The Need for Greater Communication and Coordination in Japan's English Language Curriculum

日本の英語教育カリキュラムにおける情報交換と高大連携の必要性

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Abstract

This paper examines the Japanese Ministry of Education's policy of "cultivating Japanese with English abilities" against the background of the continuing "barrier" of entrance examinations. We present the results of a survey administered to third year high school and first year university students, and pinpoint the major difficulties and problems they encounter while preparing for university study. These results show that the present situation is far from meeting the needs and wishes of the students, and that greater communication between high schools and universities is needed in order to help students progress more smoothly into university, meet the goals of the Ministry and their individual needs.

Keywords: Education, English, High school, University Entrance Exams, Communication, Government Policy

概　要

この論文では、大学入試という「障壁」を背景に文部科学省の「英語が使える日本人の育成」政策を検証する。高校3年生及び大学1年生を対象に実施したアンケートの結果を紹介し、大学入試の勉強で遭遇する諸問題や困難を明らかにする。これらの結果から、現状のままでは学生のニーズに合う教育の実現は遥かに遠いということが分かる。高校生の進学がよりスムーズに、そして文科省の目指すゴールに近づけるよう、より強い高大連携と情報交換の必要性を訴える。

キーワード：教育、英語、高校、大学入試、コミュニケーション、政策

Introduction

Japan has long been criticized for the inability of its people to speak English and become a true leader in the international community (Lehmann, 2002, Lehmann, 2003, Japan Echo, 1999, Kwan, 2002). To remedy this problem, the then Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revealed a strategy in July, 2002 to "cultivate Japanese with English abilities". The main focus of this strategy was to introduce a comprehensive English course into the junior high and high school curriculums, integrating the four skills with an emphasis on practical communicative abilities (MEXT, 2002). While a few changes have been made to the curriculum, they appear to have been more cosmetic than concrete and are unlikely to fulfill the goal of producing Japanese with English abilities.

In the current educational environment, English examinations for university entrance are generally based on reading and grammar-understanding. The pressure on students to perform well in these respects is such that there is little opportunity – or even necessity – to fulfill the government's aims of providing a four-skill integrated course of study.

We argue that, at present, it is extremely difficult for high school students to become "Japanese with English abilities" as they are preoccupied with the burden of acquiring skills in preparation for their university entrance exams. Furthermore, the gap between required skills for examinations and skills vital to undertake a university English course is so great that many students feel their high school English studies are of no use other than exam training.

In this paper we will present the results of a survey administered to third year high school and first year university students, the goals the government would like to see achieved, and pinpoint the major difficulties and problems they encounter while preparing for university study. These results show that the present situation is far from meeting the needs and wishes of the students, and that greater communication between high schools and universities is needed in order to help students progress more smoothly into university.

The Survey

Questionnaires (see Appendix) consisting of 30 questions for high school and 26 questions for university were completed by 131 third year private high school students and 114 private university students. As the students attend the same high school and university, there is no random sample and we cannot claim the results represent all students throughout the country, but we believe the high number of students surveyed provides sufficient preliminary data to highlight the problems most students face in preparing for university English study and exams.

While primarily a quantitative survey comprising of mainly multi-choice questions, open-ended questions were also included to enable us to make a qualitative assessment of the responses. Students were provided with a Japanese translation of the questionnaire to avoid a misunderstanding of the questions due to a lack of language ability.

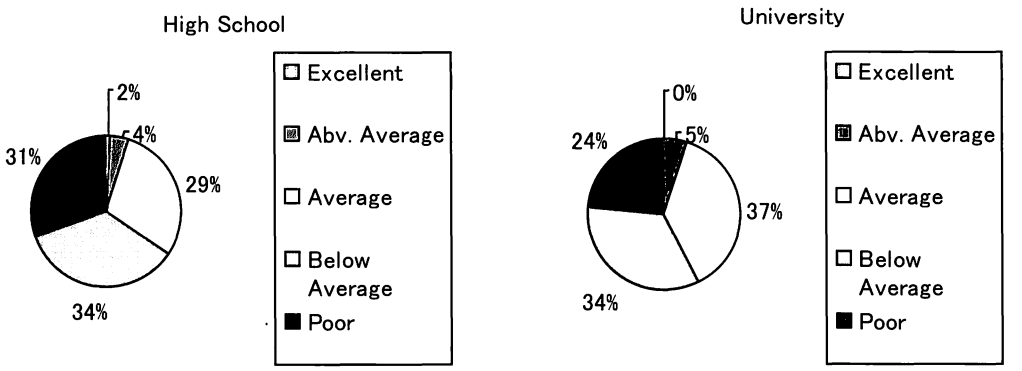
Results and Discussion

Language Skills

The first question posed to the students was a self-assessment of their language abilities. A startling

95 percent of both university and high school students rated their own abilities as only average or below, with more than a quarter saying their language skills were poor. This was an extremely surprising result considering that all students have studied English from junior high school for a minimum of six years. Although these responses can perhaps be partly put down to a cultural tendency towards modesty, factors such as the education system, motivation and effort cannot be discarded. Further questioning will be required in the future to determine these factors, as well as to what standard of English individual students believe is necessary to have "average" skills.

