

A Review of High School English Curriculum, Materials and Methods from a Language Testing Perspective

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Introduction

Following the changes in Japan's junior and senior high school English curriculum,¹ university entrance exams themselves are expected to change in order to accommodate students who have been taught a different set of skills than their predecessors. The new curriculum puts more emphasis on communication and encourages the use of English itself as the medium of instruction, suggesting less emphasis on translation and more on listening and speaking. Therefore, to reflect these changes and to be fair to students, entrance exams should be written that measure what is being taught now in schools, which is presumably spoken English for the purpose of exchanging information.

The new set of skills being taught in high schools poses a challenge to writers of university entrance exams. For one, entrance exams are often conducted on an "industrial scale" (Fulcher 2000) and tests of listening and speaking are notoriously difficult to administer to large groups of examinees. Consideration must be given to the "markability" of the exams, which are usually constructed so that a team of markers can score them within a day and often include a set of machine-marked multiple choice questions that test reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. While testing receptive skills such as reading and listening is fairly straight forward,² testing productive skills is more problematic. Examples of students' performance must be collected and then somehow evaluated.³ For another, until now entrance exams have been designed to test receptive skills such as listening and reading ability with an emphasis on grammar and translation. Listening and reading comprehension, grammar knowledge, and translation lend themselves easily to paper and pencil tests because the criteria for evaluating answers is usually quite clear.⁴ However, new rubrics that test communication must

¹ Specifically MEXT says: "In entrance examinations, communication skills in terms of the four language skills need to be evaluated properly." <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/1356541.htm>
See also Guidelines below.

² Introducing a listening component to an exam may be simply a matter of having some of the questions and/or answers given orally through a recording.

³ For example, having examinees write a short response in English to a reading passage or opinion question. In addition to rubrics and evaluation criteria, getting students to speak and then evaluating their performance poses logistical challenges.

be devised to assess students' ability to form appropriate messages in response to a stimulus and not just their ability to comprehend language input or their knowledge about the language. Evaluating productive skills such as speaking and writing tends to be more subjective, which further complicates making an assessment of ability.

Nonetheless, MEXT, Japan's Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science and Technology, is taking the lead and has promised to make significant changes to the so-called Centre Test by doing away with multiple choice questions and requiring test takers to write more instead. While the criteria used to evaluate performance on this new type of test remains to be revealed and as we wait to see how the new tests from MEXT achieve their goal of measuring communicative ability on a large-scale, those constructing bespoke language tests for their university can only wonder how and even whether to make their tests more "communicative" themselves. But one thing is clear: because of changes in curriculum, teaching methods and materials, entrance tests will have to change. To find out how they might change, we need to understand MEXT's guidelines, communicative language testing, current teaching practice, and textbooks.

The Mext Guidelines

To understand the task of testing students being taught under the new scheme instituted by MEXT, we can look at their guidelines for language teaching:

4. Regarding English classes, taking into account each subject's special characteristics, in order to expand opportunities for students to come into contact with English, and make classes into sites of real communication, classes are to be conducted in English, in principle. In doing so, due consideration is to be given to using English that takes into account the level of students' understanding.⁵

These guidelines were promulgated in 2011 with the intention of having them implemented starting in 2013. Students who have been taught using lessons supposedly following the guidelines will be entering university beginning 2017. Therefore, entrance exams should begin to take these guidelines into considerations in the coming years.

Though the guidelines do not specify what will be taught, they do suggest an approach to teaching. Teachers are told to "take into account each subject's special characteristics." The word, "subjects", here is interpreted by AJET to mean the kinds of "linguistic skill" needed for communication: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The guidelines go on to urge greater opportunities for "contact" with English, which

⁴ In the case of translation, simply: does the student's translation say the same as the English?

⁵ <http://ajet.net/announcement/english-translation-of-the-mext-guidelines/>

might include a broad spectrum of activities: from listening to an old popular song⁶ in English while reading the lyrics⁷ to reading⁸ a simplified story about a blind pianist winning first prize in the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.⁹ The guidelines recommend that “[c]lasses are to be conducted in English in principle”,¹⁰ but teachers are advised to take “into account students’ level of understanding”. Clearly, this refers to Krashen’s input hypothesis of language learning, which many feel is necessary for the proper acquisition of linguistic ability.¹¹ So, rather than having students learn the grammar of the language and giving them support in the form of explanation in Japanese, MEXT is encouraging high school teachers to use other methods¹² and to get students to learn English by associating words and phrases they hear and read directly to their meanings and not a potentially faulty and difficult to use translation.¹³

Nonetheless, although grammar translation is considered a shortcut by some communicative language teaching purists, with the appropriate follow-up exercises, student should learn to use the language just as well.¹⁴ It is the addition of the next step in language learning, language output that MEXT is really hoping to encourage, since, and perhaps most importantly, the guidelines call for “real communication” in the classroom. While the guidelines do not explicitly say that students will use English in class and despite some disagreement over the communicative approach,¹⁵ the guidelines seem to expect students to go beyond learning about the language—that is, memorizing lists of words and rules for forming sentences with them—but to use the language for communication. Indeed, we might assume that the object of “real communication” as mentioned in the guidelines is to have students use the language to send as well as receive messages. Obviously, to do that, students will have to be engaged in a different set of activities than in the past. In the past, students were usually asked to read a passage in English, translate it into Japanese, and then wait for the teacher to check

⁶ For example, Bridge Over Troubled Water by Paul Simon, Kairyudo (1986) *Sunshine English Course 3*, p. 108.

