

A Critical Analysis of English Language Entrance Examinations at Japanese Universities

Submitted by Akiko Takagi, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Education in TESOL, March 2010.

This dissertation is available for library use on the understanding that it is copyright
material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper
acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been
identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the
award of the degree by this or any other university.

.....

Akiko Takagi

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the support of many people. First of all, I would like to thank all of the students and teachers who took part in the study. I really appreciate how each individual shared their experiences and gave their honest opinion. Without their help, I would not have collected such rich data and had a successful learning experience.

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisors at the University of Exeter, Dr. Susan Riley and Dr. Salah Troudi for their patience, generous support, and advice.

I am also very grateful to my colleagues who always encouraged me and commented professionally on my study. Special thanks also to all of my professors who helped me collect data. Without their support, encouragement, and understanding, I would not have been able to accomplish my study.

Lastly, I would like to thank my mother and my friends for all the support they provided me through the duration of my studies. I especially thank Ms. Chizuyo Kojima who always encouraged me to continue my studies.

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of university entrance exams on the perceptions and attitudes that Japanese students and teachers have towards English-language exams. It is a qualitative study conducted within the framework of a critical paradigm and specifically refers to the theory of critical language testing proposed by Shohamy (2001). The study was conducted within this framework to highlight the current problems of university entrance exams and emphasize the need for change. It also challenges the positivist view which is dominant in Japanese language testing research and expands the research area within the Japanese context.

The aim of the study was to empower both students and high school teachers who, as the highest stakeholders, are in a weak position and give them an opportunity to express their opinions and feelings through an open-ended questionnaire and interview. The study also intended to raise their awareness about their rights as test-takers to question the misuse of tests and encourage them to develop a critical view about the exam system.

The results demonstrated that university entrance examination has a negative impact on both language learning for students and high school teaching for teachers. The students experience a psychological burden while preparing for and taking the exam. Likewise, teachers feel pressured by various stakeholders including students, parents, and administrators. In addition, both students and teachers realize that entrance exams have an important influence on the life and future of a student and that they cannot be avoided in an exam-driven society.

The dissertation concludes with practical implications for both test-takers and testers to improve the current entrance examination system, in order to elicit positive feedback and better outcomes, as well as recommendations for further research.

List of contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	2
Abstract	3
List of contents	4
List of tables	9
Chapter 1 – Introduction	10
1.1 Statement of the problem	11
1.2 Rational of the study	12
1.3 Aims of the study	13
1.4 Research Questions	14
1.5 Significance of the study	14
1.6 Organization of the thesis	15
Chapter 2 – Background	16
2.1 Introduction	16
2.2 The Japanese school system	16
2.3 The university admission system in Japan	17
2.4 Competitiveness of the entrance exam	19
2.5 Reform of the university entrance admission system	23
2.6 English curriculum in secondary school, and English education policy in Japan	26
Chapter 3 –Literature Review	29
3.1 Introduction	29
3.2 Definitions of reliability and validity	29
3.3 Ethics of language testing	31
3.4 Washback effect and impact	31
3.5 Studies on washback and impact	32
3.5.1 <i>Studies on washback and impact outside of Japan</i>	32
3.5.2 <i>Studies on washback and impact in Japan</i>	36

3.6 Critical language testing	39
3.7 Studies on critical language testing	44
3.8 Criticism towards the Japanese university entrance exam	47
3.8.1 <i>General criticism towards the Japanese university entrance exam</i>	47
3.8.2 <i>Issues of reliability and validity in an English test in the entrance exam</i>	48
3.9 Cultural, social, and political aspects of the Japanese entrance exam	53
3.10 Summary	56
Chapter 4 – Research Methodology	58
4.1 Approach and justification	58
4.2 Research questions	61
4.3 Participants	61
4.3.1 <i>Students</i>	61
4.3.2 <i>Teachers</i>	63
4.4 Ethical considerations	65
4.5 Data collection methods and procedures	65
4.5.1 <i>Justification of data collection methods</i>	65
4.5.2 <i>Questionnaire</i>	65
4.5.2.1 <i>Development of an open-ended questionnaire</i>	66
4.5.2.2 <i>Piloting</i>	67
4.5.2.3 <i>Procedures</i>	67
4.5.3 <i>Interviews</i>	68
4.5.3.1 <i>Interviews with the students</i>	69
4.5.3.2 <i>Interviews with the teachers</i>	70
4.6 Data analysis	70
4.6.1 <i>Methods of data analysis</i>	71
4.6.2 <i>Procedure of data analysis</i>	72
4.7 Dependability and credibility	74

