

A Research Toward Establishing Hokuriku Gakuin Standard Using a Global Standard

— An Investigation into the Growth of Japanese Students' English Abilities from Primary through Tertiary Education —

世界スタンダードに基づく北陸学院スタンダードの構築の研究
— 学校種の枠を超えた日本人学習者の英語力の伸びについての調査 —

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Abstract

Student performance on Cambridge ESOL examinations (CEFR Pre-A1 to B1) was assessed. Subjects were students of Hokuriku Gakuin, a private school in Japan educating students at all academic age levels. Subjects ranged from elementary school-aged to university-aged. Subjects sat a mock Reading and Writing section-only exam OR the mock exam AND an official exam covering all exam sections. Official exam results indicate high performance on the Listening section at the elementary school level. As a portion of overall score, Listening score declined as age-level increased while Reading and Writing (RW) score increased with age-level. A high correlation was found between RW performance and overall 4-skill performance, suggesting RW ability may be a reliable indicator of overall exam performance ability and/or English ability.

Keywords : CEFR, Cambridge Examinations (YLE, KET, PET), consistent English education from elementary school to university.

1. Introduction: Background and Previous Research

This is a part of research conducted with the support of the Hokuriku Gakuin University & Junior College In-School Grant (2009, 2010).

Hokuriku Gakuin (HG) is a private school system containing all age levels (i.e. from kindergarten to university), located in the Hokuriku region of Japan. Since an American missionary established the school 125 years ago, in 1885, the school has been known for providing “useful/practical” English education. The

total student body is roughly 1,400 (all students from kindergarten to university included).

As opposed to private schools in Japan’s larger urban areas, private schools in the Hokuriku District tend not to be as highly regarded in terms of prestige as they are in most major Japanese cities. Students attend HG with varied motives: Some seek education based on Christian Humanity; some want to study English; some do not want to go to their local public schools, etc. Academic levels at this school vary across all age levels in the Japanese education system. In terms of English ability, university students range from the 90s to the 160s on the TOEIC Bridge placement test, which would be equivalent to Pre-A1 to B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for

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Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR).

One of the features of HG's English education is that all academic age levels, from kindergarten to university, have English classes taught by native English speaking teachers. Another feature is that all the schools except for the kindergartens have foreign sister schools with which interaction and affiliation give students hands-on experience learning English language and foreign culture.

As globalization further influences the Hokuriku Area, English language communicative competency, reading and writing included, will be increasingly important. As a leading English education school in the area, HG decided in 2008 to conduct research toward establishing the Hokuriku Gakuin Standard in five fields; religion, math, Japanese, English and career development. HG English teachers and researchers decided to conduct research using a global standard, the CEFR and Cambridge Examinations produced by the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL), which correlates with the CEFR. The merit of using Cambridge ESOL examinations

lies in their global recognition and range of age-appropriate examinations suitable for evaluating test takers of all ages, from children to adults (cf. Table 1).

Previous research (Asakura, et al. 2009: 337-341) shows the Writing section of the Cambridge Key English Test (KET), which is set at CEFR level A2, proved too challenging for some groups of students ranging from junior high school to junior college (average score was 46.98% while 70% is needed to pass). There was also a high degree of variance where test sections were concerned (e.g. for Part 1, the average score was 69.37% while for Part 6, 11.68% was the average score). This research also confirmed that administering the same test to the entire group is a valid means of comparing English reading/writing ability, but that it such comparisons tend to be de-motivating for low achievers. As a result, it was decided that CEFR tests administered to students should match student ability rather than age from 2010 onward.

Other research (Yoneda 2010) showed that 6th graders, aged 11-12, can achieve CEFR Pre-A1 level

Table 1 Standardized English Examinations in Relation to CEFR

CEFR	Cambridge Exams		TOEIC	TOEIC Bridge	STEP
	Main Suite	YLE			
C2	CPE		970~		
C1	CAE		920~		Grade 1
B2	FCE		850~		
B1	PET		650~		Grade Pre-1
			570	~160	
A2	KET	Flyers	470	~150	Grade 2
			345~390	~140	Grade Pre-2
A1		Movers	~310	~120	Grade 3
			~280	~110	Grade 4
Pre-A1		Starters	~260	~100	Grade 5

(Table adapted based on Morishita (2008: vi-vii), Educational Testing Service (2001, 2006), and Cambridge ESOL (2009a).)

and that their listening score was better than the world average in both 2005 and 2007. However, writing was an obstacle to learning English for Japanese children due to a different writing system in addition to different linguistic features of Japanese compared to English.

