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THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULA AND ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS IN JAPAN

ABSTRACT. In this paper I will describe, in very broad strokes, the changes in the content, teaching and assessment of English in the past 150 years. The paper is divided into three sections. The first part is a chronological description of changes in teaching and curriculum and is subdivided into three periods following Sasaki (2008). The second section focuses on how the assessment systems in Japanese schools, universities, and the private sector relate to each other, and how they have evolved. In the next part of the paper I summarize the recent history of changes to curriculum and assessment. I close by considering how the proposed changes will affect the curriculum and assessment of English in the future.

Keywords: assessment, testing, curriculum, entrance examinations, CEFR

Introduction

In 1635, the government of the Shogun of Japan (*bafuku*) introduced a ban on communication with the outside world and forbade all Japanese citizens, on pain of death, from learning and speaking foreign languages, except for those who were permitted to trade with merchants from China, Korea and Holland. All this changed on October 4th, 1808, when a British warship sailed into Nagasaki harbour. The British demanded that they be supplied with food, water and fuel or the city would be bombarded. Outgunned, the local magistrate acquiesced to the British demands, with all communications going through the Dutch translators. The incident alerted the bafuku to the dangers of not being prepared

to face future foreign interlopers and orders were given that the government translators should learn English (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006).

After repeated incursions by the British and American navies, in 1857 the government translation school, *Bansho Shirabesho*, was given the task of teaching English to a select group of men who were then dispatched to the USA and Britain to further their study of English. From this time onwards, the learning of English has, for better or worse, been part of the Japanese educational experience.

I. 150 years of English

1. 1868-1945

The fall of the bafuku in 1868 led to the accession of the young Emperor Meiji whose government was determined to move Japan from being a semi-feudal society to a modern economic state. At the forefront of the changes was an urgent need for more people to learn foreign languages, with English being the most useful.

From 1868, the development of education was a top priority and in 1872 the Japanese government ordered the construction of 256 middle schools and over 53,000 elementary schools. Since there were no universities in Japan, the

government prioritised the building of eight colleges of higher learning. In 1877, the *Bansho Shirabesho* translation school was forced to amalgamate with several other institutions to form the backbone of what would become the University of Tokyo, the first seat of higher education in Japan. For five years, English was the medium of instruction for most classes in the new college because a number of foreigners had to be employed to teach where Japanese teachers lacked up-to-date knowledge. This was particularly so in the sciences and engineering.

It was apparent to the Japanese government that in order to modernize the country, it was essential that more people be sent overseas to study technology and business in Europe and America. This fuelled an increased demand for the study of English and the Ministry of Education decided it should be included as a subject in the middle school curriculum. It was not compulsory, but most students chose to study the language because it had become one the subjects that formed part of the assessment for advancement to higher education. English classes were usually conducted in English and some schools had native-speaking teachers.

The "English boom" continued until 1882, when it began to fall out of favour amongst the elite in Japanese society. English began to be viewed by some as a "colonizing" language and teachers everywhere, including in the

schools, began to switch to using Japanese in the classroom, instead of English (Fujimoto-Adamson, 2006). It remained part of the middle-school curriculum, but because Japanese teachers had less contact with native speakers of the language, they began to lose confidence in their ability to use English and moved away from teaching speaking skills. Instead, they chose to adopt a type of Grammar-Translation method that had been in use for centuries in the study written Chinese (Koike & Tanaka, 1995).

Remarkably, by the beginning of the twentieth century Japan had already developed into a military and economic power. To advance even further, the government recognized it was imperative for the education system to be expanded. By the early 1920s, elementary school education had become compulsory for six years and attendance was close to 100%. Middle school education was not compulsory and by 1945 only about 20% of elementary school graduates went on to higher education.