⁷ And often in the past having the lyrics explained in Japanese.

⁸ And again, in the past, translating what they have read.

⁹ Sanseido (2013) Lesson 4 Playing by Ear *Crown English Communication I* pp. 44–59.

¹⁰ The guidelines here use a curious mixture of grammar, calling into question the strength of this recommendation—“are to be” suggests a firm rule, which is compromised by the tag, “in principle” rather than the clearer “entirely.”

¹¹ See <http://web.stanford.edu/~hakuta/www/LAU/ICLangLit/NaturalApproach.htm> (retrieved August 15, 2016)

¹² For example, the Berlitz method: “...to explain objects using gestures and to act out verbs.” <http://www.berlitz.us/berlitz-method/> (retrieved August 6, 2016)

¹³ See Messerklinger (2015) Name your poison. *Toho liberal arts review* (47), 11–19. In brief: nicotine is a drug is commonly mistranslated by students as: ニコチンは薬です; nicotine is a medicine. The mistranslation is caused by mistakenly substituting the English word “drug” for its common translation. Such mistranslations are perhaps the result of the yakudoku method of language instruction found in 70–80% of classrooms in Japan (Kasmer W, 1999 The role of translation in the ESL/EFL classroom, University of Birmingham, p. 5) Also, consider the often ridiculed but effective “This is a pen” lessons used to introduce the language in junior high school.

¹⁴ Gregg, K. (1984). Krashen’s monitor and Occam’s razor. *Applied Linguistics*, 5, 79–100.

¹⁵ ‘A critical look at the Communicative Approach’ by Michael Swan (1985) *ELT Journal*, Oxford University press. Volume 39, Issue 1 pp. 2–12.

their work. They could do this quietly at their desks. Instead, the kind of classroom MEXT has in mind is one that includes “...an abundance of language activities such as presentation, discussion and debate on various topics ...[which will]... enhance [students] communication skills to understand and convey information and ideas properly”. Of course, if students are to exchange messages, especially in spoken English, they can no longer sit quietly, but must be made more active, even though this has the potential of making the classroom more chaotic.

Therefore, given the apparent intention of the guidelines, teaching methods will have changed as will have the materials used to get students talking in English to make classrooms more communicative. Still, communicative language teaching is not simply a matter of having students use the language; obviously, they must first learn the language before they can start using it. This is the role of input, or “contact” with the language, and so it is important to understand what kind of contact they are getting and how contact is being made. How the language is getting into the learner—translating sentences and memorizing lists of words versus associating English words with meaning and use—determines how learners will know the language, whether they can use it to form appropriate responses to input in English or whether they can understand it only well enough to translate it into well-formed Japanese sentences. A communicative approach to language teaching as opposed to the grammar translation method aims to help students learn a language item and then use it, for example, to express their opinions. Using the language to communicate will help students consolidate their learning, making the communication activities the important final step that reinforces what was learned. Test writers, then, should be aware of the language input as well as the communicative skills students have been taught in order to understand how to construct their tests.

Language Testing

In a report on the new guidelines, MEXT reminds us that “[i]n entrance examinations, communication skills in terms of the four language skills need to be evaluated properly.”¹⁶ Given the history of high school English education and its relationship with university entrance exams,¹⁷ MEXT seems determined to have the tests give a positive influence on language teaching. The report sets out in more detail the aims of the curriculum and therefore suggests what might be tested: “Under the reform of English education, not only the cultivation of fundamental knowledge and skills, but also

¹⁶ <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/1356541.htm> (retrieved August 9, 2016)

¹⁷ http://jalt.org/test/bro_5.htm and <http://jalt.org/pansig/2002/HTML/Brown.htm> (retrieved August 27, 2016) See also Underwood, Paul (2010) A comparative analysis of MEXT English reading textbooks and Japan's National Center Test, *RELC Journal*, 41 (2), pp. 165-182. Underwood disputes the effect of entrance exams on teaching practice claiming that, although high schools teachers say they feel compelled to teach to the tests, studies of actual teaching practice point to the contrary. (p. 168)

such abilities as to reason, make decisions or express oneself in order to solve problems by oneself will be inevitable.” These are admirable goals: rather than having students simply know the grammar and be able to understand written English, MEXT wants them to do something with the language. Likewise, a communicative exam should get examinees to do something with the language besides translating it and evaluating its grammar. So, what does a communicative exam look like?

As a starting point and to see what is required of a communicative exam, we can look to the history of communicative language testing. Fulcher (2000) points out that in its heyday in the 1980s, proponents of communicative language teaching demanded that language be taught the way the learner was expected to use it: if they were expected to speak the language, then they were taught through speaking activities and if expected to read (as far as reading is communicative) then reading exercises. Communicative language test writers tried to serve the interest of communicative curriculum design by basing test tasks on what was taught: if translation was taught, then the test taker was expected to translate, if speaking was taught then the test taker was expected to speak.

