

# **GTEC CBT and English language education in Japan: A study of washback**

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## *Abstract*

It is often found that students in Japan emerge from six years of post-elementary education with minimal English communicative competence. In an effort to change this the Japanese government is moving toward replacing current college English entrance exams with exams that have a more communicative focus, hoping that this will encourage English teachers to emphasize building communicative competence and change the way English is taught in the classroom (i.e., positive washback effect). Under the noted circumstances, the current study was set to investigate whether the intended positive washback effect would be found in classrooms and which factors are responsible for the absence or presence of such effects. Over 100 Japanese secondary teachers of English who took one of the government-approved new entrance exams completed a questionnaire. Quantitative data from the questionnaire showed 90% of the teachers favor changing their teaching practice, however, qualitative data revealed that the teachers have misconceptions regarding communicative teaching and that teachers addressed concerns toward the change. The results suggest that changing the exam does not automatically create changes in practice, and teachers will need multi-layered support from a variety of stakeholders.

### *Background of the Study*

Students in Japan often emerge from six years of post-elementary education with minimal English communicative competence. Some have indicated the reason for this unfavorable occurrence is due to a distinct lack of focus on communicative competence and assessment focusing only on receptive skills, specifically reading and listening skills, in the current college English entrance exams. In an effort to change this the Japanese government has decided to move toward replacing current college English entrance exams with exams that have a more communicative focus and including all four English skills, hoping this change will encourage English teachers to emphasize building communicative competence and modify the way English is taught in the classroom (i.e., positive washback effect).

### *Review of Literatures: Washback*

In the last few decades, there have been a large volume of research examining tests' impact on language teaching and learning, commonly referred to as washback. This washback effect can be either positive or negative, meaning a test may help meet educational objectives or interfere with the achievement of the objectives.

A basic mechanism of washback is described in Hughes (1993; cited in Bailey, 1999; see also Bailey's model). In his framework, he makes distinctions between participants, processes, and products. *Participants* are the people who are impacted by a test (e.g., language teachers, students, textbook developers), *processes* are participants' actions (e.g., teaching methods/contents, learning activities), and *products* are the results of the processes (e.g., learning outcomes). An introduction or a change in a test affects participants' perceptions and attitudes toward their work. As a result of changes in participants' perceptions and attitudes, participants' actions change. These changes in the actions in turn affect learning outcomes.

While previous washback literature generally suggests that high-stakes tests induce washback effects on teaching and learning, studies such as Watanabe (2004) have demonstrated that looking solely at stakes of a test does not help us understand the nature of washback. Spratt (2005) presented a list of factors found in empirical studies thus far to influence washback and classified these factors into four main categories: The teachers, resources, the schools, and the exams. *The Teachers* included teachers' beliefs, their attitudes, their educational level and experience, and their personalities. *Resources* included availability of materials and textbooks. *The Schools* included schools'

atmospheres and cultural factors, pressure from administrators, etc. *The Exam* included its proximity, its stakes, the prestige of the language being tested, its purpose, etc. The examination of these factors suggested that washback is a quite complex phenomenon and we must examine various factors to understand if and how a test affects teaching and learning.

### *Research Questions*

RQ 1: Will your teaching approach change/Has your teaching approach changed due to the increased communicative focus on college entrance exams?

RQ 2: Are there any factors that influence the effect mentioned in RQ1?

### *Methodology*

#### Participants

165 English teachers from junior high and high schools in Japan participated in an event in which they were invited to take one of the new government-approved exams for college admission, GTEC CBT. After the event the link to the web-based questionnaire was sent to the 165 English teachers by e-mail. 64% of participants (106 out of 165) submitted their answers, and those answers were used to address our research questions.

#### Questionnaire

The questionnaire sent to the aforementioned teachers contained 19 questions. However, only five of the 19 questions were used for this study (see the questions in Chart 1). The first question was used to address Research Question 1 and the remaining four questions, Questions 2 to 5, addressed Research Question 2. Questions 2 to 5 were chosen based on the factors shown to influence a test's washback mentioned in Spratt, 2005.

Q1. Will your teaching approach change/Has your teaching approach changed due to the increased communicative focus on college entrance exams?

Yes       No       Other

Comments:

Q2: Do you think the change in college English entrance exams has a positive impact on English education in junior high and high schools?

Yes       No       Other

Comments:

Q3: Rate of students in your school going on to college:

<10%       10-30%       30-50%       50-70%       70-90%       >90%

Q4: Grade(s) you currently teach:

Jr. high 1st year       Jr. high 2nd year       Jr. high 3rd year  
 High school 1st year       High school 2nd year       High school 3rd year

Q5: Your highest earned academic degree:

Bachelor's degree from a Japanese university  
 Master's degree from a Japanese university  
 Ph.D. from a Japanese university  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Chart 1. Questionnaire questions.

