

## **【Educational Essay】**

### **Is EIKEN A Valid Predictor of Communicative Proficiency?**

Craig Jones

Aichi Prefectural University

*Key words:* EIKEN, Communication, Testing

**EIKEN IS A VALUED ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY USED** throughout Japan. Moreover, in recent times the EIKEN 1 certification has gained a global presence and is now valued by international universities as a placement test. The rapid rise and lack of empirical research is a cause of concern for some. The essay will analyze the grade 3 test as it is the first of the seven EIKEN levels to feature a spoken interview test. The test is targeted at junior high-school students. The essay will analyze the validity of the test and discuss whether it is a reliable stepping stone towards determining an acceptable communicative proficiency. Moreover, it will investigate EIKEN's positive impact on Japanese language education as is claimed by its creators. The Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) is an established and respected test designed for a similar age group and will be used as a benchmark for comparison.

#### **EIKEN Background**

EIKEN is the most popular domestic public test of English language proficiency for junior and senior high school students in Japan (EIKEN: recognition, 2010). The EIKEN exam was founded in 1963 for the purpose of popularizing and improving English throughout the country. The exam has 7 levels and 2.3 million people take the exam every year. EIKEN certification is highly regarded within Japan and is used as a benchmark in both the private and educational sectors. Education boards throughout Japan also use the

qualification as evidence of English proficiency. Therefore the test has become a high-stakes qualification; achieving a certain level on the test can result in employment and advancement (Miura & Beggar, 2002).

In the short space of 4 years EIKEN developed from a domestic test to a globally accepted qualification (Eltsalender, 2007). The EIKEN homepage states that its level 1 qualification is being used to validate Japanese students' entry into graduate and postgraduate courses in over 300 international educational institutes (EIKEN: recognition, 2010). This is an extremely short time to complete sufficient research on the test; EIKEN did not establish an English website until as recently as 2010. The test is created in Japan and sat exclusively by Japanese candidates. Sakamoto (2012) stated that Japan ranks 29th out of 30 Asian countries in TOEFL scores. The question arises of whether a test solely created and controlled in Japan can be trusted as an indicator of English proficiency overseas.

It is well known that Japanese students are often more than adequate with literacy skills but are severely inferior in oral communicative ability (Sakamoto, 2012). The communicative teaching model is popular throughout the world. However, at junior and senior high school level Japan persists with a more direct grammar method. The government is aware of the shortcomings in communication and has made strides toward improving the communicative ability of its population. English language teaching by native English speakers has been introduced to elementary schools and even Kindergarten programs. A study by Benesse (2009) found that learners enjoy to study English up to Junior high school. However, from this point on classes tend to revert to an environment that demands grammatical accuracy. This change is evidence of the potential negative washback effect that high-stakes entrance exams can have on educational institutions, teachers and students (Cheng et al, 2004).

The EIKEN website states that the level 3 qualification is targeted at junior high school students. It is a valuable qualification to gain when applying for prestigious high schools. EIKEN offer two lower level tests, however neither of them features a spoken

examination. This gives support to the idea that the exams are useful in measuring individual progress but are inadequate in measuring communicative ability; the test is simply not designed for this purpose (Sakamoto, 2012). The tests encourage progression through stages rather than a desire to communicate, supporting diligence and competence over performance (Samimi & Kobayashi, 2004). The EIKEN website claims that students that achieve grade 3 are able to ‘understand and use language concerning familiar, everyday topics such as likes and dislikes, and basic personal and family information’ (EIKEN, 2010).

### **Comparing the Two Examinations**

The essay will now examine 6 public past exams published in a study at home book (Obunsha, 2016) to assess the validity of these claims. The oral test is an interview between individual participants and a Japanese interviewer. When the participant enters the room he/she is presented with a card that contains a short passage (see the Appendix for an example) with an illustration underneath. The candidate is then given 20 seconds to read the passage quietly before being asked to read the passage aloud. This appears to be a test of reading ability, however, one of the assessment criteria is pronunciation and this could be seen as a way of testing that skill. The student is then asked to answer one question about the passage. An example item from 2015 is ‘please look at the passage. Why is sushi popular with families in Japan?’. The answer can be found in the short passage (see the Appendix). This activity weakens the content-related validity of the test as the examinee is expected to be able to read; a fair test of speaking ability would not rely on any ability to read. The same question could be asked without the passage which would test the candidates ability to demonstrate understanding.

