

The New Direction in English Language Education: Reform of the University English Entrance Examination

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Abstract: It is said that Japanese people do not speak English well considering the amount of the time they spend studying it. There are many reasons for this, and one of them is the university English entrance examination. In the examination, the knowledge the examinees need has been almost the same for years, and it is reading, grammar, and vocabulary. Therefore, the students have not been motivated to learn other language skills. Considering this situation, the Japanese government cannot foster Japanese people with English ability even when they implement new language policies. In this paper, replacing the current English entrance exam with TOEFL is proposed as a solution, and its possibility is discussed.

Key words: English language education, university English entrance examination, TOEFL, washback effect

Introduction

In Japan, English is a foreign language, and majority of its people do not have to use it in their daily lives. Nevertheless, the importance of English language skills has been emphasized for a long time, and every child is required to learn English during his or her mandatory education. One plausible reason of this is globalization just like the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) mentions in their Lower and Upper Secondary School curriculum guideline handbooks. They emphasize the importance of English ability by referring to global competition and cooperation^{1,2)}. Therefore, it is believed by many Japanese people that globalization is very important in the twenty-first century³⁾. However, it is also commonly known by both of Japanese and foreign people that most Japanese people cannot use English well con-

sidering the amount of time they spend studying it. They study English for three years each in both lower and upper secondary schools and for two or four years more if they go to junior colleges or universities⁴⁾. However, Japanese have a trouble even with giving directions in English. Therefore, the need to improve English language education has been stressed for years, and it is clear to understand.

Over the last ten years or so, the MEXT has announced a series of policies concerning English language education. The first policy showed in 2002. It was called “Developing a strategic plan to cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’”⁵⁾ (below referred to as the Strategic Plan). This policy was backed up by the following 5 year-plan, “The National Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’”⁶⁾ (below referred to as the Action Plan) in 2003. After the MEXT implemented the Action Plan, there have been some improvements in Japan’s English language

education. However, the results were not as good as they had anticipated⁷⁾. Therefore, the MEXT needed to revise their policy and proposed a new one, “Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication”⁸⁾ (below referred to as the Five Proposals and Measures) in 2011.

Through these three policies, the MEXT has put great emphasis on communication skills with which Japanese people can understand and discuss with foreign citizens⁹⁾. To foster such skills, they have introduced several changes to Japan’s English education such as the official start of English classes at public elementary schools in 2011 and the establishment of Super English Language High Schools. However, what we have to change the most has not been radically changed for years, and that is university English entrance examinations. In addition, Shea stated the influential role of the university English entrance examinations on the English language education of Japanese high school students¹⁰⁾. From the standpoint of the current situation regarding English education and the influence of university English entrance exams on actual English language classes, it is clear that changing the current university English entrance exams would play a major role in reforming English language education in Japan. For a better change, although this suggestion need not be a final solution, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) can be a locomotive as the first step. This suggestion is made on the basis of the following three points. First point is more detailed understanding of the three MEXT’s policies briefly mentioned above, the second is a relationship between school education and university entrance examinations, and the third is the similarities in skills TOEFL measures and the MEXT targets.

1. The Three MEXT’s policies

1.1. Brief review of the three MEXT’s policies

As was pointed out in the previous section, MEXT has announced three policies, the Strategic Plan, the Action Plan, and the Five Proposals and Measures. Each policy had a purpose and has influenced on English language education in Japan. By learning what the policies are like

in details, we can find better ideas or directions of future English language education. Therefore, it is necessary to review each policy’s features below.

1. 2. The Strategic Plan

This policy presented targeted English abilities in using numerical standards, which required all students are expected to meet. The following quotation describes the standards the MEXT was aiming at:

The attainment targets of this strategic plan are to ensure that lower secondary school graduates acquire the ability to hold simple conversations comprising greeting and responses as well as a similar level of reading, writing and listening (English-language ability of graduates should be the third grade of the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) Test or Eiken, on average), and that upper secondary school graduates acquire the ability to hold normal conversations on everyday topics as well as a similar level of reading, writing and listening (English-language ability of graduates should be the second grade or pre-second grade of the STEP Test or Eiken, on average)¹¹⁾.