English remained an important part of the curriculum in middle school and high school, but the Ministry of Education was unhappy with the continued use of Grammar-Translation in schools and sought ways to modernize English teaching methods. To this end, in 1923 they invited H. E. Palmer, a British linguist, to act as an adviser to the Ministry. He accepted the invitation and

worked in Japan for fourteen years, spending much of the time trying to introduce the Oral Method into schools (Smith, 1998; Yamamoto, 1978). He decided to return to Britain in 1936, but before he left Palmer enlisted the help of A. S. Hornby, another British linguist who had been teaching in Japan for some years. Hornby was very supportive of Palmer's views of English teaching and continued to work as an adviser to the Ministry of Education until 1942, when he was forced to leave Japan because of war (Smith, 1998).

The positive legacy of Palmer's and Hornby's work was the creation of and support for the Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET), a community of academics and teachers which exists to this day. However, despite the best efforts of both men, little actually changed in the teaching of English in schools or universities. Palmer's attempts to get Japanese teachers to adopt the Oral Method did not make any real progress because most teachers had little confidence in their ability to speak English. However, teachers were not only reluctant to change methodology because of them being uncomfortable in using English, it was also because the English examinations used for entry to high school and college only contained questions that required students to translate difficult English texts into Japanese. This approach to examining English became known, and is still known, as '*juken-eigo'* (examination

English). By the time that war broke out between Japan and the USA in 1942, Grammar-Translation had become so deeply engrained as a tradition, that there was little chance of change for the future.

2. 1945-1970

The end of World War II in 1945 and the occupation of Japan by the American-led General Headquarters (GHQ) led to a watershed in Japanese education. The allies enlisted the help of educators from all fields who were instructed to work with their Japanese counterparts to remove all vestiges of imperialist doctrine that negatively affected the rights of Japanese citizens and subverted the nature of education. In 1947, a 6-3-3 school system, based on the American model, was introduced with elementary school and junior high school becoming compulsory.

The Ministry of Education also produced curricula for each subject (known in English as a "Course of Study") which contained a detailed description of the curriculum, its objectives, and how to achieve teaching goals. The document also contained advice for teachers about assessing students' English in ways that were different from the traditions of Grammar-Translation.

The teaching of English had been seriously curtailed during World War II, but remained part of the curriculum. GHQ and the Ministry of Education felt it was a timely opportunity to reform the teaching of English. Once again the Japanese government were forced to look to foreign experts for advice and they decided to enlist the support of Charles Fries, the renowned American linguist. Fries felt that there was too little emphasis on practical English skills and supported the proposals made by Palmer and Hornby to teach English through either the Oral Method, or by using the Audio-lingual method that was becoming popular in the USA, at that time. The principles that Fried espoused became part of the 1947 Course of Study for English (Schofield, 1997).

Once again, however, Japanese teachers were unenthusiastic about change. This was, in part, because the demand for new teachers of English had increased significantly, post-war. Despite the best attempts of the Ministry of Education to train new English teachers, there remained a serious shortfall throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s, resulting in teachers of other subjects, with very limited English ability, being called upon to teach English classes in junior high school. It was believed that anybody with even a basic knowledge of English could teach beginner-level English classes by following the Grammar-Translation method.

English was not compulsory in high school until the 1960s, but any student who wished to enter higher education would have had no choice but to study the language. Most university entrance examinations included a test of English and a knowledge of English increasingly became a prerequisite skill for getting a good job in Japan. This coincided with companies looking for ways to assess the English of potential or existing employees. This, in turn, led to the introduction of the first private sector test of English proficiency in Japan. Further discussion of this development will be delayed until section III of this paper.

3. 1970-1990

By the early 1970s, Japan had become an economic powerhouse and Japanese companies began to set up offices and factories all over the world. Globalization (*kokusaika* in Japanese) became the watch word of this period. Japanese companies came under intense pressure to recruit a cadre of workers who were proficient in English. These people would form a special group who could be despatched on international sales trips, or who could set up and run an overseas branch of the company. The pressure on businesses to recruit English speakers coincided with a rising demand for university places as increased

affluence allowed more families to send their children to a two-year or four-year college.

