

***Trans-Equator Exchanges:  
A Collection of Academic Papers  
in Honour of Professor David E. Ingram***

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# **Does the university entrance examination motivate learners? :**

## **A case study of learner interviews**

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### **1. Introduction**

It is normal to claim that the Japanese university entrance examinations dominate the whole educational process and practice of EFL in Japan, producing negative consequences to instruction and learning. "Examination hell" is the phrase that is often used to describe the situation. Typical arguments go like this: the exams have a great impact on EFL; then, if we change the exams, it will automatically change EFL. Some people even go so far as to argue that the English section of the entrance examination ought to be completely eliminated, because of its potential negative influence. Watanabe (1997) reviewed public opinions reported in the mass media, including newspapers, weekly magazines, and TV programmes, and found that approximately 80% of the collected 500 items were concerned with the negative aspects of the entrance examination. The other 20% of the opinions, which referred to a positive aspect of the exam, claimed that the exam would enhance students' motivation.

One type of examination impact which is designated as "washback" in ESL/EFL literature specifically refers to the effect of testing on the teacher and the learner (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Wall, 1997). Though the presence of washback has been taken for granted, the small body of recent research studies indicate that washback is a highly complex phenomenon, and only changing the exam will not automatically bring about changes in education (Wall & Alderson, 1993; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt & Ferman, 1996; Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Watanabe, 1996b; Cheng, 1997). Rather, a variety of factors, such as teachers' personal beliefs about the test, prestige of the test, the context in which the test is put to use, and so forth, seem to be mediating the process of washback being produced from the test (Wall & Alderson, 1993; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt & Ferman, 1996; Watanabe, 1996a; Brown, 1997).

The number of research studies which dealt with the issue of "washback to the learner" (Bailey, 1996) rather than teachers is even smaller, but it may be interesting to note that they also indicate a complex relationship between the examination and its impact (e.g., Hashimoto, 1966; Moeller & Reshcke, 1993; Watanabe, 1992; Clouston-Lessard, 1996).

These research studies indeed provide several important insights into the mechanism of the

operation of washback, but it is surprising that none of those deal with the issue of learners' motivation with respect to the examination, in view of the fact that a number of claims regarding positive aspects of the exam washback assume that the exam would motivate learners. The relationship between motivation and second language learning is already complex (e.g., Gardner, 1985), and the interrelationship between these and the test is likely to be even more complex. Nevertheless, the complexity of the issue should not preclude its importance. The present paper is one attempt to cast some light on this issue by reporting part of a larger project (Watanabe, 1997, 2000) of the washback effect of the Japanese university entrance examination on instruction and learning. The report, however, is not intended to test any specific hypotheses, but rather to generate hypotheses for the future research.

## **2. The background – the Japanese university entrance examination system**

In Japan the school year begins at April 1 and ends at the end of March the following year. There are more than 1,000 colleges and universities, approximately half of which are two-year course junior colleges, while the other half are four-year course universities and colleges. The entrance examinations of most universities are administered during the period of January to February. Though the screening procedures are slightly different between national/local public universities on the one hand and private universities on the other, the most common method is that each department of each university produces its own examination and offers it on its own campus. Since not all university exams are administered on the same day, students have more than one opportunity of taking tests. It is normal that the students rank several universities as first-choice, second-choice, and so forth, according to the prestige of the institutions, and their difficulty levels. In addition to main-stream private and public high schools, there are special exam preparatory schools, called *yobiko* and *juku*, and these schools not only prepare students for the examinations, but provide the information which they obtain through meticulous analyses of the past exam papers. In addition to the variety of screening procedures and the exams, most of the universities also employ the recommendation system. In this system, the universities offer places to the students who have gained sufficient academic grades at high school.

Nearly half of upper secondary level (senior high school) graduates wish to go to higher education every year. Most of the students who have failed to enter the target universities in the

graduation year study another year to take the entrance exam the next year. In addition, the rankings of universities are very steep, and there is a widespread belief that entering renowned universities guarantees better jobs after graduation. There are prospects that the excessive form of exam preparation will subside as the birth rate declines. However, it may be that we cannot be so optimistic as long as there is a widespread perception that a 'good' university guarantees a bright future for its graduates.