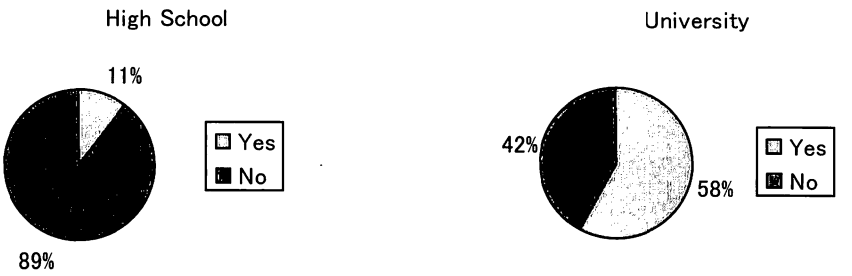
FIGURE 1: **How would you describe your present English ability?**



The Government's Strategy

Because students are going to be the main players in the strategy to cultivate Japanese with English abilities, we expected that the majority of those surveyed would be aware of the strategy. Unfortunately, as Figure 2 shows, this proved not to be the case with almost 90 percent of high school students having no prior knowledge of the plan. While a higher percentage (58%) of university students had heard of the plan, this is still a low figure for a policy in which the government has placed such a priority.

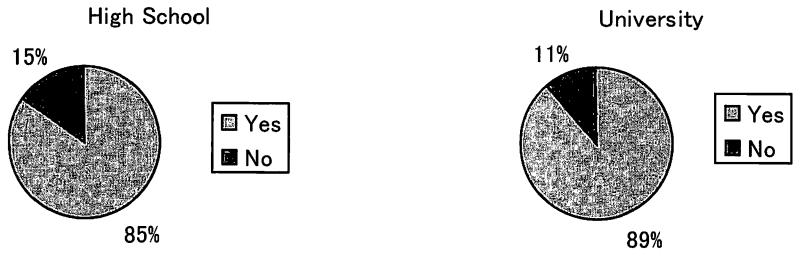
FIGURE 2: **Are you aware of the government's plan to "cultivate Japanese with English abilities"?**



When asked what they thought a "Japanese with English abilities" actually meant, replies such as "cool person", "genius", and "awesome" were provided, suggesting that those with English speaking skills are held in high esteem. But more constructively, many responses claimed that such people were those "who can communicate with foreigners", "English speaking Japanese" and "people who can conduct themselves in English in international situations". On an even more promising note, a very large number (Figure 3) of both high school and university students believe it is necessary to produce Japanese with English abilities, with most mentioning the need for Japan to join the international community and be more capable to com-

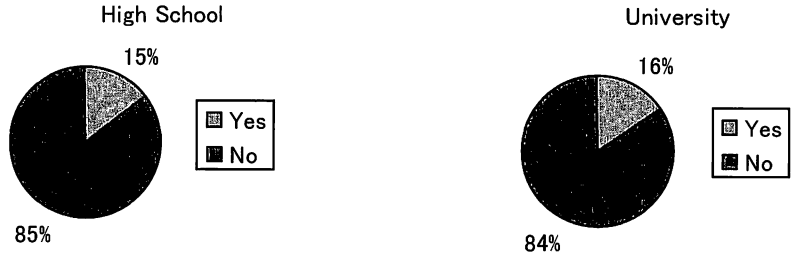
municate in what is fast becoming the world's common language.

FIGURE 3: **Do you think it is necessary to produce Japanese with English abilities?**



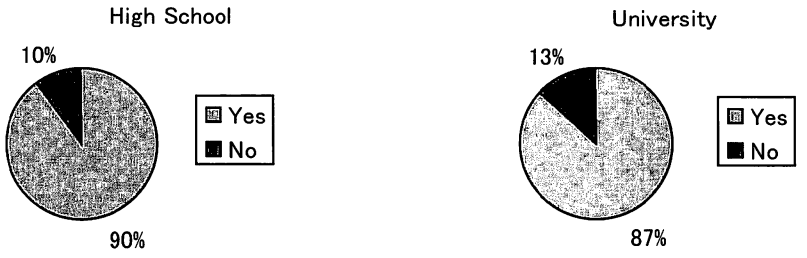
Regrettably, as can be seen in Figure 4, the current English education climate leaves students feeling that they, themselves, cannot become Japanese with English abilities. While this could be attributed to a lack of self confidence, comments provided suggest otherwise. Lack of motivation was a recurring theme here, but many also cited the lack of practical spoken English alongside the propensity of high schools to focus on university exam English, as major causes for this situation. The over reliance on grammar and reading in university examinations needs to be abandoned here if high schools are to be given the opportunity to provide an environment where students can acquire practical language skills.