Both the companies and universities made representations to the Ministry of Education to introduce major reforms in English teaching. In response, the Ministry of Education actually changed the Course of Study for junior high school and high school to include greater emphasis on communication skills, and teachers were asked to follow a more communicative style of teaching. However, yet again, the power of tradition in the teaching and assessment of English prevailed. As long as the high-stakes tests continued to focus on grammar knowledge and the ability to translate, there was little hope of substantive change.

This contrarian pull of students on the one hand needing a certain type of English knowledge for study, but on the other needing practical English skills in order to join a major, international company, caused parents to fear that their children might be at a disadvantage in the pursuit of university education and jobs. This led to a boom in demand for after-school education, with parents willing to pay *juku* (cram schools) to help them in their academic study, and *eikaiwa* (English conversation schools) to give their children extra tuition which

might help gain future employment. A more detailed discussion of cram schools and their impact on assessment will follow in a later section.

I have now come to the end of my summary of curriculum changes. I will return to the topic of the English curriculum in section III of this paper when I will discuss some of the changes that are being proposed for the future. In the following section, I will describe how English assessment has changed and evolved. This time I will not follow a strictly chronological order, but will still concentrate on the same time period outlined in section I.

II. 150 years of assessment

1. University Entrance

After the University of Tokyo was established in 1877, the number of universities slowly increased to reach forty-nine by 1943 (Sasaki, 2008). Of these, nineteen were administered and financed by the nation, two were managed and paid for by local authorities, and twenty-eight were privately run. Tertiary education was very much for the elite since only 0.3% of the population entered university by the time World War II had ended. However, in 1949, after two years of administration by GHQ, an additional seventeen public and eighty-one private universities began classes and two-year junior colleges (*tandai*) were

opened. Post-war enrolment in higher education rose consistently and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, around 37% of high school graduates went on to college (university or junior college). This figure rose to 45% in 1995 and to 51% in 2005. It reached a peak of 57% in 2014, but from the following year it began to fall as the number of eighteen-year-old students started to decline.

From the earliest times until the present, universities have been able to set their entrance examination systems independently of any controlling body. Each university jealously protects its right to decide on the format of the examinations, which subjects the candidates must take, and how the scores are used. Today, it is exceptional for a college to not include some form of English assessment, but it was not always the case. In the period leading up to World War II, and during the war itself, the teaching of English declined and some colleges thought that it was unpatriotic to test the language. However, by the end of the 1950s, English examinations had become standard for students wishing to enter even the lowliest two-year college, despite the fact that English was not a compulsory subject in schools (Sasaki, 2008).

From the early 1960s, Japanese businesses had tried to convince colleges that it would be advantageous to them, and society in general, if they could graduate students who were actually able to communicate in English. The

problem was that universities were not interested in teaching anything remotely like practical English skills, but instead they were determined to continue teaching grammar and translation. Because of this, most universities elected to continue assessing English according to the same principles they had adhered to for so many years.

A typical English entrance examination of the time would probably consist of two or three passages in English in which sections of the text would be underlined, which the candidates have to translate into Japanese. Another task, which was generally referred to as a 'writing' test, would require candidates to translate parts of a short passage from Japanese to English. Other types of questions might have been included, but the scores from the translation tasks would always carry most weight.

It is probably fair to say that most university entrance examinations have changed in favour of a more eclectic approach to English assessment. However, even today, there are few teachers who are involved in the making of university examinations that have any knowledge of even the basic principles of testing and evaluation. Most teachers who serve on examination committees are likely to be specialists in linguistics, literature, history, or culture, and not language education. It is not surprising, therefore, that changes to English assessment in

universities have been slow to emerge. As a result, a new committee will tend to model their examination on that set by the previous committee.

In addition to the regular entrance examinations, all universities have long employed a 'recommendation system' (*suisen*) where students are considered for direct entry to a university if they have been recommended by a school that is some way affiliated (Goodman, 2011). Alternatively, a student might be granted entry if the student excels in a particular academic field, or shows brilliance in areas such as music, art, or sport. The decision to accept a student is usually based on their GPA, but most universities will call applicants for an interview.