An issue of importance in Japan at present is how best to foster in Japanese students, English language skills adequate to the task of coping in business and other contexts in a global setting (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2002). As HG encompasses all academic age levels, it provides an advantageous environment in which to conduct long-term research within the Japanese school system, which is normally segmented at each academic stage making long-term assessment over different academic age levels a formidable challenge because of the necessary coordination across various academic institutions.

This paper will discuss the results of official Cambridge ESOL tests and Cambridge University Press mock-test versions of the Reading and Writing section only (Cambridge University Press 2010a, 2010b, and 2010c).

2. Research Questions and Aims

The research questions and aims are as follows:

- (1) What level of English ability do Japanese students attain by Grade 6 (the final year of elementary school)?
- (2) To what degree do students improve their English ability after graduating from elementary school?
- (3) Are reading and writing skills the basis of language learning?

To investigate these questions, Cambridge examinations were conducted and will be discussed in the following chapters.

3. Data Gathering, Results, Analysis, and

Discussion of Achievement Tests

Two sets of tests were conducted to evaluate English abilities: official Cambridge ESOL tests and Cambridge University Press mock-test versions of the

Reading and Writing section only (Cambridge University Press 2010a, 2010b, and 2010c).

3.1. Methods: Cambridge examinations as Achievement Tests

Cambridge examinations were used for the following reasons:

- (1) The tests are taken by over 3 million people in 130 countries (Cambridge ESOL 2009b), making them relevant for research seeking to evaluate students using a global standard.
- (2) The tests are designed for all nationalities, cultures, and ages, so all students from elementary school to university can be evaluated equitably.
- (3) The tests evaluate four skills.
- (4) The tests are continuously tested for validity and reliability (Cambridge ESOL 2010a).
- (5) The tests are correlated with the CEFR and are accompanied by concrete statements of probable ability at any given level (Cambridge ESOL 2009a).

3.2. Official Tests

As previously stated, HG students' abilities predominately fall into Pre-A1 to B1 levels. For this reason the Cambridge YLE of examinations (Starters, Movers & Flyers), and two of the Main Suite (the Key English Test (KET) and the Preliminary English Test (PET)) were used (cf. Table 1). Starters examinations were held in November 2007, 2008 and 2009 (These three tests were conducted as a part of research supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) 19520537 for 2007-2009 by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS)/ MEXT). Movers and Flyers were held in March, 2010. KET and PET were held in February, 2010. All tests assess the four skills.

3.2.1. Subjects

The subjects, 146 HG students, were enrolled at HG in March 2010. These subjects represent 12.65% of the whole enrollment of HG School System (excluding kindergarteners). The details are as follows:

Starters (58 students):

6th Graders at Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary school (HGES) 2007-2009

Movers (29 students):

Junior High School (JH) 1: 13 students

JH2: 4students

JH3: 3 students

Senior High School (SH) 1: 9 students

Flyers (20 students):

JH2: 3students

JH3: 9 students

SH1: 8 students

KET (17 students):

SH2: 6 students

Univ. & junior college (JC):11students

PET (22 students):

SH1: 2 students

SH2: 9 students

Univ.& JC: 11students

Students above the elementary school level were either graduates of Hokuriku Gakuin Elementary School (HGES) or non-HGES students whose English scores were high in regular English classes. To be

familiar with the test, training sessions were given at each level before the tests were administered.

3.2.2. Analysis and Discussion of the Results of the Official Test


3.2.2.1. Understanding exam results


Starters, Movers, and Flyers are the three levels of the Young Learners English Tests (YLE) of Cambridge ESOL examinations. These tests were created for children aged 7-12, but 13-year old test takers can be permitted to sit these tests as well. HG received permission for candidates aged 13-plus to sit YLE exams.


To ease understanding of the following discussion on exam results, a few notes on interpreting YLE results are mentioned here. YLE examinations measure four skills (reading and writing, listening and speaking) without assessing pass/fail results. Results are shown by the number of University of Cambridge “shields” listed on result cards (cf. Figure 1).