FIGURE 4: **Do you feel you are achieving this aim in the current English education climate?**



To appease those who mention a lack of motivation, Clark (2006) questions the need for English as a compulsory subject from junior high school. He recommends that English be eliminated from the school curriculum leaving "serious" language education in the hands of universities where "motivation is guaranteed out of interest or for their future careers". We disagree that such drastic action as removing English from the curriculum should be taken, and this also appears to be the preference of over 85 percent of students who stated that English should remain a compulsory subject in high school (Figure 5). Although they have little confidence in their abilities, these students believe that even knowledge of the bare basics will be of some use to them in the future. While Clark's proposal may provide a partial solution to Japan's lack of English skills by providing motivation and enhancing education at university, we suggest that a realignment of the high school curriculum is a better option if the government is to produce a larger population of English speakers.

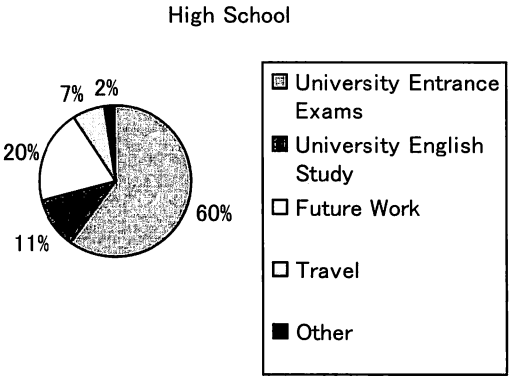
FIGURE 5: **Do you think English should be a compulsory subject at high school?**



High School and University English

The first question we posed to high school students was where they think their English study will be most useful. As expected, more than half implied that their studies would reap the most benefits for them in university entrance exams. Simply placing foreign language study in the same category as subjects such as mathematics and science defies the whole purpose of learning language for communication. This is a situation which needs to be rectified promptly to accommodate those with communicative aspirations.

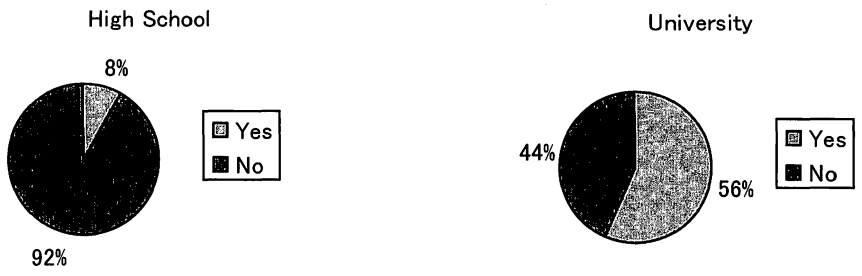
FIGURE 6: **How do you think your high school English studies will be most useful?**



Despite the fact that high school students believe that their English studies will set them up for their exams, 92 percent are not confident or satisfied with their preparations for these tests. High levels of grammar difficulty, worries about long passage sections, and quantity of vocabulary to learn were mentioned as main causes for this lack of confidence.

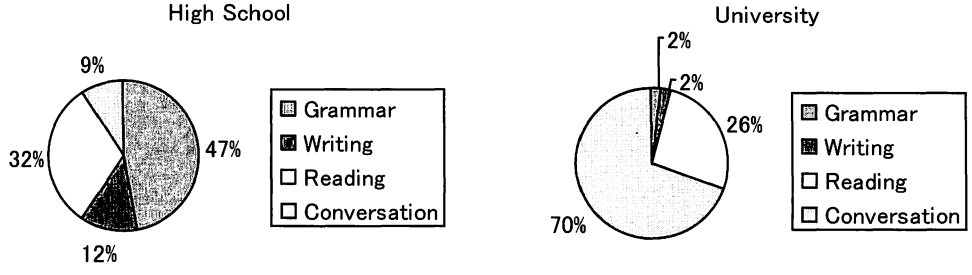
On the other hand, just over half of the university students questioned were satisfied with their preparation for the English entrance examination. This outcome could be due to hindsight though, with students obviously considering entry into university a satisfactory result. The contrasting figures require further research into high school students and how their confidence levels change closer to exam time and post-examination.

FIGURE 7: **Are (were) you satisfied and confident with your preparation for university English exams?**



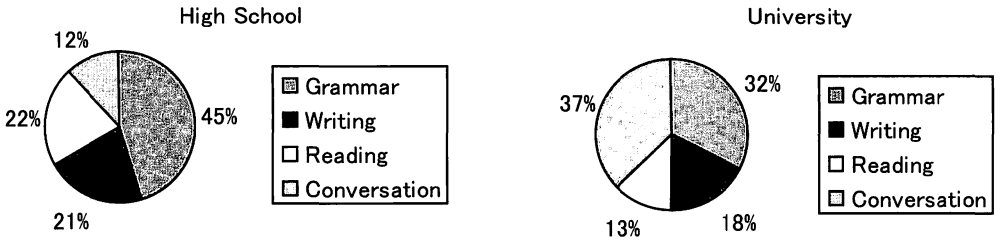
If we look at the statistics for the area of English in which students feel their respective institution focuses the curriculum, eight in ten high school students maintain that grammar and reading are the preferred skills at school. Conversely, at university, a similar percentage stated conversation as taking up the bulk of their English studies (Figure 8). These figures show that there is a large gap between what students study at high school and what they are expected to learn at university. Another problem which arises here is that if students are required to participate in communicative learning at university, how will they be prepared to tackle this in the current English education environment? With little or no conversation section in many English entrance exams, many high schools tend to provide only one hour of conversation per week. This is an hour only the most motivated of students take seriously due to the insignificance this area of English has on university entrance exams.

