

Вестник Московского университета

ISSN 0201—7385

ISSN 2074—1588



НАУЧНЫЙ
ЖУРНАЛ

Основан
в 1946 году



300
ЛЕТ

Серия 19

ЛИНГВИСТИКА
И МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ
КОММУНИКАЦИЯ

1 /2011

ТЕОРИЯ ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКОВ

Alexey Korenev

THROUGH BORROWING WE CREATE OUR OWN (social and cultural peculiarities of the Japanese National Center Test for University Admissions in English and German languages)

Статья посвящена вопросам адаптации тестовой формы центрального вступительного экзамена по иностранным языкам в университеты Японии. История развития центрального экзамена в Японии позволяет утверждать, что, сохраняя формальное сходство со своими западными аналогами, экзамены по иностранным языкам в Японии создаются на базе национальных традиций преподавания иностранных языков. Экзамены лишь отчасти учитывают необходимость контроля коммуникативных умений. Их основная задача — выделить абитуриентов с хорошей памятью и логическим мышлением, способных быстро перерабатывать большой объем информации.

Ключевые слова: тестирование, вступительный экзамен в вузы, Япония, заимствование образовательных технологий, культурный аспект, коллективизм.

The article is devoted to the adaptation of the Japanese Central Test to norms and values of the Japanese culture. Preserving formal similarities with Western tests, the Japanese foreign language tests were influenced by national mentality and teaching traditions. Exams evaluate foreign language skills of test-takers only to some limited extent. Rather, the main aim of the Central Test is to select candidates with the best ability to memorize and developed logical thinking.

Key words: test, university entrance examination, Japan, borrowing, social and cultural aspects, collectivism.

Nowadays many countries are using standardized testing as a tool for admission to universities: however the form of the exam and even its specific goals vary from country to country under the influence of national system of education, its history, social and cultural factors.

These variations may be shown on the example of the foreign language tests in different countries. Even though there are internationally recognized English and German language tests, such as TOEFEL, TOEIC,

Корнев Алексей Александрович — аспирант кафедры теории преподавания иностранных языков факультета иностранных языков и регионоведения МГУ имени М.В. Ломоносова; тел.: 8-916-885-18-97, e-mail: alexeykorenev@gmail.com

CAE or TESTDAF, the admissions test authors, while working on the university admissions exams, also take into account teaching traditions of the country and they also have to consider the way foreign language is taught at schools in a particular country.

The focus of language teaching and teaching traditions in Japan are in many aspects different from those in Europe and North America. The input of traditional Japanese philosophy shaped a special emphasis on the ability to read and understand the text, which is sometimes put over the development of communicative skills. Taking the Western form of standardized written examinations Japanese methodologists made an input of Japanese attitudes and priorities in education and Japanese traditions into the content of the exam. One of the leading Japanese education philosophers Kiyonobu Itakura stated that the modern Japanese science is a process of imitation followed by creation of something new¹.

1. Center Test and the egalitarian culture

Before considering the foreign language test in particular, a short overview over the history of the Japanese National Center Test for University Admissions may be done. The reason to do so is to prove the fact that from the beginning the idea of the exam was to promote objective evaluation and to give equal opportunity for those willing to enter a university. The key words in this case were equal, objective, unified, center, standardized — which are substantial in mainstream Japanese culture.

The predecessor of the current exam was the Common First Stage Exam. The first ideas of a standardized exam were discussed by the Ministry of Education in 1960-s—1970-s and finally in 1979 this exam was implemented. The original aim of the exam was to reduce the “examination hell” (stress caused by the difficulty of entrance examinations to the Japanese top universities)². The standardized center exam could guarantee that all of the questions in the exams were covered by the school curricula. In 1990 the Common First stage exam was superseded by the Japanese National Center Test for University Admissions.

Nowadays there are basically three main ways the results of the Center Test (short version of the name used in Japanese media by commoners) are used: some private and local public universities use it as the only source of information for admissions; other universities sum up its score with the results of the secondary exam at the university; Japanese top universities use it as the primary selection of the candidates, after which the most successful are given the second and the third examination by the university.

¹ Kiyonobu Itakura. *Mohou to Souzou: Kagaku Gijutsu ni okeru kenkyuu no sahou* (Imitation and Creation: Researcher's Manner in Science and Education). Tokyo, 1987. P. 37.

² Cummings W. *Education and Equality in Japan*. Princeton, 1980. P. 20.

Another important feature of the Center Test is its objective evaluation. Not only the form of the written test, but also the simplification of the form to multiple choice or multiple matching questions, enable automatic control of the exam using computers. Even though the form of the test is not sufficient to evaluate the academic potential of future students, the objective evaluation is one of the most important requirements to an exam in Japan and the fact, that the tests are checked by a computer is probably an ideal realization of this requirement.

The egalitarian nature of the entrance examinations is widely disputed now. High schools fees and cram school costs give advantage to exam-takers from wealthy families; however, this financial stratification becomes more obvious during the later secondary exams at the most prestigious universities. Finally, the fact that the center exam promotes equality among potential students and objective evaluation of their knowledge contributes to what is sometimes argued to be the “myth” about the egalitarian character of the Japanese education and society in general and the process of examination is explicitly covered by the country’s media.