KET and PET assess pass/fail results with a “pass” set at 70%. The Reading and Writing section contains 50% of the total marks for KET, while the Listening and Speaking sections each contain 25% of overall

What do the shields mean?
 For each skill, a candidate is awarded between 1 and 5 shields. If a candidate gets 1 shield, it means they need to improve a lot in this skill. If they get 3 shields, it means they answered many of the questions correctly, but can still improve. If a candidate gets 5 shields, it means they did very well and answered most of the questions correctly.


Need to improve


Many answers correct


Most answers correct

A total of 10 or more shields across 3 skills means that the candidate is ready to start preparing for the next Cambridge level.

Figure 1 Understanding YLE Results (University of Cambridge ESOL 2010d)

Qualification	Score	Result
PRELIMINARY ENGLISH TEST	84/100	PASS
Candidate Profile		
Exceptional	Reading	Speaking
Good	Listening	Writing
Borderline		
Weak		

Figure 2 PET Statement of Results (University of Cambridge ESOL 2010b)

exam marks. For PET, each of the four skills account for 25% of overall exam marks. Figure 2 is a sample of the statement of the results for PET.

3.2.2.2. Analysis and Discussion of the Results of the Five Official Tests

Figure 3 shows the results of all five tests conducted at HG broken down in terms of the four language skills. Since PET is the only test that shows reading and writing separately, both skills are averaged out for PET to be consistent with the other four tests. For KET and PET, the results for each of the four skills are shown in 5 bands as in Figure 2. For comparison purposes, band scores (as depicted in Figure 2) were converted to numeric values (scores within the lowest band, band 1, were assigned a value of 1.0, the next band up was assigned a 2.0 and so on up to 5.0 for scores in the highest band). HG numeric value averages for each exam are represented in Figure 3. A numeric score of 3.0 is considered “borderline” for all tests including YLE (cf. Figure 1).

The 6th graders at elementary school sat the YLE Starters (set at CEFR Pre-A1 level) exam. Figure 3 shows that these students achieved the level of CEFR Pre-A1 as their average for all sections of the test. This result was above the “borderline” score of 3.00. Encouragingly, HG students scored above the world

average for the listening section (4.27 for HG vs. a world average score of 3.73) (YLE Exam Report 2005). Unfortunately, the higher the academic age level, the poorer student performance on the Listening section tended to be. One possible explanation is that British pronunciation was unfamiliar and made the test challenging for junior and senior high school students who had been predominately exposed to American-English-speaking teachers whereas for the elementary school students, the native English speaking teachers hailed from varying nationalities. In addition, advice for overcoming problems arising from differences in English pronunciation was given as part of test preparation at the elementary school level. These factors could account for a degree of elementary school subjects’ relative strength in the Listening section.

As a portion of overall score, Listening score declined as age-level increased while Reading and Writing score increased with age-level. This tendency may be a reflection of class focus on reading and writing skills at higher academic age levels.

Pass rates for the five test levels are shown in Figure 4. For KET and PET 70% is a “pass”. While there is no official “pass” score for YLE exams, a score of 10 shields out of 15 on YLE exam (Starters, Mover or Flyers) is regarded by Cambridge ESOL as the benchmark at which to start preparing for the next highest