### **3. The interview**

#### **3.1 Participants**

A total of twenty-two university students (males and females were balanced in number) participated in the present interview. All the students were taking the freshman component of English at International Christian University (ICU) and attending the courses taught by the present author. They were all those who had been accepted to the university by means of regular entrance exams rather than recommended. The participants were from diverse backgrounds, particularly in terms of their hometown, university majors, and the types of schools they graduated from. 50% of the students had an experience of *ronin*; that is, they failed the exam the year they graduated from high school and studied another year to enter the university. 16 students out of 22 studied at an extracurricular institution called *yobiko* to prepare for the exam. Further details about their backgrounds are provided in Table 1.

ICU is a highly prestigious private university, and extremely competitive to enter. Also, the university has a reputation for its emphasis on English education. All the student interviewees were volunteers who were asked to cooperate with the research through advertisement, so no one was forced to participate.

#### **3.2 Interview methods**

According to Oppenheim (1992), there are two types of interview commonly used in social research, 'standardized' and 'exploratory.' The former type is characterised by its 'equivalence of stimulus'; that is, it is assumed that "every respondent has been asked the same questions, with the same meaning, in the same words, same intonation, same sequence, in the same setting, and so on" (1992: 67). The equivalent terms for the exploratory interview, on the other hand, are 'depth interview' and 'free-style interview.' As these terms indicate, the purpose of this type of interview is heuristic in that it is intended to "develop ideas and research hypotheses rather than

to gather facts and statistics" (1992: 67). Thus, the job of the "depth-interview" is not that of data collection but ideas collection. The type of interview employed for the present part of the research was the exploratory interview, since the purpose was heuristic in the sense that it was intended to make explicit the problems identified in the literature review.

**Table 1:**  
**Background of interviewees**

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Major	High School	Ronin	Yobiko	Exams		
							1	2	3
A	19	Male	H	Private	No	Yes	<u>ICU</u>	Toritsu	<u>Rikkyo</u>
B	19	Male	IS	Public	No	No	Tokyo	<u>ICU</u>	
C	19	Male	SS	Private	No	No	Tokyo	<u>ICU</u>	
D	20	Male	IS	Public	Yes	Yes	Tokyo	<u>ICU</u>	
E	20	Female	IS	Private	Yes	Yes	Gaigo	<u>ICU</u>	
F	20	Male	NS	Private	Yes	Yes	Tohoku	Osaka	<u>ICU</u>
G	18	Male	SS	Public	No	Yes	<u>ICU</u>	<u>Aoyama</u>	<u>Hosei</u>
H	19	Female	L	Public	No	No	Gaigo	<u>ICU</u>	
I	22	Female	NS	Private	Yes	Yes	Hokkaido	<u>ICU</u>	
J	19	Female	H	Public	No	No	Hokkaido	<u>ICU</u>	<u>Rikkyo</u>
K	20	Male	H	Public	Yes	Yes	Tsukuba	<u>Waseda</u>	<u>Meiji</u>
L	20	Male	SS	Public	Yes	Yes	<u>ICU</u>	<u>Waseda</u>	<u>Rikkyo</u>
M	19	Female	L	Private	No	Yes	<u>Sophia</u>	<u>ICU</u>	Gaigo
N	19	Male	L	Private	Yes	Yes	<u>Sophia</u>	<u>ICU</u>	Gaigo
O	20	Female	H	Public	Yes	Yes	<u>ICU</u>	<u>Waseda</u>	Tokyo
P	19	Female	IS	Public	No	No	<u>ICU</u>	<u>Tsudajuku</u>	
Q	19	Female	H	Private	No	Yes	<u>ICU</u>	<u>Doshisha</u>	<u>Sophia</u>
R	20	Male	NS	Private	Yes	Yes	<u>Jikei</u>	Fukushima	<u>Nichidai</u>
S	20	Female	L	Private	Yes	Yes	<u>ICU</u>		
T	18	Female	H	Public	No	No	<u>ICU</u>	<u>Rikkyo</u>	
U	18	Female	IS	Private	No	Yes	<u>ICU</u>	Gaigo	<u>Sophia</u>
V	20	Male	IS	Private	Yes	Yes	<u>ICU</u>		

Notes: H = Humanities; IS = International Studies; L = Languages; NS = Natural Sciences; SS = Social Sciences. School = the high school the students graduated from. Ronin = student who, having failed a university entrance exam of the graduation year, prepared for another year. Yobiko = private institutions for preparing students for entering in a higher education. Exams = the university exams the student had taken. The private universities are underlined. 1 = first choice; 2 = second choice; 3 = third choice

The procedure of the interview was as follows:

- 1) An instruction was given:

“I am interested in your experience of preparing for the entrance examinations. How are you studying for them? What are you studying? etc. All the information will be kept confidential. Please be honest with me. Do not just repeat what people are talking about. I just want to know your own experience, and what you think about it.”

