

# Examination and Evaluation of the English Portion of the Center *Shiken*

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## Abstract

English education is widespread in Japan, as it has become a required subject all the way from the primary elementary school system to the university level. For many students the end focus of all this studying is the English portion of the Center *Shiken* (Center Exam). A great deal has been written about both the accuracy of the Center *Shiken*'s measurement of English skills. A great deal has also been written about the purported power of the test to shape the English curriculum (washback effect), particularly at the high school level. Some of the writing is very critical, especially when the Center *Shiken*'s shaping of students' lives is observed. Some of the writing supports the Center *Shiken*'s role. These varied opinions are reviewed. Last, the rapidly changing demographic landscape of Japan's young student population may render all arguments moot, since in a future with far fewer high school students, keeping students out of many universities with the help of the Center *Shiken* may prove self-defeating. The new goal for many universities in a rapidly approaching future will be how to find ways to accept students with a much wider range of abilities while continuing to maintain academic standards, not keep them out.

Keywords: Center *Shiken*, washback, *juku*, *gakubatsu*, *hensachi*

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The status of English education in Japan is ambiguous. English is not an official language, yet it has been accorded a place of honour throughout the education system. In the junior high school and high school curriculum it is a required subject. From 2009 it was made a mandatory subject as well in the elementary school system in grades five and six, even though the majority of elementary schools had already been teaching it, in one form or another, for many years. In the university system, English, in oral communication classes and/or grammar/reading classes, is almost always a required subject in the first two years of a bachelors program, no matter what the field of study. At the heart of all this prodigious English language studying for many of the students is the English section of an examination called the *Daigaku Senbatsu Daigaku Nyushi Center Shiken* (University Candidate Selection University Admissions Center Test), or simply, the *Center Shiken* (Center Exam). This influential exam is often called a preliminary university entrance exam. Achievement on the test will tell a student if he/she is qualified to sit for the second stage entrance exams, or *Niji Shiken*, at the national and public universities. It is used as well as one of the entrance methods by many private universities. Students also use it to select a university that matches their capability. There are really several roles that the *Center Shiken* plays.

In order to fully understand the significance of the *Center Shiken* it is first necessary to examine the part it plays within the Japanese education system and society. Following this, the contents of the reading portion of the 2009 *Center Shiken* will be analyzed. Next, some concerns will be discussed. Last, the future of the test's continued relevance will be considered.

The Japanese University System: As of 2005 there were 726 universities in Japan., a rather bewildering number offering students an almost unlimited range of choices. 553 of them were private universities (2,112,291 students or about 74% of total), 86 were public/local government funded universities (124,910 students or about 4% of total) and 87 were national universities (627,850 students or about 22% of total). The total number of university students in 2005 was 2,865,051 (*Monbukagakusho* 2005). A useful visual metaphor to describe the structure of the

university system would be that of an immense pyramid, the high prestige schools at the top and the less prestigious schools forming the wide base.

At the apex of the pyramid are the 87 national universities. They are publicly financed hence tuition is low, at least half the rate of private schools. All of them possess wide respect but the core institutions in particular, such as Kyoto University and Tokyo University, which were former Imperial universities established during the Meiji period (1867-1911), have been able to both set high academic standards, establish traditions, and develop strong corporate and government links over the decades which have helped them to establish an almost legendary status in Japan. Entry into these universities, especially Tokyo or Kyoto University, is the goal of the most capable students.

The second most prestigious group is comprised of the nationally famous private universities. This group includes schools such as Waseda, Keio and Rikkyo in Tokyo and Doshisha and Ritsumeikan in Kyoto. Many in this group were also established during the Meiji period. They serve a role similar to the American Ivy League schools. Tuition is very high.

The next group in the pyramid is comprised of the 86-public/local government-funded universities. Tuition at these schools, like that of the national universities, is at least half the amount of the private universities, making them very attractive to parents, who pay the majority of their children's' education expenses. These schools also attract capable students.

Following closely behind are the regionally famous private universities that have long histories and strong, specialized programs such as language and cultural studies at Nanzan University and language studies at Nagoya University of Foreign Languages. Tuition at these schools is high.

The last and by far the largest group, forming the foundation of the pyramid, is comprised of the smaller (1,000 – 5,000 students) private universities. Some of these have long histories and many certainly offer quality programs. However, without the resources or wide curriculum choices that large universities offer, nor nation-wide fame, these universities tend to attract a much more varied

group of students. The students might have lower academic ability. Their parents might not have been able to afford *juku* (supplemental classes at private tutoring schools that many students attend to prepare for the *Center Shiken* and the separate entrance exams for the more prestigious universities) or they may not have had the resources to send their child to live and study at a university in another part of the country. The student might have some disadvantaging emotional/psychological handicap. There is also always the possibility that the students might simply have decided to choose the easiest route for entering university, any university, sometimes just to satisfy their parents' wishes. Many of the smaller private universities must strive to fill their enrollment quotas and have devised new ways in recent years for students to enter that are reasonably stress free for the students.