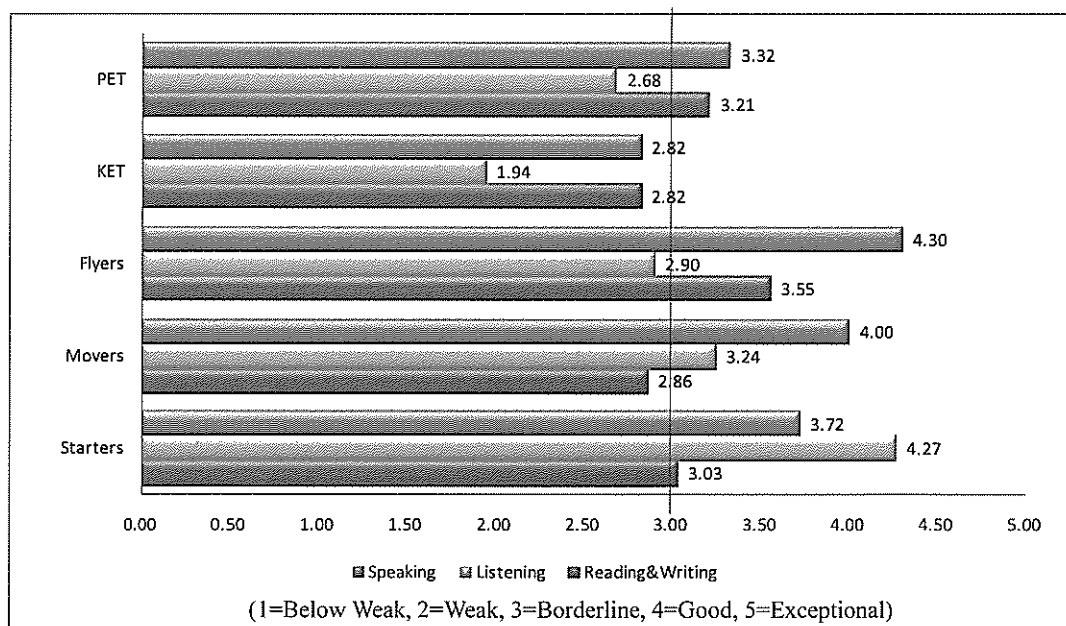


Figure 3 Cambridge Examination results broken down by the four skills

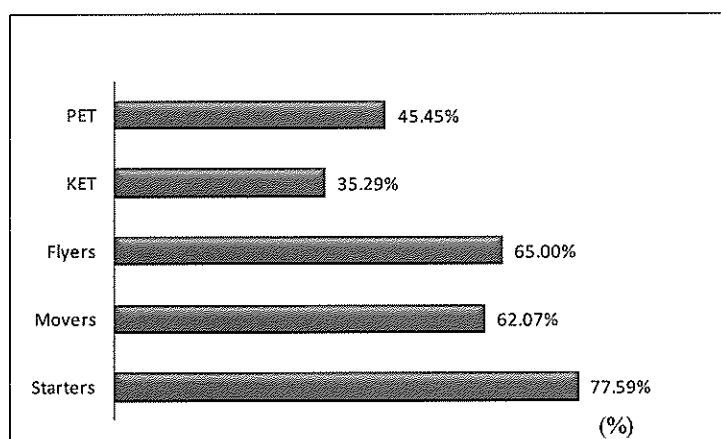


Figure 4 Pass Rate of the Five Official Cambridge Examinations at HG

test level (as described in Figure 1). Thus, for the purposes of comparing pass rates across exams, YLE (Starters, Mover and Flyers) test takers who achieved 10 shields or more were considered to have “passed” that test level.

Figure 4 indicates that, for the most part, the higher the test level, the lower the pass rate though there is a sizeable difference between the pass rate for Main Suite exams (KET and PET) and the YLE exams (Starters, Movers, and Flyers). A need for further investigation arises from the disparity between KET and Flyers pass rates. As both exams correspond to the CEFR A2 level, one would expect pass rates to be similar or at least less disparate than indicated in Figure 4. One possible explanation is that Flyers test takers tended to have skills superior to those of their KET counterparts. Another possibility is that the test format of Flyers, flush with color and pictures was more candidate friendly than KET, an exam designed for candidates aged 13 or above.

Yoneda & Endo (2010) report that Japanese YLE performance tended to be weaker than Taiwanese performance on all sections of the Starters and Movers tests. It was speculated that these differences could be the result of differing national educational policy and degree to which English is used as a tool of communication on a daily basis in the two nations. Indeed, while Taiwanese scores on all sections of Starters and Movers exceeded world averages, Japanese scores were consistently below this benchmark especially where Reading and Writing section performance was

concerned. Thus, as one might expect, Taiwanese YLE examinees outperformed Japanese examinees in all categories but with marked differences in the Reading and Writing section at the Starters level and still, though to a lesser degree, at the Movers level. Interestingly, gaps between average national scores in all categories decreased from Starters to Movers and again from Movers to Flyers with Japanese average scores on Flyers exams actually exceeding not only those of their Taiwanese counterparts but the world-average as well in both the Reading and Writing and Listening sections (YLE Exam Report 2005). From this data, it appears clear that whatever impediments to Japanese success exist early on (vastly different writing system or other) can be overcome.

