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A STUDY OF THE WASHBACK EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATIONS ON TEACHING PEDAGOGY AND STUDENT LEARNING BEHAVIOUR IN JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOLS

Justin Llaneza Bailey

ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of grammar-based university entrance examinations on teaching pedagogy and student learning behaviour in Japanese high schools. 20 high school teachers and 20 high school students completed questionnaires, and follow up interviews were offered to the teachers. The results indicated that the content of entrance examinations seem to be affecting teachers in that they tend to use more classroom time on test preparation than for the development of students' communicative ability. Similarly the students, who despite showing a strong desire to develop their speaking skills, seem to spend most of their study time memorising vocabulary and grammatical structures for the purpose of improving their scores on these examinations. The results from this study imply that in order for classrooms to become more communicative, a test of communicative ability needs to be incorporated into the existing framework of the entrance examination process.*

KEYWORDS: Communicative Language Teaching, Test Washback

INTRODUCTION

Formal testing is a common feature of a high school student's life, where it is used as a tool to measure their knowledge and proficiency in a given area. The results that these tests yield allow students to gain access to higher education and opportunities for employment in a way that is deemed to be meritocratic and free from bias. In this way, formal testing performs an integral function within our society, in which the results have far-reaching effects for the individual. It is for this reason that the notion of validity (i.e. the degree to which a test accurately measures what it is intended to measure) has become central to the development of tests. However, while subjects that measure concrete abilities may lend themselves well to standardised testing, tests that measure abstract ones are susceptible to numerous difficulties. Many researchers agree that an abstract construct such as human language ability is far too complex to be reduced to a single number on a test, and in spite of test developers' best efforts, it is believed that *'test tasks can never fully reproduce a "real life" experience'* (Green 2013: 41).

Therefore, making inferences about a person's language ability solely based on a test score should be avoided, or at the very least, be treated with caution. Indeed, many of us may recall taking a language test at some point in our lives, in which the results were used to make a judgement about our proficiency in that particular language. To what extent did we feel that the test accurately measured our ability? Did the presence of the test affect the way we studied or how we were taught? It is these kinds of questions that led the researcher to want to investigate the effects testing had on the teaching and learning of the English language in his current context (Japan).

English is a mandatory subject for Japanese students, beginning from the 5th year of elementary school (10-11 years old) continuing until the final year of high school (18 years old). It is also a required subject for many bachelor's degree programs in the first and second years, regardless

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of the field of study. Given the importance that the English language is afforded in the Japanese education system, it is unsurprising that passing an English examination is often a requirement for prospective students wishing to enter higher education.

A great deal has been written about these English tests, questioning their validity and their impact on English education. Not only are they notoriously grammar-oriented, but they have also been widely criticised for their *'poor construction and negative influence'* (Shea 2009: 97). Although the content of such examinations (and their effects) will be discussed in detail in the literature review section of this report, it is necessary to mention at this stage that the vast majority of English examinations do not contain an assessment of speaking ability, and it is this observation that is at the heart of the controversy regarding English testing in Japan.

The present study wanted to investigate the effects of these grammar-based entrance examinations on teaching pedagogy and student learning behaviour in Japanese high schools. Research suggests that the presence of such examinations has created a barrier to the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and has created a situation in which speaking skills are rarely taught or practiced. This remains the case despite changes to governmental policy that encourage the use of CLT and discourage the use of traditional teacher-centred methods of teaching.

With this in mind, this study aimed to investigate the following two research questions.

1) Do university entrance examinations affect teaching pedagogy in a way that dissuades teachers from using CLT in the classroom?

2) Do university entrance examinations affect student learning behaviour in a way that test preparation becomes the priority over the development of communicative ability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicative Language Teaching

This literature review begins with a description of Communicative Language Teaching (often referred to as CLT). CLT is a teaching approach to language learning that focuses on the students' ability to communicate, and to develop communicative competence in the target language. It rose to prominence in Europe and America in the early 1980s out of a dissatisfaction with traditional grammar-based teaching pedagogy, and has since become *'the most researched approach to second/foreign language teaching in the history of language teaching'* (Spada, 2006: 271).

Defining CLT can be quite challenging as theorists have tended to use the term in differing ways within the literature. However, it is generally agreed that the following features are typical of a CLT approach.

a) Functional uses of the target language are emphasised.

b) Teachers act as facilitators as opposed to instructors.

c) Fluency is given priority over accuracy, in which errors are not always corrected.

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d) Students are active participants, and are responsible for their own learning.

e) Authentic (real-world) materials are used.

This lack of a clear definition has led some theorists to differentiate between different types of CLT. For example, Howatt (1984) distinguished between a 'weak' and 'strong' version of CLT. While the former incorporates communicative activities within a wider framework of language teaching, the latter advances the claim that language is acquired through communication and depends entirely on communicative activities. In this way, the 'weak' version can be described as *'learning to use English'*, and the 'strong' version as *'using English to learn it'* (Howatt, 1984: 279).

English Education and Governmental Policy in Japan

The Japanese Ministry of Education, which forms part of the all-encompassing Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science, and Technology (hereafter referred to as MEXT), has held a consistent position with regards to CLT for the past 30 years. Not only has it stressed the importance of developing students' communicative competence in the English language, but also with regards to teaching pedagogy it has openly stated that *'instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centred classes is not recommended'* (MEXT, 2003: 3).

Since the 1980s, MEXT has initiated several educational reforms in an attempt to improve the English communicative ability of its student population. Three of these reforms will be briefly outlined.

One of the most prominent reforms was the 1987 JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program, which continues to employ thousands of college graduates every year from English speaking countries to work as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) within Japanese public schools. It was believed that native English teachers could provide authenticity to the classrooms as well as assist the Japanese teachers with the implementation of CLT activities. Another major reform was the 1994 introduction of a new high school subject, *Oral Communication*. These communication classes are based on the principles of CLT in which the focus is on the meaning rather than the form of the language. The final and relatively recent reform occurred in April 2011, when the Japanese government incorporated English education to the 5th and 6th grade elementary curriculum.

It has been suggested that the driving forces behind these reforms, include the rapid globalisation of the economy, as well as the personal desire to combat the label of having one of the lowest levels of English proficiency in the developed world (Mulligan, 2005). However, despite these reforms, researchers have been critical as to whether their implementation has achieved (or will achieve) the desired objectives outlined by MEXT. For example, the JET Program has been criticised for hiring ALTs who are inexperienced and unqualified. As a result, many ALTs are *'often (used) as mere human tape recorders and sometimes not used at all'* (Mulligan, 2005: 34). Therefore, students may not be receiving the full benefits of having a native English speaker in the classroom. The extent to which CLT is used in *Oral Communication* classes has also been questioned by some researchers. Based on a survey and classroom observations, Taguchi (2005) found that *Oral Communication* classes were not following the principles of CLT, instead the classes tended to be teacher-centred in which the students spent less than 15% of the class time speaking in English. Taguchi claims that the results *'reflect traditional Japanese classrooms in which the teacher assumes full responsibility, and the students remain passive'* (Taguchi, 2005: 7). The introduction of English education to

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elementary school has also not been without criticism. These English classes, amounting to just 35 hours teaching time per year, tend to focus on international understanding as opposed to developing English language ability. This is reflected by the fact that these classes are officially known as 外国語活動, which translates to *Foreign Language Activities*. Although English is the main language being taught, students are also introduced to examples of other languages such as Korean, Chinese and Spanish. Formal English education in Japan does not begin until the students are in the first grade of junior high school (12-13 years old), it is here where they are introduced to basic grammar and taught how to read and write. Many critics argue that the 2011 reform, although a step in the right direction, is not sufficient to improve the English ability of the Japanese population (Wakita, 2013).

