

Impact of Japanese university entrance examinations on individuals, education system and society

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1.1 Introduction

The influence of university entrance examinations on individuals, the education system and society has been commonly discussed as a whole. In Japan, the impact of university examinations both at a macro (society and education system) and at a micro level (individuals) is significant. This essay aims to examine the impact of this examination system.

This essay will first look at the concept of assessment and essential criteria for language assessment as impact is one of significant criteria for assessment. Then it will discuss test impact in relation to assessment and importance of impact. Finally it will analyse types of impact and degrees of impact caused by university entrance examination system, and discuss how this impact affects individuals, it's the educational system and society.

2.1 Assessment

Language assessment refers to “the process of collecting information” on a learner’s language ability or achievement measured by “systematic and substantively grounded” procedures (Bachman 6-7). The consequence of this process is also included as assessment (*ibid.*). As Bachman states, ‘systematic’ and ‘substantively grounded’ procedures are essential for assessment as these two elements are closely connected with reliability and validity (6). Systematicity means that assessments should be conducted systematically based on explicitly defined procedures, and those procedure are based on thoroughly examined methods (*ibid.*); therefore, assessments followed by well examined procedures are reliable. On the other hand, ‘substantively grounded’ means that assessments should be conducted based on “a widely accepted theory about the nature of language ability, language use or language learning, or prior research or an accepted and current practice in a particular field” (Bachman 7). Therefore, assessments are considered as valid. These two elements, reliability and validity, are an essential requirement for assessment.

Before introducing other significant principles for assessment, the function of an assessment is worth mentioning. There are two major distinct functions for assessments;

they are formative assessment and summative assessment. Formative assessment, according to O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, refers to "ongoing ... assessment providing information to guide instruction" (238). Gipps states that formative assignments "take place during the course of teaching and is used essentially to feed back into the teaching/learning process" (viii). Centre for Educational Research and Innovation defines formative assessment as "frequent, interactive assessment of student progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately" (CERI-OCED 1). In summary, formative assessment is an ongoing assessment which informs the teaching and learning process and helps learners progress. Summative assessment, on the other hand, refers to "assessment for a unit, grade level, or course study providing a ... report on mastery or degree of proficiency according to identified learning outcomes" (O'Malley and Valdez Pierce 240). It also "takes place at the end of a term or a course and is used to provide information about how much students have learned or how well a course has worked" (Gipps vii). Duncan and Dunn explain that summative assessments is "a final assessment, a final judgement about a course or a class" (73). In summary, summative assessment is final assessment which is carried out at the end of a term, and it also often assigns certificates or grades. Since the summative assessment is a final or at the end of the term, the assessment often determines of students' future lives, and also students' pass or fail of the test depends on this assessment, summative assessment is considered as high-stakes assessment (Bachman and Palmer, *Language Assessment in Practice* 27). The assessment of standardised tests such as IELTS, TOEFL and standardised university entrance examinations are examples of high-stake assessments (H. Brown 67, 69).

2.2 The relationship between language assessment and language teaching and learning

The implementation of assessment, evaluation and teaching and learning affect each other (Bachman and Palmer, *Language Assessment in Practice* 26). As mentioned above, assessments are a means of collecting information. Depending on the types of assessment, the purpose of gathering information and the types of information gathered will be different. For example, formative assessment is suitable for collecting information on students' learning attainment during the course. Summative assessment is suitable for identifying students' language proficiency of the target language and making a decision on who passes the course (*ibid*). Thus, consequences of assessment are beneficial for making judgements and decisions towards language teaching and learning. Making judgements and decisions based on the outcome of assessments are defined as evaluation (H. Brown 30). Based on evaluation, teachers could change their teaching methodology and materials, and also could provide students with feedback of their learning (Bachman and Palmer, *Language*

Assessment in Practice 26). In this sense, assessment, evaluation and the outcome of assessments are closely linked.

In the following sections, the relation between assessment and the consequence of assessment will be discussed.

3.1 Washback and test impact

As explained above, in addition to reliability and validity, there are other important criteria for assessments. Those are practicality, authenticity and washback (H. Brown 19, 28-29). In order to focus on the relation between assessments and impact of assessments, only one of the constituents of validity, 'test impact', and the last criterion, 'washback', will be discussed in this section.

The influence of tests or assessments has been identified and widely accepted in the educational field as well as society (Cheng and Curtis 4). This influence is known as backwash (Hughes 1), washback (Wall 291; Bachman and Palmer 30; Alderson and Wall 115), or test impact (McNamara 74; Bachman and Palmer 31). The major difference of these terms is the scope of the influence. The terms backwash and washback are limited within the scope of teaching and learning, whereas test impact goes beyond classroom practices.