A second alternative method of entry, called the AO (Administrative Office) system, is a more recent innovation (Kubota, 2010). AO assessment varies considerably across universities, but in the first stage a student will normally be asked to submit his/her GPA and an essay explaining why he/she should be admitted to the university. If the student is successful at the first stage, he/she will be invited for an interview. The student may be interviewed alone, or as part of a group. Such interviews invariably include some form of collaborative task. Applicants who want to be English majors will most likely be asked to write a report in English and be interviewed in Japanese and English.

It has been estimated that most universities now accept around 50% of their intake from students who did not take any entrance examination. This is good for the universities in their struggle for students, but the system is wide open to abuse and MEXT has become increasingly concerned about alternative methods of entry to university. I will return to this topic later.

2. The Common First-Stage Examination

As early as 1970, the Japanese government had become concerned at the poor quality of most entrance examinations and the negative impact they had on school education. Increasing competition to recruit the best students possible had caused many universities to deliberately raise the difficulty of entrance examinations, especially English. In response to what had become known as '*shaken jigoku'* (examination hell), the government consulted with Japan Association of National Universities (JANU) to try to find a way to reduce the stress on high school students. The Ministry of Education proposed to the national and public universities that they help develop common achievement tests for all subjects in the high school curriculum. Private colleges and universities were not invited to join the Common First-Stage Examination system because it offered them no benefit (Watanabe, 2013).

The Japanese government had tried to introduce a common assessment system as early as 1948. However, the national universities rejected it, claiming it would take away with their autonomy which had only recently been restored after years of academic repression. A similar proposal made in 1963 was rejected for the same reason. Then in 1971, the JANU agreed to the creation of common annual achievement tests to be based upon the high school curricula. The advantage of a common assessment system was that the universities would be able to select set students of specific academic level and reject those who did not make the grade. Those who were successful would go on to take an entrance examination set by a specific department. Candidates would be assessed on fewer subjects, but in greater detail than had been the case before the new system was introduced. Those who were not successful at the first stage could either wait a year to take the examinations again, or sit the examinations for one or more private universities.

Once the agreement had been made, in 1972 the National Center for University Entrance Examinations (NCUEE) was set up to create and administer the Common First-Stage Examinations. The first tests were administered in January, 1979, and all high school students that were applying to national or publically-funded colleges had to sit examinations in Japanese, mathematics,

social studies, science, and a foreign language. Over 99% of the candidates took English, but examinations in French and German were also available.

3. The Center Test

In 1990, the NCUEE introduced a revised examination system called the Center Test. The number of tests increased to cover six principal academic subjects, with a total of 28 subdivisions, and tests of Korean and Chinese were added to the foreign languages (Watanabe, 2013).

Then, as now, English tests were constructed by a committee of university or school teachers who were familiar with the Course of Study at high school. All the tasks they created had to be in multiple-choice format to allow for the use of mark sheets. In the early years, the tests primarily used discrete-point items to assess grammatical and lexical knowledge, or reading skills. Recently, however, committee members have been instructed to construct items of varying levels of difficulty, that focus on practical communication skills (as defined in the Course of Study), cover a wide range of topics, and assess sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic knowledge (Bachman, 1990). A test of listening ability was introduced in 2006. Speaking skills are still not assessed because the

NCUEE cannot train the number of people that would be required to interview the 500,000 candidates who sit the English section of Center Test, every year.

With the introduction of the new system, the NCUEE made a concerted effort to persuade private universities to accept students who had taken the Center Test. The response from private colleges was slow at first, but the number choosing to participate steadily increased. In 2017, out of a total of 848 two-year and four-year colleges, more than 650 were private. The reason for the increase is that private universities have now become more willing to accept students from non-traditional sources since they face intense competition from their rivals in the battle to enrol students from a rapidly declining population of eighteen-year olds.

