Oral Interviews in an English Communication Program
A Pilot Study at Kyoto Bunkyo University

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Introduction

This paper is the preliminary account of an oral testing program which has been developed as a central feature of the English requirement at Kyoto Bunkyo University (KBU). It will cover the original rationale for the founding of the University and the role of English Communication in that plan; obstacles and limitations experienced during the first four years of the program; background information on oral testing techniques, and some of the options offered. It then will outline the evaluation system adopted at KBU, examine the test goals and consider validity and reliability factors. Finally the paper will describe how students are prepared for the test and explain the logistics of administering the tests. A later report is intended to examine teachers', examiners', and examinees' responses to the oral testing program and its role in motivating students to communicate in English as it is incorporated into the new curriculum begun from the year 2000.

The Need for English

KBU was established on principles determined by the widely recognized need for internationalization in Japan, and by the founders' perceived needs of Japanese society in the 21st century. The institution is unique in that it has only two departments in the Faculty of Human Studies - Clinical Psychology and Cultural Anthropology. Both fields have come to the fore as areas in need of development in Japan for the new millennium. KBU President Kazuhiko Higuchi sums up the university's choice of these departments as follows: "In this age when people need to look outward to their relations with other cultures, and inward to the personal qualities required to live truly independent lives, KBU has chosen to specialize in these two vital fields of study which are replete with meaning for the . . . millennium" (KBU English Bulletin 1997).

In seeking answers to the burgeoning ills of highly developed Asian societies such as Japan's, many psychology majors may choose to continue their studies through graduate work and training in Europe and America, where a number of options for specialization and training, and a longer history of research exist. In addition, those who choose professions in counseling will find English beneficial as international seminars and conferences play an important part in keeping up with new find-
In the case of cultural anthropology, an area of study still not widely known in Japan, it is a field with obvious connections to internationalization and to global awareness and sensitivity. If Japan's internationalization is to take on a broad meaning which includes contributing to the study of the cultural implications of globalization, then cultural anthropology is clearly an appropriate area for development. English is obviously of help and often a necessity for global anthropological fieldwork. As there is a strong likelihood that cultural anthropology students may do graduate work and future fieldwork in countries other than Japan, those who choose a profession in anthropology or another field compatible with a degree in cultural anthropology, such as international relations, will commonly come in contact with foreign nationals. For those in both fields, there will be more need for dialogue among Western and Asian scholars and practitioners, as English has inevitably, for better or ill, become the lingua franca for international communication.

Finally, the proliferation of information technology also underlines the necessity of English for global communication in all fields. It is becoming clear that a good command of English affects hireability in major corporations and joint venture companies in Japan. Even more significant is the need for English due to the wide use of the Internet in domestic business communications. The Internet is currently used increasingly by companies and individuals, and in the coming decade is expected to play an even greater major role in everyday life.

Over the past decade there have been gradual changes in junior high school and high school curricula in Japan, indicating a trend toward the teaching of communicative English. An oral communication component was added in the high school curriculum and its completion is a part of the requirement for graduation (Yonezawa, S. 1996). In 1987 the Mombusho (Ministry of Education), in conjunction with other government ministries, introduced the JET program whereby college graduates from overseas are invited to serve in local government organizations and Board of Education positions, as well as in public and private junior high and high school systems throughout Japan. Those "JETs" who work for the Ministry of Education or local government bodies ordinarily serve as Assistant English Teachers. In most cases they work as team teachers together with Japanese teachers of English in presenting communicative lessons, and also give talks to students introducing them to the cultures of their various countries. This government program has earned respect both in Japan and overseas. By 1999 the program had grown to nearly 6,800 participants from 37 countries (WWW document, 2000).

In addition, the Ministry is exploring the possibility of including English in the curriculum from the primary school level as a part of the Life Skills Component and has already implemented experimental elementary school programs in selected schools from April, 2000 (Ministry considers... 2000). More
recently, the possibility of making English the second official language in Japan was considered by the late Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi (Obuchi supports. . . 2000). The noted psychologist Hayao Kawai, at a Kasei Gakuen Founders’ Day speech at KBU, reiterated the late Prime Minister Obuchi’s suggestion and said he thought that if English were to become Japan’s official second language, there would be hope for Japan’s true internationalization. (Kawai, 2000).

Despite the implemented programs and trends toward communicative English, Japanese education still appears to lag behind other nations in English skills achievement. A recent survey shows that Japanese candidates have for several years placed among the lowest percentiles worldwide on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a standardized instrument with reliable measurability in predicting a student’s ability to do academic work at an institution of higher education where English is the medium of instruction. While the TOEFL does not measure communication skills, the survey findings are significant in supporting other recent evidence that six years of English instruction at the junior and senior high school levels appear to have fallen short even in providing a solid grammatical and structural foundation as the basis for learning communicative skills.