It seems then, that despite these initiatives, MEXT has not been successful in implementing CLT practices at the classroom level. In order to understand the reasons for this, we first need to examine the Japanese culture of teaching and learning.

Teaching Pedagogy: The Japanese culture of teaching and learning

What constitutes as good teaching practice within a CLT framework, and what constitutes as good teaching practice within the context of Japan share little resemblance. Contemporary Japanese teaching pedagogy has been shaped by a large degree by Confucianist socio-political thinking. This influence has been described as being *'deep-rooted and entrenched'* in the Japanese education system (Lee, 2011: 2) in which an understanding of Confucianism is *'essential for successful teaching in East Asia'* (Littrell, 2004: 1-2).

The Japanese classroom culture for language teaching is heavily dominated by the *'yakudoku'* method; a deep-rooted sociolinguistic tradition that dates back over a thousand years to a time when Japanese people studied ancient Chinese. The term *yakudoku* is a combination of two Japanese words, *yaku* meaning 'translation', and *doku* meaning 'reading'. Therefore, this method of learning involves reading sentences in the target language and understanding its meaning through word-by-word translation. The role of the teacher is to provide a model translation, which is then used as a basis to correct the students' translations. This style of pedagogy is instructional and teacher-centred in that the teacher is expected to do most of the talking, while the students listen passively. The teacher using this method would typically use Japanese to explain grammatical points, and the students would have very few opportunities to communicate orally in English (Nishino, 2008: 30).

A key aspect of Japanese Confucianism is the idea of 'knowing one's place in society'. This concept has a considerable influence over the relationship teachers have with their students. In general, teachers hold a superior status within the classroom, their position is respected, and their authority is usually unquestioned. Lee (2011: 2) writes that *'to question a teacher would be tantamount to questioning his or her knowledge and authority, and by implication, ability to teach'*. Under such circumstances, students are often passive and silent learners. Unexpected learner talk (including asking questions) may be regarded as disruptive behaviour, and may even be seen by others as a reflection of the teachers' lack of classroom control.

Japanese students also have a culture for learning. Japanese students expect to prepare for entrance examinations and are accustomed to playing a passive role within the classroom. They also tend to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious when asked to be vocal and more active in the classroom. Doyon's (2000) description of 'social shyness' is relevant to understanding the mentality of the typical Japanese learner. In Japanese society there is a correct way to behave

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and to do things. The social norms governing student behaviour in the classroom include reticence, passivity, and the use of guarded, formal language. This can manifest itself in students remaining silent, and reluctant to take risks in class for fear of making mistakes or doing something in the wrong way. Therefore, without direct guidance from the teacher, students may find it difficult to act and think independently.

As we can see, the Japanese culture of language teaching and learning is very different from the characteristics typical of a CLT approach, in which creative discussions and democratic exchanges between teachers and students are signs of a healthy learning environment.

Despite its popularity with Japanese language teachers and learners, the *yakudoku* methodology of teaching has been heavily criticised in the literature. Even when the method was first used to learn ancient Chinese, scholars were sceptical of its benefits. An early critic was the Confucianist Sorai Ogyu (1666-1727) who claimed that the spirit of the Chinese people could not be understood through a *yakudoku* approach as it was *'merely a literal translation that ignor(ed) the linguistic and cultural differences between the two languages'* (Hino, 1988: 50). Such criticisms still hold true today, and is reflected in the series of educational reforms that have been implemented by MEXT to discourage the *yakudoku* approach over the past 30 years.

However, despite the efforts of MEXT, the *yakudoku* methodology continues to be used in contemporary Japan. One of the reasons for its persistent use may lie in entrance examinations, and the way in which English is tested.

Testing in Japan

University Structure

Before we can discuss university entrance examinations, it is necessary to understand the structure of the university system. Universities in Japan can be categorised as one of the following;

a) *National universities* are managed by central government, and are generally considered to be prestigious in the quality of the education they provide. This is especially true for the former Imperial Universities of the Japanese Empire, most notably Tokyo and Kyoto University, which are often ranked as the best in the country.

b) *Local public universities*, are managed by local governments, either at the prefectural or municipal level.

c) *Private universities*, which make up the majority of the universities in Japan, are managed privately. Despite their higher tuition fees, the majority of private universities are less highly regarded.

There are approximately 750 universities in Japan. Of these, 20% are national and local public universities, and the remaining 80% are private (Watanabe, 2013).

Antonio (2010: 159) compares the Japanese university system to that of a pyramid, in which he places national universities at the top along with a selective few private institutions such as Waseda and Keio University. The centre of the pyramid consists of largely local public universities and 'regionally famous private universities'. The wide base of the pyramid comprises of the majority of private universities, which are often small in size and carry little

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influence. Due to this hierarchical structure, the entry requirements into higher education in Japan can differ enormously depending on the kind of university the student wishes to enter.

Entrance into National and Local Public Universities

In general, acceptance into a Japanese national or local public university is based on a two staged process. The first stage involves taking a standardised test known as *The National Center Test for University Admissions* (commonly referred to as *The Center Shiken)*. It comprises of a series of examinations in six subject areas; Japanese literature, math, science, civics, history and geography, and a foreign language. Although students are only required to take the tests that are related to their intended field of study, a foreign language (which is usually English) is a mandatory test for many degree programs. The second stage of the process involves students taking an additional entrance exam, which is developed and administered by the universities themselves.

The scores obtained in the *Center Shiken* determine which entrance exams a student can apply to take in the second stage. A students' score on the *Center Shiken* is norm-referenced and graded on a scale from 1-100. This number represents the students' performance in relation to all the other students who took the test. In order to attract the best students, many of the top universities set a minimum requirement score on the *Center Shiken* before a student is permitted to take the university's entrance examination. In this way, by pre-selecting who can and cannot enter national and local public universities, the *Center Shiken 'acts as part of the country's gate keeping apparatus for entry into the status quo'* (Antonio, 2010: 160).

The *Center Shiken* is only administered once a year. Therefore, if a student performs poorly on the test, they unfortunately have to wait until the following year in order to take the test again.

In regards to the English test of the *Center Shiken*, students are examined on their reading comprehension, grammar, and listening ability by means of a 120 minute multiple choice test. Although the test has been praised for addressing issues of reliability and practicality, it tends to do so at the expense of test validity (Caine, 2005: 26). Due to time restrictions, the *Center Shiken* only contains items that can be scored objectively. Therefore, open-ended style questions such as short essay writing, which are open to a degree of subjectivity, go untested. Another criticism is that the test completely ignores the assessment of speaking and communicative ability; skills that MEXT have been trying to encourage for some time.

The English tests that are administered by the universities in the second stage tend to vary in format and style. Some tend to focus more on reading comprehension, while others tend to focus more on writing compositions and translation.

Entrance into Private Universities

In comparison to national and local public universities, entrance into private universities is more straightforward. They usually do not require students to take the *Center Shiken*, and prospective students are only required to take an examination that is administered by the university. The level of difficulty of the examination is usually a reflection of the prestige of the university. Smaller universities that struggle to maintain enrolment numbers may be willing to except students regardless of test scores, or solely on the basis of a high school recommendation.