The focus of the test then moves to the illustration. The Sushi item shows a woman preparing dinner for her family who are positioned at various points around the living room. The examiner then says, ‘please look at the picture. Where is the cat?’ followed by ‘please look at the girl. What is she doing?’. Both questions are very easy to answer and

include no interaction with the examiner. In all six past papers the format is almost identical, which lowers the criterion validity. Item 2 in all six past papers begins with 'please look at the picture.' Three of the six items then ask simple 'where is the ...' questions. The remaining three examples continue with 'How many people are ...'. The pattern is extremely predictable and therefore easy to prepare for. Item 3 does not offer much more of a challenge, the candidate is asked to answer a question about the illustration. Four of the six past items begin the same way 'Please look at the woman with long hair'. Two of the items then ask 'what is she doing' and the others ask 'what is she going to do?' One of the other examples does differ in that it asks the candidate to 'look at the woman with glasses'. All but one of the illustrations only feature one woman, which makes the latter descriptive part of the sentence irrelevant. It is difficult to assign any validity to the test because it is so simple and allows potential candidates to rote learn possible answers.

The candidate is then asked to return the card containing the passage and the picture. The last section claims that the examiner will ask questions to elicit the examinee's opinion about topics related to everyday life (EIKEN, 2010). This is where, on the surface at least, the candidate is asked to express real opinions. The problem for validity and the reliability of the test is that the candidate could have already passed the exam before even attempting the final two question stages. The candidate is awarded marks out of 5 for the reading and the five items, therefore a high score could already have been built up before the most important section. Item 4 of the past exams has a little more variety, 'How did you come here today?', 'Where would you like to go this summer?', 'What kinds of food do you like to eat?' Despite there being more variety the topics are fairly predictable and there is still no interaction with the examiner. Thus, the candidate is able to rote memorize potential answers before entering the room, knowing that it is unlikely that they are going to be asked any follow up questions.

Item five is where the examiner is finally instructed to ask a follow-up question. Some examples of question 5 items are 'Have you ever travelled abroad?', 'Are you a

member of any clubs?’ (this is a common question in Japan because all students are expected to be a member of one extra-curricular activity). The problem with the unit 5 items is that they are yes/no questions. In 5 out of 6 past papers the examiner was instructed to follow a yes answer with, ‘please tell me more’. This presents the candidate with the opportunity to regurgitate their pre-planned monologues. If the student answers no, the examiner will ask a follow-up question like, ‘What country would you like to visit?’, ‘What do you like to do when you are at home?’. However, through personal experience of working in an EIKEN preparation school, I am aware that the students are instructed never to say no.

The EIKEN homepage lists the evaluation criteria and states that candidates are evaluated on ‘response to tasks and attitude towards actively engaging in communication’. The key word here is communication. As demonstrated in the examples there is no real need to engage in communication with the examiner. Furthermore, in a ‘can-do’ statement the EIKEN website claims that a candidate who has successfully achieved this qualification ‘can take part in simple interaction about familiar things and talk about himself/herself’. The key word in this can-do statement is ‘interaction’. The analysis of the six past papers shows that there is little interaction which means that the speaking section cannot claim to have content related validity.

The statements from EIKEN suggest that they value interaction. Interaction has been an important aspect of second language learning and pedagogy for the last thirty years (Richards & Rodgers, 2015). Rivers (1987) stated that, ‘students achieve facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages’. The examples provided in the essay prove that although they may value interaction they are unable to execute a test that provides it. Therefore it cannot be said to have achieved construct validity.

The Cambridge FCE schools exam is aimed at school aged learners rather than adults. The essay will now compare the speaking section with that of the EIKEN test already analysed; the data is taken from a video published by Cambridge (Youtube, 2014). The

site claims that a candidate who takes the test can ‘communicate effectively face to face expressing opinions and presenting arguments and has the language skills to communicate in an English speaking environment’ (Cambridge, 2016). The speaking test is split into 4 sections and features two examinees. The first section involves a conversation with the examiner. Unlike the EIKEN test there is no reading comprehension needed. The examiner introduces herself and asks the candidates to introduce themselves. The examiner then asks the candidates five questions each. The level of question is similar to sections 4 and 5 of the EIKEN, ‘Do you like to read books?’ and ‘is there a sport you’d like to try?’ but the examiner sometimes asks follow up questions which is a contrast to the EIKEN test.

In section two of the test the candidate is presented with two pictures, unlike the EIKEN exam these are authentic photos. The candidates are then challenged to speak for one minute and compare the two photos. The first candidate is asked why she thinks the people in the picture choose to communicate in different ways. The other participant who has been listening is then asked a question on the same topic, ‘do you use the internet to talk to your friends?’. Stage three challenges the candidates to speak in collaboration for about three minutes. The examiner gives them instruction ‘imagine a school is planning a short trip to another country to help the students learn about life there’. They are then issued with a card containing seven pictures and are asked to discuss and decide together which two pictures will be the most useful for the students to learn about that place. The fourth section involves the examinees engaging in guided discussion with their partner, and they are encouraged to agree or disagree.