The global need for English communication skills in the coming century seems inevitable. Although, naturally, not all educated members of a society will need a second language as a life skill, ability in English as a second language is more clearly called for at the start of the new millennium than at any time in the past. It is hoped that KBU’s English communication program can assist students in gaining the basic communication skills and confidence they will need to use English in the real world, and in instilling positive attitudes so that in the future they may experience the benefits and pleasure of communicating with those of other cultures. In the following sections, the first four years of working toward these goals and transitions in developing the current program will be reviewed, and course content and preparation for helping students to attain those communication skills considered essential in an increasingly globalized society will be discussed.

KBU’s English Program: The First Four Years

Before KBU’s inception, its founders determined a number of cornerstone concepts to be considered foremost in the building of an institution designed to provide an education which could help to meet the demands of the 21st century. As Kasei Gakuen, the parent institution, has had a long history as a Jodoshu Buddhist institution, basic Buddhist principles were to provide the underlying values of the institution, with the intention of providing young people with the educational tools to lead a fulfilling life and benefit society. Among the main concrete practical goals of KBU, computer literacy and basic communicative proficiency in English for all students were highlighted.

Under the initial curriculum which remained in place for the first four
years of the university’s existence, certain restrictions made realization of the English goal problematic: most significantly, the number of contact hours allotted to English instruction. From the opening of the university in April, 1996, the English teaching staff, coming together from a wide range of training, experience, and educational philosophies, found themselves in the challenging position of creating a viable communicative English syllabus for non-English majors with one 90-minute class period per week. (At this writing the new curriculum is restructured to allow students in the first year 180 minutes of class time per week.)

Reconciling goals with actualities and adjusting curriculum accordingly take time and demand the effort of all involved. Though the basic goals stated in the previous section have remained the same, flexibility was required in the beginning stages as teachers determined student needs and attempted to set realistic goals within the confines of the stated curriculum. The first year was one of adjustment, as only basic criteria had been established and no precedents existed. Additionally, a segment of the student body obtains entrance by criteria which do not include English assessment, resulting in multi-level classes. Furthermore, in the first years of the university’s operation, many of the students had come from high schools where Assistant English Teachers from the Mombusho’s JET program were not yet present, or where the oral communication component was instituted only insofar as purchasing the textbook was concerned. This is still the case in some schools, though the effect of the AETs at high school level is now more apparent with incoming students, whose general communicative ability has increased.

When the university opened, it was necessary to take a pragmatic approach in the English program for the first years to try to assist students in areas where programs were not yet in place or where remedial needs were determined. As all four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—are clearly interrelated, teachers attempted to reinforce basic academic writing skills and reading incentives through outside assignments, while class time was designated for communicative English. ESL texts for the original curriculum were selected before the university opened, and the syllabus was based on the content of the required texts.

To assure fairness and continuity across the program, the workload of outside assignments, fluency journals and a paper designed to teach a variety of basic reading and writing skills called the synopsis-reaction paper was regulated. In addition, in the first year, core curriculum teachers outside the English program were advised that the English staff would teach communication, while the entire Clinical Psychology group and some Cultural Anthropology seminar teachers agreed to use texts written in English in their classes to help reinforce reading skills. In addition, students all had leased required personal computers, but as instruction was not yet organized, the English staff adopted a program-wide writing assignment designed to teach a variety of ba-
sic skills. All students in each class were required to hand in the same number of synopsis-reaction papers per term, formatted on their personal computers, and to take a final examination in the classroom, using their own computers. This test evaluated both the English skills and the computer skills involved. At present, as computer instruction at KBU becomes more firmly established, the communicative emphasis can more clearly take precedence. Papers and book reports are still required to be typed on the personal computer, and the English program supports the use of the computer as a necessary academic skill.

**Current Course Goals and Content**

Even with some changes in the new curriculum instituted from the year 2000, the English staff continues to support the efficacy of the original goal of the program - the ability to converse fluently on a topic in English for a period of fifteen minutes, as a practical guideline for instilling confidence and comfort in the use of English for communication. To this end, the oral testing system was suggested as a worthy goal before the program began, and has been a highlight of the English program from its beginning, as an event which enables students to view their own progress as communicators.

Emphasis on the oral test can be looked at through two perspectives: in a test-oriented academic society, students can view the compulsory class time as preparation for the assessment. Conversely, and from the teacher's perspective, the test can serve as validation for interactive classes which attempt to bring students as close as possible to real-life communicative exchange.

