Examining the Overpowering Presence of Japan’s National Center Test in the Context of English Education

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Abstract
The National Center Test for University Admissions (NCT) is an annual, nationally held examination for applying to universities in Japan. The test is taken by many Japanese high school students aspiring to enter university, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. This thesis examines the English part of the test in regards to its effect on high school teaching and the set subject guidelines by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), as well as the clashes instigated by its purposes and role within the English education in Japan. The conclusion of the thesis is that the NCT’s current existence is incompatible with the larger-scale subject plan for English that is promoted by the MEXT, and that its overpowering focus either needs to be lessened or the aforementioned plan abandoned.

Keywords:
NCT, English education, juken eigo, purposes, MEXT, subject guidelines, university entrance exams
**Conventions:**

Japanese names are rendered with given name first, surname second in the following way: Tooru Hashimoto.

The Japanese transcription system used is *kana spelling*. For instance, a long vowel such as おう (ō in Hepburn) would become rendered as *ou*.

An exception is made for personal names where the person themselves has chosen to spell their name in a certain way in roman letters.

**Transcription example:**

*Japanese:* 高等学校学習指導要領解説 外国語編 英語編

*Transcribed:* Koutou gakkou gakushuu shidou youryou kaisetsu gaikokugohen eigohen

All references are given with page number(s), expect in cases where the reference is so broad it permeates the entire source, the source itself including its conclusion is indicative of the reference given, or in the case of a webpage or similar where no page numbers exist.
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1. Introduction

English education in Japan has a long history, stretching all the way from the Meiji Restoration to the present day, where its role as the most prominently taught language besides Japanese itself remains unchallenged (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006). Despite this Japan has, and is still, facing several issues with their English education. Osaka’s then-mayor Tooru Hashimoto stated the following in a speech in 2012:

The Japanese are the only Asians who cannot speak English. I also am invited to international conferences. The Chinese, the Koreans, the Vietnamese and also the Thai all speak fluent English. I am the only one with an interpreter. They all speak and laugh together in English. I laugh one minute later, because I need an interpreter. Why did I turn out like this? (Hashimoto 2012)

While the claim that the Japanese are the only Asians who cannot speak English is dubious, Hashimoto’s complaints are rooted in some reality. In the 2017 TOEFL test, which measures English skill, Japan achieved the third lowest score out of the 29 participating Asian countries (Education Testing Service 2017), an abysmal implication considering the country’s high rankings in other scales in Asia such as GDP or HDI. And this test is only one of many signs of the significant deficiencies in the English education of Japan; a fact commonly spoken of and even parodied in the west.

One factor identified by Locastro (1990, p. 343) as a shaping force behind the English education in Japanese high schools is the university entrance exams. These exams are held annually, and provide the most common way of embarking onto higher education. The most prominent of these exams is the National Center Test for University Admissions (in the text referred to as the NCT), which provides access to all public, and some private, Japanese universities. Among the subjects tested and required are foreign languages, such as English, German or Chinese. Students usually have to choose at least one of these languages to get accepted by their university – most choose English. According to Locastro (1990, p. 352), the focus on this entrance exam is so significant that most high schools adapt their education to help students pass these tests specifically. Locastro (1990, pp. 347-349) and Allen (2016, pp. 54-55) note that students tend to study intensely for these exams, with the downside becoming that the studying becomes based around passing the test, while long-time learning becomes placed on the back-burner. Allen (2016, p. 55) significantly notes that the overt focus on university entrance exams in high school means certain skills or proficiencies, such as speaking, are deemphasized in favor of skills featured on the tests.
This creates an obvious contradiction: the university entrance exams, and in particular the NCT, seem to clash with the intended lesson content and even cause a distortion in the skills taught and learned. While the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) emphasizes a varied four-skill approach and more ambiguous aptitudes such as critical thinking and communication in their subject guidelines, the NCT seems to actively work against this plan – forcing students to commit to short-term learning and a limited skill set instead. If this discrepancy is true, it very well might be a vital reason behind the inefficiency of Japan's English education.

Against this backdrop, the objective of my thesis becomes to examine the English part of the NCT when it comes to its influence, and to what degree it fulfills the set goals for English education. Aside from the self-stated purposes of the test-makers, one can also imagine the test fills the role of a transition between high school and university, meaning it is also relevant to look at to what degree the test can serve as a final examination of high school English. In summary, whether what appears on the NCT corresponds to English education in high school, both as seen in the subject curriculum and in the classroom itself. For instance, the recognition of the four skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading in the subject curriculum warrants investigation into what degree this is reflected in the NCT, etc.

My research questions thus become as follows:

- In the context of English education, to what extent, if any, does the NCT fulfill the purposes of MEXT's subject guidelines?
- In the context of English education, to what extent, if any, does the NCT serve as an effective transition point between high school and university?