4. The Cram School Industry

There was (and still is) intense pressure for high school students to enter a university which is going to give them an advantage in obtaining a job in a good company. The intense competition for places in the prestigious colleges has forced many parents to seek to give a boost to their childrens' chances by sending them to study in *juku* or *yobiko* (cram schools) in the evening. Their essential role is to educate high school students in the necessary skills for

passing university entrance examinations, and so much of the 'teaching' that goes on centres on the student repeatedly answering questions on papers that they will ultimately take for a particular. Many cram schools tend to specialize in preparing students for a restricted number of universities and will only enrol students who they fell will have a good chance of success of passing the examinations (Koike & Tanaka, 1995).

Cram schools are able to attract students by claiming that they can identify quite precisely the universities they should aim for. The system they have developed to do this is to first have students take a battery of tests, and then average the scores to produce a standardized t-score (*hensachi*). The *hensachi* is then checked against the score that the cram school predicts will be required for a student to enter a specific department in a university. Despite the fact that the *hensachi* system has a number of serious flaws (Shillaw, 2003), the system retains strong support from teachers and students in schools and universities throughout Japan.

5. Private Examinations

In 1961, Japan's Ministry of Education recommended that to increase citizens' motivation to study more, certificated proficiency tests be introduced for a variety of subjects. Two years later, a non-government organization known as the Society for the Testing English Proficiency (STEP) responded by introducing three tests of English for Japanese learners at advanced, intermediate and beginner level. The test proved popular, in 1968, they became the only private tests of English which the Japanese government officially recognized. As the demand for their tests increased, STEP realized that the ability range of the candidature had widened considerably and that more tests were needed. To accommodate this variation, over the years the number of levels have risen to seven, as shown in Table 1 below (History: Eiken Foundation of Japan).

Table 1: STEP/Eiken levels

Grade	LEVEL	Uses
Grade 1	Advanced	International admissions to graduate and undergraduate programs
Grade Pre-1		
Grade 2		MEXT benchmarks for high school graduates
Grade Pre-2		
Grade 3		MEXT benchmark for junior high school graduates

Grade 4	Beginner	□
Grade 5		□

Being the only officially recognized test of English served the STEP organization well and for ten years no rivals emerged from the private sector to challenge its supremacy. However, the tests were not popular with everybody. The business community felt strongly that the style and content of the tests did not match their desired assessment goals, which were to evaluate a person's ability to use English for the purpose of promotion, or to select the best staff for posting overseas. As a result of their frustration with both STEP and MEXT, Yasuo Kitaoka, a senior member of the Japanese employers association, Keidanren, contacted Educational Testing Service (ETS) in 1977 to ask them to come up with a test for the purpose of assessing business-related English skills. ETS obliged, and the TEST of English for International Communication (TOEIC) was introduced exclusively to Japan in 1979.

Even though the first international test of English had been introduced into the Japanese market, STEP (more commonly known by its Japanese name, Eiken) still held a virtual monopoly on the testing of English in the private sector. This state of affairs persisted until 2000 when further pressure from

businesses and universities forced MEXT to end the monopoly Eiken held and allow other tests to enter the market.

In recent years, businesses have tended to move away from accepting Eiken test grades in favour of TOEIC, and most universities have adopted the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) for assessing their students' readiness for overseas study in an English-speaking country. But even though the Eiken tests have declined in popularity, they still dominate private assessment. They remain popular with teachers and students in all types of school and parents like the fact that the fees are low, especially when compared to international tests. Furthermore, the tests can be taken twice a year at centres in all parts of Japan, and in towns of every size.

III. Recent Developments

Throughout the 1990s, MEXT sought to emphasize the importance of using English for the purpose of communication. By introducing incremental changes to the Course of Study, the ministry tried hard to encourage teachers to nurture students' productive skills, in addition to teaching the structures and vocabulary of English. However, despite all their efforts, very little changed in

the way English was taught, especially in the high schools where teachers felt they had little choice but to prepare their students the best way they could for university entrance examinations.