However, according to Fulcher (2000), communicative language advocates avoided analysing their tests in any meaningful way and accepted what is known as “face validity” as the only necessary criteria for a good test. Communicative language testing was whatever the communicative language teacher thought was “right” and little consideration was given to performance criteria or test reliability let alone markability. Having the test taker perform, say, by speaking was good enough since it reinforced what was taught and presumably learned. This is the so-called washback effect, which is precisely the effect MEXT is hoping for when universities produce more communicative tests.¹⁸

Face validity and washback however are insufficient criteria for test design when other more critical considerations are involved such as in entrance testing and achievement testing. The end users of such instruments; in the case of universities, the admissions officewants to know whether the results reliably divide candidates into those capable of performing at their university *in light of the school's curriculum* at a certain acceptable level and those who cannot. Furthermore, face validity and washback still leave us with the question: by what criteria do we evaluate examinees? It is an admirable goal to have the examinee actually speak when we want to evaluate their speaking ability, but examiners need to measure performance on an exam against some criteria that can be used to accurately and consistently compare test takers to each other and to standards of performance: a fluency scale must be devised or chosen

¹⁸ Keeping in mind that one barrier to communicative language teaching cited by teachers are entrance exams.

based on performance criteria, some form of rater training conducted to ensure reliability and fairness, and double-marking used to guarantee validity.¹⁹

Although efficient schemes for the testing of communicative ability have been proposed, the results are not encouraging. Lombarda et al (2014) found that computer-based tests of communicative ability “require training” of test takers themselves and “seem not very communicative at this point.” Further, Razmjoo (2011 p.86) reminds us that because of “constraints of time and practicality, only a small sample of the testee’s language can be collected, and however realistic the tasks may be intended to be, the testee’s performance will inevitably reflect the fact that s/he was performing under test conditions.” He also reminds us that if students are to be tested on their communicative ability, examiners should be evaluating their performance rather than their knowledge about the language. This also leaves other questions such as: what samples of performance should be collected? Do these samples reflect the test taker’s communicative ability, or are the samples a manifestation of their personality, their interests, and their social and intellectual skills?²⁰ And once these samples have been collected, how are they to be evaluated as evidence of communicative ability? In other words, what should the rating scale look like? And how can 1,000 candidates be evaluated in an afternoon by a limited number of examiners? Resolving these issues will more or less determine the kinds of questions that can be included on a communicative test.²¹

Test Examples

With the renewed emphasis on communication in Japan’s high school English curriculum, new question types will be needed to assess students’ ability. In the past, with emphasis on grammar and translation in the high school curriculum in Japan, entrance exams often asked examinees to translate sentences into Japanese, identify grammar errors, fill in blanks with the appropriate word or word form, or answer comprehension questions about a reading passage. To get some idea of what kinds of questions might be more appropriate for an exam with less emphasis on grammar and more on communication we can look at some other tests for how this can be done.

In the US, one of the most widely used and respected exams for admissions officers

¹⁹ See for example: <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/22649-rv-examples-of-speaking-performance.pdf> (retrieved August 16, 2016) And note—how much does fluency in a language depend on accuracy? Is getting one’s meaning across sufficient? And how do we separate the form of the message from its content and things like appropriateness or value?

²⁰ And an often avoided factor because a sensitive issue, the quality of teaching they received.

²¹ So, for example, if there are 1,000 examinees and eight examiners, each examiner must talk with 125 test takers. If each test takes even 5 minutes, the exam will take over 10 hours. Perhaps more realistic is asking for a writing sample, say a paragraph. If examiners take 2 minutes to evaluate each sample, eight can do the job in a little over 4 hours. However, these figures do not include double marking, which is best practice for these sorts of tests.

at universities is the SAT, the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Although it is used primarily for university entrance testing, the designers of the exam recognized that one of the functions of their exam is to test high school achievement:

DEMONSTRATED ACHIEVEMENT. The assessment allows students to demonstrate what they have learned in school and the complex ELA [English Language Arts] /literacy and mathematics knowledge, skills, and understanding that they can apply. (Test Specifications for the Redesigned SAT, College Board 2016 p.16)

Applying what has been learned is a significant concept and one that is applicable to communicative language learning and testing. Further, the objectives above are reflected in the SAT's design goals, which include 1) "focus on a set of knowledge, skills, and understandings...essential for college", 2) "connect with meaningful, engaging work worth doing in rigorous high school classrooms, 3) "improve the prediction of postsecondary success." (p. 27) The test is designed to determine whether a candidate can apply the knowledge, skills and understanding gained in high school to work expected of them at university. In the case of language learning, students are expected to be able to apply the four "linguistic skills" —reading, listening, writing and speaking—and presumably this means to use those skills for communication.

Given the design goals set out for the SAT, the exam performs a complex task. Primarily, it tells the admissions office whether a student is capable of doing the work required at a particular institution of higher education, as stated in goals 1 and 3. At the same time, the designers have recognized that they cannot ignore the high school curriculum, and as such also function as a kind of achievement test, goal 2. Indeed, the reading texts for the SAT state that student will:

"...engage in texts worth reading and worthy of careful consideration. All passages are selected from previously published, authentic writing that represents the best of the genres represented on the test... The questions resemble questions that might emerge naturally in a thoughtful classroom conversation (emphasis added), and that return students to the text to examine closely the information and ideas within it."²² (p.206)

Being able to engage in "thoughtful classroom conversation" is common in US high schools and an important skill for students studying at most any American university, so university admissions officers should be able to determine from the exam results how well a candidate might perform at their school and in turn how well the high school

²² <https://sat-origin.collegeboard.org/pdf/test-specifications-redesigned-sat-1.pdf> p. 206

has prepared the candidate for university level study. In Japan, however, the need for an ability to participate in class discussion in English depends largely on the faculty to which students are applying; English majors may find it necessary to use English in class discussions, but science majors will most likely be asked to read, and in some cases write, research papers in English.