Moreover, the MEXT also set targeted numerical standard for Japanese English teachers. They are as follows: “STEP semi-first level, TOEFL 550 points, TOEIC 730 points”¹²⁾. The TOEIC stands for the Test of English for International Communication and “has set the standard for assessing English-language skills used in the workplace”¹³⁾. The MEXT thinks that better qualifying English teachers need to meet the level or the scores in those tests.

The fact that the MEXT published their goals in specific numerical standards should be welcomed. This is because with such clear standards, both of teachers and their students can work forward to attain them and also prove their English skills clearly. This point is one advantage of using such English language tests as the evaluation criteria. However, does the attainment of these standards really represent examinees’ English language abilities? There is a possibility that our English language education would simply focus on educational opportunities just to achieve those targeted levels and scores, and to assess people’s English language proficiencies. In short, our English language

education would focus more on short term effectiveness and would lose long term perspective¹⁴). Thus, it is hard to commend the idea of using the results of English language certification tests as an appropriate measurement.

1. 3. The Action Plan

According to the MEXT again, the Action Plan was a policy for achieving the targets presented in the Strategic Plan of 2002. It was announced a year after the announcement of the Strategic Plan and was a 5 year plan, listed meaning that the Action Plan was supposed to meet its targets by 2008. It targeted the following seven aims: “1. Improvement of English classes,” “2. Improving the teaching ability of English,” “3. Improving motivation for learning English,” “4. Improvement in the evaluation system for selecting,” “5. Support for English conversation activities in elementary schools,” “6. Improvement of Japanese language abilities,” and “7. Promotion of practical research”¹⁵). Were the Action Plan’s aims achieved? Had we completed the targets by 2008, and how had these aims been tackled or attained by 2008? Of course, the MEXT tried to improve Japanese students’ English language competence. However, it is hard to know exactly how much the students’ English skills were improved without seeing the results in figures. In order to improve English language education, we need to carefully analyze what changes the Action Plan brought.

After the implementation the Action Plan, there were changes in educational settings such as the official start of English classes in public elementary schools in 2011 and the establishment of Super English Language High Schools. Moreover, the official start of a listening test in the University Center Examination was a welcome innovation. In addition, although it was decided after the Action Plan had been implemented, it was included in the National Upper Secondary School Curriculum Guideline drawn up in 2009 that English language classes would start to be basically conducted in English in all high schools from start of the academic year of 2015¹⁶). Regarding the more detailed outcome of the Action Plan, Honna et al. evaluated it in their study report in terms of each of the 7 aspects, as well as 3 additional aspects which they compared with

four other Asian countries, Thailand, Malaysia, China, and Korea, where English language is taught in their school education like in Japan¹⁷).

Honna et al. identified the following upcoming challenges: “1. Clarification of the contents of instruction done in Japanese and in English,” “2. Implementing the instructional method in teachers’ trainings,” “3. Motivating students to learn English by creating opportunities to use English and checking its effectiveness,” “4. Revising entrance examinations being able to reflect students’ motivation to learn English,” “5. Dealing with the demands of elementary schools concerning the introduction of English language classes,” “6. Measuring the multiplier effect of Japanese and English classes,” “7. Specific suggestion for college level English language education¹⁸”. The figures of each aspect correspond with the figures in the previous paragraph. Of the seven aspects, the fourth and seventh aspects need to be emphasized more. This is because, in reality entrance examinations are deeply connected to students’ motivation for learning English¹⁹). Besides, from high school teachers’ point of view, university entrance examinations still have kept influence on the construction of their curriculum, since schools are unavoidably judged by the results of entrance examinations²⁰). Regarding the seventh aspect, if we could successfully develop a new entrance examination which enhances English language learners’ motivation to use English as a communication tool, it would be necessary for us to promote this attitude more throughout their college education or other higher education settings. Turning now to the MEXT’s reaction to the report of Honna et al., we can elucidate the future direction of English language education headed for after the two policies mentioned so far.

1. 4. The Five Proposals and Measures

This policy addresses the issues created by, and challenges identified through the Action Plan, but not all. According to the Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency, the following five proposals were made with the aim of improving English language education.