But then, in 2003, MEXT published a particularly hard-hitting report in which it detailed a comprehensive set of goals for improving English in schools (Butler & Iino, 2005). Through the report, MEXT (MEXT, 2003) sent out another strong message to educators that learners needed to develop communication skills in English.

> In order to be able to "make use of English", it is necessary not only to have a knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also the ability to use English for the purpose of actual communication. Thus, in English classes, instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centred classes are not recommended.

MEXT also hoped that English teachers would work to improve their language skills and they were strongly urged to use English as the medium of instruction, in the classroom. In another significant move, MEXT specified the levels of achievement that students should be able to achieve by the end of senior high school English education. As will become evident from the discussion in the following pages, assessment was becoming an increasingly important factor in MEXT's reform plans.

After a gap of several years, MEXT set up a working group called the Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency which submitted a report in 2011 containing the following five proposals for English reform.

1. Students' ability in English needs to be assessed and target attainment levels should be regularly verified.
2. Students should be made aware of the importance of English in a global society in order to improve their motivation to learn English.
3. Students should be provided with increased opportunities to use English.
4. Teachers' English skills and instruction abilities need to be improved.
5. University entrance exams should be modified.

The Ministry came under increasing pressure to implement the 2011 proposals after the award of the 2020 summer Olympic Games to Tokyo. In response to the demands for action, two further reports were published (MEXT 2014, 2015) which fleshed out the recommendations made in the 2011 report.

Perhaps the most controversial proposal from the 2014 report (MEXT, 2014) was to increase elementary school students' exposure to English by adding 'activity classes' in Year 3 and 4, and by making English part of the core curriculum in Year 5 and 6. Elementary school children would now experience

English once or twice a week in Year 3 and 4, and three classes a week in Year 5 and 6. I will return to this subject later.

One long-standing complaint about MEXT was that the ministry had never really set clear operational goals for the learning of English language. Critics also pointed to a lack of transparency and clarity when it came to the assessment of English ability. That was until MEXT announced in the "Second Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education" (MEXT, 2011) that at least 50% of students graduating high school should be able pass Grade 3 or higher on the STEP (Eiken) test. This was in fact a very modest goal considering that Eiken consider Grade 3 to be the target for students completing the third year of junior high school (see Table 1).

However, the 2015 report contained unexpected and far-reaching proposals concerning English assessment. The first shock was that MEXT was now proposing that the Council of Europe Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) be adopted as the backbone of the English curriculum, and, concomitantly, as the standard of achievement (North, 2014). The ministry had not dropped any hints about using the CEFR in earlier documents and so it came as a further shock when MEXT announced that tests designed to CEFR standards had been administered at the end of 2014 to over 70,000 students in

the third year of senior high schools throughout Japan. The good news was that the results showed the scores were reliable and the content was valid for its purpose. The bad news was that the scores were below expectation, ranging between CEFR levels A1 and A2. Even more disappointingly, a majority of the students were not able to reach A1 level on the speaking section of the test.

MEXT dropped another bombshell in 2017 when it announced that the Center Test would be phased out by 2019 and replaced by new forms of assessment for the core curriculum subjects. The plan they presented was for the NCUEE to retain responsibly for assessing for the core curriculum subjects, but this time in the second year of high school study, not the third. Its new role would be to create two examinations per year, with students being allowed to take both, the NCUEE would assess the two tests and the higher score would be passed on to universities.

The testing of English skills, however, will follow a totally different system. MEXT insists on the need for tests which assess English skills, but recognize that the NUCEE is not in any position to test all four skills in schools. Therefore, MEXT decided that the only practical way to test English is incorporate the expertise of the private testing sector. Consequently, in 2017 MEXT invited national and international testing companies to submit an

application for any examinations they wanted MEXT to consider. MEXT would then evaluate submissions and identify those which met all the specified criteria.