To assess students’ long term development, Yoneda & Endo (2010) compared the results of students who sat Starters in elementary school Grade 6 and those who sat either Movers or Flyers three years later. Figure 5 contains data for current Jr. High 3rd year students (14-15 year olds) who sat either Movers and/or Flyers after having sat Starters three years prior as Grade 6 elementary school students. As this was the first group to participate in these exams, it is the only group for which such data exists as yet.

As Figure 5 shows, YLE achievement tendencies observed in the final year of elementary school (6th grade) carry over into secondary education with gaps between high/medium achievers and low achievers becoming increasingly pronounced. These data underscore the significance of early achievement tendencies,

YLE (CEFR)	Shields within Test Level	Accumulated Shields	JH1			JH2			JH3		
			low	mid	high	low	mid	high	low	mid	high
Flyers (A2)	13-15	43-45									
	10-12	40-42									
	6-9	36-39									
	3-5	33-35									
Movers (A1)	13-15	28-30									
	10-12	25-27									
	6-9	21-24									
	3-5	16-20									
Starters (Pre-A1)	13-15	13-15									
	10-12	10-12									
	3-9	3-9									
Avg. Current No. of Shields			21.50	23.67	28.50	24.00	24.50	25.00	25.00	41.00	40.33/44.00
Avg. No. of Shields Starters			6.00	10.83	14.00	8.00	10.00	13.00	7.50	12.00	14.00

Figure 5 Comparison of the results of Starters at Grade 6 and those of Movers/Flyers in Junior High School (Revised table of Yoneda & Endo 2010)

those of grade 6 in this case, as they relate to probable long-term achievement.

3.2.3. Findings and limitation of this study

The findings suggest that the differences in writing system between English and Japanese must be taken into account at the elementary school level: children struggle with four writing systems (3 Japanese + English). Students who become accustomed to the English writing system can progress smoothly to higher performance ability while those who struggle in the 6th grade tend to continue struggling with meager progress in secondary education.

A limitation of this research is that only a limited portion of HG’s student body sat the exam at the 2 intervals, which means this study does not give full-spectrum analysis across all academic age levels. Concurrently, owing to time and budget restrictions, having all HG students sit official Cambridge exams is unrealistic at present. Another obstacle is that Cambridge examinations are, as yet, not as well-known and, thus, not as highly esteemed in Japan as they are in other parts of the world, potentially interfering with candidate motivation to perform to the best of their abilities on them.

3.3. Mock Tests

Based on previous experience, the researchers decided to give mock tests appropriate for each age-level, i.e. elementary school (ES), junior high school (JH), senior high school (SH), and university (Univ.). The aims of this mock testing were as follows:

- (1) To obtain a full-spectrum grasp of HG-student English ability, inclusive of all academic age levels
- (2) To evaluate student abilities using Cambridge examinations
- (3) To find common mistakes, to the extent that they exist, for purposes of guiding future lesson planning
- (4) To gauge the degree to which students tend to improve per year of instruction

Previous research at HG found that high achievers on the Reading and Writing section tend to be high achievers on the Speaking section (Asakura et. al 2008: 341). Based on this tendency, the research team administered a Cambridge University Press-produced mock version of YLE’s Reading and Writing section to students ranging from elementary school to university (Cambridge University Press 2010a, 2010b, and 2010c). Administration of the Reading and Writing section of Starters, Movers and Flyers requires 20, 30 and 40 minutes, respectively. Mock testing was planned to be administered on two occasions for each academic age level: once at the beginning of the school year and again at the end of the school year. This paper will analyze and discuss the first series of mock tests in terms of aims (1) and (2) above.

3.3.1. Subjects

All 625 subjects, were students enrolled in the HG School system, i.e. ES, JH, SH, and Univ. The junior high school has two courses: Advanced Course (Adv.) and Regular Course (Reg.). The senior high

school has three courses: Advanced Course (Adv.), English and Science Course (Eng.), and Regular Course (Reg.). The Univ. divides all first year students of the required English Communication course into four separate classes: classes “A” through “D”, based on placement test performance. The “A” class is the highest achieving class while the “D” class is the lowest achieving class.

The details of the levels of the tests and the students are as follows:

Starters (54 students):

HGES: 34 sixth Graders (G6)

JH1:20 students (Reg.)

Movers(283 students):

JH1: 9 students (Reg.)

JH2: 23 students (Reg.), 10 students (Adv.)

JH3: 23 students (Reg.)

SH1: 45 students (Reg.)

SH2: 75 students(Reg.)