2. Background of English Education in Japan

In this chapter I give a background to English education in Japan, initially from an historical point of view. I examine English proficiency among the Japanese population, and introduce the National Center Test as well as various important particularities of the Japanese school system and society that not every reader may be familiar with, as well as the discussion surrounding this. English education in this text refer to both the learning and teaching sides in the classroom.
2.1 History of English Education and Entrance Exams

English education in Japan began with the start of the Meiji Era, following a 200-year period of isolation from most foreign countries. Japan started sending emissaries abroad to study technology, politics and language, and bring it back to Japanese universities. Additionally, Japan invited many foreign scholars to teach of “their advanced knowledge such as technology, science, architecture, and medicine”, and also to teach foreign languages (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, p. 266). Fujimoto-Adamson refers to this beginning of the Meiji Era as an English boom, where the newly founded Ministry of Education focused its efforts on obtaining English facility, and English became the standard language used in lectures at Kaisei University, which would go on to become Tokyo University (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, pp. 264-268). English summarily became the foremost foreign language to learn, followed, but not overshadowed by, French and German, showing how important language education was for the Meiji Era Westernization (Cripps 2016, p. 2).

However, during the second half of the Meiji Era, English education and the view of it changed. In 1883 the official lecture language of Tokyo University was reverted to Japanese as many of the emissaries sent abroad to study returned home to replace the foreign teachers. English quickly went from a necessary tool to achieve higher education to just another school subject (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, pp. 266-269). Significantly, both grading and teaching became primarily focused on reading and writing rather than oral skills, something that Cripps (2016, pp. 2-3) claims is still felt today. Furthermore, this period saw the first rise of juken eigo, English taught for the purpose of passing university entrance examinations, as literature started being published with tips specifically aimed at those taking the exams (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, pp. 268-269).

In 1947 the ministry presented their Course of Study, which standardized lesson content in the English classes (Cripps 2016, pp. 3-4). In 1956, Japanese business leaders publicly called for improvements in the teaching of practical English in schools, to make sure Japan would be able to stay relevant during the postwar economic boom. An Oral Communication class was introduced in 1989, marking the first time the government directly tried to improve the students’ oral abilities through curriculum reform, although this change did not reach all the way to the university entrance exams (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, p. 274, pp. 277-278). This reform was notably the first time the word “communication” was used in the Course of Study (Yoshida 2003, p. 291). This was followed by the declaration in 2003, that the national plan was to “cultivate Japanese who can use English” (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, pp. 277-278). In 2011, the Course of Study was revised into what Cripps calls the New Course of Study, in which among
other things English class hours are increased, and perhaps most importantly the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking are heavily emphasized (Cripps 2016, pp. 5-6).

It remains to be seen however if this reform will finally mend the problems of English education in Japan, one of which is the university entrance exams, or if, like Cripps claims, it will like various other English education reforms not result in “meaningful change” (Cripps 2016, pp. 23-25).

2.2 The National Center Test for University Admissions

The National Center Test for University Admissions (NCT) is an annual test held in winter which mediates access to all Japanese public, and some private, universities. The test is created and managed by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations (NCUEE), which is an institution under the control of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The nationally held NCT is commonly used as an initial filter by universities, who following the test administer their own specific exam to the aspiring students – thus making the application process in many cases twofold.

The NCT has more than 500,000 annual test-takers in locations all over Japan. A number of tests are administered in a variety of subjects which the examinees themselves choose. Among the subjects tested and required for most universities are foreign languages, such as English, German or Chinese – invariably most students choose English, the language most commonly taught in their secondary education.

As has been pointed out by several researchers these last decades, the NCT has a huge influence on the focus and contents of high school English classes (Perche 2002, Yoshida 2003, Stewart 2009, Allen 2016, Cripps 2016), even causing teachers to purposely stray from the curriculum to properly prepare their students for the test (Perche 2002, pp. 30-33).

2.3 English proficiency of Japanese people

In the 2017 edition of the TOEFL test,¹ which measures the English proficiency of non-native applicants to English-speaking universities, Japanese examinees achieved the third lowest average score out of the entire Asian region (with 29 participating countries), sharing the spot with Afghanistan while only Laos and Tajikistan ranked lower. Additionally, when looking at

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¹ Test of English as a Foreign Language.
only the speaking part of the test, there was no Asian country with a score lower than, or equal to, Japan’s (Education Testing Service 2017).

Similarly, on other English proficiency tests such as the work-related TOEIC, the Japanese have on average scored low compared to Asia and the world (Terasawa 2014, pp. 67-68).

There does exist an argument that these tests may not paint an accurate picture of the English proficiency of Japanese people as a whole, as TOEFL is aimed at aspiring foreign students, while TOEIC is used to screen workers for business communication purposes (Terasawa 2014, p. 68). In other words, for example the TOEFL test would only measure the English proficiency of those wishing to live and study abroad, which may skew the results (Terasawa 2014, pp. 68-70).

Using another survey, ASES-2000, for which the participants are randomly picked, Terasawa nevertheless reaches the conclusion that Japanese people have low English proficiency by international standards, but that it cannot be concluded that they have the lowest proficiency in all of Asia (Terasawa 2014, pp. 70-74).

