

Developing In-house assessment for English performance in universities: Additions to standardized testing

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Abstract

This paper first examines the role of English in contemporary Japanese society in order to identify the type of assessment tools which should be employed for English education. Next, as an example, this paper examines the process of developing an in-house performance assessment related to English communicative and writing skills by the faculty of one Japanese university.

1. Introduction

This paper was inspired by a recent article on English in Japanese society. According to Honna (1995) in international comparisons of TOEFL scores by country, "Japan is ranked among the very lowest" (p. 57). Honna argues that there is not necessarily anything "wrong even though there has been no significant change in linguistic competency and fluency despite the concerns expressed and reforms proposed by many government, industrial, and educational leaders" (1995: 58). He gives two primary reasons for his argument: (1) there are relatively few opportunities for Japanese to use English as a language for international communication, and (2) the objective set by the Ministry of Education for teaching English in order for students to acquire native-like proficiency is unrealistic. These two factors may be the primary reasons why Japanese TOEFL scores are and continue to be lower than those of students of English in other countries. These factors raise two points. One, it is necessary to consider if TOEFL does actually measure the English proficiency of learners in Japan, and two, if it is not an effective form of measurement, what kind of assessment tools do we need?

2. The role of English in contemporary Japanese society

English was introduced to Japanese education as a required subject in junior and senior high schools about fifty years ago. At this time, there was a strong emphasis placed upon understanding written texts in English as well as specific points of English grammar. These elements of the language were taught to students and then, along with other subjects, used as a method of assessing students on entrance examinations for high schools and universities. Since this time, the principal reason for learning English has been to pass entrance examinations as well as to acquire a high-salaried job, thus advancing one's economic status. The students' language ability in both reading and writing at the end of high school is far from adequate. As Hoffer and Honna states:

Competence, in at least written English, became a critical factor in a pass or fail at the entrance examinations for higher education and, for many Japanese students, a high test mark is almost exclusively the only purpose for study (1999: 54).

Therefore, the common claim that Japanese students know how to read and write English but cannot communicate verbally is far from the actual situation. The reality is, what students are required to learn at school is how to read English by way of translating from English to Japanese based on their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. Even students' knowledge of International Phonetic Alphabets (IPA) which, theoretically, deals with how a word should be pronounced is focused more on distinguishing between two underlined words in a discrete-point test than in producing these words orally! In other words, Japanese students in their English classes do not have opportunities to read English materials extensively, write their own words in English, nor exchange their opinions verbally with others in English.

One of the reasons why there is a significant number of English learners in Japan who take proficiency tests such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), and STEP (Society for Testing English Proficiency) is that many members of Japanese society and the educational establishment do not see these tests as a reliable tool for measuring language ability but as a tool for screening students, comparable to school entrance examinations.

2.1 Reliability of grading system

Each prefectural board of education in Japan provides individual public school teachers with a guideline suggesting the point system for gradings. Within junior and senior high school systems, students' achievement is usually measured by their teacher using a point system of 1-10. For example, Shiga prefectural board of education (2001: 20) advises teachers to give fewer than 4% of the students of a class the highest possible grade within the respective grading system. Even if 90% of a class has achieved an average score of 90% during a school term, only the top 4% of the class will be given a grade above 90% as a final grade.

To complicate matters further, even among classes taught and/or evaluated by the same teacher, because of the guideline on giving the highest grade to the top 4% percent of the class, the students in that group will receive the top score, be that a 10, regardless of what their grades are, as long as they are in the top four percent of their class. That means that in a class where the top scores are 60% or whatever the equivalent is in the respective grading system, the top 4% of students will receive 100% (or the equivalent), the same grade as the students in the top 4% of a class that scored 70%, 80%, 90% etc. as the top score. Therefore, although the reliability among different instructors is of course an issue, there is also the issue of reliability of scores even among classes taught by the same teacher.

Due to the lack of reliability in the grading system, it is difficult for anyone to clearly assess a student's proficiency in English (even among teachers in the same school). Therefore, individual students must take some other tests to determine their English level as compared to other learners, usually for the purpose of the entrance examination. The type of test employed can measure one's standard deviation among all those who are interested in, for example, taking the entrance examination.

