

# **Do standard Japanese High School entrance exams focus on testing discrete grammar points?**

**What implications does this have for the classroom approach taken in schools?**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Japan is often recognised as being a test focussed culture, with the ubiquitous phrases ‘juken’ and ‘juken jigoku’ succinctly describing the “exam hell” that is an accepted part of all students’ school careers. The university ‘Center Test’ that regulates admission to public university has been charged with having a negative backwash effect on the pedagogical approach of both senior and junior high schools by focussing mainly on memorization of discrete grammar points at sentence level. (Brown & Yamashita 1995, Poole 2003, Murphey 2002 / 2001). Various studies of the Center Test have been carried out however; the degree to which the High School entrance exams contribute to a backwash in the teaching approaches taken at Junior High School has not been explored in depth.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the question types and required language skills contained in High School Entrance Tests with the aim of establishing empirically whether discrete grammar points actually form the main focus on the tests themselves. Establishing a clear picture of the language skills required by the entrance test will allow teachers at Junior High School to better select methods and materials that will provide students with the skills that are required. Furthermore, the research will shed light on the degree to which 2003 Action Plan released by MEXT has been incorporated into public school examination requirements.

While the Center Test offers a national standardised test for analysis the situation for High School entrance tests is markedly different. Each prefecture sets a basic standard test while private High Schools also offer their own test to regulate entry. For the purposes of this study the standard High School Entrance test administered in Oita Prefecture (大分県公立高校入試) was selected. The test is offered to approximately 8000 students each year (8320 students in 2012 according to Oita Board of Education) and is used by the 57 Prefectural High Schools to decide admission. Each test from 2004 to 2009 was analysed to give an appropriate overview of current test design and practice, and results are given both for each individual test as well as the overall trends detected in the studied period.

## **THE DEBATE ON TESTING**

Research into standardized testing in the Japanese schooling system has been the focus of much academic debate, with analysis of the standardized university entrance test – the “Center Test” – at the



## Part 2B

Since 2006 the second part of the Listening section has had students listen to the first 3 lines of a dialogue then select the most appropriate 4<sup>th</sup> line from a list of four answer choices in the test booklet. Again, these focus on adjacency pairs, rather than matching grammatical exponents. This example comes from the 2009 test; (answer in bold)

A; What sport do you like the best?

B; I like baseball the best.

*(\*\*first couplet uses replication of the grammar form in the question)*

A; Do you play it?

**B; I've just become a member of the baseball club**

*(\*\*adjacency pair as opposed to the basic grammatical coupling of "Yes I do")*

The test pre-2006 had a listening section where information heard in English was used to complete information in Japanese on the test booklet.

## Part 2C

\*\* Part 1B in pre-2006 tests.

In this section students listen to a passage of roughly one minute in length and also hear 4 questions. The answer choices are contained in the test booklet. This section provides a heavy information/memory load.

## Part 3

The first section contains gaps in a long passage that require the students to correctly spell the missing information – most commonly days of week, months or numbers – based on information read in Japanese. This is followed by two 'sentence ordering' questions and then one or two questions that require the translation of a Japanese phrase into English.

## Part 4

Here students read a 4 part picture story and provide a missing line. Again, since 2006 the second section students now complete a slot fill sentence with their own opinion on a topic, with a minimum word length stipulated on the test. The 2009 test has the following statement;

"TV is very useful because ....." (complete using 5 words or more)

## Part 5

This section contains a visual (usually in the form of a graph or chart) and a reading passage of approximately 250 words in length (230 words on the 2009 test), and in each test a number of lexical items are glossed at the bottom of the passage. These items are ones that are not covered in any of the 3 different Junior High School textbooks used in Oita Prefecture - It is also important to note here that the vocabulary coverage of each textbook is different and therefore students will encounter potentially unfamiliar lexis beyond the glossed items.

Students answer four questions on this section. The first requires students to look at the pronoun referent "that" and identify the section of text being referred to. They then write this answer in Japanese. The second question requires information to be gleaned from the graph or chart. The third requires the students to identify 2 supporting reasons following from an underlined statement in the test and write these reasons in Japanese. The final question requires students to read the passage and look at the visual to select one correct sentence from four choices.