In their annual survey of 2016, MEXT presented the results of that year’s STEP Eiken test, which tests all the four skills (speaking, listening, writing, reading) and consists of different grades for students in various stages of their education. The survey showed the average passing rate of junior high school students on the third level of Eiken: 36.1% (down 0.5% from the previous year) and of high school students on the second level: 36.4% (up 2.1%) – with both results being noted as significantly below the goal of 50% (MEXT 2016). The test is notably used to measure the English proficiency of students, and can also replace the English part of a school’s entrance examination.

Beyond the students, it is also relevant to look at English teacher skills and fluency, as this is without doubt tied to their success at teaching. According to Green (2016, pp. 135-136), Japanese English teachers tend to hold their classes in Japanese and primarily focus on reading materials. This is often because of a lack of confidence in their own communication skill, and thus their ability to teach it (Komiya Samimy and Kobayashi 2004, pp. 252-253). Many teachers have to rely on native English speakers, so-called ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers).

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2 Test of English for International Communication.
4 A test administered by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP).
employed through the JET Programme,5 to do the oral exercises – although this can easily reinforce the negative stereotype that even Japanese English teachers cannot speak English (Komiya Samimy and Kobayashi 2004, pp. 252-253). Poor levels of language proficiency among Japanese teachers remains a common issue, and may be why they commonly employ the criticized grammar translation method, as it is easy for teachers to learn and is in many cases the same way they once learned English (Perche 2002, p. 51, Green 2016, pp. 138-139). Another reason this method survives in the classroom may be that it is often required for the university entrance exams (Perche 2002, p. 50).

2.4 Unique aspects of English Education in Japan

One particularity of the Japanese education system is the prominence of university entrance exams, of which the aforementioned NCT is the most notable. These exams are commonly focused on during the senior year of high school, and many teachers make the students invest considerable time and energy into these preparations, as high school grades and other achievements are often disregarded when applying to university. So many students feel immense stress over these exams that the expression shiken jigoku, or examination hell, has become commonplace (Locastro 1990, p. 344).

One concept related to the English part of these exams is juken eigo, the type of English that appears on university entrance exams. Juken eigo tasks commonly consist of reading, translating, grammar-related tasks, et cetera – in other words tasks that notably differ from MEXTs English curriculum, which since 1989 has included an emphasis on oral skill and communication as one of its focal points (Stewart 2009, pp. 9-10). Because of this, and due to the immense importance of these exams, teachers often feel forced to deemphasize the teaching of communicative skills in their classes, instead focusing on skills covered by the entrance exams, and thus ignoring the curriculum (Perche 2002, pp. 28-34). In addition to reasons such as genuinely wanting their students to achieve success, many teachers are further motivated to do this by the fact that they are partially evaluated by what ratio of their students successfully pass their entrance exam (Perche 2002, p. 30). The very existence of juken eigo as a phrase, implying English taught not for the sake of fluency, might be considered indicative of the problems associated with the university entrance exams, while shiken jigoku represents the perhaps-too-great focus on them.

5 A Japanese government project that employs foreign university graduates as assistants in English classes.
Brown and Yamashita (1995) and later Kikuchi (2006) have after surveying the English part of several university entrance examinations also made the argument that it is testwiseness, rather than actual language proficiency, which is promoted in the exams and thus also in the classroom. For example, a student may have to use a certain translation or grammar skill when solving a task, or detailed knowledge such as of word accentuation that even native speakers may not know of (Brown and Yamashita 1995, pp. 26-29, Kikuchi 2006, p. 94). According to Koike and Tanaka (1995, pp. 18-19), English language teaching in Japan has grown to a remarkable industry, consisting of everything from *juken eigo* literature to *juku*. *Juken eigo* literature exists as one way to teach the aforementioned testwiseness – in the form of books geared towards a specific test such as the NCT, in which commonly appearing words or test patterns are presented. Similarly, Allen (2016) argues that *juku*, or cram schools, fill very much the same purpose. In his paper, Allen surveyed students at Tokyo University, the most prestigious university in Japan, about their experiences at cram school prior to taking the entrance exam. He found that most of the participants (133 out of 190) had attended cram school, where they near exclusively prepared for the entrance exam through exercises involving grammar, listening or going through past exams. Skills rarely featured on exams, such as speaking or creative exercises, were not trained at all. Accordingly, the students felt their skills in reading and listening increased, while they lost motivation to practice oral and creative exercises. Allen found that students attending cram school to prepare for their university entrance exam have a higher pass rate than students who do not. He concludes that *juku* promote and develop test-taking skills, although their teaching methods will also likely change if the entrance exams do (Allen 2016).

When it comes to the skills tested by the NCT, from which speaking and writing are notably absent, Watanabe (2013, pp. 567-568) gives the scale of the NCT as a reason. Since the exam is nationally administered with more than half a million participants each year, questions involving speaking are naturally hard to implement. The same applies to writing, as the need to evaluate the answers subjectively rather than objectively arises. As the correct answers to the NCT are released immediately after the test, all questions need to be objective and arbitrary with no potential for interpretation or creativity. The speed at which the exam needs to be evaluated and graded also disallows the emergence of either of the productive skills.

