A qualitative study of three preparatory schools' answers to the English writing section of a Japanese university's entrance exam

Gregory Wheeler
English Division, Center for Medical Education, Sapporo Medical University

Although there are reports of the declining importance of entrance exams as criteria for admission into Japanese universities, the preparatory schools, which aim to assist university candidates in achieving high scores on these exams, continue to flourish. This paper is a qualitative study that analyzes the effectiveness of these schools in preparing exam takers for the English writing section of one university's entrance exam. Preliminary conclusions suggest that they have ample room for improvement.

Key words: preparatory schools, entrance exams, writing scores

1 Introduction

There have been numerous reports in the last decade about how entrance exams have declined in importance for many Japanese universities. However, it is questionable as to whether this has had an adverse effect on the preparatory (cram) schools which help prepare potential university students for the rigorous of these exams. As Sato reports in The Japan Times, “With over 50,000 juku [preparatory schools] nationwide, cramming has become a ubiquitous part of the Japanese education system, and grown into a 10 trillion yen business.” Moreover, according to Rowley and Tashiro, “The juku [preparatory schools] have been around for years, but demand for the services of the better schools is soaring as national anxiety about educational standards intensifies. Profits in the $8.8 billion industry are soaring. Fifteen of the 21 publicly traded juku estimate that their earnings rose for the year ended in March.” Clearly, the exams are still considered important at enough universities that at least some of the bigger preparatory schools continue to thrive.

Entrance exams are often considered tests in which route memorization of facts is rewarded, and the preparatory schools are believed to play an important role in teaching as many of these facts as possible. However, although Sapporo Medical University is not currently among them, there are many universities that include a writing section on their English exams, requiring test-takers to express their own opinions in short paragraphs. How effectively do the preparatory schools prepare their students for questions that do not rely on basic memorization? In this qualitative study, seven professors with experience marking the English writing section of their university's entrance exam evaluate three of the larger preparatory schools' sample answers to the writing questions that appeared on a recent exam from the university.

2 Graders

Shortly upon completion of the university's exam, the three preparatory schools examined in this study posted sample answers on their websites to the English section's writing questions. Nine professors who had graded this section of the exam were invited to grade these answers, and seven responded. Graders participated on an individual basis, and no participant had access to information provided by the other graders. Information concerning the graders can be seen in Table 1.
Table 1: Profiles of survey's graders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graders</th>
<th>Yrs.</th>
<th>Grading</th>
<th>Exam's Written Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>G3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>G4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>G7</td>
<td>19</td>
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</tbody>
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3 Procedure

For the study, graders were first asked to comment on whether they had noticed any recurring trends while evaluating the writing section of the actual university exam, and if so, if this had affected the manner in which they scored the answers. It should be mentioned here that before the grading process commenced, the university provided rough guidelines concerning manners of evaluating answers to the written section. In general, graders were encouraged to view answers that reflected genuine thought as ideal, even if the grammar was perhaps a bit shaky. This, in fact, was a major reason why the written section was introduced to the exam several years ago. It was perceived as an exercise in which test-takers could express original thought, rather than merely answer more fact-oriented questions. Overall, however, for graders, there were no strictly determined rules concerning how to score the written answers.

Next, graders were asked to read and write evaluations of the sample answers that the three preparatory schools had posted on their websites. To avoid possible bias (during the actual grading process, a number of graders had expressed less than flattering sentiments concerning these schools), they were not informed that what they were evaluating had been produced by the preparatory schools until after they had completed the survey.

To describe in brief the writing section of the actual exam, test-takers first read a short passage which was an overview of two opposing positions from experts concerning a current events issue. They then wrote one-paragraph answers to two questions. The first question required them to summarize the two views presented in the passage. For the second question, they wrote about the effects the subject matter in the passage had, if any, on their daily lives. The first question (Question A) was worth eight points and the second (Question B) was twelve points. Together, these questions accounted for 20% of the English test. The other sections of the exam, which mostly consisted of multiple choice, short answer, and translation questions, are not considered in this paper.