2.2 Purposes of language tests

According to McNamara (1996), tests focus on two distinct areas in assessing a person—what s/he knows (knowledge) and what s/he does (performance). Tests of knowledge can also be divided into two types: proficiency tests and achievement tests. TOEIC is a discrete-point test measuring proficiency in listening, grammar, and reading

against 'American native speakers of English' at the time of testing, while TOEFL measures performance in writing on the basis of what American native speakers of English in higher education are supposed to write. Most of the tests administered in English classes in Japan are similar to TOEFL and TOEIC with regard to discrete-point features but different from TOEFL and TOEIC with regard to achievement over time. In another words, Japanese tests specifically measure what students have learned between the beginning and the end of a term with regard to the English they were taught by a particular instructor.

The STEP tests, however, have different purpose, content and procedure from TOEFL and TOEIC. STEP has been specifically developed to meet the stages of criteria for achievement endorsed by the Ministry of Education. If one can pass the third level of the STEP, the examinee is determined to have a proficiency level equivalent to someone who has finished a junior high school English curriculum. If s/he passes the second level of the STEP, the examinee is determined to have a proficiency level equivalent to someone who has finished a high school English curriculum. If s/he passes the first level of the STEP, the examinee is determined to have a proficiency level equivalent to someone who has finished a university English curriculum. Because of these criteria, many students in Japanese junior and senior high schools are encouraged by their teachers to take the STEP test. English majors are advised to take the first level STEP test because those who pass this stage are considered to have achieved the highest level of English proficiency, thus increasing their opportunities for obtaining English related careers.

The procedure of the STEP test is as follows: (1) first, students are required to take discrete-point tests including translating both English and Japanese, and (2) students take an oral interview examination to determine their level. This technique mirrors some of the elements of the traditional entrance examination in many public universities in Japan i.e., a student may not take the second part of the exam unless s/he can pass the first part.

The tests referred to above are all basically centered around testing knowledge, although the second part of the STEP test does, to some degree, measure a test taker's oral/aural performance in English. Because of the limited types of testing tools, there is a need to develop a type of assessment which will measure learners' language

performance in communication as well as in writing. The next section of this paper looks at how one faculty in a university in Japan approached this issue and then examines what is necessary for the development of language performance assessment.

3. Faculty of Intercultural Communication

The Faculty of Intercultural Communication (FIC) was established at Ryukoku University in 1996 and is different from many other faculties in several ways: construction of the academic year, nationalities constituting both the student population and teaching staff, and the foreign language program. Usually in the first two years of a typical Japanese university (UNI hereafter), students register for a large number of courses (between 10 and 15 classes) which usually meet once a week for 90 minute lectures. These courses run from April to January with two months off for summer holidays. The FIC, like its American counter part, has two semesters in which most students take 6 to 8 courses per week per semester.

While the faculty of a typical UNI is made up of mainly Japanese professors, almost half the FIC professors are from countries such as China, Korea, Singapore, Australia, Hungary, France, Argentina, England, and the US. The other half of the faculty, the Japanese professors, have spent a number of years teaching at institutions or conducting research outside of Japan. Of the 400 students accepted at the FIC, about 40 to 60 are international students from China, Taiwan, Korea and other countries. This diversity leads to a unique learning environment as was stated by Johnson, Terhune and Macadam:

The breadth and depth of the accumulated international understanding gained from living in a wide variety of cultures is immense... In practice, on a daily basis, students can see how teachers and students from various cultures are able to communicate and interact in an intercultural setting. They witness as a matter of course the greetings, the brief exchanges, the good-humored conversations between people whose countries, languages and cultures they know to be different. They may see two or three of these same teachers engaged closely in animated conversation over a meal or a cup of coffee... They are invited to observe what is going on around them, to become interested, to gradually develop a greater awareness of how people interact between cultures (1999: 139).

While in some universities students usually have to take two foreign languages, i.e. English and another language once a week for two years, students at FIC take only one foreign language three times a week for the first two years. After this period students may choose to take English, French, Chinese, Korean or Japanese as a second language.

Another difference between UNI and FIC is that if a student at UNI fails English 1, that student can proceed to English 2 while simultaneously repeating English 1 in the same year while students at FIC must pass each level in order to advance to the next level. While the academic viability of the former is questionable, the latter, in practice, assures that students have met the language requirements before they can undertake more advanced study.

While there is little accountability among most foreign language teaching staff at UNI and few teachers know exactly what their colleagues are teaching in their classrooms, the teaching staff of the foreign language program at FIC, especially those of the English language program, hold meetings on a bi-monthly or weekly basis, to make sure that their oral communication goals are met.