Because of this, universities are recommended to test these skills in the second round of examinations, administered by the universities themselves rather than the NCUEE (Watanabe

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6 Japanese cram schools that are extracurricular and privately owned.
The lower number of applicants along with the specific needs of each department allows for more expressive entrance exams, such as English essay writing or even spoken English interviews. Nevertheless, many universities still forgo the speaking skill in their exams (Kikuchi 2006), while high school teachers are unlikely to focus more on speaking just to cater to the individual needs of some students who are taking second-stage examinations where this is necessary (Allen 2016). Instead, private English Conversation Schools are likely to be employed instead in these cases (Allen 2016). This creates a cycle that is hard to break. According to Perche (2002, p. 176), students do not want to have their speaking tested in the entrance exams, because they did not study it enough in school. Knowing this, many universities balk at changing their entrance exams out of fear of scaring away prospective students (Perche 2002, p. 33). Furthermore, Kikuchi (2006, pp. 94-95) suggests universities know they will not get more applicants from changing the exams, and thus do not, a fact that should doubtlessly become more important as the population of Japan declines and universities struggle to retain their student numbers.

3. Purposes of English Education in Japan
Here I bring up the purposes, intents and roles of Japan’s English education and university entrance exams. These purposes are considered both as stated and desired by the agencies such as MEXT, but also beyond that – as in what the purpose becomes once it evolves beyond the planned curriculum. This kind of purpose, although not official or perhaps not even intended, is nevertheless as important as it fills a practical role overseen by the education authorities. More concretely, this section will introduce the NCT as a transitional middle ground between high school and university, a role it is undeniably and unofficially assigned. This in spite of its seeming failure at it, as indicated by the curriculum-classroom disconnect in English education.

3.1 English Class Curriculum and Guidelines by MEXT
The importance of developing all of the four language skills has been a goal of the MEXT since 1960, when the Council of Improvement of English Teaching proposed measures to make listening and speaking exercises as equally emphasized as reading and writing (Koike and Tanaka 1995, p. 18). Similarly, ever since 1989, when the Oral Communication class was for the first time introduced, there has been a stated aspiration from the MEXT of developing the students' communicative skill in English (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, p. 277). These two goals are emphasized in the recent 2018 curriculum plan for English as well, wherein it is made clear
that English classes have to be varied and well-planned to properly incorporate these elements (MEXT 2018).

The reason behind this is explained in MEXT’s English curriculum guidelines. In the 2009 guidelines, English is described as an important skill in the globalizing world as it allows for communication (MEXT 2009, pp. 2-3). Several Japanese business leaders have expressed the importance of English skill and the economic benefits it brings, having established the domestic STEP Eiken test to screen “practical” English speakers (Fujimoto-Adamson 2006, pp. 274-275). This focus on practical English is not unlikely the reason behind the twofold focus on communication and the four language skills. In fact, after decades of critique against the impractical grammar translation method and exam-oriented approach of Japanese ELT (Perche 2002, pp. 50-51), these English guidelines changes may point to a conscious swing toward a sort of English proficiency more applicable in everyday life. In the 2018 English guidelines, one of the most emphasized focuses is to teach students “what they achieve by knowing English” – a clear move in this direction (MEXT 2018, pp. 2-3). The point of this addition seems to be addressing the risk that if the students do not feel the English they are learning will become useful in their post-education life, then their approach towards learning it will be affected. In the opening statement of the 2018 guidelines, English is described as something not only useful in one’s future career, but also in other ways throughout one’s entire life, further emphasizing this new philosophy of teaching. Meanwhile, another goal of the 2018 guidelines is to make sure English classes are the same across different schools to achieve consistency in the education (MEXT 2018).

The guidelines also put a great focus on active learning, emphasizing that it is important for students to learn to be able to debate and express their own opinions about what they learn in class (McMurray 2018). In the guidelines this also doubles as reviewing and repeating, as it is suggested the teacher brings up subjects and topics from past lessons to have the students discuss them. Additionally, specifically defined debate and discussion classes have newly been added to the English class roster, providing ample opportunity for these exercises (MEXT 2018).

The importance of the four language skills is described as lying in the prerequisites for communication. Without the receptive skills of reading and listening, students cannot take in enough information to form their own opinions and thoughts – while naturally they cannot express them without the expressive skills of writing and speaking. To be able to express one’s opinion using these skills is thus one of the major stated goals of the MEXT guidelines. Finally, one thing of note is that, in the recent 2018 guidelines, one of the four skills has been further divided into two; as speaking has been split into presentation and conversation (MEXT 2018).
From this, we can see that the stated, and desired, purpose of English education is clear: to produce English speakers capable of stating and forming their own opinions, capable of making use of English in their daily life in a globalizing world, and who do not shy away from learning more. In other words, to prepare a generation of people for practical communication, both mentally and skill-wise.