Japanese tend to be highly status conscious, befitting the hierarchical social structure of the culture's institutions. It should come as no surprise then that the dream of the most aspiring university applicants (or the dream of the most aspiring parents) is to study at a university in the top half of the university pyramid, particularly in the elite national universities and then the Ivy League style universities. Apart from the prestige bestowed upon a student that is fortunate enough to gain entry into one of these schools, there is the added incentive of something called the University Designation System, or *gakubatsu* in Japanese (Sugimoto, 97). This simply means that the top corporations, major banks and financial firms and the national civil service (prestige employers that generally guarantee well paid employment for life) use the elite universities almost exclusively as a source for their new employees. Any young Japanese with the ambition to land a job with one of these entities must graduate from one of the national universities or from one of the Japanese Ivy League. This helps to explain why the *Center Shiken* is so important. It is not simply a part of the university entrance system. By selecting who can and cannot proceed to the second stage entrance exams at the elite national universities it also acts as part of the country's gate keeping apparatus for entry into the status quo.

The University Entrance Examination System: Due to the overwhelming number of students who would like to study at one of the top echelon national universities, the *Center Shiken* was launched in 1990, replacing an earlier exam (1979-89) called the Common First-Stage Exam, as a way to pre-select the students most likely to pass the national university entrance exams, called a *Niji Shiken*, or second stage entrance exam.

The student's mark on the Center Shiken is given as a number on a scale of 1 – 100. The number represents the student's performance in relation to all other students who have taken the test. In Japanese this number is called the *hensachi* (deviation score). This is a norm-referenced test. For example, a student who has received an overall mark of 80 has performed better than 79 percent of all the other test takers. The student then becomes eligible to apply to take the second stage entrance exam (known as the *Niji Shiken*) at any national university, and some of the public universities, that have a standard of 80 or less. If the university's minimum standard is 85 the student must attain an overall score of at least 85. In the case that the student's score is too low, but the student absolutely wishes to enter that university and no other, the student has only one choice. They must study more and take the *Center Shiken* one year later because it is offered only once a year. By this method, in theory, students are guided to enter a university that is suited to their own intellectual capability. It is a clear admission that universities in Japan are not, by any stretch of the imagination, created equally.

Many of the middle-ranked and lower-ranked private universities will take students based solely on an acceptable *Center Shiken* result as long as the student's result meets their own standard. This is called a *Center Suisen* (Center recommendation) entrance. The elite private universities, like the national and publicly funded universities, usually require students to take their own *Niji Shiken* entrance examination as well. It is a complex system requiring detailed knowledge of each university's entrance requirements. Most parents are incapable of providing correct advice to their children so third year high school students, who make up the vast majority of university applicants, rely on their high schools for guidance, and the high schools in turn rely on the *yobiko*. *Yobiko* are

large educational corporations that develop *mogi shiken* (practice exams) for high school students to practice with. For example, they make practice *Center Shiken* and almost all high school students use them before taking the real test. *Yobiko* also provide tutoring for failed university aspirants.

The Center Shiken: On the third Saturday and Sunday of January approximately 500,000 students, the vast majority third year high school students, will take the Center Shiken. It is, in fact, a series of exams in six subject areas: Civics (Social Studies, Ethics), Geography and History (World History, Japanese History, Geography), Japanese Literature, Foreign languages (English, German, French, Chinese, Korean), Science (General Science, Biology, Earth Science, Chemistry, Physics), and Mathematics 1 and 2. Students will take the tests required by their intended field of study. For example, a student who wishes to study in a liberal arts program will not need to take the science exams. However, Civics, Geography and History, Japanese and a Foreign Language are mandatory subjects. English is by far the most frequently chosen foreign language.

The 2009 edition of the English test is divided into six sections worth a total of 200 points. Students have eighty minutes to complete the entire test. All questions are multiple choice and answers are marked on a separate computer card.

The first section is worth 16 points (8% of total). It includes identifying words with similar pronunciation, syllable stress in individual words, words stressed in sentences, and identifying the implied meaning of a stressed segment of a longer spoken speech. The pronunciation and stress of syllables in individual words are discreet point items. The later word and sentence stress questions require pragmatic knowledge.

The second section is worth 44 points (22% of total). It includes vocabulary/cloze sentence questions. The first ten are vocabulary items, placing individual words or short phrases into a dialogue sentence. The next three questions are comprised of two person dialogues with four lines of dialogue. One of the lines must be chosen from a selection of four, requiring both vocabulary

and social knowledge. The last three questions ask student to find the correct order of a scrambled sentence requiring vocabulary and syntactic knowledge.

The third section is worth 44 points (22% of total). The meaning of a metaphoric expression in a short two person dialogue must be chosen in question one and the meaning of a single word in a three sentence statement must be chosen. The second part of this section involves a lengthy (416 word) debate style dialogue between a teacher and three students about the topic of friendship. The student is required to identify the overall meaning of each student's lengthy speech. The last part of this section is a 363-word article style essay about the topic of fair trade in a small British town. At three intervals in the essay the student must choose a sentence that will logically fit with the overall meaning, requiring comprehension and logical thinking skills.