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As with national and local public universities, the examinations that are administered by private universities vary in format and style. Watanabe (2004: 132) writes that private university examinations '*exhibit even greater variety in their test contents and methods; some examinations include grammar, vocabulary, and reading, whereas others include listening and writing.'*

One point that all these tests have in common, regardless of whether they are for national, local public, or private universities, is that they do not contain an assessment of speaking ability. In addition, due to issues regarding time and practicality, many entrance examinations tend to only test what is convenient to test, and subsequently this has led to a disproportionate number of items that test grammatical knowledge and translation ability. The effects that such grammar-oriented tests have on teaching pedagogy and student learning behaviour will be explored in the next sub-section, it is here where the terms test impact and washback will be introduced.

Test Impact and Washback

The terms *impact* and *washback* (sometimes referred to as *backwash*) have been used in various ways throughout the language testing literature. Some use the terms interchangeably (e.g. Turner, 2001), while others make a clear distinction between the two concepts (e.g. Hamp-Lyons, 1997). However, in recent years, there seems to be a general consensus that test impact refers to the effects tests have on the *'macro-levels of education and society'*, while test washback refers to the effects on the *'micro-levels of teaching and learning'* (Cheng and Curtis, 2012: 89). In this way, washback can be seen as a part of the overall impact a test has.

For many years, washback was simply regarded as a mere 'side-effect' of testing rather than a factor that could seriously influence the attitudes and behaviour of teachers and students. Indeed, research into washback only started to find its way into the context of language testing in the early 1990s (Loumbourdi, 2014). It is now understood that washback is a complex phenomenon that can be categorised by its direction (i.e. positive or negative) and by its intensity (i.e. strong or weak).

Alderson and Wall (1993: 41) claimed that *'tests can be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in the classrooms'*. Positive washback refers to the beneficial effects that a test can have on teaching and learning. This can include motivating factors, as well as the role they play in maintaining high academic standards. On the other hand, negative washback refers to the detrimental effects that a test can have. These may range from specific teaching behaviours such as focusing too heavily on test preparation, to more general effects such as student stress and anxiety.

A tests' washback can also be categorised as being strong or weak, and this is believed to be directly related to the importance that is attributed to the test. It is here where a distinction between high and low-stakes testing should be made. Low-stakes testing refer to tests that carry no significant consequences for the test taker, such as an ungraded classroom assessment. In contrast, high-stakes testing refer to exams that have important consequences for the test taker. University entrance examinations fall into the category of high-stakes tests, as they can affect the future career prospects of a student. It is with these kinds of tests where the power of the washback is at its strongest, and are therefore more likely to influence teaching pedagogy and a student's learning behaviour.

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Test Washback in Japan

There is a widespread feeling that university entrance examinations exert negative washback effects on the way in which English is taught and studied in Japanese high schools. As mentioned previously, university entrance examinations are largely focused on grammar and rarely contain an assessment of speaking ability. This contrasts sharply with the current aims and objectives outlined by MEXT, which wants to encourage a more communicative syllabus. Sakui (2004: 159) claimed that *'contrary to the teachers' aspirations to incorporate CLT into their teaching, they cannot ignore the demand to prepare students for entrance examinations'*. This is due to the 'high-stakes' nature of testing in Japan, in which the name of the university one attends can greatly shape the future prospects of a student. Antonio (2010: 160) describes the *University Designation System* (学閥) in which top corporations, major banks and financial firms, as well as high paid positions in government use elite universities almost exclusively as the source for their recruitment. Therefore, for some students, the need to prepare for examinations outweighs the need to develop communicative competence in the English language.

English teachers, and the high schools that they represent, are also affected by these examinations. The credibility of a school is often judged by the number of students who are able to enter elite universities. Because this information is made available to the public, it can put significant pressure on teachers and can ultimately affect the ways in which they teach. For example, it has been noted in the literature that the need to prepare students for grammar-based examinations has led to a 'narrowing of the curriculum' in which certain areas of the syllabus are not studied because they are not tested in the entrance examinations. This can manifest itself in lessons that are *'heavily weighted towards exam preparation, with a strong focus on the structure of the language, rather than its communicative value'* (Lee, 2011: 11). This assertion is reinforced by Akiyama (2003: 205) who claimed that high school teachers avoid teaching speaking skills as they are *'not included in the highly competitive university admissions tests'*.

Further evidence of test washback comes from Sakui (2004: 157-159) who, based on classroom observations, describes the typical Japanese high school English classroom as follows:

> Teachers spent most of the class time involved in teacher-fronted grammar explanations, chorus reading and vocabulary presentations. Students attend to teachers' explanations, learnt to translate at the sentence level, read the textbooks aloud in choral reading, copied vocabulary items in their notebooks, and engaged in sentence manipulation exercises … This practice is understandable when so much emphasis is placed on preparing students for grammar-skewered entrance examinations.

Rationale for Present Study

The literature regarding test washback in Japan is rather limited, and most of the published literature seems to have focused on how washback has affected teaching pedagogy, but not how it has affected students and the ways in which they learn. The present study aimed to examine the degree to which teachers and students are affected by entrance examinations, and hoped to shed more light into this enigmatic area.

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RESEARCH DESIGN

The research questions were investigated using a combination of quantitative data obtained from questionnaires, and qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire for teachers was administered in English and consisted of four sections;

- *Section 1* was interested in teachers' opinions about the *Center Shiken*.
- *Section 2* was interested in teachers' opinions about university administered tests.
- *Section 3* was interested in teachers' current teaching practices.
- *Section 4* was interested in whether teachers had any recommendations for how the current system of entrance examinations could be improved.

The questionnaire for students was administered in Japanese and consisted of four sections;

- *Section 1* was interested in students' opinions about the *Center Shiken*.
- *Section 2* was interested in students' opinions about university administered tests.
- *Section 3* was interested in students' current studying behaviour.
- *Section 4* was interested in whether students had any recommendations for how the current system of entrance examinations could be improved.

Both questionnaires contained a variety of closed and open-ended questions. The closed-ended items contained 'Likert scale' type questions in which respondents were presented with statements to which they indicated their response on a scale of extremes (e.g. strongly disagree – strongly agree). Section 4 was open-ended in nature as it was important that any recommendations came from the respondents and not from the researcher. Optional comment boxes were added to the end of each section to allow for respondents to add any additional information or to clarify their responses.

The Semi-Structured Interview

The questionnaire that the interviewee had completed beforehand served as the basis for much of the interview, in which topics from each section were explored in greater detail.

The Sample and Sampling Method

The Questionnaire Sample:

The sample population for the questionnaire consisted of 20 high school English teachers and 20 students. The student sample consisted of 10 2nd grade students and 10 3rd grade students, they were of mixed gender and all had an intention to study at university in the future. Due to reasons of practicality, the participants were selected using a convenience sampling method. While the student sample were obtained from the same high school, due to the lack of numbers,

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the teacher sample were taken from five different high schools. All of the schools used in this study came from the public (as opposed to the private) sector, and were located in the city of Nagoya in central Japan.

The Interview Sample:

Because of the researcher's limited ability to speak Japanese, the interviews had to be conducted in English. It was for this reason students were not included in the interview sample. The 20 English teachers who had completed the questionnaire were asked if they would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview. Of the 20, only two agreed. One of the participants (P1) was male and had 13 years of experience working as an English teacher. The other participant (P2) was female and had 33 years of teaching experience. Both teachers came from the same high school.

RESULTS

Analysis of the Questionnaires

The questionnaire contained four distinct sections. Therefore, the results of the questionnaires will be analysed using these as sub-headings.

The Center Shiken (Section 1)

As mentioned in the literature review, the *Center Shiken* is a multiple choice test that contains no assessment of writing, or speaking ability. When asked about the inclusion of a written component to the test, the majority of teachers (80% N=16) claimed it was a 'good' or 'quite a good' idea. A similar response was reported from the students with 70% (N=14) feeling the same way. When asked about the inclusion of a speaking component, 70% (N=14) of teachers and 75% (N=15) of students claimed it was a 'good' or 'quite a good' idea.