FIGURE 8: **Which area of English does your school curriculum MAINLY focus on now?**



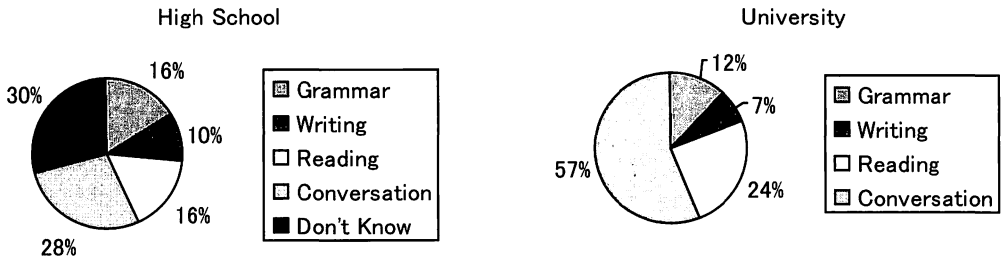
An interesting finding from the questionnaire results was regarding the area of English students found most difficult at high school. While almost half of all interviewed third year high school students stated grammar to be the most difficult, of the first year university students, the highest proportion (38%) said it to be conversation. Even so, one third of university students also had the opinion that grammar was the most difficult at high school. This discrepancy between the two surveys could come down to any of a number of factors including a change in content of the curriculum between the two years. We hold that the anomaly here is due more to the time (ten months) since the university students participated in secondary education, and therefore not being able to clearly recall, leading to the current focus of their university studies influencing their replies. As the scope of this survey was also limited to a single high school, the results are only relevant to this school and a further study with random samples is necessary to provide greater insight into this question.

FIGURE 9: **Which area do (did) you find most difficult at high school?**



When asked to provide more information into what area of English they thought would be most difficult at university (Figure 10), the results were varied, with the highest response being conversation at 27 percent. Conversation was also the highest response for current difficulty among university students, although the figure was more than double that of high school students. A notable figure in the high school data was the 30 percent who were unsure of where the difficulties will lie after entering university, pointing to the uncertainty that high school students face in regards to the content of the English curriculum at university.

FIGURE 10: **Which area of English do you think will be (do you find) the most difficult at university?**



A major factor for this could come down to the fact that the students have received little or no course information for university English study. This assumption is backed up by the fact that 85 percent of high school students (Figure 11) surveyed, claim that they haven't received any information regarding course content and required skills or ability for undertaking English study at university. Of the few who said that they had received such information, the sources varied from teachers at school to the Internet and family members. On top of this, less than 30 percent of university students were satisfied with the amount of information they received prior to entering university (Figure 12).

We are of the belief that it is in the best interests of the students to be provided in advance, with as much information as possible to prepare for the next stage of their education. Concerted efforts must be made, by both secondary and tertiary institutions, in exchanging information regarding courses and content to aid students in a smooth transition into university (while at the same time recognizing the vast discrepancies amongst universities).

FIGURE 11: **Have you received information regarding course content and required skills / ability for university English study?**

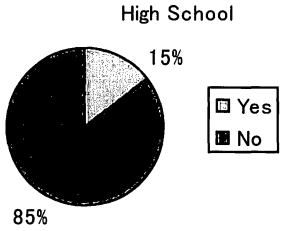
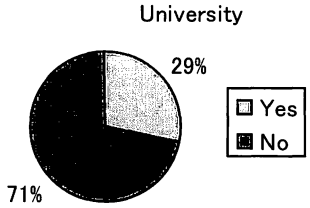
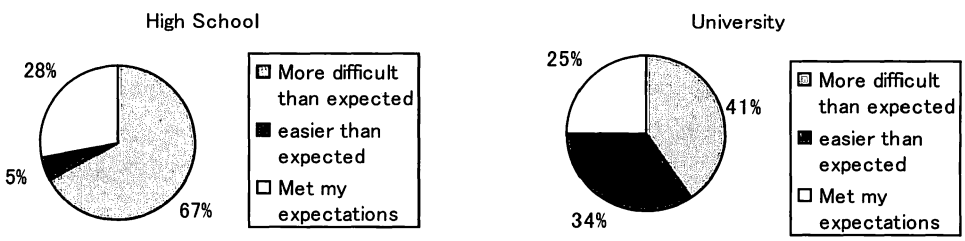


FIGURE 12: **Were you satisfied with the amount of information you received at high school regarding university English study?**