Proposal 1. English ability required of students – assessment and verification of attainment level

Proposal 2. Promoting students' awareness of necessity of English in the global society, and stimulating motivation for English learning

Proposal 3. Providing students with more opportunities to use English through effective utilization of ALTs, ICT and other means

Proposal 4. Reinforcement of English skills and instruction abilities of English teachers/Strategic improvement of English education at the level of schools and communities

Proposal 5. Modification of university entrance exams toward global society²¹⁾

The Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency did not clearly mention how each proposal addresses the seven aspects of the Action Plan. However, with careful clarification of the meaning of each proposal, it is possible to find links with the Action Plan. Specifically speaking, Proposals 1 and 4 relate to aspects 1 and/or 2, proposals 2 and 3 to aspect 3, and proposal 5 to aspect 4. Other aspects of the Action Plan were ignored; therefore, this means that the Commission may have not regarded the other aspects as important. In other words, the Commission might have reached a conclusion that the five proposals are sufficient for promoting better outcomes in English education and decided to focus on them. However, the other aspects also should not be ignored because they are policies which have been decided and have already been implemented in schools, such as English language classes in elementary schools.

So far we have outlined the MEXT's three policies. What needs to be changed at this juncture is the reform of university English entrance examinations. This is because as it has been stated above, the impact of them on English language education at schools cannot be ignored. Hence, I would like to pay attention to the relationship between school education and the university English entrance examination in the next part of this paper.

2. School Education and University English Entrance Examinations

2. 1. Brief review of the origin of modern school education

Before describing the current situation of English language education in schools in Japan, it is important to look at how the school education system was started and was developed. This is because official English language education in schools started with the establishment of national schooling, at a sort of the elementary school level²²⁾. In Japan, a nationwide public school system began in the Meiji era as a part of Japan's modernization movement. Through this modernization, Japan was trying to catch up with western countries in terms of industrial production and military strength. This is reflected in slogans of the period such as "Enrich the Country, Strengthen the Military" (fukoku kyouhei)²³⁾. At that time, schools were mainly expected to train a large number of Japanese citizens as a workforce which could sustain modern society's development, and to select a small number of its citizens as an elite to lead the country's future direction²⁴⁾. It means that the modern educational system started not because its citizens wanted or needed one, but because its government demanded one. Hence, everything was under the government's control. This system had lasted until the end of the Second World War.

2. 2. English language education before and after the World War II

The biggest difference between before and after the war was the status of English as a subject in schools. It was not until after the war that English language education was introduced to compulsory education. After the war, the Japanese school system was changed, and English was set as one of the essential subjects at the lower secondary school level. As was mentioned above, English language education had started even at the elementary school level in the Meiji era. However, it was a kind of selective subject, and English language classes were offered in the senior elementary school education, which is equivalent to school education between fifth grade at present-day elemen-

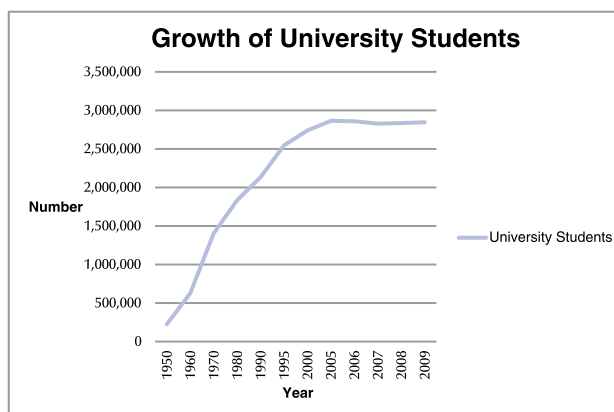


Fig. 1 *Growth of University Students*, created from MEXT School Basic Survey Website

tary schools and second grade at present-day junior high schools. This meant that each senior elementary school could decide whether or not it offered an English language class until the end of the World War II²⁵). After the war, English language education was established in the current school system. Moreover because of this change, the way of university English entrance examinations was also changed later. It was changed from a more subjective test into a more objective one²⁶).

2. 3. University English entrance exams and their influence on English language education

How was the university English examinations developed by today? Two studies have examined the development of university English entrance examinations. One of them was done by Brown and Yamashita, and the other was by Kikuchi. Brown and Yamashita^{27, 28}) analyzed the English entrance examinations of 20 Japanese colleges and universities and a nationwide test called the “Center Examination” in 1994. They mentioned the great difficulty of the reading passages, the number of difficult words used, and the high concentration of grammar questions in the tests. In 2004, Kikuchi conducted the same research as Brown and Yamashita did to see how college entrance examinations had been changed. He found that a few new tasks, such as summarizing passages and listening passages, had been added; however the skills required to pass the tests were basically the same. Examinees still have to