3.1 English Language Program at FIC

In 1996, the first year of operation of FIC, the English language program conducted an experimental study which required all the first year students to take an institutional TOEFL before and after the first semester of the year in order to assess the general improvement in proficiency. It was found that there was a statistically significant increase in the listening section of the TOEFL, but that there was no significant increase in the other two sections (Futaba, 1999). In response, the English language program quickly altered the content of the curriculum from three classes of oral communication to two classes of oral communication and one class of reading/writing.

In addition, the program transformed its first year curriculum with its emphasis on oral communication to the following (adapted from Figure 3 from Johnson, Terhune and Macadam, 1999: 142).

Figure 2. Goals for English 1, 2, 3 & 4

<p>English 1 and 2</p> <p>Goals for Speaking</p> <p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ English in simple conversation ◦ Talk about present, past, & future activities ◦ Talk about personal information, such as hometowns, school, daily schedules, health & travel preferences <p>Functional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Know formal & informal introductions ◦ Learn simple telephone English ◦ Exchange personal & familiar information ◦ Ask the teacher questions ◦ Volunteer answers ◦ State a simple opinion <p>Intercultural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Gain knowledge of cultural differences in communication ◦ Begin to evaluate one's own needs & goals for English ◦ Feel at ease when traveling among the world community ◦ Use language required for restaurants & transportation 	<p>Goals for Writing</p> <p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Gain a fundamental familiarity with sentences & their combination in organized & effective paragraph ◦ Obtain active knowledge of essential punctuation ◦ Learn to use capital letters, basic conjunctions & prepositions, correct English syntax & word order <p>Functional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Express basic ideas, feelings & opinions in a clear, simple & coherent manner in writing ◦ Understand fundamental computer functions for English word processing ◦ Learn to type, word processing skills, printing, use of spell check & a familiarity with e-mail ◦ Understand, respond to & give instructions <p>Intercultural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Understand different kinds of written texts (e.g. formal & informal letters, essays, & reports) & their purposes ◦ Begin to evaluate one's own needs & goals for English ◦ Feel at ease when traveling among the world community ◦ Use language required for restaurants & transportation
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(continued...)

Figure 2. Goals for English 1, 2, 3 & 4 (continued)

<p>English 3 and 4</p> <p>Goals for Speaking</p> <p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Describe experiences, problems & opinions ◦ Describe people's qualities & characteristics ◦ Describe possibilities <p>Functional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Give advice ◦ Make apologies ◦ Make requests ◦ State a simple opinions with supporting statements <p>Intercultural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Learn communicative strategies together with cultural differences in communication ◦ Evaluate personal performance from various perspectives ◦ Learn geographical locations & be exposed to various other cultural, historical & social information ◦ Speculate about the future ◦ Begin to develop critical thinking skills 	<p>Goals for Writing</p> <p>Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Learn to express oneself in written English with proficiency & ease ◦ Learn academic writing <p>Functional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ participate in writing projects including research papers, opinion essays, movie reviews, business letters & essays that stress content rather than form ◦ Understand & discuss graphs, tables & other textual devices ◦ Manage a formal & informal correspondence on topics of common interest <p>Intercultural</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Begin to develop critical thinking skills ◦ Evaluate personal performance from various perspectives ◦ Understand different kinds of rhetorical strategies in written text
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The third year after FIC was established, about 20 junior college graduates who were seeking to transfer from other institutions, were accepted and placed into appropriate classes based on the results of an oral interview developed and administered by the faculty.

While third year UNI students usually do not have any foreign language classes available, at FIC there are classes for English 5, 6, and 7 for further study. While English 5 offers a variety of content-based subjects such as contemporary films and 'World Englishes'

among others, English 6 and 7 focus on improving all four language skills and on developing intercultural communication strategies.

3.2 Language Tests

As discussed earlier, there are two kinds of language tests: the proficiency-based test to measure language learners' knowledge, and the performance-based test to measure language learners performance in communicative situations. Existing standardized tests do the following:

1. To measure one's English proficiency in listening, grammar, and reading → TOEIC
2. To measure one's English proficiency in listening, grammar, and reading, + to measure one's English performance in writing → TOEFL
3. To measure one's English proficiency in listening, grammar, and reading + to measure one's English performance in communication → STEP
4. To measure one's English proficiency in listening, and reading + to measure one's English performance in communication and writing → IELTS
5. To measure one's English proficiency in communication → OPI (Oral Proficiency Interview in North America).