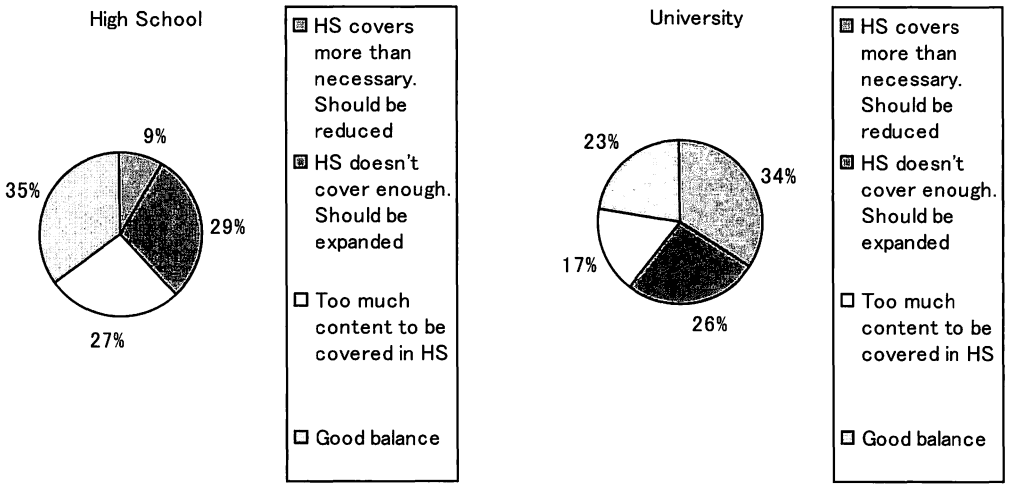
When asked to comment on the content of university English entrance exams (mock and past exams included) and the relationship to high school English courses, responses showed that both (exams and high school courses) are in need of restructuring to meet the needs and expectations of the students. Of current third year high school students, two thirds found that past university mock and real exams turned out to be more difficult than expected, with only five percent and 28 percent, respectively, saying the exams were either easier than expected or met their expectations (Figure 13). On the other hand, of the university students, 40 percent found these tests too difficult and one third too easy. A variety of reasons may explain the gap in responses from the two institutions. Individual factors, such as the level of each student's expectations and language ability are to name but a few. Furthermore, the same tests from the same university would have to be taken by all students to provide more accurate figures. Nonetheless, the exceedingly high number of students who claimed the tests were more difficult than expected, provide a worrisome situation that on top of the test anxiety students already possess, they also face the burdensome task of sitting English examinations set at a level of difficulty beyond the capabilities of the average student.

FIGURE 13: **How would you describe past university exams / mock exams you have taken?**



In figure 14, the students gave mixed responses into how they view the relationship between the English entrance exam and the high school English curriculum. While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the curriculum and test are at conflict, with less than one third of all students surveyed replying that there was a good balance between the two, it can be said that high schools and universities must make more of an effort to exchange information and advice in order to provide a curriculum which can comfortably cover the required content for the exam and vice-versa. With the highest percentage of students saying that they want either a reduction in the content covered or more time to cover required structures, it is clear that high school students and teachers are struggling to get through the material which is deemed necessary to prepare students for university exams.

FIGURE 14: **How would you describe the relationship between university exams and the high school English curriculum?**



While not demanding a dumbing-down of course content in the high school curriculum, we do question the necessity of the current quantity of vocabulary and grammatical structures students are forced to input, with no practical environment for output. When students are at a pain to get through the required workload with minimum understanding, we propose that the government reduce the number of required grammatical structures to be covered in each school year, resulting in more time for teachers to provide detailed instruction, rather than the current situation of focusing almost entirely on exam preparation. A reduction in content would also result in more opportunities for high schools to introduce extra practical conversation-focused lessons, leading to more Japanese with English abilities. The run-off effect here would also carry on to universities, providing students with more conversational ability to use as a springboard in their tertiary studies. Unless the barrier of having to prepare for overly difficult exams is removed, the government's stated goal may never be obtained.

So what do students expect to achieve after completing their English studies? A majority of high school students would be satisfied if they had the ability to either hold a simple conversation with a foreigner or speak and comprehend everyday English. A similar result was noticeable in the responses when asked of their expectations after university study but with an increase in those hoping to use everyday English as opposed to just holding a simple conversation, figures which were also comparable to those of the university students. With the exception of the 28 percent who hope to acquire level 2 of the Eiken test

at the end of high school, surprisingly there appears to be little interest in gaining official certification of their English abilities. Few students also expect to reach a level where they can read an English newspaper, bringing again, into question the propensity to include difficult, long passages in university entrance exams, when it is obvious that speaking and practicality is where students' interests lie.

FIGURE 15: **What standard of English do you expect to have at the end of high school?**