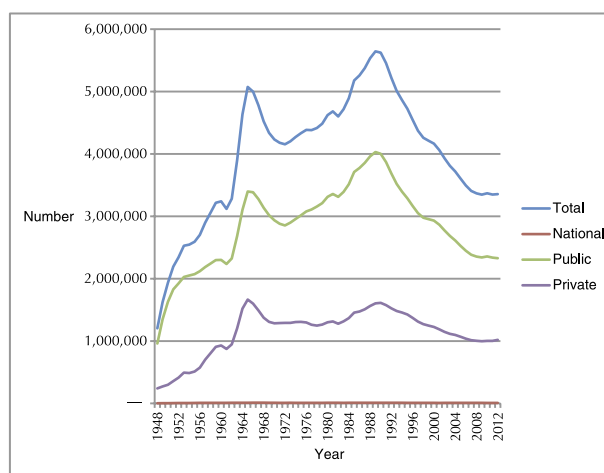


Fig. 2 *Number of High School Students*, created from MEXT School Basic Survey Website

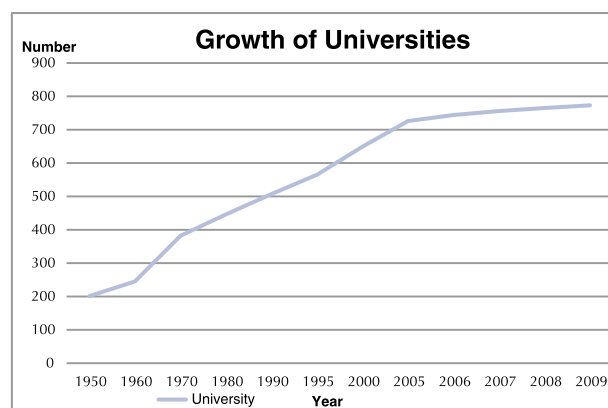


Fig. 3 *Growth of Universities*, created from MEXT School Basic Survey Website

be able to read and translate extremely difficult passages²⁹). Thus, English language education at high schools must have been oriented to acquire skills needed to pass university entrance examinations.

Moreover, as shown in Figure 1, the number of university students has been increasing. On the other hand, as shown in Figure 2, the number of high school students has been decreasing. This indicates that the role of university entrance examinations may no longer be screening tests. Moreover, some people may say that university entrance examinations are getting easier citing the data shown in Figure 3 that the number of universities has also been increasing. To have a better idea, we should also look at Figure 4 as well. As shown in Fig. 4, the number of appli-

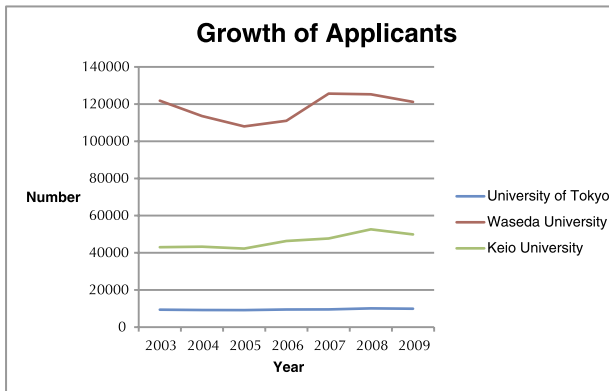


Fig. 4 *Growth of Applicants*, created from Yoyogi Seminar Website

cants at prestigious universities has been almost the same over the years. To be accepted by such universities, the applicants have to overcome stiff competition. This fact must have encouraged keeping the difficulty of entrance examinations to maintain and their roles as screening measures.

Under these circumstances, high school English teachers have no choice, and have to focus more on designing classes which help their students to prepare for university entrance exams. Therefore, Hiramatsu stated that it is hard for actual teachers to move from traditional teaching styles focusing on grammar, reading, and translation³⁰⁾. In this case, what would happen if the university English entrance examinations were replaced? In the next part, I would like to discuss the possibility of introducing the TOEFL as the university English entrance examinations.

3. The TOEFL and the MEXT's three policies

3. 1. What ability does the TOEFL measure?

The ETS explains the characteristic of the TOEFL in the following way:

The TOEFL test helps prove you have the English skills you will actually use in an academic classroom. In the test, you may read a passage from a textbook and listen to a lecture and then speak or write in response, just like you would in a classroom. Because the test is composed of 100% academic questions and tasks, many universities

consider it the most appropriate test to use when making admissions decisions³¹⁾.