However, this paper examines only those available within the context of Japan. Here is a list of suggestions for students at FIC.

A. TOEIC

Students at FIC take a TOEIC test before the first semester of their study as well as at the end of the second year. Considering the availability and the content for testing proficiency, TOEIC appears to be the best choice for the FIC students. Only the institutional TOEIC and TOEFL tests are available in Japan. While TOEFL is specifically designed for students who wish to study in North American universities, TOEIC is designed for business and international communication. Results of the TOEIC need to be examined acknowledging the fact that the content of the test is developed considering the assumed proficiency of 'native speakers of English' in

North America. An advantage of TOEIC over TOEFL is that many private corporations in international business now require their incoming workers as well as their employees to provide them with their TOEIC results.

B. Oral-interview test

In-house oral interview tests based on existing standardized communicative performance tests such as the oral-interview section of IELTS and STEP need to be developed to meet the goals of FIC English language programs. Cambridge EFL On-line (2001) describes the IELTS interview section in their website as, "Speaking module is a structured interview with an emphasis on general speaking skills. It assesses whether candidates have the necessary knowledge and skills to communicate effectively with native speakers of English."

The development of an in-house oral-interview should include the following elements:

1. To create questions based on the communicative goals of each level with emphasis on linguistics, functional and intercultural components.
2. To collect an end-of-year random sampling of raw audio-recorded data from oral-interviews with questions above (1) for each level of English 1-4. Interviews should be administered according to a timed schedule in each respective instructor's office in order to avoid external distractions.
3. To make the entire teaching staff listen to these recordings while each individual instructor assesses the interviewee's performance on the basis of 1-100 from the points of the three components referred to above. A scale of 1-100 is suggested for assessment because the final grades at FIC and UNI employ this scale which makes for ease in comprehension among other members of their faculty.
4. To make individual assessors write grade points on a white-board. When there is a significant discrepancy in any part, discussion is to be held until a consensus is reached.

5. To make assessors hear and discuss the tapes of each level to reach conclusions about the range for each level of English from 1-4.
6. To collect another random sampling of audio-recordings from approximately 12 oral-interviews with the agreed list of questions. The assessors evaluate the interviews in the aforementioned manner.

C. Writing

1. To make a list of essay questions based on writing goals of each level with linguistic, functional and intercultural components emphasis.
2. To collect a set of essays with one of the essay questions above from each level of English 1-4 at the end of the term. Essay writing should be administered in a timed schedule in each instructor's office in order to avoid external distractions.
3. To have individual assessors read each essay while they evaluate the student's performance from the points of three components mentioned above on the basis of 1-100. They should use 1-100 because the final grades at FIC and UNI use this scale and it is easy to understand this scale when shown to other members of their faculty.
4. To have individual assessors write their points on a white-board when they finish. When there is a significant discrepancy in any part, they have to discuss why until they reach a consensus on the assessment.
5. To have assessors read and discuss the essays of the students of each level, and have them reach a conclusion about the band range for each level of English 1-4.
6. To collect another set of essays from the agreed list of questions and the assessors evaluate writing.

Based on the results of oral-interview and essay writing at the end of each term, the FIC teaching staff should provide the assessments of oral-interview and essay writing within the context of their final grade for each class of English 1-4.

4. Conclusion

Through this paper, I have tried to examine the current status of English in Japan and the way English is taught within a faculty. With this analysis, I attempted to find out what needs to be developed for the particular needs of a faculty of a university. There is a need, however, to find out if any of the claims in this paper reflect the current society in Japan. This is done not by questionnaires or surveys but by ethnographic studies to reveal what they do in each institution rather than what they are supposed to do. There is also a need to find out if this proposed scheme can produce interculturally competent English speakers in a world of real communication. Finally, the program needs to develop a comprehensive examination in English for the understanding of Japanese society through the accumulated knowledge and experiences at FIC.¹

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for comments on various stages of this paper to Timothy F. McNamara at the University of Melbourne, Wayne K. Johnson, Barbara R. Stein, Joseph P. Macadam, William S. Bradley, Stephen J. Wolfe, Noel M. Terhune at Ryukoku University, Thomas Santos at the School for International Training and the editors.

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¹ Futaba (in progress) examines the literature of the theories of the Japanese in order to develop this type of comprehensive examination.

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