Therefore, the writing and language portions of the SAT are more germane to the needs of Japanese test writers at universities where students are not majoring in languages. The SAT test uses bespoke texts with questions designed to “assess writing and language skills and understandings in extended prose contexts rather than isolation and require students to make active choices in revising and editing rather than simply identify errors.”²³ While some of the sample questions²⁴ from the SAT show how they have tried to gettest takers to make “active choices” that go beyond grammatical appropriateness and require a metacognitive understand of the reading, some questions do test usage. Nonetheless, most questions on the SAT require more than grammar knowledge. Instead, questions ask examinees to use the language, for example, to add information from a table or graph to support, correct, or improve the main idea of a passage. Still, other questions, for example in a passage about traffic, ask examinees to improve a text by choosing from a list of revisions, all of which are grammatically correct and appear to have equal meaning, yet only one makes the intended meaning of the text clear.²⁵ And in another question from the same passage, examinees are asked to choose a revision that improves pronoun reference.²⁶ The objective is to get the test takers to use the language to communicate ideas or at least improve the communication of ideas, which goes beyond the mere manipulation of grammar and requires a bit of thought.

Although we are mainly concerned with university entrance testing, perhaps we can also turn to the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication, originally designed as a proficiency test) for some other indications of what directions tests might take. The TOEFL has already been proposed as a replacement for the English portion of the Center Test,²⁷ and TOEIC is one of the best known and in some ways most successful industrial scale communicative language test and is already being used by some schools as an admissions requirement.²⁸ Regardless of debate over how well it evaluates communicative

²³ IBID p. 207

²⁴ <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sample-questions/writing-language>

²⁵ <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sample-questions/writing/1>

²⁶ <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/sample-questions/writing/2> (retrieved August 16, 2016)

²⁷ Achieving University Entrance Exams that Test Practical English Abilities—Connection with English Education Reform in Primary and Secondary Education and International Standardization (2013) Keizai Doyukai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives) policy proposal.

²⁸ http://www.gunma-u.ac.jp/english/html/admissions_001.html and <http://www.ch.t.kyoto-u.ac.jp/en/admission/exam> (retrieved August 30, 2016)

ability, the test designers have done a remarkably good job of returning reliable results and giving those with a stake in the results an idea of the examinee's language ability.

Elegant in its simplicity, the following rubric is also a hallmark of the TOEIC exam and requires about as much communicative ability as possible on a multiple choice test:

Select the best response to the question or statement.

Where is the meeting room?

(A) To meet the new director

(B) It's the first room on the right.

(C) Yes, at two o'clock.²⁹

The questions and responses are not written, and so examinees must listen to both the questions and the choices in order to answer, putting them in the exact position of someone responding to the question; they must hear the question and answer appropriately. In the example above, the examinee must be able to understand the question as it is spoken, the key to which is hearing and identifying the question word "where" and the noun phrase that follows. The examinee must also hear and identify the appropriate response. The examinee can eliminate response (A) because the question was not about purpose (*Why* are we going to the meeting room?/*What are we doing* in the meeting room?), and response (C) can be discounted because not a yes/no question and no mention of time (Is there a meeting today?) The communicative constraint of the question requires a place, some *room*, be given if the answer is to be effective.

Although we might say that this type of question simply substitutes listening ability for reading ability—which we might also say about the final listening section of the TOEIC, a set of listening comprehension questions—these types of questions do test communicative ability because there is no other way to answer the question except by using one of Grice's Conversational Maxims: be clear, precise, truthful, and relevant. Using either skill set—reading or listening—the answer may seem obvious: a question beginning with *where* implies a place be given in the answer. However, to answer correctly, the examinee must understand not just the grammar of the sentence, but the pragmatic force of the question. Nonetheless, in either case, reading or listening, the rubric does not tell us whether 1) the examinee could form the appropriate response by themselves, and 2) whether the examinee could form the appropriate response, either in written or spoken form, in such a way as to make it comprehensible to another speaker or reader of the language.³⁰ Still, as a test rubric, it at least gives some evidence of communicative ability.

²⁹ https://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/TOEIC/pdf/TOEIC_LR_examinee_handbook.pdf page 10 (retrieved August 9, 2016)

³⁰ leaving aside the listener's/reader's ability—a sympathetic listener/reader, i.e. rater, accustomed to the accent or grammatical idiosyncrasies of a non-native language user is more likely to understand than a non-sympathetic listener unfamiliar with the speaker's accent or use of the language.

The other largely communicative section of the TOEIC uses pictures and spoken statements. As with the Question-Response questions mentioned above, this section also requires test takers to follow Grice's Conversational Maxims to say something relevant about a specific context, one given in the picture for each question. But here again, it is not so much the form of the questions and answers as it is the communicative skill needed to answer which is important. The examinees are required to use context to answer appropriately; comprehension is a given, the first step in choosing the correct answer. Communication, however, is an exchange of messages, which assumes both sending as well as receiving. While receiving messages typically involves listening and reading, sending a message requires the examinee to first of all have a message to send and then to encode it properly either in written or spoken form. In other words, while the subskills needed for receiving a message is listening or reading comprehension, the subskills for sending a message involve, for example, pronunciation (in the case of speaking), spelling (in the case of writing) and the proper application of grammar and vocabulary.

The TOEFL places more emphasis on academic content and skills and in many ways is more like the SAT. Although some questions seem to require mere reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary knowledge, other questions attempt to evaluate the test-taker's understanding of discourse, for example finding the topic or main idea³¹ summarizing ideas³² adding key ideas.³³ Rather than manipulate sentence and word-level grammar, students need to understand the reading or listening and respond with the appropriate idea.