Graders G1 and G2 had marked Question A on the exam, and were therefore asked to examine the paragraphs provided by the preparatory schools (which will hereafter be referred to as Schools 1, 2, and 3) that pertained to that question. The remaining five graders had been in charge of marking Question B and evaluated the corresponding sample answers provided by the schools. School 1 posted two sample answers for Question A on its website, while the other two provided one. All three schools provided two answers for Question B.

4 Noticeable trends evident among exam takers' answers

The following are written comments provided by the graders concerning whether they had observed recurring trends while marking the actual exam answers, and how these may have affected their scores. Of interest, four of the graders mentioned dissatisfaction with the use of stock phrases, and three singled out the preparatory schools as at least partially responsible for this:

**Question:** During the course of the grading, did you notice any recurring trends amongst the paragraphs you read? If so, did this affect the manner in which you scored the paragraphs? (If yes), please explain.

G1: Yes. Many students wrote essays with memorized stock phrases, some of which were irrelevant to [the] question. . . . I tended to be quite harsh score-wise with all examples of the above, since I do not view this as actual language production. I gave higher point totals to obviously original answers, even if they contained grammar/spelling/usage errors that the above answers did not.

G2: Quite a few students misunderstood the question (i.e.,"opposing views"), and wrote only one of them, or even stated their own opinion of the issue (not summarizing the essay author's point). When I found this, I basically reduced 30-40% of the grading, no
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matter how they wrote the essay itself, because I believe that understanding the writing instruction is also the important [aspect] of the exam to test students' English skills. Secondly, quite a few students made (partial) copy and paste, not trying to use their own words to summarize the ideas written in the essay. When I found this, I basically reduced 80% of the grading, and sometimes gave 0 points when the answer was a complete copy of the parts of the essay.

G3: There tend to be a number of juku [preparatory school] phrases, set phrases that the candidates have obviously learned by heart and are determined to get in their answers if at all possible. I tend to mark this down for lack of originality and free thinking. . . . I give marks for a genuine attempt to answer the question and ability to communicate in English. Message/content over linguistic accuracy (and poor language usage usually loses people marks for making the message unintelligible), and originality over pre-prepared set phrases.

G4: I clearly noticed the copying of sentences or sentence parts from the original text; I also noticed use of stock phrases, apparently acquired while attending cram schools. Once I recognized these patterns of copied sentences and stock phrases (after I read through about 10-15 short essay answers), I started actually grading the essays. Essays with copied sentences or stock phrases—especially if used indiscriminately so as to show lack of individual composition and production—received significantly lower scores, usually about 20%-50% less points.

G5: No.

G6: There were a lot of set phrases used by students. These seem to be certain stock phrases taught at a cram school in preparation for the university entrance exam. This did affect my marking as it was clear that students were not really thinking about the question and answer for themselves. It seemed that just the topic . . . automatically meant that they try and remember as many phrases they were taught without addressing the question. Typically, if students used too many set phrases then they would lose a few marks.

G7: I noticed trends but the quality of those trends escapes me now other than I think most students agreed that they should have make changes in their lives . . . . The trends may have affected the way I scored but I do not clearly remember in what way.

5 Evaluations of the preparatory school answers

For the second part of the survey—evaluating the preparatory schools' answers—graders were given the option of providing a point value for what they would have assigned the samples had they been graded during the actual exam. Five of the graders chose to assign scores, a breakdown of which can be seen in Tables 2 and 3.

There is obviously a wide range of scores, suggesting a need for more detailed guidelines when it comes to marking the exam's written section. However, as can be seen in their comments below, many of the graders expressed dissatisfaction with grammar errors, overuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graders</th>
<th>School 1</th>
<th>School 2</th>
<th>School 3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answer 1</td>
<td>Answer 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Breakdown of scores for Question B (12 points)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Graders</th>
<th>School 1</th>
<th>School 2</th>
<th>School 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answer 1</td>
<td>Answer 2</td>
<td>Answer 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Graders G6 and G7 did not assign scores to the sample answers, and G7 provided comments for the answers from School 1 only.
of stock phrases, and even misunderstanding of the questions, mirroring concerns they had when marking the actual exam.