## Part 6

This is similar to Part 5 but features a longer text (453 words on the 2009 test). There is a pronoun referent question, a vocabulary matching question and three comprehension questions.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The data for the study was collected from the "Oita Ken Kouritsu Koukou Nyuushi Mondai" published by Kyoei Shuppan. This contains the standard entrance tests administered for Oita Prefectural High Schools between 2000 and 2009; however for the purposes of this study the tests between 2005 and 2009 were analysed to ascertain current test content following the publication of MEXTs updated Foreign Language Curriculum in 2003. The study is therefore limited in that the sample consists of tests for a single prefecture and these cannot be generalised to all public High School exams in Japan without qualification. However, by analysing a time period of 5 years between 2005 and 2009 a representative sample of current test design practice is provided.

In order to analyse the questions on the test the following descriptions and criteria were developed:

- **lexical clues:** this describes test items that could be understood from single lexical items without the need for syntactical or morphological awareness. e.g. *2009 listening test*. Students look at 4 T-shirts with differing designs. It would be possible to choose the appropriate answer only by picking out the words "black and white" and "Japanese words" from the spoken text and matching them to the visuals.
- **morphological awareness:** test items that require familiarity with verb tenses. These included listening passages that required students to understand past tense forms of verbs.

- **knowledge of spelling**: each year students are required to spell common words – days of the week and months of the year frequently re-occur.
- **receptive knowledge of syntactical rules**: test questions that require re-ordering of a phrase or clause within sentence to fit a correct syntactical pattern (narabekai mondai). On each test there are two questions and in each the students have to correctly re-order 4 parts.  
e.g. 2009 test; *I really (to / people / want / understand) the things I learned*
- **productive knowledge of syntactical rules**: items that require the students to write in full sentence format and correctly follow syntactical rules
- **receptive knowledge of phrasal units**: items requiring recognition of stock phrases e.g. `Nice to meet you`, `have a nice day`
- **productive knowledge of phrasal units** items requiring production of stock phrases
- **understanding of how text elements relate to each other** these questions require the students to understand adjacency pairs, pronoun referents and flow of discourse.
- **deduction of information from visual source** based on graph, chart or picture data
- **deduction of information from clues in the text** information not directly stated in the text is required in order to answer the question
- **global comprehension of text** understanding of multiple lines of discourse is required.

Distinction was made between knowledge of phrasal units (e.g. recognition or production of “how are you?” would be treated as a fixed phrase rather than a demonstration of syntactical knowledge) and knowledge of wider syntactical patterns. Where the correct answering of a question required more than one skill, the available points for that question were divided equally between each of the skills required.

## **RESULTS**

The analysis of the test items between 2005 and 2009 showed that the most required skill was that of “understanding of how text elements relate to each other”. The average value for this question type was 18.6 points from a possible 50, with the lowest figure of 12 points in 2005 contrasting with a high of 27 points in 2008. Productive knowledge of syntactical rules produced an average of 5.2 points from a

possible 50, with scores varying from 3 to 8 points, while “productive knowledge of phrasal units” also maintained an average of 5.2 points from a variable range of 3 to 7 points. “Knowledge of spelling” scored consistently with an average of 4.2 points, however this was due to a single variable from the 2007 test and with this removed the figure has remained constant at 4 points over the 5 tests studied. Similarly “receptive knowledge of syntactical rules” has accounted for 4 points on each of the 5 tests in the study. Significantly for this study, morphological awareness, which is a key component of sentence level discrete grammar testing, scored an average of only 1.2 points from a possible 50. Figure 1 shows the collated figures, while figure 2 gives contrasting data for each test within the five year period.