These are just a few examples of attempts to design tests intended to evaluate communicative ability. However, while MEXT would like university entrance exams to promote a more communicative high school curriculum, the exams must also be in step with what is being taught. To understand that, we need to look at current teaching practice in Japan and at the materials being used.

Teachers

Teacher trainers in Japan are working to make classes more "communicative"—getting teachers to encourage students to speak English in class by setting tasks that require students to exchange information and by using the reading passages for class discussion rather than mere comprehension and translation.³⁴ Even so, high school

³¹ TOEFL practice question p. 15

³¹ TOEFL practice question p. 15

³² IBID p. 8

³³ IBID p. 7

³⁴ MasaeInose, MEXT teacher trainer, personal communication

teachers in Japan must cope with large class sizes—a formidable barrier to communicative language teaching—as well as the lack of training in and uncertainty over communicative language teaching itself, so their ability to meet the demands of the guidelines is uncertain. Teachers are also perhaps waiting to see how far universities will change their exams, which is why MEXT is urging universities to follow their lead and produce more “communicative” exams. Caught in the middle, though, are students. Radical changes to one but not the other, curriculum versus entrance exams, will hurt their chances of getting into a good university and cause confusion among admissions officers. Caution, therefore, is understandable, and so ideally, test writers would also like to observe as many classes as possible to see how these guidelines are actually being implemented and the educational outcomes they produce before making any changes to their exams.

Classroom observation, unfortunately, is not a common practice in Japan. However, in place of observing English language classrooms, we can turn to some very helpful research into how high school teachers are reacting to the new guidelines, giving us further insights into how entrance exams might change. In 2012, Tsukamoto and Tsujioka conducted a survey of high school English teachers working in Osaka to find out how teachers in Japan feel about the new guidelines. The Authors of the study, *Teaching English through English to Senior High School Students in Japan: Towards the Implementation of the New Course of Study* (Tsukamoto M. and Tsujioka N 2013) exclaim that “[t]his drastic shift (from grammar translation to teaching English through English) is shocking to high school teachers”³⁵, and that most teachers feel teaching English for communication is “useless” because students in Japan do not really need to speak English. Tsukamoto and Tsujioka (2012) point out that teachers teach according to how they have been taught themselves, the knowledge and teaching skill they gain while working and from other teachers, and the needs of students. However, the greatest need, they point out, are the university entrance exams. Another barrier, they note, to communicative language teaching, is class size. Indeed, as anyone who has tried to teach conversational English knows, getting a group of more than 10-12 students to use English and stay on task is difficult at best.³⁶ Nonetheless, Tsukamoto and Tsujioka report that many teachers think CLT is a good idea. Besides the barriers—class size, lack of training, student needs, and not least of all, teachers’ own perceived lack of ability in English conversation—they remind us that CLT is not a method. Rather it is an attitude towards teaching the language and as such there is little concrete guidance in how to do it.

³⁵ p. 310

³⁶ From a University of Texas report on ESL conversation teachers: “Based on their experience, our participating language teachers suggested that the ideal class size is between 10-12 students.” <https://coerll.utexas.edu/methods/modules/classroom/02/howmany.php> (retrieved August 13, 2016)

Based on the results of their survey, Tsukamoto and Tsujioka found that at the time of the survey (2012) “[n]ot many teachers conduct more than half of their classes in English.”³⁷ Most of this English use seems to have been for incidental communication—perfunctory greetings and classroom instructions, which they point out, do not really count as communication. Tellingly, the researchers assumed that all teachers rely on grammar explanation to help students understand the language and found that fewer than 4% use English when doing so.³⁸ Considerably more, around 25%, use English to explain vocabulary, but it is not clear whether or not this was followed up with further explanation in Japanese and a translation.³⁹ Nearly one-third used English to check comprehension, presumably of reading passages. While the communicative value of this kind of comprehension checking is limited, if done properly it does at least have the advantage of avoiding reliance on translation.⁴⁰ Still, at the time the survey was conducted, before the implementation of the new guidelines, grammar and the use of Japanese for instruction was still very much a part of teaching English in Japan.

Furthermore, an important point missing from Tsukamoto and Tsujioka’s survey and not mentioned at all in the guidelines is how, how much, or even whether students themselves are actually speaking English in class. The focus seems to be entirely on teacher behaviour. Indirect evidence of student use of English comes from Tahira (2012) who reports that a MEXT survey of teachers in 2010 found that “...48.5% of the 9,726 teachers who participated [in MEXT’s survey] noticed that less than half of their students’ utterances were in English during oral communication courses,”⁴¹ a disappointingly low percentage. Why more emphasis is not placed on getting students to talk is unclear,⁴² given that getting students to use the language is the defining feature of the communicative approach no matter how the language is getting into learners. In fact, Gregg (1984) famously demonstrated that language can be learned through successful *use* of forms learned through explicit grammar instruction—comprehensible output—despite the emphasis theorists such as Krashen have placed on the a priori need to learn language through comprehensible input. So rather than focusing on language input, teachers who wish to continue explaining the language in Japanese must also let their students practice what they have been taught by using the language learned.⁴³ Rightly so, then, the authors Tsukamoto and Tsujioka (2012) and Tahira (2012) feel that what

³⁷ p. 319

³⁸ p. 315

³⁹ Translations, of course, are not definitions. Consider the word “duck”. The common translation into Japanese is アヒル, which makes no sense in this sentence: Duck under a table when there is an earthquake. Translated by google as: テーブルの下にアヒルはときに地震があります。

⁴⁰ Often, however, comprehension questions require that students merely find and read the appropriate section from the text.