The last two sections are a clear step up from the EIKEN test. The third section in particular demonstrates interaction and makes the claims made by Cambridge valid. It is also spontaneous and unpredictable. There is no way to predict what the other candidate is going to say as you do not know them before the test, therefore it is extremely difficult to rote learn in preparation. It is easy to say that the FCE test is better and should be implemented in Japan. However, practicality has to be taken into consideration. The

examiner is heavily involved in the interaction meaning that another assessor is required to be present in the room. As mentioned earlier the sheer numbers of people attempting the test in Japan makes it very difficult to find examiners with the necessary level of English proficiency. It may also be difficult to have two candidates speaking together as Japanese students are notoriously shy.

Lazaraton posed the question ‘reliability and validity, so what? What will its impact be?’ (2010, p.261). The EIKEN homepage claims that it endeavors to ‘enhance positive washback and contribute to the improvement of language education in Japanese society’ (EIKEN, research, 2010). To a point the EIKEN examination is achieving this as the qualifications display a clear level of ability that allows potential institutions to make an accurate assessment of the candidates’ English ability. It also provides students a target for study; a benchmark that they can use to assess their own progress. The EIKEN tests set vocabulary targets which are invaluable for students embarking on the study of a new language. Knowing where and what to study can be a daunting task, particularly if you are an adult that is trying to improve English ability after graduating from formal education. The previous points prove that the test has its merits.

Despite this claim the test that has been examined shows that the current tests are inadequate for promoting communication, which the government is actively attempting to change. Moreover, they are potentially having a negative washback effect, particularly at the micro level of teaching and learning (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). The majority of people sitting the EIKEN test are extrinsically motivated; a good result on the test results in better opportunities for their future. The washback effect is that students will only engage with study that will help them pass the exam, as it is the qualification that counts most. This is also true of educational institutions, whether it be a junior high school or a private preparatory school. The institution is judged by the results of its graduates. Therefore, it is beneficial for the syllabi to be driven by what it takes to pass the exam, and the current analysis shows that communication is not a paramount priority for this exam. The previous points are counter to the claim on the homepage that declares its

commitment to developing a test that promotes beneficial washback for its participants. It is clear that the prestige of the EIKEN qualification dictates the way that classes are run. If the government is to get students, teachers and parents to embrace a more communicative approach it needs to be realized and implemented in the assessment. The initial steps have already been taken by introducing native teachers into elementary schools. However, this is wasted as students get older because their sole focus becomes passing exams to better their future educational opportunities.

The analysis of the EIKEN test reveals it to be inferior to the more established Cambridge FCE test; there is limited interaction and answers are easily rote learned. The test is practical in that it is easily mass produced and there is no difficulty for the examiner. If there is to be a departure from the current culture of grammar focused language education there needs to be a change at the level of testing, because it is clear that the test is dictating in class performance.

### REFERENCES

- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. (1996). *Language testing and practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benese Educational Research and Development center. (2009). First Basic Survey of English at Junior High School. Retrieved from [http://berd.benesse.jp/up\\_images/research/data\\_00\\_\(2\)](http://berd.benesse.jp/up_images/research/data_00_(2))
- Cambridge. (2016). Cambridge Assessment English. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/first/>
- Cheng, L., Watanabe, Y., & Curtis, A. (2004). *Washback in language testing: Research contexts and methods*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- EIKEN. (2010). Overview of The EIKEN Framework. Retrieved from <http://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/research>
- Eltcalendar. (2007). Who is STEP? And what is EIKEN? Retrieved from

<http://www.elcalendar.com/events/details/3664>.

Lazaraton, A. (2010). From close to consequences and beyond: An interview with Elana Shohamy. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 7, 255–279.

Miura, T., & Beglar, D. (2002). The EIKEN vocabulary section: Analysis and recommendations for change. *JALT Journal*, 24, 107–129.

Obunsha (2016). *EIKEN: Grade 3 past exam papers*. Tokyo: Obunsha.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2015). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rivers Wilga, M (Ed.). (1987). *Interactive language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Samimi, K., & Kobayashi, C. (2004). Toward the development of intercultural communicative competence: Theoretical and pedagogical implications for Japanese English teachers. *JALT Journal*, 26, 245–261.

Sakamoto, M. (2012). Moving towards effective English language teaching in Japan: issues and challenges. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 33, 409–420.

Sarich, E. (2012). Accountability and external testing agencies. *Language Testing in Asia*, 2, 1–19.

Thanhthien, T. (2014). FCE First Certificate in English Speaking Test. Retrieved from

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9pn3LWHAAdg&t=24s>

### **Appendix**

Sushi is famous all over the world. Sushi can be eaten at many cheap and delicious restaurants, so it is popular with families in Japan. Some people enjoy making sushi with friends at home.

### **About the Author**

Craig Jones is an Associate Professor at Aichi Prefectural University. He was born in Swansea, U.K. and grew up in Wales. He received his BA (in English Language and Literature) from The Open University and received his MA (in TEFL) from Swansea University. Craig has been living and teaching in Aichi for 10 years.

*E-mail:* jones@for.aichi-pu.ac.jp