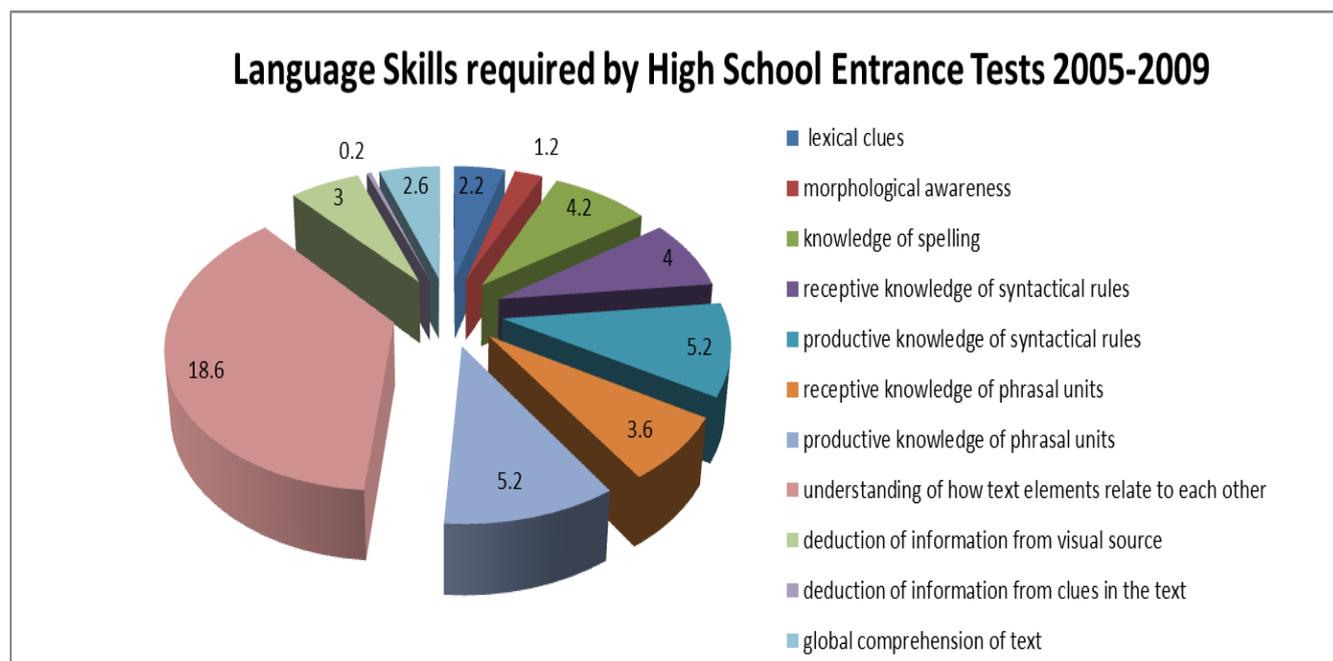


Fig. 1 Breakdown of Language Skills on the tests

When the figures are grouped according to four general skill types – Grammatical Awareness, Phrasal/Lexical Awareness, Text/Discourse Awareness, and ‘Other’ - the results place the role of grammatical knowledge at around 20.8% of the available points on the test. This is very similar to the score for Lexical Awareness - 22%, but significantly lower than the combined score for Text/Discourse Awareness, which accounted for an average of 41.4% of the marks on the tests administered between 2005 and 2009. These are shown in Figure 3 below.

| Required skill            | Maximum Points on Test |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Grammatical awareness     | 10.4                   |
| Phrasal/lexical awareness | 11                     |
| Text/Discourse awareness  | 21.2                   |
| Other                     | 7.4                    |
| TOTAL                     | 50                     |

Figure 3. Data grouped as general skills

The number of glossed lexical items in each test averaged 22 items per test (32.6 individual words), the lowest number of glossed items occurred in the 2008 test, when 14 items were included, while the 2006 test saw the highest number with 28.

## **DISCUSSION**

The question posed by this study was whether or not High School Entrance Tests focus on discrete grammar points. The analysis of five years of tests administered in Oita Prefecture point to a resounding negative reply to the question. In the tests there were no single sentence grammar selection questions, such as those commonly found in TOEIC Part V, Eiken Part 1 and in Part 2 of the Center test. Test items that focussed on syntax rules were present, but the “narabikai mondai” (sentence ordering) questions accounted for only 4 points (or 8 percentage points) on each of the tests studied. The remainder of the grammar influence on the test was on meaning focus – understanding a series of points within a text or production of a personalized and meaning focussed sentence. Perhaps the key finding of the research is that 40% of the test focus lies in understanding how text elements relate to one another. Thornbury (2005) states, “Language is realized, first and foremost, as text. Not as isolated sounds, or words, or sentences, but as whole texts.” and all of the exam questions included in the study were based on the understanding of a minimum 2 line exchange.