3.2 The Effect of University Entrance Exams on English Education
According to Stewart (2009), the contents of the NCT as well as the pressure associated with the test are major forming factors when it comes to the actual English education in high school. Many teachers know their students’ results on the NCT will determine their futures, and thus willfully defer from MEXT’s curriculum, which they consider does not prepare students for the test – and instead focus solely on receptive skills rather than teaching the four skills/communicative approach recommended in the subject guidelines (Koike and Tanaka 1995, pp. 23-24, Green 2016, pp. 139-142). Additionally, teachers often feel pressure to have their students succeed in the test because they get evaluated based on their pass rate (Perche 2002, p. 30).

Researchers have also found that reading tasks featured on the NCT are generally more difficult than reading tasks appearing in high school textbooks. This imbalance might mean teachers have to allocate comparatively more time to preparing students for the reading parts, while also encouraging extracurricular activities such as cram schools (Chujo and Hasegawa 2004, Underwood 2010, pp. 178-180).

Since skill in speaking plays no part in the NCT, teachers tend to deemphasize these exercises, especially during the senior year of high school. This is a problem that has persisted throughout MEXT’s many reforms to the Course of Study, such as the 1989 Oral Communication change, and one that is likely to persist so long as the NCT does not incorporate oral exercises (Perche 2002, pp. 29-31, 44-47). Conversely, high school students may pay less attention to any speaking exercises appearing in class, knowing these skills will not be relevant for the upcoming NCT (Perche 2002, p. 31).

As mentioned earlier, students also allocate considerable attention to preparations for the NCT, to the point of examination hell becoming a commonplace phrase. The test becomes tantamount, its importance always pressed by parental figures, teachers and fellow students. During these circumstances, it would in fact be unreasonable for students to focus on anything but the skills and questions appearing on the test. It will never be the students’ duty to follow
the curriculum, that task falls to the teacher and other authoritative forces in the classroom. The task that falls upon the students is to always try their best to achieve whatever goal these figures put up for them. The extensively trafficked cram schools fill a similar role, as students merely make use of them to succeed in the entrance exams, which to them have been set up as the objective of utmost importance.

Furthermore, as is discussed in 2.4, the second-stage university exams are built up to be a net testing the skills the NCT does not. However, many universities balk at differing from the students’ expectations, and end up forgoing some of these skills still. Meanwhile, the overwhelming importance and scale of the NCT means teachers are likely to focus on its aspects rather than the differing and individual second-stage exams that come after. In other words, meaning so long as the NCT does not change, or the focus on it lessens, the lesson content in high school is also unlikely to.

In conclusion, both teachers and students are immensely affected by the university entrance exams, to the point of purposely straying from the set curriculum. This implies any changes to the impact and result of English education cannot come through revision of the guidelines alone. This blame cannot be put on the students, and while the teachers are the ones to consciously create this discrepancy, they too do it out of perceived necessity for the sake of their students and themselves. Whatever solutions are considered in the future, it is clear they have to in some way be tied to the overpowering presence of the entrance exams.

3.3 Purposes of the University Entrance Exams and the NCT

The primary purpose of the NCT, as stated by the administrators of the test: the National Center for University Entrance Examinations (NCUEE), is to “provide information that is to be used as part of selecting students for university admission” (Watanabe 2013, p. 566). Entrance exams, including the NCT, are the most common screening procedure in the admission process, with a much smaller number of students entering through other means such as recommendations. Additionally, another function of the NCT is to improve and enforce the Course of Study and thus improving pre-college-level teaching (Watanabe 2013, p. 566). Teachers have to adapt to the difficulty level and content of the NCT, thus making the test a powerful tool in this way.

Watanabe (2013, p. 566) describes the NCT as an achievement test and a certification test. Students have their level of skill tested, while also validating everything they have learned up until that point, with a “pass” certifying their success. Conversely, Guest (2008, p. 89) argues that the NCT is not an achievement test in that it is not meant to certify practical skill, nor does
it accurately test all aspects of the student’s English proficiency. Instead, Guest describes the test as a placement test, used to help the student realize their own level and chance of success during the secondary entrance exams following the NCT, and helping them make a suitable choice. It also has the purpose of ascertaining the students have the academic aptitude to study at university level (Guest 2008, pp. 89-91). Thus the purpose of the test in this case would not be to measure the students’ growth in accordance with the Course of Study, but in making sure their studying skill, or testwiseness, is sufficiently up to par to survive tertiary education. Certainly, the absence of two of the four language skills as well as the pre-test cram school focus make a lot more sense in this context.

This, however, creates a tangible disconnect between the actual reality of testwiseness versus the stated purpose of the test as an enforcer of the Course of Study. The NCT has, as discussed above, a significant effect on the English high school classroom; making it seemingly work against itself in regard of the communicative four skills-approach of the Course of Study. If the NCT is viewed with so much importance by teachers and students alike in the senior year of high school, and if it is the vision of NCUEE to have the NCT strengthen and comply with the MEXT guidelines – then in practicality the test fills the role of a final examination from high school, and thus as a transitional middle ground between secondary and tertiary education, regardless of whether it successfully fulfills these two roles or not.