SH3: 51 students (Reg.)

Univ.: 27 students (Class C), 20 students (Class D)

Flyers (288 students):

JH3: 9 students (Adv.)

SH1: 58 students (Eng.), 24 students (Adv.)

SH2: 54 students (Eng.) , 19 students (Adv.)

SH3: 45 students (Eng.) , 24 students (Adv.)

Univ.: 27 students (Calss A), 28 students (Class B)

Table 2 Results of Mock Tests: Class/Course, Tests and Average

Starters		Movers		Flyers	
class/course	average	class/course	average	class/course	average
G6	56.12	JH1 Adv.	45.28	JH3 Adv.	66.57
JH1 Reg.	51.37	JH2 Adv.	68.00	SH1 Eng.	53.17
		JH2 Reg.	48.04	SH1 Adv.	75.83
		JH3 Reg.	51.50	SH2 Eng.	57.41
		SH1 Reg.	50.11	SH2 Adv.	74.11
		SH2 Reg.	48.84	SH3 Eng.	67.38
		SH3 Reg.	55.44	SH3 Adv.	79.75
		Univ. C	60.28	Univ. A	79.63
		Univ. D	50.88	Univ. B	61.36

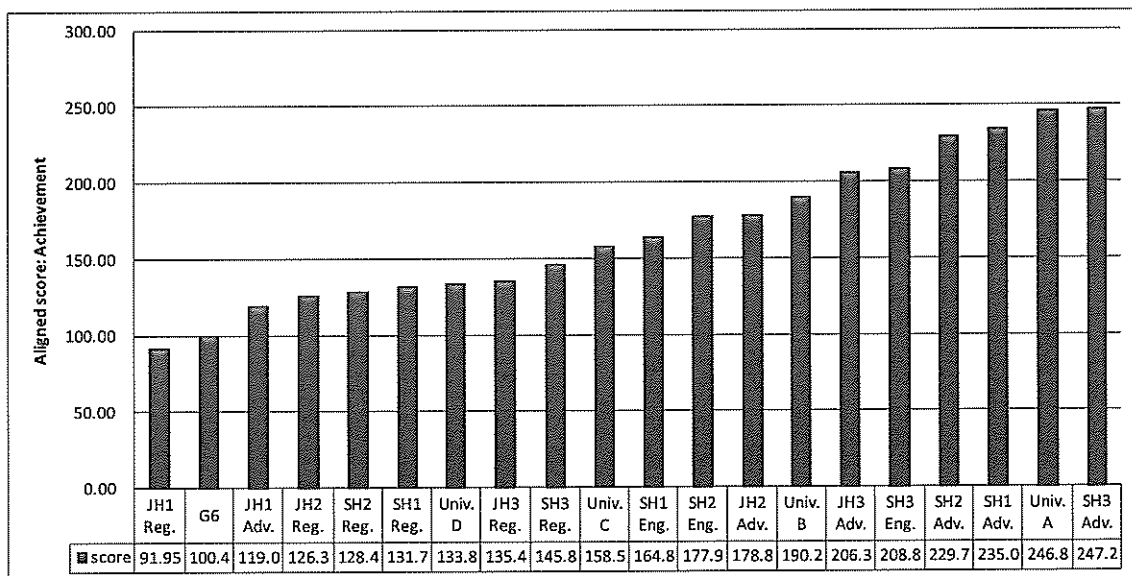


Figure 6 Results of Mock Testing Using the YLE

3.3.2. Analysis and Discussion of the Results of the Mock Testing

The results of each class are shown as percentages in Table 2.

Scores (expressed as a percentage) for each test shown in Table 2 were calculated according to “Formal alignment/linking exercise May 2008: CEFR ratings for levels & skills” by Papp and Salamoura (2009), whose ratings for reading are 1.79 for Starters, 2.63 for Movers, and 3.10 for Flyers. Using these coefficients, the three YLE tests, despite being set at different ability levels, can be compared. Results of each class/course are shown in Figure 6.

The results show that students tend to stay at the CEFR A1 level in writing right up to the university level, which supports previous results. Figure 6 shows that the highest 3 groups (out of 20) are mostly “Advanced” classes, which emphasize a variety of subjects rather than focusing in on English. At HG university, students’ majors are either Education or Social Welfare. This may indicate that general study habits and/or cognitive abilities affect English abilities to a greater extent than does academic focus on “English” such as that provided by enrolment in an English & Science-focused course of study (Eng.) at HG’s Senior high levels.