The fourth section is worth 36 points (18% of total). It contains a 268-word essay and corresponding numerical graph about the destruction and protection of Brazilian rainforests. This is a comprehension exercise, which asks the student to analyze the information and draw logical conclusions. The second part of this section uses a bit of realia, a medical patient's hospital pre-registration form. The student must locate information.

The fifth section is worth 18 points (9% of total). It contains a detailed description of a picture of a drum major in a marching band. Only one description is completely accurate. The second question is similar, asking the student to choose a picture of a bridge out of four different kinds of bridges after reading the description of the bridge. The last exercise is made of a four-panel picture story depicting a man carrying a box who then accidentally breaks a vase. There are four descriptions of the sequence of events with only one being completely correct. Each is a reading comprehension exercise requiring accuracy.

The sixth section is worth 42 points (21% of total). It contains a single 788-word essay about the value of monolingual dictionaries for learning English. There are five comprehension questions. Following is one question that asks the student to group the paragraphs according to meaning and

one question that asks the student to choose one statement which best summarizes the general meaning of the writer's story. Apart from comprehension this section also tests the student's knowledge of essay construction.

Although there have been some people (Murphey 2001, Brown 1998) who have criticized the *Center Shiken*, noting the lack of communicative content, others (Mulvey 2001, Guest 2008) have made strong cases showing that the content is in fact varied and the points are distributed well making the test suitable for its intended purpose, which is pre-selecting students who are capable of using English mostly for academic reading and writing purposes at university. Presently, the argument can go both ways. There has been no study about the predictive utility of the *Center Shiken* but it should be also acknowledged that the test has changed since its early years when it did indeed rely too much on discreet items and may not have been a good test of general English skills.

Concerns: Brown states two other major concerns about the test. First, it places an enormous, and in his opinion, unnecessary amount of pressure on the test taker. This cannot be denied. Students prepare at least one year ahead, most likely in *juku* or at high school taking *mogi shiken* outside of their regular school schedule. The test itself is extremely formal, every detail controlled by regulations published in a thick binder by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations. The university staffs that administer the tests do not dare stray from the routines. The gravity of the event is constantly impressed upon the students.

Second, Brown worries about the possibility of negative washback the test may have on the high school system. Guest (2008) has disputed the claims of negative washback. However, in 2006 strong proof of its existence was made public in a nationwide educational scandal (Yomiuri Newspaper). It was discovered that about 300 top public and private schools had, for years, been secretly stealing time from some mandatory classes like music or physical education and using it to provide extra *Center Shiken* practice. Since the students had not completed enough class hours in the neglected subjects, MEXT (the government ministry responsible for almost all educational matters as well as science and technology) had to declare that the students would be unable to



graduate on schedule unless they took supplementary classes to make up for the lost time. Parents were outraged and deeply worried that their children would have to spend another year in school. The scandal showed to what lengths high schools will go, given the opportunity, to gain an advantage for their students in the *Center Shiken* competition. A high school that demonstrates the ability to consistently train students who do well in the *Center Shiken* and then enter the top universities will be able to attract more students, and thereby, in the case of private high schools, make more money, and in the case of public high schools, maintain their prestigious reputations. There have been no further reports in the media since 2006 of schools neglecting less valued mandatory classes but no doubt they have found new ways to devote more school time to the practice of the *Center Shiken*. It is common now for schools, both public and private to offer time on the weekends for students to take the *yobiko* produced practice tests.

A similar concern, though framed in a slightly different way, was raised by Stewart (2009). He suggests that MEXT's English long-term English education goals clash with the university entrance system and the *Center Shiken* at its heart. MEXT wants to promote the development of communicative English studies so that Japanese will acquire the skills to use English for verbal communication with foreigners. There is no interview component on the exam however, nor on most *Niji Shiken*, so there is no extrinsic motivation for students to make an effort to develop their speaking skills. This is an example of one branch of MEXT, the National Center for University Entrance Examinations, undermining the goals of the other.

Conclusion: 2010 marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Center Shiken*. Over the past two decades it has become a cultural phenomenon. Lives are ordered around it. Taking the exam is like a rite of passage for young Japanese leaving high school and entering their early adult lives. Most people in Japan, when asked about the necessity of the exam, cannot imagine the university system without it. It seems to work and they cannot see how students could choose, or be chosen, for the right university without it. The population has become *Center Shiken* dependent.

Change will eventually come however. Unless the Japanese government can find a way to increase the birthrate soon the Japanese high school population will decline dramatically over the next 20 years. Demographic data provided by the research arm of Benesse Corporation, owners of one of the main yobiko, show that between 2011 and 2031 the 18-year-old population is expected to decline from about 1,200,000 to about 870,000. This is a decline of about 27 percent (Shinken Ad. Co., Ltd. 2009) This will surely alter the shape of the university pyramid. Many of the private schools in the lower rank will close and/or amalgamate with each other. All universities will have to reconsider their standards and entrance methods as they struggle to maintain their enrollment numbers. The process has already begun. Today, all of the lower and many of the mid-rank universities already rely on a myriad of “recommendation” exams and AO (admissions office) exams, which favour simplified writing tests, essays and interviews to fill their classrooms. One day the *Center Shiken* might simply vanish for lack of test candidates.

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