The second question relating to the *Center Shiken* was interested in how satisfied respondents were with the overall content of the test. Here, respondents had to rate their level of satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 5; a score of 1 indicated a low level of satisfaction, while a score of 5 indicated a high level of satisfaction. The mean score was 3.5 (SD=1) for teacher satisfaction, and 3.15 (SD=0.74) for student satisfaction, indicating that students were slightly less satisfied than teachers.

The respondents were offered the opportunity to express any additional comments about the *Center Shiken*. The teachers seemed to have a more positive opinion about the test than the students. One teacher praised the test on the grounds that it included natural examples of the English language as opposed to formal, textbook language. In this way *'students can hear useful everyday expressions'*. Another teacher claimed that the level of the test was appropriate for the high school students he/she taught. The students, on the other hand, seemed more critical of the test. For example, 25% (N=5) of the students mentioned that the inclusion of a speaking test was necessary to improve their ability to communicate in English. Another student mentioned that the test seems to measure how well one prepares for the test as opposed to the level of one's English ability.

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University Administered Tests (Section 2)

As with the *Center Shiken*, university administered tests contain no assessment of speaking ability. When asked about the inclusion of a speaking component to the tests, the majority of teachers (80% N=16) claimed it was a 'good' or 'quite a good' idea. A similar response was reported from the students with 75% (N=15) feeling the same way.

The second question relating to university administered tests was interested in respondents' level of satisfaction. Again, respondents had to rate their level of satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 5. The mean score was 2.9 (SD=0.85) for teacher satisfaction, and 3.05 (SD=0.82) for student satisfaction, indicating that teachers were slightly less satisfied than students.

The respondents were offered the opportunity to express any additional comments regarding the content of university administered tests. Upon looking at these comments it became clear that some of the respondents were unsatisfied for the following reasons. Three of the teachers mentioned that the level of university administered tests was too difficult for the majority of their students, claiming that *'texts are quoted from technical books which include many difficult technical terms'*. Two teachers mentioned that they were unsatisfied with the tests as there was no assessment of speaking ability, suggesting that an interview test should be taken. This was supported by two students who also mentioned the need for a more communicative test that emphasised the assessment of speaking and listening skills.

The following section was different for teachers and students; for teachers this section was interested in teaching practices, and for students this section was interested in studying behaviour. For this reason, Section 3 has been divided into two sections: Section 3a and Section 3b.

Teaching Practices (Section 3a)

When asked how important it was to prepare students for entrance examinations, most teachers (80% N=16) agreed that it was 'important' or 'very important'. A similar positive response was found to the question of how important it was to develop students' ability to communicate in English in which 85% (N=17) were in agreement. When teachers were asked about the purpose of their lessons, 85% (N=17) agreed that it was to help students pass their English examinations. An equally high number (70% N=14) agreed that the purpose of their lessons was also to develop students' ability to communicate orally in English. When asked whether it was more important for students to pass the entrance examination than to be able to speak well in English, teachers responded in differing ways; 40% (N=8) agreed, 35% (N=7) disagreed, and 25% (N=5) were undecided. The answers to these questions show that for the majority of teachers both test preparation and the development of communicative ability are of equal importance.

However, when we analyse the average classroom time spent on test preparation versus the average classroom time spent on developing communicative ability a rather different picture emerges. Figures 1a and 1b show this information in graph form. The data has been separated between 2nd and 3rd grade high school students.

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Figure 1a. Percentage of time teachers spend on test preparation and the development of communicative ability (2nd Grade)

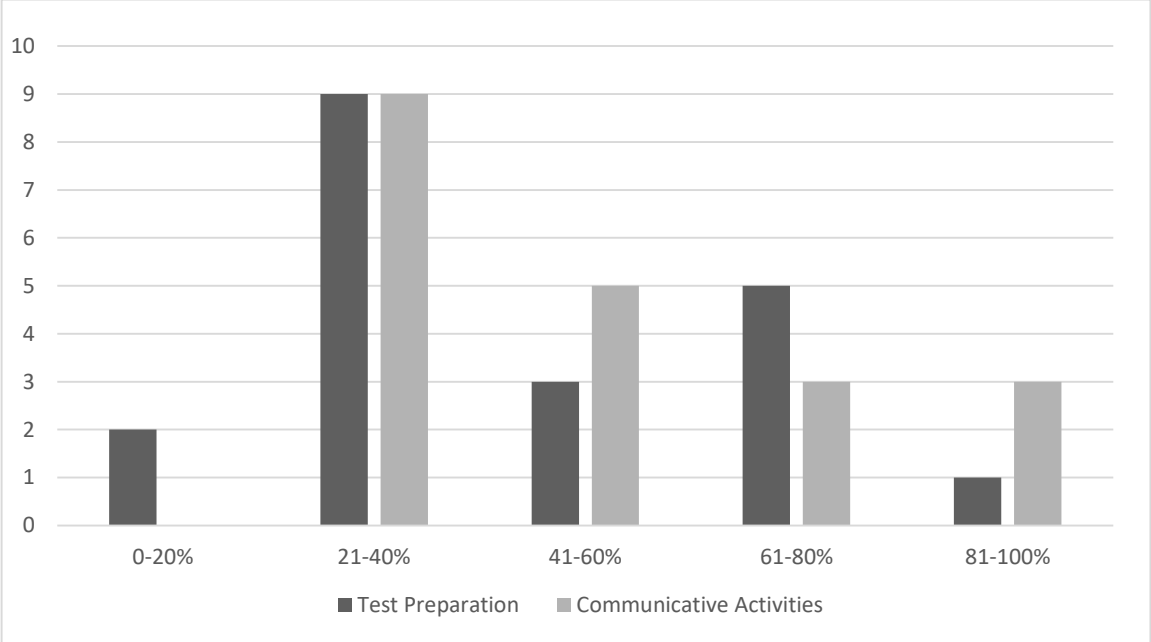
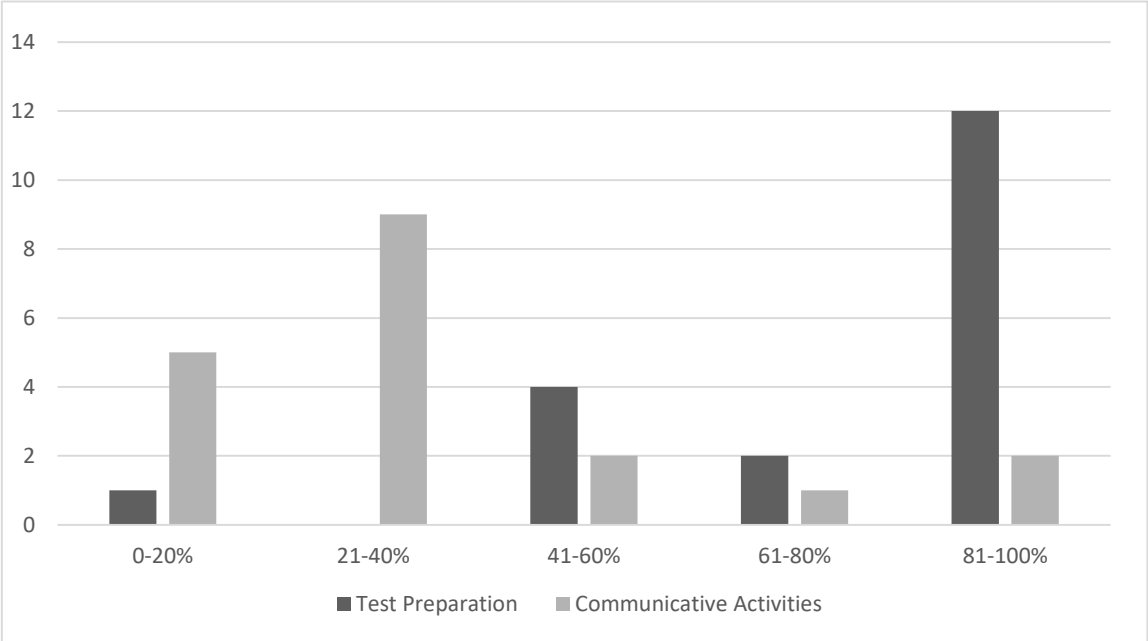