In conclusion, the Japanese Center Test has one more social function, in addition to selection and control of education. This forces the majority of those willing to enter the university to spend their high school time in working under stressful conditions, memorizing massive amounts of information and studying until late at night — it makes an important contribution to the character of young Japanese. Formerly the Japanese economy needed a big number of brilliant hard-working “*kaishain*” (company employees), who did not need much creativity, but a good temper to do monotonous work day by day, being ready to overwork and keep a lot of precise information. The education system produced those efficiently. Now certain changes have been observed, since companies pay more attention to candidates communicative skills during recruitment (here it means general communicative skills primarily in the native language).

2. Center Test as a big cooperation project

Japanese culture is defined as a “collectivistic” culture, which has its root in the peculiarities of the development of the agriculture (rice farming villages) along with a number of other factors. Cooperation is one of the key terms in the Japanese business culture and the organization of the Center Test is probably one of the splendid examples of such cooperation in the area of education.

The Center Test is the result of the cooperation of 797 institutions of higher education in Japan and in the year 2010 the number of students

signed up for the test reached 553,368³. Originally, the fact that such a number of universities are cooperating in the selection of potential students instead of using their own ways to select them and exercise their academic freedom to a full extend, is a phenomenon partly caused by the general Japanese working culture. However, it should be mentioned, that the way different universities use the results of the Center Test is different and there is certain diversity in the admission process after the exam.

The academic part of test preparation and development is held by the scholars from the participating universities. The universities also announce the subject areas and subjects of the test, as well as every university decides, which exams an applicant to every faculty of the university should take. A university has to announce the required examination subjects 2 years in advance. National universities try to preserve the students’ motivation to study various school subjects independently from the chosen major at the desired university, by requiring potential students to take tests in a wide range of subjects during the center test.

3. Main goals of the Center Test in English and German

Traditionally, the main goal of the foreign language tests in Europe and the USA was to evaluate the development of the communicative competence. This aim is methodologically based on the belief that a foreign language is a tool of communication and should be learned at school with the aim to use it in the process of international communication, expressing opinions, bringing forward views, interacting and understanding the ideas of the communication partner.

However, the main aim of foreign language learning in Japan was the ability to read accurately and understand a written text in a foreign language. The current implementation of this tradition is the amount of reading tasks in the tests (more than 50% in the English language test and almost 40% of the German language test). The positive side of this fact is that more than the half of the tasks are contextualized and there is relative diversity in genres and the types of texts.

The university admissions tests in Japan usually put more emphasis not on skills, but on the ability to memorize details, logical thinking and accuracy in facts. This has an effect on the language tests as well. The first part of both texts — phonetics — does not check the ability to pronounce a word appropriately or to recognize a word or a sound pronounced — it checks the ability to memorize phonetic structure of a word and to find a word with a different length of a vowel or different type of a sound:

³ http://www.dnc.ac.jp/modules/center_exam/content0229.html

In which word is the length of the underlined vowel different? (Center Test in German 2010. Part 1. Question 3):

問 3 次の語(1~4)のうち下線部の母音が短いものが一つある。それを
選べ。

1. Minute 2. Tag 3. Monat 4. Stunde

A correct answer to this question does not guarantee that the candidate can pronounce the word in a correct or at least recognizable way, but it guarantees that he or she has a good memory, to remember the phonetic structure of those words. This makes the language test to some extent similar to a geography or history test, where the amount of memorized facts is checked.

Some of the questions in the reading parts check not only the ability to understand the text, but also logical thinking, which is a traditional value in Japanese education. Certain amount of background knowledge is necessary as well to pass the Center Test in foreign languages sufficiently.

4. Composition of the tests

The composition of the Center Tests in English and German is similar (excluding the listening part, which deserves particular attention). Both tests offer 51 multiple choice (matching) tasks. Those are divided into phonetics, sentence construction, vocabulary and grammar, dialogue reconstruction, and various reading assignments. The overall length of the test is 80 minutes.

An evident feature of the Center Test is the overwhelming number of receptive (reading) tasks over those simulating production (reconstruction of a dialogue, construction of a sentence). This is a consequence of a Japanese belief that it is more important to teach to understand and accurately analyze or translate the text, than to express one's opinion. That is why the test in German includes a task, where the exam-taker has to select out of 4 sentences in Japanese, which is the better translation of a segment of the text.

Logical thinking along with the ability to memorize and implement rules in a particular situation (a very important social feature for the Japanese culture) is tested in the grammar part of the test. In the German language test this part with 21 questions is the largest in the test. This was enabled by excluding the contextual guessing — synonyms and text-division parts from the test. This peculiarities of the German language test may be explained by the certain difficulty of the German grammar, but also by the fact, that there is much more material to memorize and to evaluate the exam-takers' abilities to memorize that material (therefore,

there are several questions — where a correct preposition should be used — a particular part of the German grammar that is acquired mainly through memorizing).