4. Examining the NCT

4.1 Difference in English Levels between High School and NCT

If we assume that the NCT acts as a final examination/transition point between high school and university, then it is important to look at to what degree its contents are the same as what is taught in high school. It is immediately evident from that the test forgoes entire areas like speaking or writing, but to examine what level of proficiency the test features as well as how this proficiency ranks compared to high school English is critical.

In this regard, a distinction may need to be made. It has already been made clear that the English recommended by the MEXT in their guidelines is not the same as the English that is taught in the classroom. Thus, the answer must become twofold: to what extent the MEXT curriculum, as well as the classroom English, correlates to and prepares students for the NCT.

Looking at the MEXT guidelines – which emphasize teaching a four skills-approach, the want and skills to establish communication, as well as helping students understand what they can achieve by knowing English – it becomes clear that the NCT in its current form does not
vie to become the culmination of these goals. The memorization and arbitrary nature of the test
tasks do not inspire students to seek communication, nor do they show what students can
achieve by knowing English – since proficiency in English wanes in importance compared to
learned testwiseness, as has been earlier established. With this knowledge, it is no strange thing
that most teachers choose to ignore the guidelines during the preparation for the NCT, since
actually following them would ironically give a disadvantage during the test.

As for the official teaching materials, Chujo and Hasegawa (2004) and later Underwood
(2010) have investigated English textbooks and discovered that university entrance exams
generally feature much harder texts and tasks than what appear in high school textbooks. The
difficulty of the NCT itself seems harder to pinpoint, although the texts appear to be getting
harder each year in comparison to high school. Guest (2008, p. 102) claims the texts of the NCT
had a much higher difficulty level in 2006 compared to in 1981, while Underwood (2010, p.
180) has noticed continued difficulty growth following this. According to Guest (2008, p. 90),
this is because the average score has been getting higher and higher, forcing the NCUEE to
make the test harder. Considering the constant competition to get into the best universities, it
becomes logical that many students take to cram school because they cannot get sufficient
preparation through school alone – while all the while the NCT itself evolves beyond the
English textbooks along with any other vision MEXT seems to have for the English subject.

Seemingly, from what has been established so far, most or any success the students find
on the NCT stems from the teacher’s proportionate focus on it, as well as the aforementioned
cram schools and the students’ focus itself. English teachers know that their juken eigo-
approach works, and are not likely to change it until the entrance exams themselves change
(Perche 2002, p. 33, Cook 2013, pp. 25-26). Meanwhile preparatory juken eigo literature, being
privately published, will always change as the test does, providing information that the English
textbooks cannot. Since the scores on the test have been rising (Guest 2008, p. 90), we can
assume that despite the subject guidelines’ irrelevance to the NCT, the learning methods
employed by students are sufficient for the level featured on the test. This implies if there are
any entrance exam-related faults in the English education in high school, it is not brought on
by a lack of hard work from the side of the teachers or students, nor in the gap of difficulty
between the official material and the test content, but in the layout and presence of the NCT
itself.
4.2 Washback Effects, Testwiseness and Student Views

Allen (2016) makes a case that the university entrance exams of Japan have a strong washback effect, whose sway is hard to predict. The huge emphasis on the exams, and the NCT in particular, means not only that skills not appearing on the test are deemphasized, but also that short-term learning becomes the de facto manner of studying. This ties in with the earlier mentioned testwiseness brought up by Brown and Yamashita (1995) and Kikuchi (2006), in that students study only for the sake of passing the exam and not to achieve long-term proficiency or communicative competence, thus working against the goals set by the MEXT. Green (2014, pp. 12-15) further finds in his survey of Japanese students that although the receptive skills tested on English exams are perceived as useful for university studies, the omitted skills – such as speaking – are also viewed as important at university. Furthermore, Green (2014, pp. 20-25) and Allen (2016) both in their surveys find that Japanese students and teachers are aware of the problems with English education and their ties to the entrance exams, and identify general wants to move away from the current system. Meanwhile, Perche (2002, pp. 123-126) finds that high school students are generally dissatisfied with their English classes and have a negative view of the language in general, which is attributed to the grammar translation teaching approach. Perche (2002, p. 76) also observes that student motivation to learn English drastically drops upon completing the entrance exams and entering university.