Listed below in Table 2 are the eight tests which MEXT initially identified as having potential (MEXT, 2015).

Table 2. Comparisons with CEFR. (Adapted from MEXT, 2015)

CEFR	Cambridge English	Test in Practical English Proficiency (EIKEN)	GTEC CBT	IELTS	TEAP	TOEFL iBT	TOEFL Junior	TOEIC/ TOEIC S&W
C2	CPE (200+)			8.5-9.0				
C1	CAE (180-199)	Grade 1 (2810-3400)	1400	7.0-8.0	400	95-120		1305-1390 L&R 945~ S&W 360~
B2	FCE (160-179)	Grade Pre-1 (2596-3200)	1250-1399	5.5-6.5	334-399	72-94	341-352	1095-1300 L&R 785~ S&W 310~
B1	PET (140-159)	Grade 2 (1780-2250)	1000-1249	4.0-5.0	226-333	42-71	322-340	790-1090 L&R 550~ S&W 240~
A2	KET (120-139)	Grade Pre-2 (1635-2100)	700-999	3.0	186-225	300-321	385-785	385-785 L&R 225~ S&W 160~
A1		From Grade 3 through Grade 5 (790-1875)	-699	2.0				200-380 L&R 120~ S&W 80~

In March, 2018, MEXT announced that out of ten applications, eight were acceptable. Out of the tests shown in Table 2, only the traditional Eiken test system (see Table 1) was rejected because the Grade 3 tests and above require two days of test time and MEXT had specified that a test would only be approved if a test of all four language skills could be completed within one day. This was in order to minimize inconvenience to test takers, and to reduce costs.

Fortunately for Eiken, the organization has been offered a lifeline from MEXT who say they are willing to any new test from them that will meet the single-day requirement. At the time of writing Eiken are trialling three alternative forms of assessment. Details are still unavailable, or incomplete at the moment, but it appears that one has been designed for online administration, while the other two will be conducted face to face.

The decision to reject the Eiken tests was a shock to many since they are still considered by many to be the gold standard for English assessment in Japan. It did, however, send a clear message that MEXT had no favourites and was serious about implementing the best system it could.

Comments in the 2014 and 2015 papers about the need for change indicate that MEXT has become more serious about the need for universities to reform their own entrance examinations. MEXT fully recognizes that universities are never going to abandon the right to administer their own tests, but the ministry is insistent that from 2020 universities need to be totally transparent about how they assess applicants, and how test content relates to the high school curricula. From 2019, MEXT wants universities to utilise more diverse types of assessment and to make the goals of the assessment more transparent. Universities will also need to explain to candidates in advance how

tests are scored and what criteria will be used by the university to determine success on examinations.

MEXT also wants universities to address concerns about 'alternative means' of entry. As I stated in an earlier section, universities can adopt a wide range of techniques to recruit students directly. As things stand, a university can come up with any set of assessment criteria without being subject to oversight from MEXT. Although the ministry has reservations about both the *suisen* and the AO systems, it does not wish to prohibit their use. However, MEXT wants universities to explain clearly to potential students what they must do in order to gain direct entry. By applying the same strictures to the entrance examinations and methods of direct entry, MEXT is sending a clear message to universities that they need to be more transparent and accountable in the ways they conduct their assessments.

IV. The Implications of MEXT's Plans

In this final section I will summarise several of the more critical points arising from MEXT's proposals for change. I will first consider the potential impact on the curriculum, and then summarize issues arising from changes to assessment.

1. Curriculum

Two things stand out here. The first is the plan to extend the English teaching across four years, instead of the present two. This would present two problems for elementary school teachers. Firstly, class (homeroom) teachers would need to improve their English, a subject they did not have to study to obtain their teaching license. Secondly, they would require training in how to teach basic English communication skills and learn ways to assess students' language ability. In response, MEXT has instructed the local boards of education within the prefectures or cities to set up workshops to address the homeroom teachers training needs. In addition, schools will be given increased financial support to employ ALTs to assist the homeroom teachers. In some areas, teachers from local junior high schools have been brought in to help plan or teach classes. Whether these initiatives will prove to be effective, time will tell.