3.1.2 Washback

Although, 'backwash' and 'washback' are different terms, they seem to refer to the same meaning. Backwash is defined as "the effect of testing on teaching and learning" (Hughes 1). Similarly, washback refers to "the effects of tests on teaching and learning" (Wall 291). As Alderson and Wall state, the term in backwash is used in general education, while washback is prevalent and a commonly accepted term in applied linguistics (115). Therefore, the term washback will be used in this essay. One of the noticeable and prominent washback effects is 'curriculum alignment' which was introduced by Shepard (4-5). Curriculum alignment refers to the cohesion between academic programme, including teaching contents and materials in a course, and examinations (*ibid*). As "[t]ests or examinations can and should drive teaching, and hence learning", school curriculum should be established by considering the contents and formats of examinations (Cheng and Curtis 4). In other words, the educational system is influenced by washback.

Bachman and Palmer discuss the effects of curriculum alignment on individuals: teachers and students. They noted that teachers are required to teach for the test regardless of their preference or personal values, and this situation is "almost unavoidable" (33). In other words, teaching materials and contents applied in the classroom should be authentic

to the examinations. Therefore, teaching methodology has to be relevant to prepare for the test. Students are also influenced by curriculum alignment in relation to language use, including language knowledge, strategies and topical knowledge such as topical or cultural information (*ibid*). Considering the nature of the washback effect, Wall and Alderson argue that “tests can be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in classrooms” (41); and that washback effect therefore plays a significant role as a determiner of language teaching and learning at educational system level and individual level.

3.1.3 Test impact

The term test impact refers to “[t]he wider effect of tests on the community as a whole” (McNamara 74). In other words, this is an effect which extends beyond the classroom (*ibid*). The rate and types of impact differs according to social and cultural values. In addition, high-stake tests have a greater impact than low-stake tests. One example of this impact is the assessment of university entrance examinations, which serves select people.

4.1 Washback and test impact of university entrance examinations in Japan

In Japan, university entrance examinations have been largely criticised in terms of negative washback effect on English classrooms of Japanese high schools (Watanabe, “Does grammar” 318) and test the impact on a students’ future. In this section, I will examine both the washback and test impact of the Japanese university examination system. I will first analyse the washback effect, and then move on to test impact.

4.1.1 Washback effect in Japan

In order to show the effect of washback clearly, I will focus on the standardised Japanese university entrance examination, called ‘the centre test’ here. The centre test serves two functions as an achievement test and admission test (Watanabe, “The National Center” 566). It is a final achievement test which is administered by the minister of education in Japan and implemented at the end of the high school course. As Hughes points out, the content of final achievement tests “must be” connected to the course (13), the relation between the high school course programmes and the centre test is based on curriculum alignment. Since it is to measure “how successful individual students ... have been in achieving objectives” (*ibid*), there should be content validity in the centre test. Content validity is concerned with the forms of the test, or if the tests measure what they are intended to measure (*ibid*). Therefore, it is concerned with whether components of the

test, such as contents and materials, are relevant in order to measure test takers ability (*ibid.*). As far as language tests are concerned, if the tests have content validity, there should be cohesion between the components of the tests, including contents, materials, structures and required language skills, and what students learnt during the course. Considering those tendencies, the course curriculum should be examined in order to make the tests valid in the designing process. Therefore it could be assumed that the tests should be based on syllabus, not vice versa.

Regarding the Japanese context of English education, as briefly mentioned above, there is curriculum alignment between school curriculum and the centre test. The National Center for University Entrance Examinations, in which the centre test is produced, announced that the centre tests are designed by thoroughly considering the guideline of national standardised curriculum presented by the ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (NCUEE 3).

However, it seems that the relation between course curriculum and tests is the opposite. The curriculum alignment is formed by the fact that classroom activities are designed to match the contents of the centre tests. Japanese high schools are encouraged to follow the guideline of national standardised curricula. In response to the climate of globalisation, there are needs for the development of students' communicative competence. In order to meet these needs, MEXT introduced several reformed curriculums in the past. One, in particular, published in 2013 emphasises adopting activities and teaching materials which are aimed at developing students' communicative competence (MEXT 1). For example, regarding the objective of speaking activities, adopting of activities "in which ... students actually use language to share their thoughts and feeling with each other" are recommended (NEXT 3). Similarly, regarding objectives of reading activities, adaptation of reading materials designed "to understand the writer's intentions in texts such as messages and letters and respond appropriately" (*ibid* 2). If the centre test is designed based on the guideline of this curriculum, the content of the centre test should contain questions to measure students' communicative abilities. Considering the contents of this test, it seems that the focus of English knowledge is only on grammar. In addition, there is no oral examination in order to measure students' oral communication skills. There are questions about pronunciation. However, that is not enough to measure a student's speaking ability, in that recognising pronunciation is merely one of many skills used when speaking. Moreover, since the form of the centre test is multiple choice based, it would be hard to measure students' communicative competence. Although the National Center for University Entrance Examinations states they design the test along with the guideline of national curriculum, there is a discrepancy between them.