To summarize, the university entrance exam system fundamentally works against the MEXT English guidelines and is not perceived as featuring all the skills necessary for tertiary education. Students and teachers both seem to be trapped in the current system of disobeying the curriculum and preparing for the ever-looming exams. Breaking free is unlikely without outside intervention – as discussed earlier, teachers have many reasons for their exam-focused behavior, while students will always work to succeed based on what the education brought up in the classroom is. This all in spite of an existing awareness of the current problems, and of the huge stress brought on by the exams, causing widespread dislike of the subject in general. When seeing all this, the MEXT’s focus on communication, the four skills and teaching the students what they can achieve by knowing English makes sense – in theory if the current guidelines were successfully adhered to, English proficiency would certainly increase. Despite this, the problematic exams, whose high-stakes presence overshadows the last year of high school, seem for some reason untouchable.
4.3 English Proficiency and Usage at University

As to the usefulness and application of the English taught by the NCT in university, there exists conflicting views. On one hand, the opinion that the test’s focus on reading prepares students for academic work seems to be the most widespread, and is one of the most common arguments for the current format of the test (Widdows and Voller 1991, p. 130, Benson 1991, pp. 34-35). Many university students seem to share this view of the English language as well (Benson 1991, p. 36, Perche 2002, pp. 104-108). On the other, there exists the aforementioned viewpoint that the NCT English’s application lies not in the ability to conduct academic work, but in the opportunity to demonstrate intelligence and potential for the university entrance process (Butler 2007, pp. 89-91, Green 2016, p. 136). While the two purposes doubtlessly coexist to some degree, it seems the former is closer to an ideal, an optimal state present in the eyes of MEXT and students alike – while the latter is observed reality. Benson (1991, pp. 44-45) and Perche’s (2002, p. 76) surveys of students, indicating little to no English usage outside the classroom and declining motivation to study English post-entrance exam, support this idea. Perche (2002, p. 31) further posits that the English level at university still is surprisingly low in comparison to the level of the exam, because the exam does not teach English usage.

As a result, most university students still do not feel comfortable using English, whether for academia or communication. The language remains enclosed to the classroom only, just like in high school, but now without the one existing impetus of the NCT. However, while the driving force of the test is gone, bad memories associated with it will remain (Perche 2002, pp. 123-128, Green 2014, pp. 18-20, Allen 2016). English becomes something merely for entering university, an effect amplified by the huge importance of high-ranking universities (Cook 2013, pp. 23, 25-26) and perpetuated by the undeniable focus on the entrance exams. In conclusion, neither the purpose nor the conclusion of the NCT becomes skill in conducting academic work or communication, because the culmination happens earlier – upon successfully entering university. If reading academic texts in English is the goal, then longer-period essay exercises as well as exploration and exposition to various subjects in high school should serve better than the objectively-based NCT. And while the headhunting aspects of the test scores is valuable to the universities, they are currently working against the set goals of the education, while also resulting in few positive skill- and mind sets afterwards. If one considers the ambitious goals set by the MEXT, students enter university with an embarrassing lack of language skill. If we were to replace English with another subject such as math, the failure would become astounding – students who have merely picked up a fraction of the skill described in the curriculum
guidelines, and whose practical skill seemingly does not match the level of the entrance exam they just passed.

4.4 Upcoming Changes to the NCT

Partially in response to the widespread criticism of the NCT and university entrance exam system, the MEXT plans to change the tests starting in 2020 to comply with their new subject guidelines (McMurray 2018). The changes will be part of the more widespread focus on communication and active learning, with the focus being to teach students to debate and express themselves in English by using a four skill-approach. The layout of the test itself has as goal to prioritize critical thinking rather than memorization and arbitrary translation techniques. Furthermore, the entrance exam process will be transformed so to “balance the four competencies” (Shimomura 2014).

Although the changes look promising, it remains to be seen whether they will result in meaningful improvement or end up changing nothing in the grand scheme of things as so many other ideas have. For instance, Haebara (2018) worries that the undue focus on the four skills will in fact work against the purposes of education when featured on a test. Since the skills will be individually tested, larger proficiencies such as communication, that depend on a simultaneous combination of several skills, will fall out of focus (Haebara 2018, pp. 83-85). If this were to happen, it would not be unlikely for the testwiseness-approach, with juken eigo literature geared to each test-part and skill, to live on and adapt, while the actual goals of the curriculum are ignored in the learning process. The necessary objectively formatted questions of the NCT will also always lend itself to this approach. Furthermore, Cripps (2016, pp. 23-25) is skeptical about the past reforms of the MEXT and fears future reforms can also become superficial if not implemented on a practical level. By looking at the past decades of changes to the English education, and the still remaining problems, this certainly does not seem unfamiliar: MEXT carefully outlining the ideal education system in their guidelines, yet without the power to actually convey their ambitions to the classroom. Perhaps, if this latest attempt at reaching the teachers and students by modifying the entrance exams themselves does not succeed, the disproportional focus on the exams themselves should be discussed within the MEXT next.

5. Discussion

So does the NCT fulfill the purposes of MEXT’s English education?
From 3.1 we can see that MEXT’s goals for English education are clear: to produce English speakers that are capable of critical thinking and practical communication. English speakers that can flourish, hold their own and advance in a globalizing world society, whether for the purpose of business or recreation. Capable Japanese English speakers unlike the politician I mentioned in the introduction, Tooru Hashimoto, who felt ashamed he was the only one in international meetings needing an interpreter and thus felt left out. At some level, these goals represent a very basic concern for any nation – the wish to be respected and known to be capable of nothing less than any other country. An image quite unlike the current stereotype of the Japanese English speaker. If MEXT’s stated goals for the English education were to be materialized in reality, then this stereotype would certainly fade away.