Figure 1b. Percentage of time teachers spend on test preparation and the development of communicative ability (3rd Grade)



*There was one non-response to this question (N=19)

Figure 1a shows that for the 2nd grade students it seems that on average, teachers spend roughly the same amount of time on test preparation and on developing students' ability to

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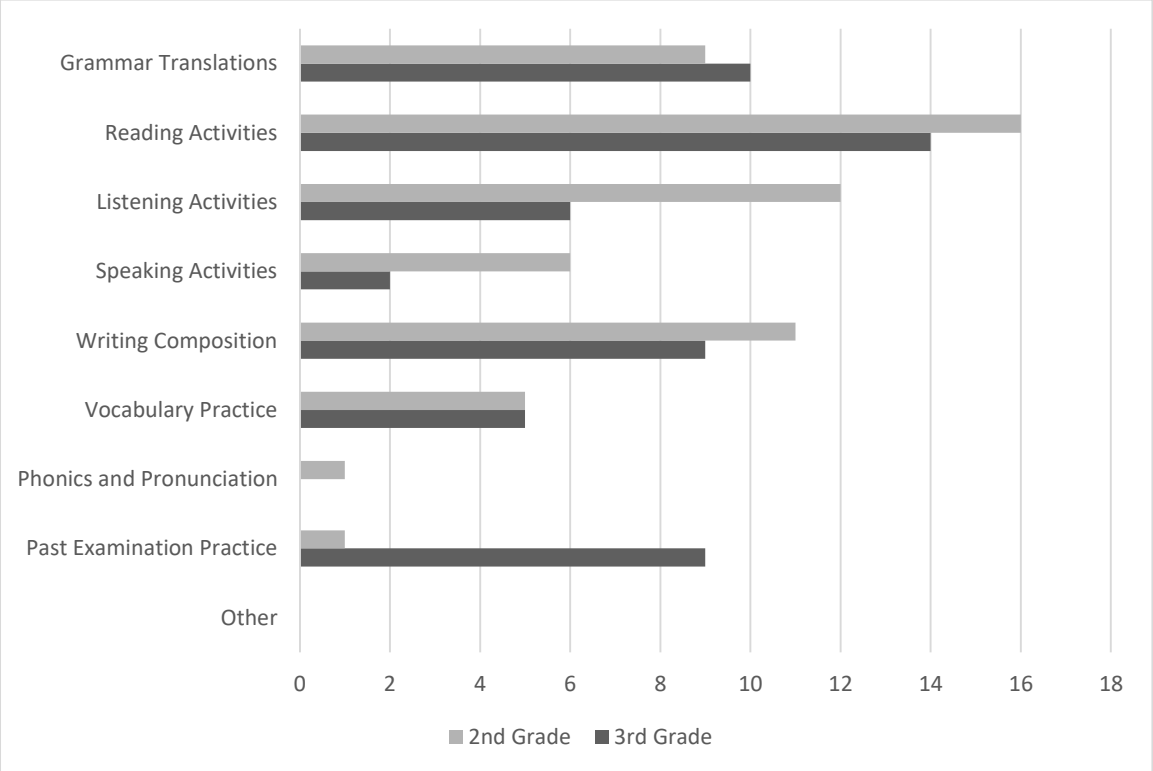
communicate in English. However, Figure 1b shows that when teaching the 3rd grade students, teachers seem to spend the majority of classroom time on test preparation. For example, 63% (N=12) of teachers claimed that they spend 81-100% of classroom time on test preparation, compared to just 10.5% (N=2) who spend the same amount of time on developing students' communicative ability. This result shows a clear influence of test washback on 3rd grade students, and emphasises the importance of preparing for university entrance examinations.

The influence of this test washback was also seen when teachers were asked whether they would use more classroom time to develop students' speaking ability if there were no entrance examinations. To this question 65% (N=13) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. Similarly, when asked whether they would use more classroom time to develop students' speaking ability if the entrance examinations contained a speaking test, 75% (N=15) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. A small minority of teachers (10% N=2) wrote that the amount of time they spent on communicative activities would be unaffected by changes to the entrance examination.

Further evidence that test washback affects 3rd grade students to a greater degree can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the most frequently used activities by high school teachers for both grades.

Figure 2. Most frequently used activities for 2nd and 3rd grade students



The activities teachers most frequently use for 2nd grade students are reading activities, listening activities, writing compositions, and grammar translations. The activities teachers most frequently use for 3rd grade students are reading activities, grammar translations, writing compositions, and past examination practice. We can see that there are some similarities in the types of activities that are used (and not so frequently used) in both year groups, in which there

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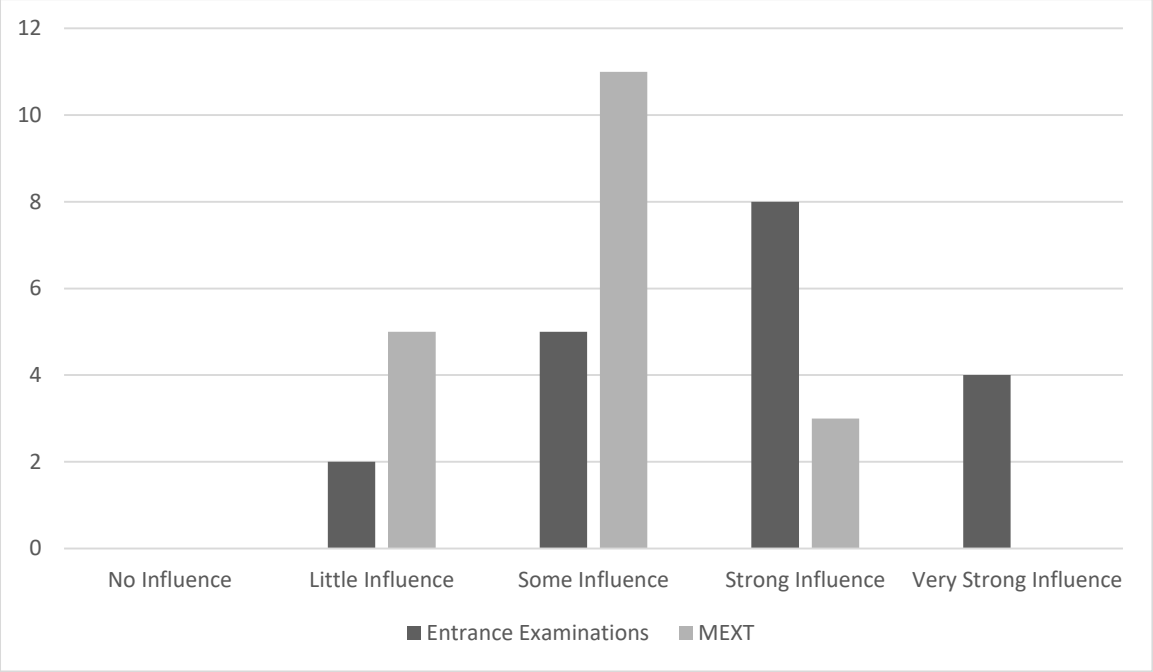
is a heavy focus on reading, grammar and writing and less of a focus on speaking, phonics and pronunciation. We can also see some clear differences. For example, only 5% (N=1) of teachers frequently use past examination practice with 2nd grade students, whereas 45% (N-9) do so with the 3rd grade students. Another difference is that while 60% (N=12) of teachers frequently use listening activities with 2nd grade students, only 30% (N=6) do so for the 3rd grade students. The use of speaking activities was low for both grades, however it was much lower (10% N=2) for the 3rd graders than it was for the 2nd graders (30% N=6). It seems then, that when teaching 3rd grade students, teachers are more affected by test washback, and this is manifested in the use of more past examination practice and less listening and speaking activities.