### *Results*

#### Research Question 1:

Will your teaching approach change/Has your teaching approach changed due to the increased communicative focus on college entrance exams?

The results from Question 1 from the questionnaire show that 90% of the participants reported they will change/have changed their teaching approach due to the increased communicative focus on college entrance exams. Only 9% reported, they will not/have not, and 1% reported Other (See Table 1).

	Number of responses	Washback Rate
<b>Yes</b>	95	90%
<b>No</b>	10	9%
<b>Other</b>	1	1%
Total	106	

Table 1. Results for Question 1: Will your teaching approach change/Has your teaching approach changed due to the increased communicative focus on college entrance exams?

### Research Question 2

Are there any factors that influence the effect mentioned in RQ1?

The first factor we examined was teachers' perceptions towards the new exams. Our results revealed that 59 participants (56%) responded that he/she thinks the change on college English entrance exams has a positive impact on English education. Of those 59 participants, 54 participants (92%) indicated he/she will change/has changed their teaching. These results indicate washback effect was found among 92% of the participants in this group (see Table 2). Interestingly, the same percentage (92%) of washback effect was found among participants who responded negatively toward the change. 12 Participants (11%) mentioned he/she does not believe the change has a positive impact on education. 11 out of the 12 participants (92%) mentioned that he/she will change/has changed his/her teaching, showing washback effect among 92% of the participants in this group. From these results teachers' perceptions toward the change in the exams did not seem to affect the rate of washback. For this factor, however, a fairly large number of participants ( $n = 35$ ) chose Other, not demonstrating favorable nor unfavorable opinions. Many of the comments from those participants indicated they are not yet ready to make any judgement because they do not think they are fully informed regarding the change.

No difference being found on this factor may be explained by the comments from a participant who indicated he had unfavorable perceptions toward the exams but mentioned changing the way he teaches. Regarding his perceptions toward the exam he stated, "Now we have to make time for students' output activities (speaking and writing) because of the test. But when we don't even have enough time for input activities (reading and listening), how can we make sure to help students improve any of their English skills.", but regarding changing the way he teaches, he mentioned "It is the duty as a teacher to make sure our students go to their desired university. Therefore, there is no

option other than I prepare students for college entrance exam.” Based on these comments, it may be inferred that regardless of the attitudes teachers have, they may feel they are required to change their practice because preparing students for college entrance exams is considered extremely important.

	Number of responses	Q1- “Yes”	Washback Rate
<b>Yes</b>	59 (56%)	54	92%
<b>No</b>	12 (11%)	11	92%
<b>Other</b>	35 (33%)	30	86%
Total	106	95	

Table 2. Results for Question 2: Do you think the change in college English entrance exams has a positive impact on English education in junior high and high schools?

The second factor is the amount of students continuing on to college. As shown in Table 3, the rate of washback was 91% among the teachers if more than 90% of their students continued on to college. Among the teachers with 70-90% of their students going to college, the rate of washback was 88%. The lowest rate of washback, 85%, was found among the teachers who had less than 70% of their students going to college. From the data, there appears to be some evidence that teachers are more likely to change their teaching approach when a higher percentage of their students are college bound. Unfortunately, we had to group responses from the categories “Less than 10%”, “10-30%”, “30-50%”, and “50-70%” together in a single “Less than 70%” category, as shown in Table 3 because the number of participants who selected each of these categories placed in the “Less than 70%” category was extremely small. Because of this, we could not verify any trend among those categories grouped together. However, even the limited data from this study seems to further support previous research findings that washback effect was found more when teachers considered a test to be important for their students (e.g., Shohamy et al., 1996).

<b>% of students going college</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Q1 – “Yes”</b>	<b>Washback Rate</b>
> 90%	67	61	91%
70-90%	26	23	88%
< 70%	13	11	85%
Total	106	95	

Table 3. Rate of students in your school going on to college.

The third factor is the grade each teacher currently teaches. The data from the questionnaire show that (see Table 4) 92% of washback rate was found among teachers who teach 3<sup>rd</sup> year in a high school, 93 % rate among those who teach 2<sup>nd</sup> year in a high school, 84% rate among those who teach 1<sup>st</sup> year in a high school, and 100% rate among those who teach junior high school. The results indicated no relationship between what grade teachers taught and their likelihood of changing their teaching approaches. For this factor many responses fell under Other. This Other category included teachers who taught multiple grade levels or who were school administrators, not teachers. The “Jr. high school only” category included teachers who taught “Jr. high school 1<sup>st</sup> year only”, “Jr. high school 2<sup>nd</sup> year only”, and “Jr. high school 3<sup>rd</sup> year only” because the number of responses for each category was so small that all those three categories were grouped together.