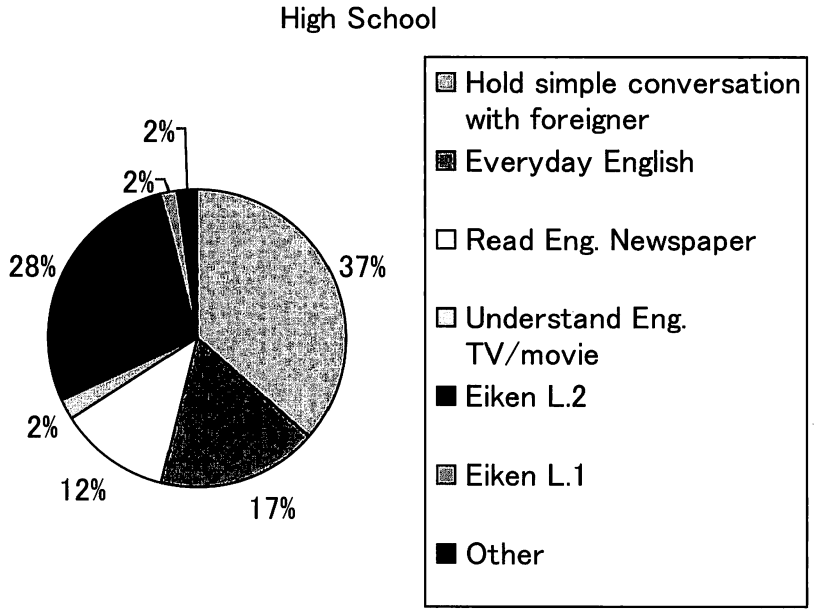
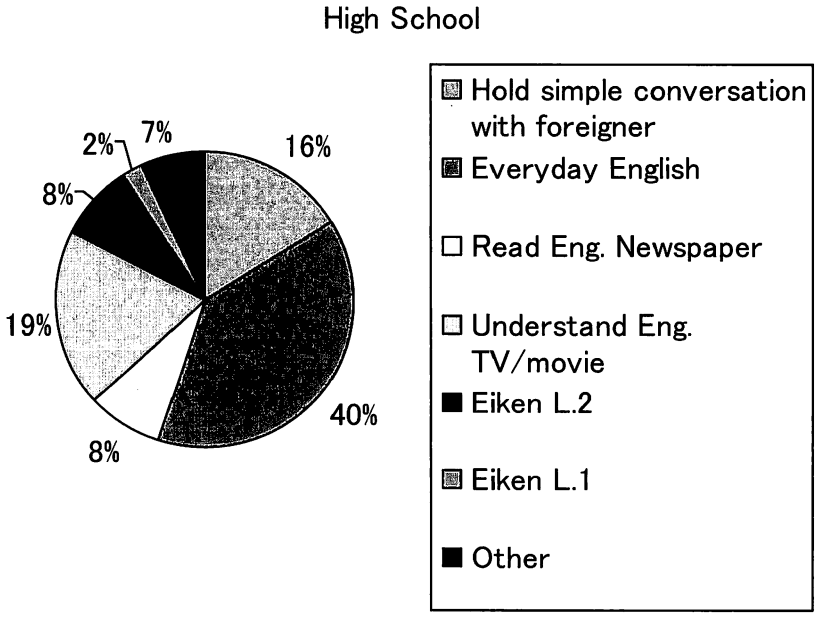
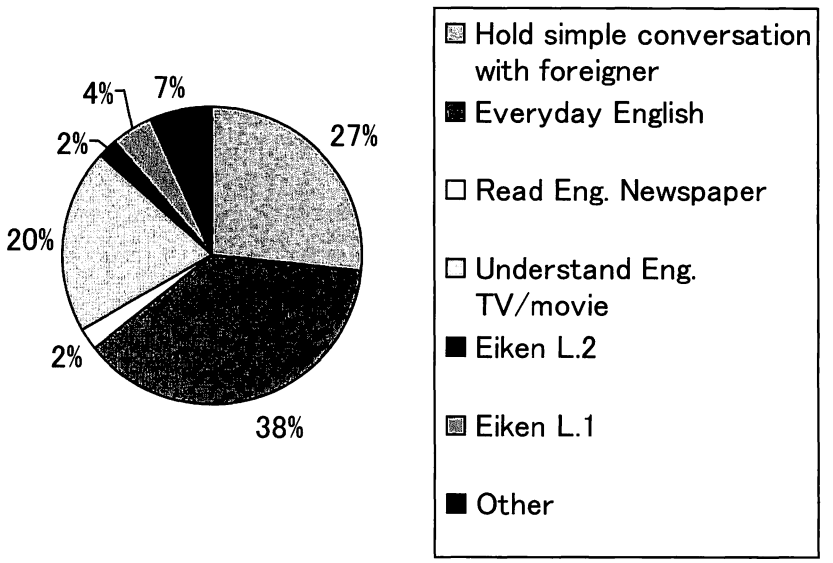


FIGURE 16: **What standard of English do you expect to have at the end of university?**



University



Finally, we asked the students how they would change the high school curriculum if they had the chance. Being an open-ended question, we were given a plethora of areas in which students believe the current curriculum should be changed or improved. But among these suggestions, the most salient proposition was the desire to have more conversation lessons and opportunities to use practical English. Although there were a few dissenting voices calling for English to be totally dropped from the curriculum, there were many more voices actually calling for an increase in the number of English lessons at high school. A surprising, but pleasing result for those involved in English education.