5. Reading as the key skill. Texts and tasks

The reading part of both tests is probably the most developed one. It evaluates the ability to implement different reading skills, such as contextual guessing and text division (in the English language test), summarizing abstracts, searching for details, reading charts and diagrams as well as choosing and inserting an appropriate sentence into a dialogue.

The test developers made an attempt to include more communicative background into the reading tasks, which is a consequence of the newest changes in the Japanese attitudes towards foreign language teaching, when more attention is paid to communicative skills. This may be seen in a high proportion of the dialogues, simulating everyday communication, in the reading part of both tests (5 in English and 8 in German). Some of the tasks in the Center Test have clear communicative background (natural necessity to read in foreign language and understand such "texts" as flight schedule, advertisement, complains directions etc.). The implementation of charts, pictures and diagrams in the test makes the tasks look more authentic, because in real life we rarely deal with text only while reading.

A useful task to evaluate reading as part of the communicative competence of the student may be the following one:

Which reaction is more appropriate in this case? Choose the correct sentence (Center Test in English 2010. Part 2 B. Question 1):

B 次の問い(問'~3)の会話のF 1に入れるのに最も適当なものを、それぞれ下の1~4のうちから一つずつ選べ。

問 1 Yuko: You'll never guess what my husband bought me for my birthday.

Bethany: What?

Yuko: He bought me exactly the same thing as last year!

Bethany: F 1

1. It must have cost you an arm and a leg.

2. Oh well. At least he remembered your birthday.

3. On second thought, I've decided not to accept it.

4. Well, you never could keep with in your budget.

In this case the student should consider the context and choose a sentence that would fit into the dialogue. In that way some simulation of production is added to the reading task.

Finally, the diversity of the topics in both tests should be mentioned. In both tests the authors took into account age and interests of the exam

takers and included texts about weather, school report preparation, food, generation gap and cycling into the test. An important advantage of the English language test is the presence of 2 texts devoted to Japan (food and foreign stereotypes). The implementation of those texts might be necessary, because students should not only be ready to read about or to discuss foreign affairs, but to possess some vocabulary to tell about their own country as well.

An ideal candidate for university admission should be also interested in science and social problems. That is why there is a text devoted to gene modification in the German language test and a text about history of attitudes towards age and childhood in the English language test. Both texts correspond with the general Japanese interest in technology and age issues.

Conclusions

The Center Test as well as the Japanese System of Education in general is a delicate synthesis of Western European and American technologies and patterns with Japanese values and attitudes. While analyzing the Center Test one may find different aspects of Japanese teaching traditions, interests, values and even the influence of the history of modern Japanese education in just 76 tasks of the Center Test.

The primary objectives of the test are defined by the universities, who want to evaluate general knowledge, logic and memory, and only then do the universities assess foreign language skills of the exam takers. The exam is designed for the selection of the most motivated and hard-working, not necessarily creative.

The key characteristics of the Center Test are uniformity, equality and objective evaluation. Development of creativity and productive communicative skills of the students are almost left without attention in this test. The multiple choice or multiple matching form of the exam leaves no space for their evaluation. The most prestigious universities have an opportunity to evaluate it during the secondary exams, although, for the majority of Japanese students those skills will remain unchecked. As a result, most Japanese students are insufficient in expressing their opinion in a foreign language⁴.

The possibilities of the changes in foreign language teaching in Japan may be seen in the introduction of the Listening part in 2006. Listening includes a lot of dialogues simulating everyday conversations and some of the tasks in the Listening test the ability not only to get the direct meaning of what has been said, but also to predict the behavior of the conversation participant, to guess the reason of an event described in the

text or to choose a sentence, that could be an appropriate reaction to the spoken statement or question.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned, that at some points the Japanese Center Test in English is a developed example of a standardized testing. The strongest point of the test is the selection of the texts and the contextualization of the tasks. Although, limitations of the multiple choice (matching) form make the Center Test not sufficient to evaluate the communicative competence of a student. Finally, it may be stated, that the Center Test in foreign languages for 2010 is somewhere in the middle between Japanese traditions in foreign language learning and teaching, and modern challenges and necessities, that encourage extended attention towards the development of the communicative skills in foreign language teaching.

Acknowledgements

The author of the article is indebted to all, who encouraged him to create this work, especially to Prof. Shinichi Tokoro, Dean of the Faculty of Education at Hokkaido University, who was supervising the research in Japan.

Sources of information

- Cummings W. Education and Equality in Japan. Princeton, 1980.
Kiyonobu Itakura. Mohou to Souzou: Kagaku Gijutsu ni okeru kenkyuu no sahou (Imitation and Creation: Researcher's Manner in Science and Education). Tokyo, 1987.
Suzuki Kazue. Damning report on school English // AEN. 1998. September 20. http://www.dnc.ac.jp/modules/center_exam/content0229.html

⁴ Suzuki Kazue. Damning report on school English // AEN. 1998. September 20. P. 9.