In line with the research questions of this study, a closer analysis of the influence of university entrance examinations and MEXT were examined. Figure 3a compares the influence of these two factors on *how* teachers teach.

Figure 3a. Influence of entrance exams vs. MEXT on teaching pedagogy



The figure shows that for the majority of the teachers, the influence of entrance examinations is stronger than the influence of MEXT; 63.1% (N=12) wrote that examinations had a 'strong' or 'very strong' influence on how they taught, compared to just 15.7% (N=3) for MEXT. A similar finding can be seen for the influences on lesson content, which is displayed in Figure 3b.

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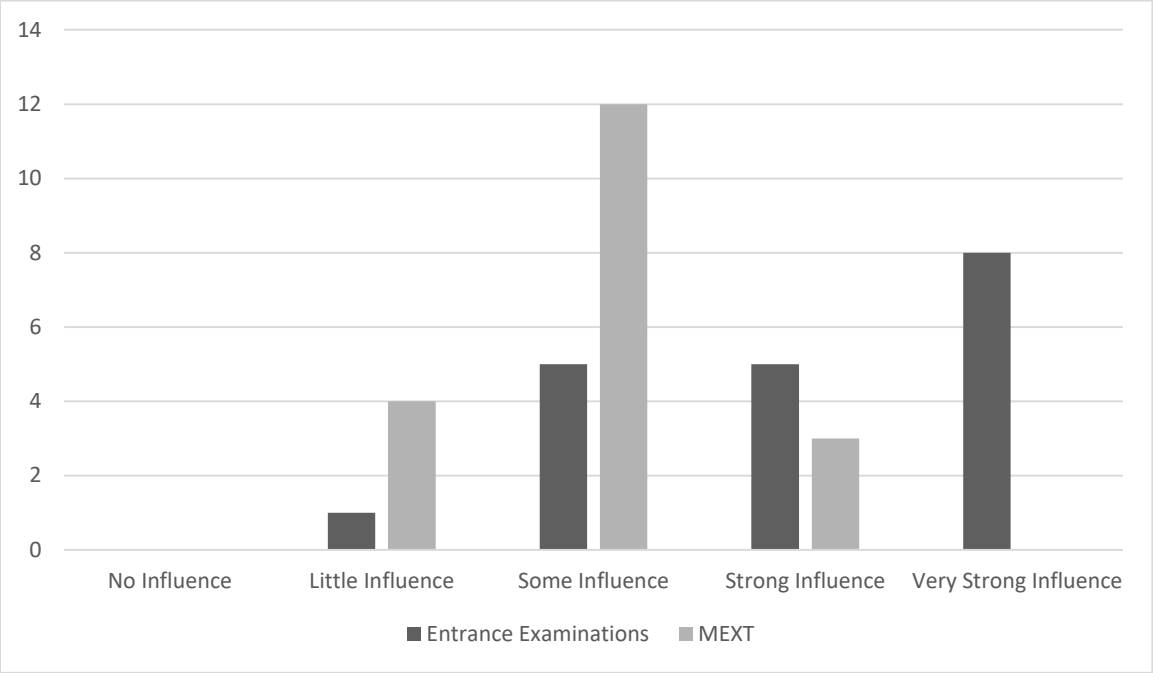
Figure 3b. Influence of entrance exams vs. MEXT on lesson content



The figure shows again that the influence of entrance examinations is much stronger than the influence of MEXT; 68.4% (N=13) of teachers reported that examinations had a 'strong' or 'very strong' influence on what they taught, compared to just 15.7% (N=3) for MEXT.

It seems then that for both teaching pedagogy and lesson content the influence of MEXT is quite minimal. This has significant consequences for the government of Japan, which has been trying to encourage a more communicative syllabus for several years. It implies that governmental recommendation regarding teaching pedagogy and lesson content may not be realised if they are in conflict with the washback effects of university entrance examinations, which appear to have a much stronger influence.

Studying Behaviour (Section 3b)

Upon analysis of the results, it was seen that 2nd and 3rd grade students answered the questions in almost identical ways. It was for this reason that their data were combined, and analysed together as one group.

When asked how important it was to prepare for entrance examinations, most students (90% N=18) agreed that it was 'important' or 'very important'. A similar positive response was found to the question of how important it was to develop the ability to communicate in English in which 95% (N=19) were in agreement. When asked about the reasons for studying English, all of the students (100% N=20) agreed that they studied English to improve their communicative ability. 30% (N=6) claimed that they also studied English to pass their entrance examinations. Similarly, when asked whether it was more important to pass the entrance examination than to be able to speak well in English, most of the students (80% N=16) 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. The answers to these questions suggest that for the majority of students, developing

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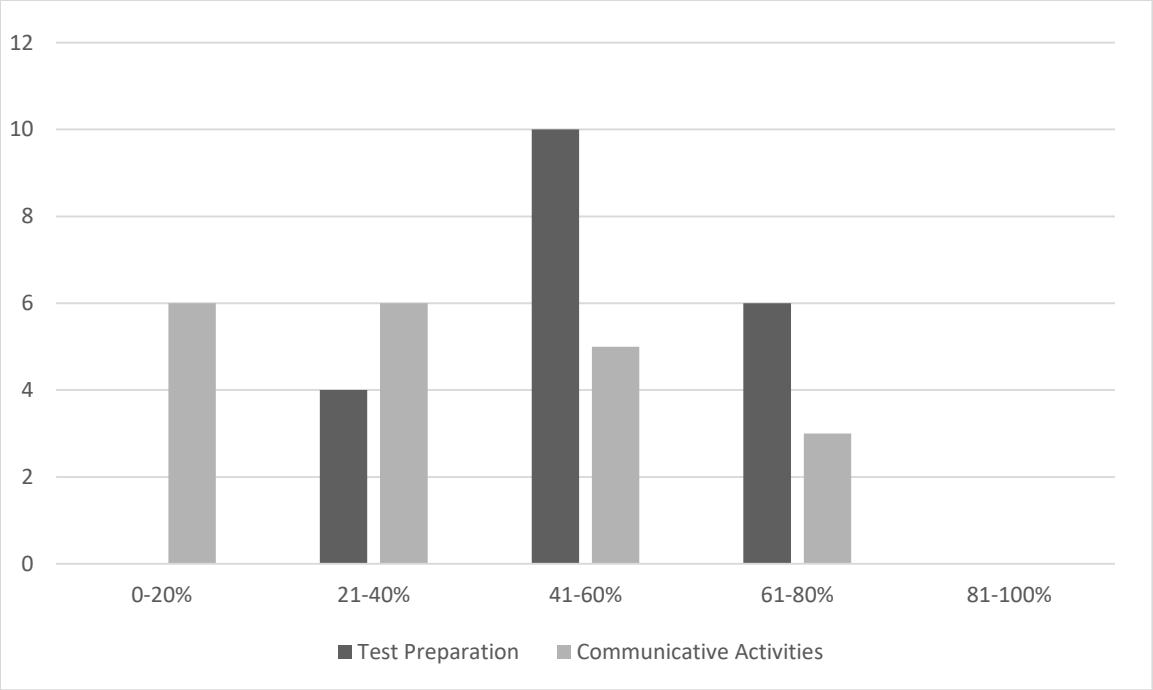
communicative competence in the English language is more important than preparing for university entrance examinations.