One of the main revelations from this survey is that it is time English became separated from the "content" subjects and a distinction made between the different types of knowledge they require (Lodge, 2005). To enable this, we implore a change to the existing format of university English entrance exams and the high school curriculum. This must be enacted at a faster pace than at present. It has been six years since the government unveiled its plan to cultivate English speaking Japanese and little progress has been made. More practical, spoken English must be brought into the curriculum. As this is also a wish of those directly concerned, namely the students, it will contribute to a rise in motivation levels, and, in turn, better results in English examinations. While it may be impossible for universities to introduce a spoken component into their entrance exams, more communication and information sharing with high schools can lead to an improvement to this situation. Introducing a spoken language requirement at high school, with results available for universities to use, for example, is one avenue which should be explored. Whatever course of action is taken, the government should take a more central role, providing clearer guidelines for test and course makers alike, and promoting more interaction between the institutions.

Conclusion

One of the more interesting finds in this study was that a majority of students, while being unaware of the government's strategy to cultivate Japanese with English abilities, believe it is an aim worth striving for, as English is generally considered the global lingua franca, and therefore necessary if Japan is to play a

leading role internationally. Unfortunately, an extremely large number of those surveyed indicated that they personally don't believe they have what it takes to become a "Japanese with English abilities", a statistic also reflected by the fact that more than nine out of ten students rated their English ability as only average or below. When pressured further into why they lack confidence in achieving this goal, a recurring theme among the responses was the lack of practical English offered in high school, in part, due to the focus of preparation for university entrance exams.

Although the government envisioned a new course of study at junior and senior high school level, targeting the comprehensive integration of the four skills (MEXT, 2002), student responses reveal that the status quo remains, with approximately 80 percent of students feeling that the focus of high school English lies in reading and grammar, the skills which also happen to be the main focus of university entrance examinations.

Coincidentally, these are also the skills in which two-thirds of the interviewed high school students claimed to find the most difficult, a figure, which could be used to explain the overwhelming 92 percent who said they have no confidence heading into their English entrance exams. This is further evidenced by the two-thirds of students who believe more effort should be put into creating a better balance between the high school English curriculum and university entrance exams. In addition to this, responses showed that high school students tend to believe there will be a substantial increase in the number of conversation lessons and opportunities to learn practical English at university. This points towards a considerable gap between the skills students need to pass the exams and the skills required for university study. A more disturbing factor here is that the students receive very little information regarding the skills which are actually required to successfully undertake a university English course, with 85 percent of those surveyed claiming to have received no such information. Of those who had received information, the sources were varied, ranging from the internet to school teachers and family members. Even here, there were comments suggesting that the information was less than useful.

We firmly believe that more information should be provided to the students regarding what level of language ability is expected of them on entry to university, as well as a thorough outline of what lies ahead in their English studies. While further research is needed to gather actual data from high school guidance departments, student data suggests that it is essential for high schools and universities to increase communication and exchange up-to-date information on their respective courses. Doing so will enable the English departments to fine tune their curriculums to enable a smoother transition from secondary to tertiary education. Due to the sheer number of universities and high schools throughout the country, it is virtually impossible to physically distribute such information between all facilities or organize face-to-face meetings, but in this age of ever-advancing technology, more effort should be made to make detailed course and required skills information available for educators and students alike to access.

While there are an increasing number of private universities opening or acquiring affiliated junior and senior high schools, possibly enhancing information exchanges between the levels, a worrying aspect of these associations is that they appear to be more for business-related reasons than education-based ones. This is a seemingly detrimental trend to student learning. Instead of cultivating their own backyards, it is imperative that universities aid high schools in cultivating theirs as well (McLauchlan, 2006).

Feedback showed that not only do students expect increased opportunities to learn and practice spoken English at university, but if they had the chance to change the current high school curriculum, it would be to introduce more practical spoken English lessons. These wishes of the high students also reflect the government's plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities where integration of the four skills

is desired. Although not the sole cause, university entrance exams are one of the main culprits in impeding progress towards a revised curriculum capable of sustaining the government's aims. Hashinaga (2005) has shown that study styles are controlled by the content of tests. The main aim for teachers is to get students through these tests, and with grammar and reading being the major focus of these tests, the preferred options for lessons is the grammar-translation method, in turn leaving students with little competence in communicative language. In the current climate, private universities are creating (and, in some cases, outsourcing to private companies) their own entrance examinations. However, the level of difficulty varies widely from university to university, leaving students and high school teachers alike, in a conundrum as to where exactly to focus their attention in lessons.

We believe it would be in the best interests of all parties concerned, if private universities made more use of the government monitored "Center-Shiken" for enrolment purposes. Each university would then be able to judge students on a national basis, and set the pass mark for their university to suit their enrolment needs, thus selecting the desired pool of new entrants. If private universities are adamant that they produce their own exams, the government should be setting more thorough guidelines in regards to content and parameters of such tests. This alone will create a less stressful environment for the students than the "lottery" that is currently in place.