2) Background information of the participant was elicited.

3) The core questions were asked.

The interview was conducted at my office of ICU. All the interviews were administered in Japanese, the first language of both the interviewer and the interviewee. Each session was audiotaped, and also the main points were written in English during each session. The data were summarised within the day when each interview was conducted.

### **3.3 Data collection and analysis procedures**

The interview with university students was conducted during the period of December 8th, 1992 to February 26th, 1993, almost one year after they had taken the entrance exam. At the beginning of each session, the demographic information of each participant was gathered, the results of which have already been provided above. The following were the types of background information collected:

- Demographic information
  - 1) His/her university major
  - 2) High schools he/she graduated from
  - 3) The university exam/s he/she took other than that of ICU
  - 4) Yobiko he/she went to, if any
  - 5) Ronin or not

Core part of the interview questions consisted of the following, which were formulated based upon the review of public opinions.

- Core questions
  - 1) Interview question 1: Did you study specifically for the entrance exam?
    - Why or why not?
    - If yes, how did you study?
    - If yes, what materials did you use?
    - If yes, which sections of the exams and which skills did you place the greatest emphasis on?

- 2) Interview question 2: Do you think if the exam were to change, then the teaching and learning would change? If yes, in what way do you think it would change?
- 3) Interview question 3: Did you try to develop aural/oral English skills when preparing for the entrance exam? Why or why not?
- 4) Interview question 4: Did you like to study English for the entrance exam? Why or why not?
- 5) Interview question 5: Do you feel the preparatory study for the exam was useful for improving the ability to use English for communication?

During the interview these questions were used as a cue for eliciting information, but interviews were in fact open-ended, in the sense that other 'unplanned' questions came up during the interview.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

The data were analysed by the following procedure, which was adapted from Hitchcock and Hughes (1989: 97-107).

- 1) Familiarisation with the transcript: I read the summary again and again, and familiarised myself with the data. A consecutive number was given to each sentence for the purpose of future reference.
- 2) Description and analysis: The main ideas of each sentence were extracted, and rewritten in propositional forms.
- 3) Isolating general units of meaning: Commonalties were identified among the items gathered at step 2.
- 4) Relating general units of meaning to the research focus: The items were related to the present focus. The important claims were circled in red.
- 5) Extracting patterns and themes: After analysing the data, the items were classified into several categories.

The procedure that is recommended by Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) for the analysis includes 'validation' as a final step, and validity checks can be achieved typically through 'triangulation' of several research methods. However, this requirement could be relaxed for the present purpose of generating hypotheses.

### **3.5 Results**

Among various findings, only those relating to motivation are reported below.

1) The exam seems to influence some students, but not other students.

Evidence

- There were several students, who reported that they were taught by grammar-translation at high schools, but did not care about how to translate when they were studying for the exam. The exam of their first choice university did not include translation.
- There were a few students, who reported being interested in speed reading, reading phrase by phrase without translation, which they learned at yobiko. However, their target university exams included translation questions.
- Some students reported that their high school teachers had mentioned various test-taking techniques, but they were not interested in the techniques. Other students claimed that it is important to learn to use test-taking techniques to pass the exams. Some of the students who belonged to the latter group even went so far as to claim that the biggest difference between the learning of English for communication and for the exams lies in that the latter requires the techniques while the former does not.

However, there were also general tendencies.

2) Among several university exams the students took, the one which was more important to them seems to have a greater impact than the one which was less important.