3.3.3. Findings and limitations of this study

This series of mock testing seems to indicate that low-achieving students early on (i.e. elementary school level) tend to remain low achievers throughout their academic careers while those who attain CEFR Pre-A1 (i.e. comparative mid to high achievers) progress further and earlier than their low achieving counterparts. This suggests that early-onset basic English education is important from a long-term point of view, and that low achievers require a great deal of extra support early on if they are to stand a good chance of escaping from the above-mentioned trend. While these generalizations are based solely on this initial round of mock testing, they are nonetheless supported by tendencies demonstrated in previous research (Yoneda and Endo 2010).

Since mock tests covered the Reading and Writing section only, it is dangerous to conclude that results are indicative of “overall English abilities.” From the CEFR point of view, Listening and Speaking sections of the tests should also be conducted, though time and monetary considerations preclude doing this at HG. The next chapter discusses the reliability of using the Reading and Writing section of the exams to predict likely outcomes on full-test versions of the exams inclusive of all sections and not only the Reading and Writing section.

4. Reliability of Using Reading & Writing Performance as a Predictor of Overall Exam Performance

4.1. Method

Subjects sat Cambridge YLE exams on two occasions: the first in March 2010 and the second in April 2010. The March 2010 exam was an official full-test version of either the YLE Movers or the YLE Flyers exam. The April 2010 exam was a mock Reading-and-Writing-section-only (mock RW) exam (Cambridge University Press 2009 a,b, and c). Only subjects who wrote the same level of exam in March 2010 and April 2010 (i.e. Movers then Movers or Flyers then Flyers) were included in this study.

4.2. Subjects

A total of 38 subjects were included in this study. Subjects were students of HG and, at the time of the March 2010 official full-test exam, ranged in academic grade level from JH grade one through to SH grade three. Owing to April’s status as the beginning of the Japanese school year, subjects ranged from JH grade two to Univ. first year at the time of the April 2010 mock RW. Despite vastly greater numbers of HG students sitting official and/or mock exams during this period, the subjects chosen for inclusion in this study were the only ones who sat the same level of tests on both occasions (i.e. Movers then Movers again or Flyers then Flyers again). Twenty-two subjects sat YLE Movers and 16 subjects sat YLE Flyers.

4.3. Analysis and Discussion of Results

A strong positive correlation was found between student performance on the upper two levels of Cambridge YLE (Movers and Flyers) and student performance on mock RW tests set at these same YLE levels.

Figure 7 contrasts official full-test scores with mock RW scores (correct answers were converted to percentages for comparison purposes). As shown in figure 7, there is a high positive correlation apparent between the two scores in individual cases. Further analysis reveals a relatively strong correlation between these two scores ($r=0.72$) when Movers and Flyers results are calculated together. The correlations become even stronger when Movers results ($r=0.75$) are calculated separately from Flyers. The same is true for Flyers results ($r=0.77$) when calculated separately from Movers.

While average official overall scores and mock RW scores are similar for both Movers and Flyers test takers, there is an important difference. For Movers, scores on the official full-version of Movers were higher, on average (66.97%), than were average scores for the mock RW examinations (59.20%). Interestingly, where Flyers was concerned, scores on the official full-version of Flyers were lower, on average (71.25%), than were average scores for the mock RW examinations (78.13%). Thus, where Movers is concerned, the inclusion of the other sections of the test (Speaking

& Listening) brings overall scores up in comparison to what a prediction based on mock RW performance would suggest. Conversely, where YLE Flyers is concerned, it appears that the reverse tendency is indicated: Inclusion of the other sections of the test (Speaking & Listening) will bring their overall scores down in comparison to what mock RW performance would suggest.

4.4. Findings and Limitations

These analyses suggest that student performance on the mock RW examinations can provide a strong indication of likely performance on whole-test official versions of these examinations. Further, to the extent that student performance on YLE examinations can be considered a reliable measurement of actual “overall English ability”, these analyses give support to the notion that performance on a Cambridge-sanctioned YLE Reading and Writing section mock-test can be used to make predictions on general ability with some degree of confidence.