4.8 Limitations of the study	76
Chapter 5 – Results and Discussion	78
5.1 Research question 1	78
5.1.1 <i>Influence of university entrance exams on students’ learning in class</i>	79
5.1.2 <i>Usefulness of preparation for the exam</i>	80
5.1.3 <i>Influence of university entrance exams on students’ learning outside of school</i>	82
5.1.4 <i>Influence of entrance exams on students’ feelings</i>	84
5.1.5 <i>Summary discussion</i>	87
5.2. Research question 2	89
5.2.1 <i>Influence of university entrance exams on teachers’ teaching in English classes</i>	89
5.2.1.1 <i>Teachers’ awareness of English entrance exams</i>	89
5.2.1.2 <i>Activities teachers carry out in English classes to prepare for English entrance</i>	91
5.2.1.3 <i>Teachers’ perceptions of the influence of English entrance exams on their teaching</i>	93
5.2.2 <i>Students’ pressure on teachers’ teaching</i>	96
5.2.3 <i>Influence of university entrance exams on the English curriculum in high school</i>	99
5.2.4 <i>Influence of university entrance exams on regular English exams in high school</i>	101
5.2.5 <i>Summary discussion</i>	102
5.3 Research question 3	104
5.3.1 <i>Appropriateness of English entrance exams as an assessment tool</i>	104
5.3.1.1 <i>Students’ view</i>	104
5.3.1.2 <i>Teachers’ view</i>	107
5.3.2 <i>Discrepancy between the purposes of foreign languages</i>	110

<i>and English entrance exams</i>	
5.3.2.1 <i>Students' views</i>	110
5.3.2.2 <i>Teachers' views</i>	111
5.3.3 <i>Necessity of the English entrance exams</i>	113
5.3.3.1 <i>Students' views</i>	113
5.3.3.2 <i>Teachers' views</i>	115
5.3.4 <i>Summary discussion</i>	117
5.4 <i>Research question 4</i>	118
5.4.1 <i>Reflection of educational policy in the entrance exams</i>	119
5.4.1.1 <i>Students' views</i>	119
5.4.1.2 <i>Teachers' views</i>	120
5.4.2 <i>Influence of English entrance exams on students' life and future</i>	123
5.4.2.1 <i>Students' views</i>	123
5.4.2.2 <i>Teachers' views</i>	125
5.4.3 <i>Summary Discussion</i>	126
Chapter 6 – Implications and conclusion	130
6.1 <i>A summary of the findings of the research questions</i>	130
6.1.1 <i>Research Question 1: What are students' perceptions of the influence of university English entrance exam on their learning English in high school?</i>	130
6.1.2 <i>Research Question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of the influence of the university English entrance exam on their teaching of English?</i>	131
6.1.3 <i>Research Question 3: What are students and teachers' attitudes toward the English entrance exam in general?</i>	131
6.1.4 <i>Research Question 4: How do students and teachers perceive the use and consequences of the English entrance exam for education and society?</i>	131
6.2 <i>Implications and recommendations</i>	132
6.2.1 <i>Implications for students and high school teachers</i>	132

6.2.2 <i>Implication for university professors</i>	133
6.2.2.1 <i>Developing a fair exam</i>	134
6.2.2.2 <i>Being a responsible tester</i>	135
6.2.3 <i>Implications for university administrators and officials of the MEXT</i>	136
6.3 Contribution to existing knowledge	137
6.4 Recommendations for further research	138
6.4.1 <i>Needs for research on a variety of participants</i>	138
6.4.2 <i>Consideration of using other research methods</i>	139
6.4.3 <i>Needs for more research on language testing in the critical paradigm</i>	139
6.5 Conclusion	140
6.6 Personal reflection	141
Appendices	142
Appendix 1: Participants information	142
Appendix 2: Biographical details of the six teacher participants	143
Appendix 3: Consent form	145
Appendix 4: Questionnaire for students	146
Appendix 5: Questionnaire for teachers	150
Appendix 6: Example of answers to the questionnaire for teaching about the English entrance examinations for universities (T3)	155
Appendix 7: Example of categorization (Answers to question 3 in teachers' questionnaire)	161
Bibliography	166

List of tables

	Page
Table 1	Activities conducted to prepare for the exam in English class 79
Table 2	Usefulness of preparation for the exam in English class 80
Table 3	Activities conducted to prepare for exams outside of school 83
Table 4	Influence of English entrance exam on students' feelings 85
Table 5	Reasons that teachers are aware of English entrance exams for universities in their teaching 89
Table 6	How teachers who are aware of English entrance exams for universities teach their English classes 91
Table 7	Teachers' perceptions of the influence of the English entrance exams for universities on their English classes 94
Table 8	Students' requests in English classes to prepare for the English entrance exams for universities 97
Table 9	Teachers' perceptions of the influence of the English entrance exams for universities on the English curriculum in high school 99
Table 10	Teachers' awareness of the English entrance exams for universities in regular English exams in high school 101
Table 11	Students' perceptions of appropriateness of the English entrance exams 105
Table 12	Teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness of the English entrance exams 107
Table 13	Students' views on the discrepancy between English entrance exams and the purposes of foreign language instruction 111
Table 14	Teachers' views of the discrepancy between English entrance exams and the purposes of foreign language teaching 112
Table 15	Students' views of the necessity of the English test in university entrance exams 113
Table 16	Teacher' views of the necessity of the English test in the university entrance exams 115
Table 17	Students' views of the relationship between university entrance exams and educational policies 119
Table 18	Teachers' views of the relationship between university entrance exams and educational policies 120
Table 19	Students' views of the influence of entrance exams on students' life and future 123
Table 20	Teacher' views of the influence of entrance exams on students' life and future 125
Table 21	Student participants information 142
Table 22	Teacher participants information 142