However, despite students' desire to improve their communicative ability, they seem to be spending more time preparing for entrance examinations than on communicative activities. Figure 4 shows the average percentage of time students spend on test preparation and the development of communicative ability when they study English.

Figure 4. Percentage of time students spend on test preparation and the development of communicative ability



The figure shows that 60% (N=12) of students spend between 0-40% of their English study time developing their communicative ability, and of this 60%, half of them spend between 0-20%. This seems quite low considering that all of the students claimed that the reason why they studied English was to improve their communicative ability. It seems then that the presence of university entrance examinations influences students to study in ways in which they do not prefer. The influence of test washback was also seen when students were asked whether they would use more time to develop their speaking ability if there were no entrance examinations, or if the entrance examinations contained a speaking test. To these questions, 70% (N=14) and 85% (N=17) respectively 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'.

Further evidence of test washback can be seen in Figure 5, which compares the activities that students find most important with those that they most frequently use.

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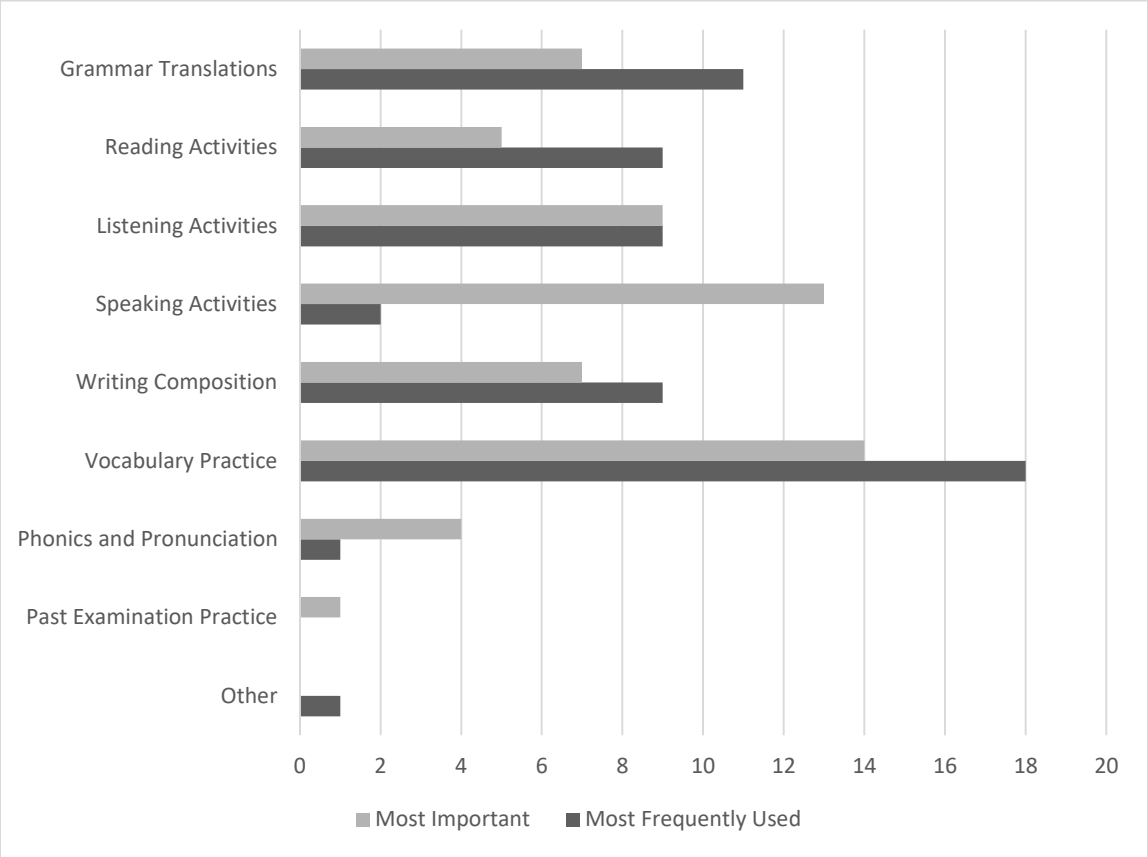
Figure 5. Most important and most frequently used activities for 2nd and 3rd grade students



The above figure shows that the majority of students regard vocabulary practice and speaking activities as the most important. However, most students reported that they most frequently use vocabulary practice and grammar translations when they study English. Other activities that students regarded as important included listening activities, grammar translations and writing compositions. These activities as well as reading activities seemed to be also frequently used by the students. The largest discrepancy between the two categories can be seen in the use of speaking activities, in which 65% (N=13) reported that it was most important, but only 10% (N=2) claimed to frequently use speaking activities when they studied English. This result echoes what was found in the teachers' questionnaire, in which teachers reported using speaking activities very little during classroom time despite 85% agreeing that it was important to develop students' ability to communicate in English.

Recommendations (Section 4)

In this section respondents were asked whether they had any recommendations on how the current system of entrance examinations could be improved. Unlike in previous sections, where response options were provided, the respondents were encouraged to answer in an open-ended format.

Of the 20 teachers, 50% (N=10) did not answer, or wrote that they did not have any recommendations for how the current system could be improved. The high non-response may

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reflect the difficulty that such a question poses, in which there are no fast and easy solutions. Of the teachers that did respond, several mentioned the need to include an assessment of productive skills such as speaking ability and essay writing, but were unsure how this could be achieved given the logistics of testing almost half a million students in a short period of time.

However, a few teachers (N=3) did provide recommendations, and these points have been summarised below. One teacher suggested that outsourcing the speaking test to an outside company may be a solution, claiming that *'tests such as the Step (Eiken) Test could be used as part of the assessment criteria'*. For the benefit of the reader, the Step Test is a government backed English test that includes a compulsory assessment of speaking ability. The test is sometimes used as a requirement for Japanese students who wish to study abroad. Another teacher mentioned that high school grades/teacher recommendations should be given more weight in the assessment criteria. This would mean that teachers could give an evaluation of speaking ability, which would take the pressure off the *Center Shiken* and universities to conduct their own speaking test. A final recommendation did not wish for a change to the content of the tests, but instead wanted the tests to be administered more frequently, allowing students to have more than one opportunity to take the examinations.

With regards to the students, 55% (N=11) gave a non-response to this question. Of the students that did respond, all of the students (N=9) mentioned the need to include a speaking test to the examination process, although none of the students could provide a method for how this could be achieved. Three students also mentioned that the current entrance examinations seem to focus too heavily on grammar, and that tests should focus more on the natural uses of language. What is clear from the students' responses is that there is a desire for an English test that is less grammar oriented and more focused on communicative ability.