⁴¹ Tahira, Masumi (2012) Behind MEXT’s New Course of Study Guidelines. The Language Teacher volume 36 (3) pp. 3-8.

⁴² For a possible explanation, see Farooq, M Exploring the Effectiveness of Spoken English Classes of Japanese EFL Learners, Nagoya University Kenkyukiyo no. 3 Feb. 2007. Students do not want to embarrass themselves.

is needed most is teacher training to help teachers get started using not only the new guidelines but also a truly communicative approach to teaching language.

Textbooks

Besides teacher behaviour, another important and obvious influence on what happens in the classroom can be found in the textbooks used.⁴⁴ A look inside the textbooks being used will give us an idea of what language is being taught, either through a “communicative approach” or by whatever methods each teacher and school adopts. Further, since the guidelines do not specify content, the textbooks should make that plain, all of which should help us understand what sorts of language and communication skills might be included on an entrance exam.

The major textbooks in Japan are *Access*, *Crown*, *Mainstream*, *New Horizon*, and *Unicorn* to name just a few. The new books written for high schools are divided into two subtitles, *English Expression* (in place of the former “writing” books) and *English Communication* (formerly reading) as is called for under the new curriculum. Interestingly, thumbing through the various examples of the *English Communication* books being used shows that they are based on a series of lengthy reading passages. In the *Crown* series textbook for first year high school students published by Sanseido, for example, there are 10 units, each with reading passages usually between 5 and 7 pages. The final unit, number 10, has a passage on Charlie Brown which is 9 pages long. At the end of each unit there is further optional reading (“OR”.) Each unit begins with a quote somehow related to the passage above a picture that illustrates the topic. Below the picture are anticipatory questions that seem aimed at focusing students on the content of the reading. For example, in the story of the blind pianist, students are asked, in English, whether they play a musical instrument and if they can play it with their eyes closed. Whether they answer or are expected to answer in English is unknown. The passages are presumably graded based on previously learned language (in this case, vocabulary and grammar learned in junior high school.)

Calculating the reading ease of several random paragraphs, the Flesch-Kinkaid read-

⁴³ See, for example, Ellis, R. (2005) *Instructed Second Language Acquisition, A Literature Review*, The University of Auckland. According to the report, most communicative approaches assume that “...grammar is learned inductively; there is no need for (and no value) in explicit explanations of grammar points.” (p. 4) But goes on to clarify that “...grammar instruction can help learners to perform grammatical features more accurately in experimentally elicited performance (i.e. tests.)” The report concludes that “The evidence relating to the effects of grammar instruction on learners’ ability to use the target features in communicative language use (especially unplanned oral language use) is somewhat meagre.” The studies that do exist point to the conclusion: “...grammar instruction does not always result in more accurate use of the target features in free oral production.” And that “[g]rammar instruction does not enable learners to ‘beat’ the natural route of acquisition.” (p. 10) In other words, grammar instruction will not help learners learn more quickly.

⁴⁴ As Underwood (IBID p.166) eloquently says: “As an agent of change, the textbook has potential for directly influencing classroom instruction.”

ing ease scores range from 71.9 in unit 2 to 55.4 in unit 8 to 84.6 in unit 10 (lower number means more difficult) which corresponds to the 6th grade, 8th grade, and 5th grade in the US. Average words-per-sentence comes to about 12.5, with the longest sentence in the three paragraphs at 20 and the longest word, appropriately enough, *communications*. At the bottom of each page of the reading is a pronunciation guide for some of the words, a gloss in English of difficult words, and comprehension questions, also in English. The first use of Japanese in every unit comes at the end of the passage in the form of a discussion question. Again, we might wonder if students are expected to discuss in English or Japanese. The next page consists of comprehension exercises about the reading passage. The directions—answer the following questions about the passage—are in Japanese, but comprehension questions are given in English with a summary that takes the form of a cloze exercise, students being asked in Japanese to use words from the passage to fill in the blanks.

Then there are “Activities,” two listening comprehension questions (in Japanese) writing (more fill in the blank for the first 5 units, a short model answer given for the last five) and speaking, the instructions for which tell students to use the writing exercise for their answer with two further options given to challenge students to talk about similar topics. For example, after a reading about underwater archaeology in the Mediterranean Sea, the writing passage asks students to fill in the blanks with names of Japan’s natural and man-made wonders. One option asks them to talk about World Heritage sites they have visited and another to name Japan’s Living National Treasures. Besides preparing students for the speaking activity by having them write first, the listening exercise—a dialog between two characters, Bill and Yoko—seem to form a possible basis for some of the speaking practice as well; students can model their answers on the dialog. The dialog for the unit on inventions, for example, has Yoko and Bill talking about “the greatest invention of all time,” and has as an optional question, “What is the world’s worst invention?” which would lend itself to an interesting debate.

Next is a page of grammar with explanation in Japanese, followed by a page of grammar exercises. The grammar exercises include the familiar “narabikai” (word sorting) and disappointingly, translation of Japanese into English as well as the other usual exercises like fill in the blank with the correct preposition, change the form of the verb to make the sentence grammatically correct, and choose the phrase that fits in the blank or matches the meaning of the underlined word or phrase. The unit ends with the optional reading—a page or so with a brief introduction in Japanese and notes at the end, also in Japanese. The optional reading does not include any other activities or exercises, and how teachers might use this is unknown.

After every second unit, there are specific reading and pronunciation skills pages.

