used here. The irony is that the Oxbridge examinations tested knowledge of classical languages which are "dead," in the sense that they cannot be tested as an extant medium of communication of a speech community, whereas English is very much alive and is the de facto international language in many areas of global communication.

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My feeling is that many students who take the compulsory or even elective English courses that I teach, are learning English for No Apparent Purpose, only that they feel it is important to keep up their English studies. Some do aspire to continue their studies overseas and some are aware of the potential value of English in their future work, but no student has mentioned it as being important for their present needs except to gain the required number of credits in the General Education program. Therefore, setting an entrance examination that is anything more than a general proficiency indicator doesn't appear appropriate. For that matter, if all we are expected to test is English proficiency, then why bother with an English examination at all, why not simply use the Mombusho national English examination that all students take at the end of high school? While I must admit that it isn't the most inspired piece of test writing I have ever seen, it does serve a purpose and I am sure that simply because of the huge candidature that take it every year, it has to be a reliable examination. However, the Mombusho examination is probably not to the taste of most college teachers as it looks easy and doesn't appear academic enough.

But here we return to those "special circumstances." As Buck says in his article, ". . . a test should look difficult, to give the impression that the college has a very high standard" (p. 16). From my own study of university entrance tests, this is clearly a fact, as some of the translation questions I have looked at would, I'm sure, tax a U.N. translator. The result is that for the sake of the face validity, or perhaps just the face of the college, students are asked to sweat through gruelling years of preparation for an examination that will reveal little or nothing of their ability to really use English, and is possibly unreliable in measuring whatever it measures.

This is surely a shameful waste of time, energy and potential by sacrificing students on the altar of dubious evaluation. One can only hope that the time is near when circumstances will change and entrance tests will become truly special; when universities turn from the past and look towards creating examinations that give a true and reliable evaluation of students' ability and have the positive wash-back Buck and Berry hope for. Above all, the English exami-

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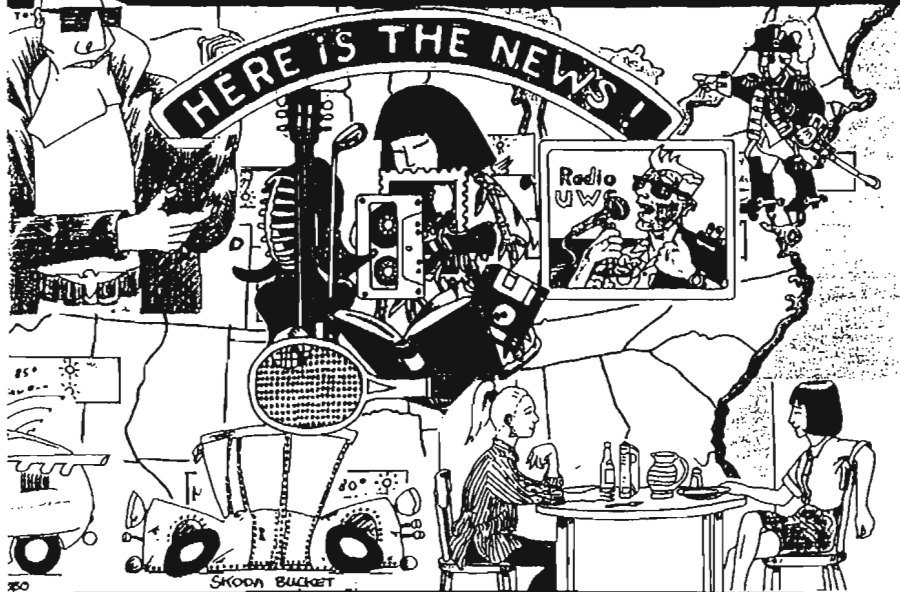
nations should motivate students to study English as a useful, living language and not a linguistic curiosity.

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