As found in other studies (e.g., Shohamy et al., 1996), our expectation was that a washback effect would be more likely when teachers were working with students in upper grade levels because teachers would feel more pressure from the exam, given that their students would take exams in the nearer future than students of teachers in lower grade levels. This expectation was not met, but it provided us interesting insight that strong washback effect appears to clearly exist even among teachers in junior high schools.

<b>Grade teachers taught</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Q1– “Yes”</b>	<b>Washback Rate</b>
<b>High school 3<sup>rd</sup> year only</b>	25	23	92%
<b>High school 2<sup>nd</sup> year only</b>	28	26	93%
<b>High school 1<sup>st</sup> year only</b>	19	16	84%
<b>Jr. high school only</b>	7	7	100%
<b>Other</b>	27	23	85%
<b>Total</b>	106	95	

Table 4. Grade teacher currently taught at the time of the study.

The last factor we examined was a teacher’s highest earned academic degree. The results in Table 5 show that an 89% washback rate was found among those with a master’s degree or Ph.D., an 88% rate among those with a bachelor’s degree, and a 100% rate among those with a degree from a foreign institute. Based on these results, there seemed to be no significant relationship between what academic degree teachers have and their likelihood of changing their teaching approach. When analyzing responses for this factor, we found that some participants who selected Other also noted “experience studying at a foreign institute”. Interestingly all of those participants (five participants) answered they have/will change the way they teach, showing a 100% of rate of washback. The number of responses is extremely small; therefore, we cannot make definitive claims. However, further study looking into this population may bring interesting insights. As Watanabe (2004) stated, teachers’ own education and educational experiences is a factor affecting washback effect. This particular group may have qualitatively quite different experiences from the group of teachers without education experiences abroad, and these differences may have created the results.

	Number of responses	Q1 – “Yes”	Washback Rate
<b>Master’s degree/PhD</b>	27	24	89%
<b>Bachelor’s degree</b>	67	59	88%
<b>Other: Studied at a foreign institute</b>	5	5	100%
<b>No answer</b>	7	7	100%
<b>Total</b>	106	95	

Table 5. Teacher’s highest earned academic degree.

### *Discussion*

In our study, 90% of participants mentioned they have changed/are going to change the way they teach because of the change in the exam; therefore, quite high rate of washback effect was found in this study. As for the possible factors mediating washback that we examined, only in one of the four factors, “Amount of students in teacher’s school going on to college”, there was some evidence of affecting washback rate. Besides the explanations already mentioned in our results section, another reason the other three factors did not appear to be mediating factors may be that a high percentage of the teachers responded they would change the way they teach.

By simply looking at the high rate of washback effect, it appears that the change in the exams will have quite impact on teaching practice. However, as Cheng (1997, p.49) rightly argued, “What teachers stated they would like to change is not necessarily the same as what they actually would do in classrooms.”, therefore, we caution readers not to take our data as a guarantee that the change would occur. Also, if the change in practice actually occurs as our data indicate, how those participants change their practice, positively or negatively, would be something we cannot foresee from the data from this study.

When we retrospectively examined the comments on the questionnaire from the participants, we found that approximately 24% of participants (25 out of 106 participants) mentioned they have concerns regarding communicative teaching. Some participants mentioned that changing to communicative teaching means they would focus less on linguistic accuracy in classroom and worry that this decrease in focus would hinder students’ learning. Other participants commented that their students’ English proficiency

is not high enough to engage in communicative tasks; therefore, these teachers cannot imagine communicative teaching would work for their students. Also, some participants mentioned that communicative teaching places too much emphasis on simple and easy conversation and cannot help students build real English proficiency. From these comments, which suggest they have a misunderstanding of what communicative teaching is and how it works, it is clear that many of the teachers are not well-informed about communicative teaching. If they change the way they teach without having such knowledge, the outcome of change in practice would likely not induce the expected learning among learners. As Wall & Anderson (1993, p.67) stated, "An exam on its own cannot reinforce an approach to teaching the educational system has not adequately prepared its teachers for"; therefore, for a positive washback to occur in the way the Japanese government expects, this study clearly suggests that teachers should be provided needed support. Only with the proper support we can ensure a positive change will take place in teaching practice.

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