It could also be asserted that in a highly technological society such as Japan's, many young people are losing opportunities to communicate in "real time and space" with others. It is felt that this test and the preparation leading to it afford students opportunities to learn communication skills not only for English, but for Japanese as well. It could further be asserted that this activity can help set the ground for lifetime skills in communication and self-confidence.

Unlike the lecture classes which most students are accustomed to, the communicative classroom is a venue for practice. The majority of students have had minimum opportunities to use English for communication. In an age and society where singular activity has begun to take precedence over group communication, students need orientation and practice in communicative strategies as well as in speaking the language itself. Therefore, the course content emphasizes everyday spoken English, learned through extensive pairwork and groupwork exercises, short dialogues which can be rehearsed, expanded, and lead to substitution of content from students' real-life experience. Roleplay and games are introduced to bring students' speaking practice closer to authentic use of the language. Learning appropriate body language and eye contact are necessary and increase awareness of the same elements and their different ways of expression in the students' first language.
At first, some students may feel at a loss to participate in a class where student activity is paramount and the teacher's most evident role is as that of facilitator. Here, in the interest of preparation for the goal of the oral test helps to involve students with one another. As class members become accustomed to pair and group work, it becomes increasingly difficult for a student to remain in a reluctant role. Making language learning "fun" may be interpreted as non-academic. On the contrary, when students discover the concept of language for face-to-face communication, their delight is expressed and their self-image becomes more positive. *This can be asserted through a five-year history of student responses to KBU English classes and oral tests in their English journals. While not all students are effective communicators in their first language, the communicative classroom seeks to provide a non-threatening environment for communicative practice.

*The planned subsequent report to this paper will seek to validate these subjective assumptions through the use of questionnaires to be distributed to students, teachers and evaluators at the end of the 2000 academic year.

Oral Assessment: Background

KBU's oral test has its unique features, but before discussing the test itself, a look at the tradition of oral testing may be helpful.

An oral test, according to Underhill (1987), is a test in which a candidate is encouraged to speak and is assessed on the basis of that act. From this definition it follows that oral tests must be regarded as being different from conventional written tests, and as requiring separate criteria for evaluation. The most familiar types of language tests are written tests which have been developed, tested, and revised according to statistical data gathered by testing experts. A test has its own identity, form, and purpose, and specific rules for its administration. If we think of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), for example, we see it as an instrument used mainly for assessing a candidate's ability to perform in a university program conducted in English, and most commonly, in a country where English is spoken. The TOEFL test has its own familiar form and the test-takers can prepare for it by understanding the style and logic and by becoming familiar with the various sections of the test (Underhill). As in virtually all written tests, the emphasis is on the test itself, and the test-takers are regarded as "subjects".

In an oral test, however, as Underhill (1987) points out, a test document may not even exist. Thus an oral test is more of an event than an instrument. Language testing experts therefore often tend to look askance at a test which cannot attain a high level of reliability due to its necessarily subjective nature. However, as the emphasis is on the speakers and the communication that transpires between or among them, the oral test can be a dynamic and human experience. Though various types of models may be useful in preparing a
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A student for such an event, the greatest difference in such a test is that the person who takes the test, rather than the testing instrument, is the more important element.

With this in mind, we can see that an oral test is highly individualized, and must be designed specifically for the students who are to take the test, not only for its appropriateness to their proficiency level, but also for their specific needs and goals. In order to view oral testing as a viable measure of ability to communicate in a language, it is necessary to separate statistical assumptions which form the basis for mechanical tests such as multiple choice and cloze-type tests from oral testing, which involves the human element and therefore must include subjective evaluation. It seems obvious that a combination of various types of tests might result in a broad profile of a student's language ability. The term "best test" is used in relation to oral testing, stressing the need for oral test development in the context of the specific group for which it is intended (Underhill, 1987). According to Delarche (1995), the test should be devised by those directly involved with the test takers, in which case it is possible for an oral test to attain high validity, "the single most important factor in testing". By validity is meant the degree to which a test measures what it is supposed to measure (Nakamura, 1995). When test validity is discussed, it is generally accompanied by an account of the reliability factor (i.e., in its most basic meaning, the extent of objectivity). Delarche asserts that it is best to first create a test which is valid, and then to try to increase reliability, whereas if reliability is given foremost attention it will be difficult to improve validity.

One more essential pointed out by Delarche (1995) is that of "schema". The main type of schema to be considered in the case of the tests discussed here is known as content schema: that is, the student's aforehand knowledge of the test structure and of what to expect from the examiner. In regard to content schema, we here refer to the background content knowledge students bring to the test series.