Upsetting this is the current university entrance exam system, and above all the NCT. The overpowering focus on the test means the skills and questions featured on it will always be the focus in the classroom. Problematizing this further is the limited potential of the test questions, which must always be objective and arbitrary in nature. Effectively this means there is little room for productive and subjective instruction in the English classroom, especially in the senior year of high school. Simply put, the focus on the NCT will always overwrite any changes to the curriculum viewed as non-relevant to the test – no matter how effective the changes may look on paper in improving the students’ English proficiency.

In fact, students only seem to succeed thanks to the teachers purposely straying from the curriculum to focus on test, as well as through external means such as cram schools. Absurdly enough, this means students are succeeding in spite of the official subject guidelines, rather than because of them. This does not only become a non-sustainable system, but also completely pointless.

From this we can draw a simple conclusion. The NCT and MEXT’s English goals are not compatible in purpose, and in fact seem to cancel each other out. The NCT may fill the role of a transitional middle ground between secondary and tertiary education, as speculated in the second question and proven in 3.3, but it also does not prove successful in this role, instead just necessarily filling it because of the focus heaved upon it in high school. For all intents and purposes, MEXT seems to be ruining themselves and their own ambitions with the NCT. Thus the answer to the first question posed in the introduction: the NCT does not seem to fulfill the intents of MEXT’s English subject guidelines, but instead seems to be actively preventing them.

Whether the test fulfills its own purposes seems impossible to unlikely at best. Its stated desire to comply with and strengthen the MEXT guidelines naturally fails immediately as the carefully laid-out communicative four-skill approach gets no attention on the test. Meanwhile
it remains doubtful whether the NCT helps students prepare academically for tertiary education, as university students seem less motivated to study English upon passing the test and also still do not feel comfortable using English. The only purpose the test does seem to somewhat fulfill is allowing universities to pick and choose from the students who have mastered the testwiseness skill the most, as opposed to actual long-term proficiency within the English subject. In conclusion, the NCT fails largely at its role as a transition point between high school and university, answering the second question posed in the introduction.

As is discussed in 4.4, even the upcoming reforms to the NCT may not prove sufficient to combat this self-perpetuating contradiction. The large scale of the exam means questions always have to be kept as objective and arbitrary as possible, while large skills such as practical communication may remain out of focus because of the testwiseness-approach being newly applied to skills such as writing, opening new doors for *juken eigo* literature. Above all, any reforms of the past, such as the revisions to the Course of Study or the addition of a listening segment to the NCT, seems to have resulted in little to no positive change in the larger picture – validating concerns that this change too might just disappear in the wind.

If this upcoming change does prove inefficient, then it will become clear there is only one change left that would make any sense: to remove or lessen the focus of the NCT itself. In the current state, students and teachers are both trapped in a vicious cycle of conforming to the overpowering presence of the test. This cycle is not something they can break free from so long as the test remains the effective culmination of secondary education and very nearly the only way to move on to the next stage of education. Nor should they be expected or morally obliged to break free, as students and teachers both are doing their best to interpret and succeed despite the clash of educational purposes. Instead that duty will fall to the MEXT, whose ambitions so obviously misalign with the testwiseness and *juken eigo* culture that has resulted from the presence of the NCT. One possible solution is to not have every student apply to university through the NCT, but instead put a greater focus on, and perhaps even fund, the more subjectively-oriented individual university exams. Rules and a system could be made, making sure practical communication among other curriculum goals would be tested. Another potential solution would be to have students apply to university with their grades from high school, which can be measured based on how closely the student’s skill set aligns with the curriculum goals.

Doubtlessly, many practical ways of lessening the focus on the NCT can be crafted by the MEXT and scholars should that day come, and it is not this essay’s purpose to speculate on what solution would be the most convenient. Instead, the obvious conclusion will be twofold – whatever changes are presented by the MEXT in the future, they need to be above all be
practically implementable rather than just looking good on the paper; and second, the overwhelming focus on the NCT as a necessary step between high school and university needs to be addressed, especially when any other changes, whether to the subject guidelines or the NCT itself, prove unsuccessful. This, I think, will be the only realistic next step forward English education in Japan can take.

6. Conclusion
This thesis examines the conflicting existences of the NCT and MEXT’s English subject guidelines. It is evident that problems exist within the current system, and furthermore that some of these problems are closely linked to the university entrance exam and the overpowering focus put on them in the senior year of high school. In the current state, the MEXT is ruining their own ambitions by allowing this, by effectively making sure any revisions to the English subject are ignored in the classroom. Moving forward, the MEXT is going to have to make a choice: between giving up on their current ambitions for the English subject and Japanese students’ language proficiency, or lessening the focus and presence of the NCT to allow their goals to become practical.

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