The current Education Ministry Course of study states the following:

- “The following language activities should be conducted ..... in order to develop a practical command of English which would allow students to understand English and express themselves in English.”
- “For the treatment of “(3) D. Grammatical items,” consideration should be given so that instruction does not center on issues like explaining grammatical terms or differentiating between usage, but on actual use of grammatical items”

This would support Torikai’s view that the approach to English language teaching has changed, however, the question of impact on classroom pedagogy is one that has not been addressed. If, as Torikai notes, teachers continue with the belief that discrete point grammar teaching is necessary for school entrance exams changes at the top may not effectively filter down. Nishino’s 2011 study of High School teachers’ beliefs about Communicative Language Teaching also appears to support the notion that classroom level pedagogy is not changing, mainly due to lack of confidence in ability to conduct CLT activities, minimal influence of Education Ministry policy on classroom practice, and the fact that teachers had no direct experience of CLT in their own High School and university careers. Hato (2005) also criticizes the decision by the Education Ministry to relate goals in the 2003 Action Plan to levels of attainment in The STEP English Proficiency Exam, as well as lamenting the lack of teacher input in the Action Plan.

While appearing to represent a more holistic text level approach to language, the tests also present a level of difficulty in the length and lexical level of passages used. The existence of three different

textbooks, each with a different core vocabulary means that students will face unfamiliar lexis on the test which may have an adverse effect on their ability to correctly complete questions. Furthermore, the passage length of 230-450 words contrasts with reading passages of around 190 words in the final unit of 3<sup>rd</sup> year textbooks. In addition, the reading passages in textbooks are printed in larger print and over several pages, allowing students to digest the content more easily. The readability of the passages, however, matches the level of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year textbooks. Using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, The New Crown series moves from a 2.1 (82.6 reading ease) level readability in unit 1 to 4.1 (78.2 reading ease) in Unit 8. (Data from Takeda, Choi, Mochizuki & Watanabe 2006). In the 2009 High School Entrance Test the 2 reading passages rated as 224 words / Flesch-Kincaid Grade 4 / Reading Ease 83.9, and 472 words / Grade 3.2 / Reading Ease 86.7.

## **SUMMARY**

Japan is currently in a period of change with regards to English language education. Government initiatives have seen the introduction of classes at Elementary School 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Grade from 2011 and from 2013 High School English classes will, in principle, be taught mainly in English. Meanwhile, Junior High School level texts are undergoing a re-writing process that will hopefully address some of the concerns raised by Takeda et. al. about the fragmented approach taken to language in the current volumes. The 2003 Action Plan made clear proposals for a change in approach from the grammar-translation to a more communicative methodology. Analysis of the Oita Prefectural High School Entrance Tests fits with Guest's recent analysis of the Center Test and supports the view that discrete item testing no longer constitutes the bulk of Japanese tests, and demonstrates implementation of at least some of proposals in the Action Plan. There is a clear focus on text/discourse level understanding, while a narrow focus on morphological and syntactical grammar has been shown to cover only 20% of test content.

This should encourage teachers at Junior High level to focus more classroom time on text/discourse level processing and to weight discrete grammar point knowledge accordingly.

Further research is required, however, to ascertain the penetration of these changes at classroom level. A corpus based review of vocabulary and lexis in both textbooks and standardised tests would help ensure some uniformity – Miyagi (2004) notes that current textbooks cover only around 50% of the first 1000 most frequent English words, while The Education Ministry provides a list of only 507 vocabulary items to be covered in Junior High textbooks, despite the course of study requiring 1,200 words to be taught in principle. In terms of teacher training and attitudes, Nishino's study suggests that change may be slow in coming, meaning a potentially fragmented system that does students a disservice. Given the key role Junior High School plays in laying the foundations of English study under the present school system, more research focussed at this level would be warmly welcomed.

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