The “Reading Skills” page that introduces concepts apparently aimed at helping learners to read more efficiently and presumably without resorting to translation. Rather than read word by word, students are taught to read phrase by phrase (and hopefully understand how English makes clauses and how these clauses make meaning by identifying who is doing what to whom, etc. which is explained using the S + V + O grammar notation.) They also learn about discourse markers and paragraph structure. Along with the Reading Skills page is a page called “Sound Studio” which teaches students about English phonology. Raising awareness of how the English language sounds when spoken should help learners improve both their listening and speaking ability, but whether this is actually followed up by pronunciation practice (for example by shadowing the dialog included with each unit) is not clear; the instructions for “listening” only include the comprehension questions and the suggestion to use the dialog as a model for conversation is not given.

The *Crown* textbook also includes two “readings” and an optional lesson, all along the same lines as the regular units. At the end of the book is a grammar summary, transcripts of the listening dialogs, and a list of new words and phrases. Despite the word *communication* in the title, the textbook looks very much like the old English textbooks used for reading/grammar/translation. So, much of the textbook’s “communicativeness” depends on how teachers actually use the material. But with so much of the textbook devoted to reading passages, grammar explanations and exercises, *Communication*, as it says in the title of these books, is presumably taken to mean reading comprehension. What do teachers have students do with the material in the book? With the obvious emphasis on reading and a classroom full of 40 students whose speaking ability most likely varies widely, there is a frightening temptation to have students translate all that text into Japanese and thereby keep such a large group of restless teenagers quiet and busy for 50 minutes at a time four days a week.

Although their specific contents and order of presentation differ, the offerings by Zoshindo (*Mainstream*) and Buneido (*Unicorn*) each follow the pattern of reading, language focus and skill development. Not surprisingly, the readability scores are also quite similar. The *Mainstream* English *Communication* textbook ranges from a Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease of 78 (grade 6.8) in Chapter 2 to 64.9 (grade 8.0) in Chapter 10 while *Unicorn* ranges from 70.9 (grade 6.4) in Lesson 1 to 63.2 (grade 9.2) in lesson 9. But at least Bun-Eido’s *Unicorn* does include dialogs in a section called “Unicorn Travel” after every second lesson. Pragmatically, the dialogs are actually very complex and offer keen teachers rich opportunities to teach communication. For example, in one dialog, a traveller asks for directions:

Mari: Excuse me, could you tell me the way to the Spencer Public Library?

Citizen: Sure. First, go east along this main street.

Mari: How long should I keep walking?

Citizen: You will find a supermarket on your right. (*Unicorn English Communication* p. 34)

While at first glance, the Citizen's second reply seems to violate Grice's maxim, be relevant, if students put themselves in the Citizen's place they can understand that the best way to answer Mari's question is that she should keep walking until she sees a supermarket on her right, since the citizen has no way of knowing how fast Mari usually walks. As a text, what is missing is key information expressed by the Citizen's intonation, something that the teacher can point out. In another dialog, a traveller asks for concert tickets:

Hitomi: Do you have any tickets for the concert of traditional music?

Staff: The concert will be held on Saturday and Sunday. (*Unicorn English Communication* p. 115)

Again, the reply seems to violate Grice, yet conversation often proceeds in this fashion and students can learn that there is in fact an implied question here: which day would you like tickets for, Saturday or Sunday? But again, it is unclear whether students are given the opportunity to practice these dialogs themselves by, say, giving directions to real places near their school or asking about show times at a local theatre.

On the other hand, Zoshindo's *Mainstream Communication* textbook does go the one step further and asks students to use the content of the lesson for communication. At the end of each chapter, there is a page called "Another Step", which offers a variety of activities from discussion prompts to debate ideas to presentations. Most of the instruction is given in English and all the activities require language output, either written or spoken.

The other textbook written for the new guidelines, *English Expression*, is devoid of lengthy English texts. In fact, flipping through the *Crown* textbook from Sanseido, more than half of it seems to be in Japanese. It starts with an explanation of how to effectively use the material and what is called the "G-module", a comprehensive explanation of English grammar again using the using the S + V + O grammar notation. The explanation seems to be an attempt "...to 'beat' the natural route of acquisition" (Ellis R 2005 p. 10), in other words speed up language acquisition, which is all very well and good as long as students are given practice in using this way of putting ideas together and using English labels for the ideas they wish to express.⁴⁵ However, the G-module not only gives the grammar notation for each model sentence, but also a translation.

Much of the G-module for first year students seems to be a review of junior high school grammar; so, much of how students approach this section may depend on how they were taught previously.

The textbook contains 16 “Lessons”. The regular units are short, two page affairs, and most significantly are based on specific topics—from 世界はばたく日本人 to 宇宙の果てまですばる大望遠鏡 to 沈黙の春レイチェルカーソン. Each unit starts with a very short reading passage followed by three true/false questions given as a listening exercise. Then there is a section called the “G-file”, which like the G-module, explains the grammar used in the unit and a translation for target sentences followed by a list of expressions and their translations. On the next page are a series of exercises, for example fill in the blank of sentence b) by changing the grammar of sentence a), word sorting, translate the Japanese sentence into English, and rephrase the English.

Between every second Lesson are “Speaking” lessons which begin a section called “Input”—four with reading input and four with listening input. The input is followed by an explanation of the grammar; key phrases from the input are used in example sentences and then translated for the learners. On the next page is a section labelled “Output” which in other terms might be called “controlled practice.” Students fill in the blanks of a short speech using grammar highlighted in a textbox above labelled “Info Depot”. The words to be used come from the input. Below the output section is “Sounds”, which appears to be sentences for reading aloud “expressively”. These sentences are translated for the students, perhaps in the hopes that it will help them understand what they are saying. The speaking unit ends with a brief section titled “Try”. Learners are asked to choose one of three topics and using what they learned in the output section, explain their ideas about it.