One final area we would like to make recommendations for is teachers. While the scope of our research was limited to students, and a follow-up survey with teachers is required to collect more detailed data, student statements regarding teacher roles and abilities are worth commenting on. Although we do not question teacher knowledge of the English language or their abilities to teach, it has been documented (Browne & Wada, 1998) that teachers in Japan lack formal training, especially in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. As until recently most Japanese-native English language teachers have majored in only English literature (Browne & Wada, 1998), they require TESOL/TEFL training in the future when (or if) the government eventually introduces more practical English into the high school curriculum. This situation provides a prime opportunity for universities to offer extra training in TESOL/TEFL to current English teachers, and introduce more courses offering TESOL/TEFL qualifications for teachers of the future, while at the same time improving communication between high schools and universities.

In summary, if the government is truly serious in "cultivating Japanese with English abilities", then it must make more concrete efforts than the snail-paced progress witnessed from the announcement of its vague guidelines for the strategy more than 6 years ago. Rather than lowering the starting age of English education, we recommend that high schools and universities take the lead and restructure their curriculum and entrance exams to suit the necessities of the students. More contact between institutions will provide students with vital information of what is required of them post-examination. Furthermore, cutting back on the quantity required to be covered for the examinations will not only relax the burden for students, but also give teachers more time to provide detailed, quality instruction of the English language. A more balanced curriculum covering the four skills should be introduced, as this will provide the students with extrinsic motivation to learn the language for communication as opposed to the current tendency for test-only initiated intrinsic motivation they now possess. It is essential that the government steps in here and provides both high schools and universities with concrete aims for test-making, so tests can be produced to cover all skills. If this can be accomplished, then the benefits all-round will be enormous.

While the final responsibility lies with the central government, we firmly believe that secondary and tertiary institutions should make the first move by exchanging information across the board and making concerted efforts to help students believe that, they too, can become "Japanese with English abilities".

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Appendix

高校と大学英語のカリキュラムについてのアンケート　（日本語での回答は **OK**）

1. What sex are you?

A Male　　B Female

2. How long have you studied English? _____

3. Have you ever studied abroad?　　Yes / No

If yes, where? _____　For how long? _____

4. How would you describe your present English ability?　自分の英語力を評価してください。

A Excellent　優れている

B Above average　良い

C Average　普通

D Below average　あまり良くない

E Poor　劣っている

5. Are you aware of the Japanese government's plan to "cultivate Japanese with English abilities"?

政府の「英語が使える日本人の育成」計画をご存知ですか。

A yes　　B no

6. What do you think "Japanese with English abilities" means?

_____

7. Do you think it is necessary to produce "Japanese with English abilities"?

「英語が使える日本人」を育成する必要があると思いますか。

A yes

B no

Please state why _____

8. Do you feel you are achieving (or are capable of achieving) this aim in the current English education climate?　現在の英語教育の状況から判断して、自分自身が「英語が使える日本人」になれると思いますか。

A yes　　B no

Please state why _____

9. Do you think English should be a compulsory subject (必修科目) at high school?

A yes B no

10. As a high school student, were you satisfied and confident with your preparation for university English exams?

A yes B no

Please state why _____

11. Which area of English does your university curriculum MAINLY focus on now?

A Grammar
B Writing
C Reading
D Conversation

12. Which area of English did you find the most difficult at high school?

A Grammar
B Writing
C Reading
D Conversation

13. Which area of English do you find the most difficult at university?

A Grammar
B Writing
C Reading
D Conversation

14. At high school, when did the English curriculum begin to focus on university exam preparation? (eg. Year 2, Term 2) _____

15. Did you receive any information regarding course content and required skills / ability for university English study?

A Yes B No

If you answered Yes, where (from who) did you receive this information?

_____

How useful was this information to you?

A extremely useful
B very useful
C somewhat useful
D not very useful
E not useful at all

16. What information about university English would you have liked to receive (that you didn't)?

_____

17. Were you satisfied with the amount of information you received at high school regarding university English study?

A yes B no

18. Did you attend a university demonstration English lesson (模擬授業)?

A yes B no

19. Do you think attending one did or would have helped you in preparing for English study at university?

A yes B no

20. Did your chosen university offer demonstration English lessons?

A yes B no C I don't know

21. How would you describe past university English exams / mock exams (模擬試験) you have taken?

A more difficult than expected 思ったより難しかった
B easier than expected 思ったより簡単だった
C met my expectations 思った通りだった

22. Based on those exams, to what extent do you think the high school English curriculum covered the content required to pass university entrance exams?

A adequate (十分)
B more than adequate
C inadequate (不十分)

23. Based on your experience, how would you best describe the relationship between university entrance exams and content of the high school English curriculum?

A The high school English curriculum covered more than necessary and content should be reduced.

B The high school English curriculum didn't cover enough for university exam preparation and needs to be expanded.

C University exams / preparation demanded too much content to be covered in high school. I wanted more time to fully understand structures.

D Balance between obtaining required skills and material covered was just right.

Please write your reasons_____

24. What standard of English to you expect to have at the end of university?

A Ability to hold a simple conversation with a native English speaker

B Ability to speak and understand everyday English.

C Ability to read an English newspaper

D Ability to understand a movie / TV programme in English

E Eiken Level 2

F Eiken level 1

G Other _____

25. How are the university entrance exam skills you have learnt different from the skills required for university study?

_____

26. If you could change the high school English curriculum, how would you change it?

_____

_____

_____