Through the explanation of the TOEFL above, it is clear that the TOEFL has been designed to measure examinees' English skills in academic settings, and it includes four language skills in it. However, how do we know that the TOEFL measures the English skills required in academic settings? The TOEFL answers this question with specific figures.

3.2. What are the similarities and differences in the English abilities which the TOEFL and the Center Test measure?

Both of the tests have similarities in their purpose. They are both designed to measure how well the examinees will perform in their studies at universities. Scores of the test are used to determine the probability of their successes at universities. However, the contents of the test are different. While the TOEFL includes reading, listening, writing, and speaking, the Center Test only includes reading and listening. These differences mean that the ETS thinks four skills are necessary to accomplish its purpose, but the National Center for University Entrance Examinations does not.

Therefore, it is reasonable to say that English writing and speaking skills are not considered necessary skills for university education in Japan, or that these skills are considered measurable by checking one's reading and listening skills. When we remember the fact that most Japanese people have trouble in giving directions mentioned in the beginning of this paper, English skills measured through the Center Test is insufficient in terms of the English communication skills desired by the MEXT has desired. Thus, it would be meaningful to change the Center Test. This idea is also strengthened by the influence of the university entrance examinations have on high school education as mentioned above.

However, how do we know that the TOEFL measures the English skills required in academic settings and in other situations which require English as a communication tool? Let's look at how the ETS responds to these questions. The next section answers the first question. The section after the

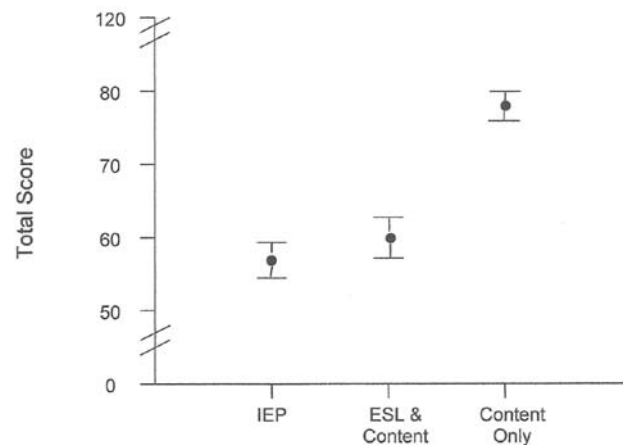
next answers the second question.

3. 3. Validity and Reliability of the TOEFL score

As shown in Figure 5, there are differences in the TOEFL scores among three different groups. The lowest score group is composed of students taking Intensive English Programs (IEPs), the second lowest is composed of those taking both English as a Second Language (ESL) and content courses, and the highest is composed of those taking only their content courses³²⁾. The Japan Association for Working Holiday Makers said that although each school has different required scores, examinees usually must score at least 61 and preferably more³³⁾.

As shown in Figure 5, examinees enrolling in content courses need to score around 61 or more than 61. However, the examinees only attending the content courses score around 80. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that for enrolment at universities in English speaking countries, students should achieve 80 in the TOEFL test. Over and above that, this score corresponds to the desired score for English teachers mentioned in the MEXT's three policies, the Strategic Plan, the Action Plan, and the Five Proposals and Measures. Thus, the reason the MEXT requires English teachers to score 80 in the TOEFL test must be that achieving this score means they would be able to actively participate in university classes in English speaking countries. Moreover, the MEXT must have regarded this level of English language skills as necessary in the future.

As for the reliability of the test, the ETS compiled Table 1. According to this table 1, the reliability estimate of the total score is 0.94³⁴⁾. Since 1.00 is perfectly reliable, it is clear that the TOEFL is a highly reliable test. In the other parts of the test, the reliability of writing is relatively lower compared to other parts of the test. Additionally, the writing and speaking sections are subjective tests. Therefore, how the ETS evaluates these two sections is questionable. As a countermeasure, the ETS uses a multiple raters' judgments system to keep it objective and to minimize raters' bias³⁵⁾. What is more, the examinees can have their writing and/or speaking of the tests rescored³⁶⁾. From the above, it is fair to consider the TOEFL is a reliable test for its purpose.