Paired with the Speaking Units are units called “Grammar Profiles.” The Grammar Profiles, as the name suggests, give two pages grammar explanation, also in Japanese and contain exercises instructing students to translate Japanese into English, correct grammar mistakes or choose the correct word form to complete a sentence.

At the end of the book are summaries for each of the 16 regular units that give translations for all of the expressions and vocabulary used in the unit, speaking lesson transcripts—the only section that does not contain a translation—a list of useful phrases and their translations, a summary of the grammar profile units with answers, and a list of words and their translations.

⁴⁵ Again, see Gregg’s reply to Krashen: KEVIN R. GREGG Krashen’s Monitor and Occam’s Razar Applied Linguistics (1984) 5 (2) : 79-100 doi:10.1093/applin/5.2.79

The *Unicorn* textbooks from Bun-Eido follow a similar approach to the guidelines set out by MEXT as the *Crown* series. *Unicorn*, however, is organized into three units with five, ten, and then five lessons. The first five lessons are two pages each, but the following lessons are four pages each. On the first page of all lessons, difficult words and concepts are given a gloss in Japanese and the example sentences translated into Japanese. The next page provides a series of exercises including fill-in-the-blank and narabikai, but also translation from Japanese into English. The lessons in units 2 and 3 contain two more pages, one that focus on grammar and another that focuses on writing with a “challenge” speaking activity at the end that follows up on the writing topic.

Like the *Unicorn* textbook, the *Mainstream* textbook from Zoshindo is sub-divided into four parts with four, six, six and two lessons each. The first four lessons are two pages each, but subsequent lessons are six pages with a two page “Column” that gives advice on skills such as taking notes, punctuation, and summary writing. Unlike *Crown* and *Unicorn*, *Mainstream* relies more on pictures to help students get the meaning of the English words and phrases, although regular use is made of translation throughout each lesson like in the other textbooks. At a glance, it seems that while the *Crown* and *Unicorn* series of textbooks seem to take a conservative approach to interpreting the guidelines given by MEXT—offering students translations of difficult vocabulary and explaining new grammar in Japanese, the *Mainstream* books tend to be a bit more progressive. The comprehension check at the end of each chapter is given orally in English and words are explained in English. Frankly, however, it is difficult to see, just by looking at the textbooks, that much has changed. If change has taken place, it will largely depend on the teachers themselves and how they use these materials and the time and importance they give to the various speaking and other output activities, something that test-writers cannot really know.

Students

In April 2017, university English teachers will have the educational outcomes of the new curriculum guidelines in front of them. How much change will we see? No matter the kind of exam students are given—one that focuses on the ability to find grammar mistakes and translate English into Japanese or one that asks them to write a paragraph explaining their opinion of some topic—it is hard to imagine much will change. There may be a greater number of students in our classrooms who are more willing to speak English in class and indeed expect to do so, provided MEXT and high school English teachers have followed through on the new guidelines. But the guidelines most likely will not change student personalities nor will it change university curriculums. Furthermore, students may end up second-guessing entrance exams and hedging their bets by studying for traditional paper and pencil grammar-translation-based exams. The exams themselves may continue to act as a filter if they

are weighted in favour of students with a better understanding of English grammar, vocabulary, and ability to translate. On the other hand, if the curriculum has not moved very far from the traditional grammar/translation focused model then we will not see much change at all, not matter the style of exam. Exam writers, then, will also have to hedge their bets and wait and see what students are capable of. If they make their tests too different from what is actually being taught—communicative tests but traditional grammar/translation curriculum—their exams may end up inadvertently and unfairly screening out capable students.

Certainly, the exams should be written with the students' interests in mind. While understandable that MEXT would like to improve language education by having university entrance exams move high school education in a certain direction, the exams given by institutions of higher education are not merely achievement tests but are instruments used by admissions officers in order to help them decide whether a student is capable of study at their school. If the exams fail to do their job, student could waste valuable time and money studying at a university that does not match their interests and abilities. But entrance exams do not simply test what was learned, which is what achievement tests do,⁴⁶ rather they help predict whether a university is a good match for a student or not and so must reflect the university's curriculum. So, if students enter a course of study that requires the use English for communication, the exam should predict their ability to succeed at their studies. If, on the other hand, students enter a course of study where they must read English journal articles and textbooks, the exam should select for students capable of doing so. Of course, it is unfair to test students on something they have not studied; however, it is also not fair to require that students be able to have a conversation in English to enter a school when they will have no need for it whatsoever in their chosen course of study.

Conclusion

Naturally, high school and juku teachers want to help their students get into university and most likely will study the exams published yearly by universities to see what skills are being tested in order to teach the skills needed to pass. In this way, university entrance exams are being used in lieu of an exit exam and will most likely continue to determine curriculum despite new guidelines, revised textbooks, and innovative teaching methods. And yet, the immediate purpose of entrance exams cannot change: no matter the curriculum being taught in high schools, the exams must ensure that the applicants accepted to a given university and a particular course of study can be taught to perform tasks typically required of students, whether it is reading high level texts written in English that are related to their studies or communicating in spoken English.

⁴⁶ So, perhaps better for MEXT to institute a high school exit exam like some states in the US have done. For general background on exit exams, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exit_examination (retrieved October 9, 2016)