The second issue relating to curriculum change is the introduction of the CEFR. This proposal is complex and controversial. As mentioned in earlier sections of this paper, MEXT has regularly looked outside Japan for help and advice to improve the teaching and assessment of English. However, the Course

of Study for English at all levels has always been a reflection of the goals and nature of Japanese education. One has to question whether a curriculum/assessment system designed for use in Europe can be transplanted elsewhere. Can the goals and standards that have been set for a foreign population be applied to learners in Japan?

It is true that the CEFR has been adopted to some degree in other countries (Madaminov, 2017), but there are those who caution against indiscriminate adoption of the curriculum model. Fulcher (2010) and Davies (2008) fear that some education authorities cannot resist taking an "off-the-shelf" package to ease the burden on resources and reduce the time needed to formulate curriculum and assessment goals. There is a definite possibility that the 'ease factor' could be at play here, especially when one considers the speed at which MEXT moved to adopt the CEFR.

2. Assessment

MEXT argues that universities must be allowed to select English tests according to their own standards, but using the CEFR grades. For example, one college might want students who have basic communication skills, around A2 level on the CEFR scale, while another may want students to possess academic

skills, around B2. Allowing choice, especially in education, is usually viewed positively, but when it comes to assessment, choice can be problematic if the standards of the various tests are not consistent. I have argued elsewhere (Shillaw, 2017) that this is the case here and that MEXT should not have approved the use of tests (Table 2) which are so different in style, content and purpose.

In addition, there is a serious issue concerning score equivalence. All the tests listed in Table 2 are shown with a CEFR grade equivalent, yet MEXT does not provide evidence to justify the extrapolation. However, in a footnote to the original table (MEXT, 2015) they state that all equivalence data is supplied by the test providers. I have researched all of the tests (Shillaw, 2017) and have not been able to verify this claim, except in two cases. But even if it were true, it would be unwise to be so categorical about interpreting a score on one test against a score on another. Davies (1999) cautions that:

> …, this concept is unjustifiable, since each test is designed for a different **purpose**, and a different population, and may view and assess language **traits** in different ways, … (page 199: emphasis in the original).

This is not an academic quibble. From 2020, the NUCEE will receive scores from all students who have taken the different private sector English tests. They will then convert these scores to CEFR grades and pass the new scores on

to each university. Quite how they are going to do the conversions is unknown at this point, but however they intend to do it, I would argue could result in a significant and unacceptable chance of error. I am not alone in this belief, because Tokyo University and several other prestigious universities have refused to join the system. The media have also written at length on the same topic and expressed the same concerns.

Conclusion

Although I have been quite critical of MEXT's recent efforts to introduce changes in curriculum and assessment, I have to give them credit for their efforts. The past fifteen years have seen more innovative proposals on ways to improve English education than in any period. One can perhaps sense that MEXT is slowly taking off the gloves, and is adopting a more assertive and combative stance with regard to implementing change. It is a beginning, but there is still much to do.

MEXT needs to continue to move forward, pushing the boundaries of change. In particular, the government needs to act to improve teacher education. Unlike education ministries in many other countries, MEXT does not formulate teacher training policy. Instead, MEXT leaves the content of pre-service training

programs (PRESET) to the universities while in-service training workshops (INSET) are delegated to the local boards of education. The programs tend to be uncoordinated, piecemeal and vary tremendously in relevance and quality. In order to bring about improvements to English education in Japan, teachers need to be better educated, to become more aware of alternatives ways of teaching and assessing their students.

Cripps (2016) and his colleagues (Cripps et al., 2017, 2018) have written extensively on the shortcomings of the training of English teachers in Japan. Their current research, supported by funding from MEXT, explores ways teachers can become empowered and take responsibility for their learning. This is precisely the kind work that MEXT needs to look to for guidance in the training English teachers.

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