However, these analyses were based on a sample size of a mere 38 students. Owing to this consideration, any prediction on YLE whole-test performance or generalization of “overall English ability” derived from performance on Cambridge YLE mock RW examinations must be tempered with extreme caution unless similar tendencies are observed in future research

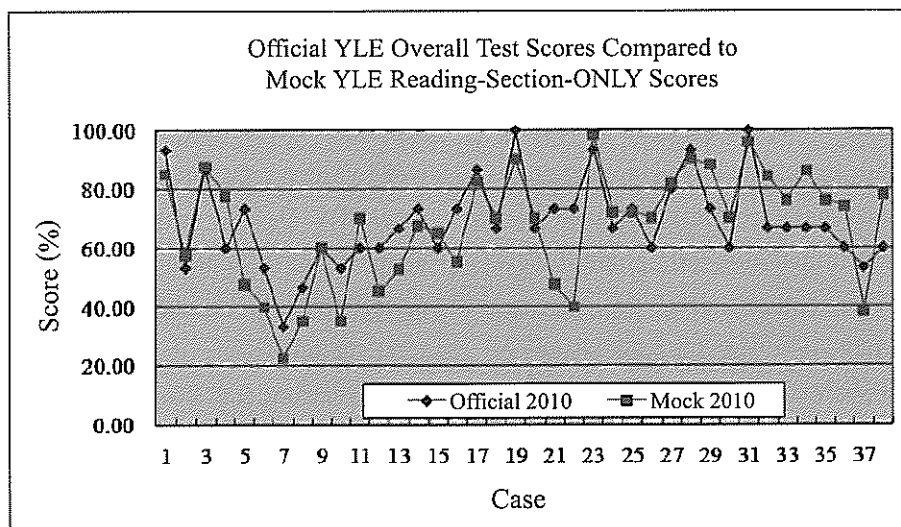


Figure 7 Comparison of Official YLE Test Scores and Mock YLE Reading-and-Writing-Section-Only Scores

conducted with a more statistically reliable sample size. The small sample size limits these findings to intriguing suggestions for future research.

5. Conclusion

This paper covered three studies conducted toward establishing a long term education strategy, The Hokuriku Gakuin Standard. Official YLE exams and mock YLE exams were conducted to assess academic achievement of students within the HG school system across academic levels ranging from elementary school to university using a global standard, the CEFR, and Cambridge examinations. Further, a reliability test was conducted.

These studies have contributed answers to the research questions first posited:

(1) What level of English ability do Japanese students attain by Grade 6 (the final year of elementary school)?

Mock testing showed that the average was 56.12% (HGES) and 51.73% (JH1 Reg.). The results in this paper indicated that the students did not achieve the CEFR Pre-A1 in Reading and Writing. However, previous classes of HGES 6th grade students did in fact achieve the CEFR Pre-A1 on the official test (all sections included). The RW section tends to bring down overall HGES test scores while the listening section brings them up. These studies indicate that reading and writing could be an obstacle in English learning at the ES level. At the same time, as is always the case with human subjects, classes are different each year, making it necessary to temper this assertion with an allowance for the effects of class vagaries and their potential influence.

(2) To what degree do students improve their English ability after graduating from elementary school?

Official test results show that some students reach CEFR B1 level (pass rate of 45.45% on the PET exam). At the same time, mock test results show that low achievers tend to remain low achievers with their scores never advancing beyond those of “beginner” English language learners, irrespective of the volume of English instruction received. High achievers on

YLE exams tend to be those enrolled in advanced classes, though the classes focused on a variety of subjects as opposed to being English-focused classes though more investigation is required on this aspect of the research.

(3) Are reading and writing skills the basis of language learning?

The analyses gave support to the notion that performance on a Cambridge-sanctioned YLE Reading-and-Writing-section-only mock test can be used to make predictions of general ability with some degree of confidence.

In conclusion, these studies as a whole give insights into the state of English education from elementary school up to university at HG. Another series of mock tests are planned for late 2010. This will give us better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses unique to HG’s approach to English education. The next and perhaps more challenging step is to discern how best to apply and share these results for the betterment of English education at each of HG’s academic levels (encompassing all levels of Japanese education) and perhaps, by extension, English education throughout Japan.

Notes: All sections of this paper were written by Sakiko Yoneda except for Chapter 4 which was written by Jason Hughes. The paper was edited for English grammatical accuracy by Jason Hughes.

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