Evidence

- The students claimed that they had prepared with a greater emphasis on the exam of their first choice university than their second choice or below. There were several students who even claimed that they had not studied for their third choice at all.
- Those who took national university exams placed their primary focus on preparing for the second-stage exam rather than for the first stage exam (i.e., National Center for University Entrance Exam)<sup>1</sup>, which they claimed included only basics, and the weight of English is quite low (i.e., 20 points out of a total of 110).
- If their first choice included a section of translation of structurally complex sentences, the students tended to study for it, even though the second choice did not include it.
- If their first choice included translation of Japanese into English as a writing test, then they tended to study writing by translation, even though the second choice did not include it.
- If their first choice included summary of a passage, then the students tended to



prepare for it, even though the second choice did not include it.

- 3) The sections of the exam which students perceive to be more difficult, thus, more discriminatively powerful, may have a greater impact than those which are not.

#### Evidence

- The students who had taken the exam of Sophia University said that they had studied for the context-embedded grammar questions, which seemed to them to be discriminative.
  - The students who had taken the exam of the University of Tokyo said that they had studied with their primary emphasis on understanding grammatically complex sentences, because they had perceived them to be the most difficult and thus discriminative.
  - The students who had taken the exam of the University of Tokyo said that they had done a large amount of summary exercises of a passage, because they had regarded the section as difficult, thus, discriminatively powerful.
- 4) The sections of the exam which the students perceive to be less difficult, thus, less discriminatively powerful, may have a smaller impact.

#### Evidence

- The students who had taken the exams of national universities claimed that they had not seriously prepared for the listening section, because they felt the listening tests were very easy for them.
  - The exam of the University of Tokyo included the gap-filling of grammatical items, but students said that they had not placed emphasis on these questions, because they thought that all the examinees would obtain high scores in the questions; hence, discriminatively less powerful.
  - The exam of Tokyo Universities of Foreign Studies included sections of idioms. But the students who had taken the exam of this university said that they had not studied for them seriously, because they thought that those questions were very easy.
  - There was one student who said that she had studied seriously for the NCUEE. The exam included a paper test of pronunciation, but she said that she had not studied for this particular section, because she thought that the section would be easy for all the examinees.
- 5) If the test section is perceived to be too difficult, then it may discourage students; thus, the section may not cause washback.

## Evidence

- Nearly one fourth of the students claimed that they had not prepared for the ICU listening test, because they perceived it to be too difficult.

### 3.6 Interpretation of the results

In summary the present interviews produced the following tentative conclusions regarding the relationship between learners' perception of and attitudes towards the exams, and their motivation.

1. An exam which is more important to a student will have a greater motivating power than an exam which is seen as less important.
2. The sections of the exam which are perceived by the students to be more difficult, thus, more discriminatively powerful will motivate them more than those which are not.
3. The sections which are perceived to be less difficult, thus, less discriminatively powerful, will have a smaller motivating power.
4. If the test section is perceived to be too difficult, then it will discourage students; thus, washback will not be produced.

These hypotheses for the future research suggest that it is not the test alone that causes washback to the learner, but rather washback is caused by interplay between the test and the test-taker in a complex manner. It should further be noted that what may count is not the objective difficulty of the test, but the test-takers' subjective perception of its difficulty that may potentially cause washback. This implies that in order to motivate the learner by the test, it is important to construct a test task that is a little more challenging but not too challenging to the test-taker (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992).

What the ideal test task should look like is yet to be explored, but it could at least be suggested that the quality of test to this end may not be the type of reliability and validity of the psychometric tradition, but a type of "face validity," which is defined as the "degree to which a test appears to measure the knowledge or abilities it claims to measure, as judged by an untrained observer ..." (Davies et al., 1999). Face validity has been rather neglected in the psychometric tradition, but in education it is important that the test appears to be meaningful to the test taker (Bachman, 1990). From test writers' point of view, it is important in the future research to identify what kinds of test could be said to have face validity from test-takers' point of view.

#### 4. Conclusion

The present paper has reported the results of the students' interviews which were conducted in an attempt to examine if the Japanese university entrance examination really motivates students. The results indicated that the exam alone would not motivate test-takers, but rather the degree of difficulty or easiness which each test-taker perceives each test or test section to have mediates the process of the type of positive washback being produced. It has also been emphasised that the future research needs to identify a type of test which appeals to test-takers to motivate them.

#### Note

1. National universities employ the two-stage screening system, where applicants are to take the first-stage exam constructed by the National Center for University Entrance Exam (NCUEE), and proceed to the second-stage exam produced by each individual university.

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