Analysis of the Semi-Structured Interviews

Of the 20 teachers who had completed the questionnaire, only 2 teachers agreed to a follow-up interview. For the purpose of anonymity, the identity of the participants will not be disclosed. Instead they will be referred to as Participant 1 (P1) and Participant 2 (P2). The data from the semi-structured interviews have been summarised under two sub-headings;

- Attitude towards entrance examinations
- Factors that influence teaching pedagogy and lesson content

Attitude towards Entrance Examinations

P1 had a fairly positive opinion about the *Center Shiken*, claiming that the grammar, reading and listening content were appropriate in difficulty, and contained natural usage of the English language. However, his opinion about university administered tests was less favourable. He expressed that many examinations have a heavy focus on grammar, translation and reading. He said that for many universities the ability to read and understand academic texts in English is regarded as more important than the ability to communicate in English. The reason for this is that regardless of the field of study the student wishes to pursue, they may have to read articles or journals that are only available in the English language. It is for this reason that many university entrance examinations contain academic reading texts as part of their assessment criteria.

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P2 also provided some insight into this area. Similar to P1, P2 agreed that the *Center Shiken* was a good test in which its grammar, reading and listening content were appropriate for her students. Her attitude towards university administered tests was undecided in that the tests varied depending on the type of university. She claimed that high level national universities tend to contain difficult questions that require students to translate and write compositions in English, while low level private universities usually rely on multiple choice questions where students simply have to select their answers.

Another point raised by P1 and P2 was that they were both in favour for the inclusion of a speaking test to university entrance examinations. However, when questioned about the logistics of such a test, both were at odds about how this could be realistically achieved given the current structure of the admissions process.

Factors that Influence Teaching Pedagogy and Lesson Content

Teachers were asked about the factors that have influenced the ways in which they teach. Although several factors were identified, only the factors that are central to the research questions are discussed below.

University Entrance Examinations

University entrance examinations were identified as having a significant influence over teaching pedagogy and lesson content. Both P1 and P2 expressed that it was very important to prepare their students for entrance examinations and as a result both reported using the majority of their teaching time for this purpose. Both teachers expressed a desire to teach more communicative English, however they felt that this was not possible given the present content and format of university examinations, which is mainly focused on grammar, reading and translation. This finding supports the work of Sakui (2004:159) who claimed that *'contrary to the teachers' aspirations to incorporate CLT into their teaching, they cannot ignore the demand to prepare students for entrance examinations'*. In reference to this issue, P1 said that *'if the entrance exams should change, our lessons would also change'*. This response implies that teachers are not necessarily constrained by the power of tradition, and providing that what they teach is relevant to the content of entrance examinations, are willing to change their current teaching practices.

Expectations of Students and Parents

The expectations of students and parents were also identified as having a strong influence on teaching pedagogy and lesson content. For both P1 and P2, students have an expectation to prepare for entrance examinations, and therefore want help to improve their skills in reading and writing. P2 mentioned that *'some students may question the benefits of speaking activities given that this is not included in the entrance examinations'*. Similarly, parents have an expectation that teachers will help to prepare their children for these tests. According to P2, most parents want their children to enter high level universities as this will give them better job prospects in the future.

MEXT

The influence of MEXT was deemed to have little influence on teaching pedagogy and lesson content by both P1 and P2. When asked why this was so, they responded that the policies recommended by MEXT are incongruous with the current structure of English education in

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Japan. P2 mentioned that in her opinion *'MEXT does not know what is happening at the school level. They should visit and look at the situation before making suggestions on how we should teach'*. It is hard to say whether the other teachers who were not interviewed would share this opinion or not. However, it may offer an explanation as to why the majority of teachers (N=16) in the questionnaire reported that MEXT did not have a strong influence on the ways in which they teach.

DISCUSSION

The discussion forms the final section of this study and has been divided into four sub-sections;

- Summary of findings
- Implications for MEXT and English education
- Limitations of the study
- Concluding remarks

Summary of Findings

As mentioned in the introduction, the first research question was interested in whether university entrance examinations affected teaching pedagogy in a way that dissuaded teachers from using CLT in the classroom. On the whole it seems that it does, and there seems to be a mismatch between the positive attitude teachers have towards CLT and the degree to which they use such activities in their classrooms. For example, the results from this study showed that although the majority of teachers regard both test preparation and the development of communicative ability as equally important, they seem to be using substantially more classroom time on test preparation. The extent to which this is true seems to be more applicable to the teaching of 3rd grade students than for 2nd grade students, implying that the effects of test washback become stronger as the time to take the examination nears. In addition, the fact that 75% of the teachers in this study agreed that they would use more classroom time to develop students' speaking ability if the entrance examinations contained a speaking test adds further support to the idea that teaching pedagogy and lesson content are somewhat influenced by the content of these examinations.

The second research question was interested in whether university entrance examinations affected student learning behaviour in a way that test preparation became the priority over the development of communicative ability. Again the results seem to show that it does. For the majority of students, developing communicative competence in the English language was regarded as more important than preparing for university entrance examinations. However, despite this conviction, students reported spending more time preparing for examinations than on developing their communicative ability. This seemed to be the case for both 2nd and 3rd grade students, who answered the questionnaire in very similar ways. For example, 65% of students reported that speaking activities were of most importance, yet just 10% of students claimed to frequently use them when they studied English. Therefore, the results of this study imply that the content of entrance examinations encourages students to study in ways in which they do not desire. This is supported by the finding that 85% of the students in this study agreed

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that if the entrance examinations contained a speaking test they would spend more time to develop their speaking ability.

It seems then that changes in the examinations would result in changes to both teaching pedagogy and student learning behaviour. However, what is unclear is how much of a change we could expect to see. This study accepts that examination washback is just one out of a number of factors that can affect the ways in which English is taught and studied. However, even with this in mind, the results indicate that both teachers and students are affected by the content of these examinations and that this is creating a barrier to the use of CLT in the classroom.

Implications for MEXT and English Education

The results from this study showed that for both teaching pedagogy and lesson content, the influence of MEXT in comparison to that of entrance examinations is quite minimal. What this implies is that government recommendation regarding teaching pedagogy and lesson content may not be realised if they are in direct conflict with the washback effects of university entrance examinations. Because the current examinations are heavily focused on grammar and do not contain a speaking component, in order for classrooms to become more communicative a test of communicative ability is needed.

Other implications concern how a test of speaking ability could be incorporated into the existing framework of entrance examinations, in which two suggestions were put forward. One suggestion involved outsourcing a speaking test to a government approved company such as the Step (*Eiken*) Test. Another involved giving high school grades/teacher recommendations more weight in the assessment criteria, thereby allowing teachers to conduct their own assessment of speaking ability. Future research may benefit from exploring how far other teachers and students are in favour of such changes, and the extent to which these suggestions are feasible.

Limitations of the Study

The data from the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews yielded many interesting findings, and indeed this study has attempted to explain what such data could imply. However, it is important to remember that the data is based on a small sample size and therefore generalisations to the whole of Japan cannot be made with certainty**.**

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In spite of the limitations, this study shows the need for a change to the current examination process. It seems that many teachers and students are in favour of a test that incorporates a speaking component and it is probable that such changes could even help MEXT with its ambition to encourage the use of CLT in the classroom. It is without question that such changes would be costly to the Japanese government, but the cost of having a test that is counterproductive to government initiatives may prove to be more costly in the long run. Although the content of entrance examinations is just one factor out of many that can influence teaching pedagogy and student learning behaviour, the results indicate that the majority of teachers and students would change their current practices should such changes in examination content occur. With this in mind, the results of the study should provide MEXT with some

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confidence that money spent on incorporating an assessment of speaking ability to English entrance examinations is likely to have the desired effect of encouraging the use of CLT in the Japanese classroom.

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