Graders’ comments regarding School 1

Question A

As indicated in Table 2, G1 was more critical of School 1’s answers than was G2. Of particular concern was a lack of balance in the information provided in the answers; far more was written concerning one viewpoint on the passage topic, with little mention of the opposing argument. Additionally, G1 wrote that neither paragraph, in fact, actually answered the question that was posed. Perhaps this should not be entirely surprising; on School 1’s website, the accuracy of the translation of the question (which appeared in English on the exam) was, at best, questionable.

G2 shared G1’s view that the first answer was overly weighted toward one position, but had high marks for the second answer.

Question B

Answer 1 was generally well received. Nearly all the graders commented that the grammar and sentence structure were suitable, and wrote that they would give the paragraph a decent score. However, the answer posed a number of rhetorical questions, something that most of the graders believed could have been toned down somewhat. G6 (who did not provide a score) was not entirely impressed with the content of the answer, commenting that “this answer really doesn’t answer the question.”

The graders were in agreement that the second sample answer was superior to the first. “Pretty darn good,” wrote G4. According to G5, it was “not perfect grammatically, but [the] argument is well made.” G6 thought that although it was better than the first answer, it was still “too general.” G3 commented that it was very difficult to mark because the English was “virtually flawless,” adding that it would be necessary to examine other sections of the test to see if the English was at the same level. “Otherwise it is a pre-learned paragraph on the topic, or the candidate is almost bilingual.”

School 2

Question A

G1 noted again the lack of specific mention of the views presented in the passage, and also expressed disapproval over the fact that one of the sentences began with the word “and.” G2 asserted that the sample provided by School 2 did not answer the question in accordance with the instructions. Rather than summarizing the two opposing views objectively, it instead “sounds like the student is expressing his/her own view.”

Question B

The first answer from School 2 received low marks from two of the three graders who provided scores, both of whom noted, with disapproval, the presence of stock phrases. According to G3, “Completely does not answer the question. Classic example of juku set phrases/model answer. The last two sentences can be discounted as pre-prepared. Probably a 3 for actually having produced some nice sounding English.” G4 was also critical: “This is, at least as far as the second part of this answer is concerned, the answer that made me think ‘Oh my God, not again!’ This is because I read answers full of stock phrases like these over and over again. They indicate poor composition skills.” Although G4’s score for the answer was five points, this was “only because the first part is somewhat ok; otherwise 3-4/12.” According to G6, “It’s a standard answer . . . without any thought about the actual question.” G5, the one grader who had generally positive comments, wrote that the “word choice is accurate” and that the “argument is made.” G5 also observed, however, that the “grammar is not perfect.”

The second answer was generally considered superior to the first. There were comments concerning questionable grammar and how the sentence organization could have been better, but overall the paragraph was considered satisfactory. G6, however, wrote that the answer was far too general, and that “once again the student has chosen to ignore the main part of the question.”

School 3

Question A

G1 thought the answer was at times unclear, and once again the balance between the two views was stilted. G1 also noted with disapproval an expression used in the paragraph— “Rapidly getting serious” — writing that it was “overused in Japanese-English.” G2 also believed that the answer could have delved more into one of the views presented in the passage, but
overall indicated a belief that the paragraph was strong.

**Question B**

Concerning the first answer, three of the four graders who commented wrote that although it contained a few grammatical mistakes, it did a decent job in providing specific examples of potential lifestyle changes. G3 wrote, “Answers the question, gives some concrete examples, and is in intelligible English, albeit with a few errors.” G4 expressed a similar view, writing, “Not a brilliant composition, redundant in word choices (especially conjunctions), but it seems OBVIOUS that the student tried to create a somewhat original paragraph.” G6, however, noted that the examples used were similar to those many others had written, and wondered if this was perhaps “another standard answer taught at cram schools.”

For the second paragraph, two graders thought the grammar was problematic at times, but overall the question was answered competently. G5’s comments are indicative of the general view: “Word choice is accurate, argument is made, grammar is not perfect and [the] intro sentence [is] not complete.” G3 believed it to be the best of the six sample paragraphs provided, due to its “strong referencing of the arguments given in the text.” G6 was less impressed, commenting that it was “a standard answer without any thought about how changes are not needed in their own lives.”