Considering the above aspects, English classrooms in Japanese high schools focus on the centre test. The empirical survey of Lockley et.al, (156), Sakui (“Wearing” 159) and Wanatabe (331) revealed that the teaching method of Japanese English teachers is influenced by the centre test. For example, teachers interviewed by Sakui points out grammar-oriented teaching is unavoidable as the centre test heavily relies on grammar (158). Similarly, a teacher in Watanabe’s survey states that “high-school teachers are forced to give priority to teaching English through GT (grammar-translation method) to meet the demands imposed by various university entrance examinations” (“Does grammar” 318). Those teachers exercise grammar-centred classes in order to make students achieve a better result on the centre test. In this sense, it could be interpreted that English teachers’ teaching methods are strongly influenced by the centre test. As a consequence, students’ linguistic knowledge is likely to be restricted within grammatical knowledge. With that reason, the construct of the centre test has been widely criticised as it gives negative washback effect on both teaching and learning in the English contest of Japanese high school.

4.1.2 Test impact in Japan

As far as the test impact is concerned, it has two types of influence on individuals and society as a whole. Regarding the nature of admission tests, the result of the centre test is considerably influential as it is a high stake exam. Bachman states how the outcome of the test is used in the real world; it is used to “inform decisions about employment, professional certification and citizenship” (6). In Japan, the outcome of university entrance examinations has an impact on academia as well as individuals. Sasaki points out that it is competitive university examinations which are most likely to give a university a higher ranking position. In this case, the university examination plays a role as a determiner of ranking in the educational context (Sasaki, “The 150-year” 71). It seems that the ranking of a university is decided by the university entrance examination regardless of the quality of study a university provides.

As a micro level of test impact, it appears that university entrance examinations have an impact on an individuals’ future employment. Sasaki and Watanabe report the common belief in Japanese society; “admission to a high-ranking ... university guarantees a high-ranking position in the society” (“The 150-year” 71); “there is a widespread belief that entering renowned universities guarantees a better career after graduation” (Watanabe, “Does grammar” 143). This is based on an assumption that university ranking is according to the competitiveness of the university entrance examinations. In this sense, examinations give social values to university. Therefore, university entrance examinations have an impact on an individual’s future employment. Accordingly, passing the examinations of a

university ranked in a higher position is considered as respectable and prestigious. As a consequence, university examinations influence an individual's perspective and social identity

There is an example provided by Brown that shows the negative effect of test impact on individuals (J. Brown 95). He reports a male student's case who chose a university according to the result of university examination, not according to subject he was interested in: "Yuki ended up going to University A and studying a major that didn't interest him at all. Simply because that was the entrance examination that he managed to pass" (*ibid*). This example shows how university examinations negatively affect certain individuals.

5.1 Conclusion

This essay tried to present the washback and test impact of Japanese entrance examinations on individuals, teachers and society. In doing so, it first started with explaining the concept of assessment, then present the relation between assessment and impact of tests. Even though the curriculum alignment between English classroom orientations and the centre test could be observed, this relation is based on the fact that classroom orientations are designed in order to match the centre test. As one line of evidence, Sakui's and Watanabe's surveys reveal the situation that English teachers employ grammar-oriented teaching in order to teach for the centre test. As a consequence students' linguistic knowledge is likely to be limited to within a knowledge of grammar. These are the prominent examples of washback effect shown in the context of the English classroom in Japanese high schools. As for the evidence of test impact, university ranking and students' choice of university are influenced by university entrance examinations. University ranking is based on the degree of competitiveness, and highly ranked universities received social values. As a consequence, passing the university examination of a highly ranked university is considered as respectable and prestigious. Therefore those who passed those entrance examinations are guaranteed future employment. In this sense, this examination system influences an individual's perspective and social identity.

As mentioned above, assessment of tests has a great effect on different individuals, universities and society as a whole. Therefore it is important to consider the facet of washback and test impact on individuals, education systems and society.

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