Mean total test score (+/- 95% CI) for test takers studying in English speaking countries who were enrolled in institutional English programs (IEP, $n = 208$), taking both ESL courses and content courses ($n = 285$) or only content courses ($n = 488$).

Fig. 5 *Validity of the TOEFL Score*, from TOEFL HOME Website

3. 4. How should we use the TOEFL with the MEXT's three policies in mind?

The MEXT has emphasized the importance of communicative competence in English through their three policies. In the Strategic Plan, it was expressed in the following way: "With the progress of globalization in the economy and in society, it is essential that our children acquire communication skills in English, which has become a common international language, in order for living in the 21st century."³⁷⁾ The Action Plan describes the importance of English by saying, "For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language"³⁸⁾. The Five Proposals and Measures states "We live in the age of increasing borderless flow of things, people and money. Nowadays, command of English is required in many fields."³⁹⁾ Considering the above, it is certain that the MEXT's purpose is to develop English language skills as a communication tool. As a measure for this purpose, the MEXT has examined the replacement of the current university English entrance examinations with the TOEFL through the three policies. Therefore, there arises one question, which is whether or not the TOEFL can improve Japanese student' English competence to communicate with foreign people.

With regard to this question, the ETS does not answer this question. Instead of giving an answer, the ETS shows their recognition of the importance of English as a communication tool and mentions a teaching manual to maximize the positive washback effect of the TOEFL and its classroom use⁴⁰⁾. This indicates that taking the TOEFL test itself does not develop the MEXT's desired English language skills. However, there is the fact that examinees scoring around 80 points can actively participate in universities classes in English speaking countries. Thus, it should be reasonable to assume that even though the TOEFL test itself does not develop examinees' communicative English language skills, it can be the foundation on which to develop such skills. This is because international students in English speaking countries do not only study with using English, but also have to live in the countries with using English. Through this kind of experience, they can develop communicative English language skills. Hence, we should think about how we can create a better educational environment, too if current university English entrance examinations were to be replaced with the TOEFL test and its implications for English education in Japan.

3. 5. The TOEFL as a university English entrance exam and then

In this section, I would like to discuss how English classes should be conducted in the future. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, if we were to introduce the TOEFL as a university English entrance exam, we would have to adjust our English language education. Unfortunately, at this moment, the MEXT does not have a specific answer addressing this concern. They only encourage universities to set standards on foreign language proficiency, e.g. 80 points in the TOEFL test on graduation from universities, and to increase more chances of study abroad or classes conducted in English⁴¹⁾. If so, how should we teach English? In answer to this question, Yamada stated that we should motivate students to express their ideas. Through this process, they would become more active English language learners and would be able to develop practical English ability⁴²⁾. In line with Yamada's point of view, Mizuno introduced his teaching approach which focuses

on students' language uses. The approach was called the "Interactive Writing Community (IWC) Project." In the IWC Project, students were given a topic and shared their ideas on an internet website, and the website eventually included other universities from all over the world later. As a result, the students could communicate with others internationally. Therefore, the students could realize different aspects of language or could regard English as a practical language through this approach⁴³⁾.

Conclusion

The MEXT has desires to develop English language skills and to this end it has implemented the three policies. Through these policies, changes have been made to English education in Japan. However, those changes did not achieve as the MEXT targets. This is because we still have kept the university English entrance examinations unchanged for years. We should change the university English entrance examinations to foster Japanese with better English ability among Japanese students. As a replacement for the current university English entrance exams, there is a great possibility that the TOEFL has much potential. Therefore, we should use the TOEFL test instead of the present university English entrance exams. However, we also need to reform university English education to maximize the benefit the TOEFL test can confer, otherwise it would just be a great burden on students.

The Future Direction of the study

In this paper, the potential of the TOEFL test as a replacement for the current university English entrance examinations has been discussed. However, what the present study has provided insufficient evidence to conclude that the TOEFL test is the best option to achieve what the MEXT targets. This is because this study has not demonstrated how effective the TOEFL test is at developing Japanese students' communicative competence in English with sufficient evidence based on scientific researches. In addition, it is also necessary to compare the English skills the TOEFL test assesses with the targeted English skills for

Japanese students. These limitations exist since the study is new and is still ongoing. Therefore, it is hard to gather reliable data as supporting evidence. The future direction of this study will require further research into the ability of the TOEFL test to measure English skills in the TOEFL test and in its impact on Japanese school education.

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