### 6 Limitations and Discussion

As seen from the above comments, it would appear that at least some of the sample answers appearing on the preparatory schools’ sites could stand to improve. However, there are, of course, numerous limitations to any conclusions that can be reached in this study. First, the comments and scores from the graders illustrate the difficulties inherent in including a written section on the exam without concrete guidelines for graders to follow. It is obviously not ideal that scores for School 2’s first answer to Question B ranged from three points to nine; also worrisome is that the majority of graders found School 1’s first answer to Question B satisfactory, but assigned very different scores. There simply needs to be more consistency during the grading process, especially when numerical values are being assigned. Unfortunately, even with definitive guidelines, scoring problems would likely persist to some extent. Graders have a limited amount of time to complete their sections of the exams. Considering the sheer volume of paragraphs to read—at some of the bigger schools, graders may be expected to score over 800 paragraphs in two days—it can be extraordinarily difficult for any grader to remain absolutely consistent in their evaluations.

Moreover, considering that this study was conducted at a single university with only seven participants, it is difficult to conclude definitively that the opinions voiced by the graders are representative of the majority of professors in Japanese universities. A larger sample size, with graders from several universities, would be ideal.

Additionally, the writing questions made up only twenty percent of the entire English section of the exam, which in turn was only one of many subjects on the test. It is very possible that information and strategies learned by students at the preparatory schools did make the difference between a successful applicant and one who did not earn admission. Moreover, it is also possible that despite the at times questionable English and overused expressions the preparatory schools appear to employ, students learn to write better paragraphs than they would were they not to attend these schools. Additionally, a few of the paragraphs did receive high marks. Considering the number of actual exam paragraphs graders evaluated, it is impossible to determine a mean score (especially because once the grading period is finished, there is no longer access to the exams), but it is likely that the second answer for Question B from all three schools compares favorably to actual exam answers.

Despite the limitations of this study, however, it seems clear that the preparatory schools have ample room for improvement. For example, it is disconcerting that the graders often commented on the faulty grammar and sentence structure present in the schools’ answers. Japanese high school students receive little training in English composition so they cannot be expected to write grammatically flawless answers. The preparatory schools, on the other hand, are supposed to help alleviate this problem. That the writing samples appearing on their websites were often riddled with basic mistakes does not inspire much faith in their instructors’ abilities to teach composition skills.

Additionally, that School 1 mistranslated a rather basic question from the exam also gives pause. If that
school's instructors are having difficulty understanding the questions, is it also possible they do not always fully comprehend the content of the reading passage upon which the questions are based?

Finally, judging from their comments, what provoked the most dissatisfaction among several of the graders was the use of stock phrases. As they indicated when asked about recurring trends on the exam, graders do not consider this as actual language production, and tend to evaluate answers with such phrases severely. It should not be considered a coincidence, then, that School 2's first answer to Question 2, which contained clear examples of a stock phrase, received the lowest scores from the graders. Certainly, considering test-takers' likely lack of experience with English composition, it should be expected that the preparatory schools would try to teach them a number of basic expressions commonly used when writing. However, expressions such as "The happiest solution" or "This problem will have a great influence on our lives and the way we will behave will have a great influence on our society" are hardly phrases one finds often in print.

7 Conclusion

As the importance of written English skills becomes more recognized by Japanese universities, it is expected that the number of schools incorporating a written section on their entrance exams will increase. It should thus be expected that as a result, the preparatory schools will also focus more on this section of the exam. Although the results from the survey used for this study do not necessarily suggest learning at preparatory schools currently has a harmful effect on test takers' written paragraphs, it would seemingly behoove the schools to strive for improvement. There is the very real possibility that one or two points could separate the line between admission to and rejection from a university, and it would be the unfortunate student indeed who was on the wrong side of that line because he or she chose to include in the writing section an often oddly worded stock phrase learned at a preparatory school. Considering the amount of time and money students are spending in order to improve their chances of entering university, it is important that the preparatory schools be better than just slightly more skillful than those they are supposed to be teaching; the students deserve more than that.

References