To be sure, KBU's concept of an oral examination is not unique. Oral language assessment has a long and controversial history, but is most often used in the ESL field to determine placement in a program. The United States Foreign Service Institute (USFSI) designed an oral proficiency test which has been used for nearly 50 years, and which has served as a prototype for a variety of similar assessments. In this test candidates are assigned a proficiency level on a scale following the successful completion of specific language tasks. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) guidelines for assigning proficiency level are also widely used (Delarche, 1995). A wide variety of other types of oral testing instruments and configurations exist, but most standardized instruments such as the USFSI proficiency test and ACTFL proficiency test evaluate a range of proficiency too broad to make them appropriate for the mean proficiency level of KBU students at the present time.
Development of the Oral Testing Program at KBU

The original concept for a communicative English program at KBU was based on a program for language majors at a French institution. In this program the exit examination was a 20-minute extemporaneous speech. Students were assigned a topic upon entering the examination room, and had to speak for 20 minutes with a board of examiners on that topic. It was thought that a similar assessment tool for the communication program at KBU would be appropriate, but with a somewhat different objective. The French prototype was adapted to meet the goals of the KBU program; rather than to test proficiency or achievement, the test would be used as incentive for students to practice oral skills and to gain confidence in their own speaking ability. As the focus of the course is on communication skills, it was advisable to include oral skills assessments, both to clarify and emphasize the main program goals for the students. Most importantly, it was assumed that the inclusion of an oral test would motivate students to practice communication skills in the class and would be a concrete goal, the attainment of which would increase confidence in speaking ability year by year. Therefore participation in the test would be compulsory, while the result would not be a determining factor in the student’s final grade. With this objective, the test could maintain a high level of validity, while reliability would not be a relevant factor.

The following decisions were made regarding the oral test at KBU. First, the test would not be used as a determining factor in the students’ grade. Secondly, the challenge of undergoing the test itself would be compulsory, and would be promoted as a centerpiece of the program. It was also decided that the goal of 15 minutes would be attained by a tiered approach: that is, in the first year, the student would test with an instructor other than his or her own, on a topic selected by the examiner from three topics chosen and prepared by the candidate. In the second year oral test, students would converse with a partner for ten minutes, with the examiner possibly directing the conversation or asking questions to elicit as much language as possible. The third year test would fulfill the ultimate goal of fifteen minutes. In this test the student would speak with a highly qualified examiner from outside the university on a prepared topic, in most cases related to the student’s academic field, for a period of fifteen minutes.

As explained above, participation in the oral test was made compulsory, but the evaluation on the oral test is not a factor in the final course grade. That grade is determined by other criteria, the most important of which is evidence of effort, including class participation, attendance, completion of assignments including extensive fluency journals and progress in listening and speaking. Individual teachers’ criteria have varied slightly, but an attempt is made to keep students’ workloads consistent throughout the program, and to emphasize consistent effort as a crucial factor above
achievement or proficiency.

Teachers are in general agreement that participation in the oral testing process challenges students of limited proficiency and often limited interest in English study to make progress in basic communication skills, and to gain a degree of poise and confidence in using English for communication.

The Tests

English I: Original Curriculum

The key goal for the entire program, which was originally comprised of 90 minutes of class time per week for a period of three academic years, is the ability to converse “fluently” on a given topic. In order to achieve accountability, the test goal was established as a fifteen-minute conversation with one of a team of highly-credentialed English teachers from other universities or colleges, thus unknown to the test candidate, for a period of fifteen minutes. (On assessing this goal and its effectiveness in the academic year 2000, teachers expressed a high degree of satisfaction and unanimously determined to continue the same goal in the new curriculum from the year 2000.) The first-year syllabus is designed for beginners, and introduces and reviews simple basic grammatical constructions and communication strategies.

As the key goal for the original program was the ability to converse fluently in English for 15 minutes, the “first step” oral test goal for first year students was thus determined as the ability to converse on a topic with a teacher other than the student’s own instructor for a period of five minutes. As the format for the test remains the same in the new curriculum, but the test is now to be administered at a different point in the program, the basic test can be described for both the old and new curricula.

The student prepares and lists three topics of conversation prior to the test. Common topics for the first year examination are home and family, hometown information, hobbies, clubs or sports interests, and other content which mirror the first year syllabus and text, thus addressing the requirement for content schema (see Delarche, 1995). The student fills out the form and brings it to the test site at the time of the test. The examiner selects one topic from the list of three submitted by the student. In addition, the student is allowed to bring realia such as a photograph, drawing, or favorite item such as a musical instrument (although only a small minority have chosen to do so).

The student is invited to sit across from the examiner and the test is timed by a stopwatch. The student is given time to develop the topic, after which the teacher may interrupt with comments or questions. In cases where the presentation is clearly memorized, the evaluator may interrupt earlier in the test, in an attempt to elicit spontaneous speech from the candidate. When the time has elapsed as indicated by the stopwatch, the teacher quickly fills out the feedback form, and may give a few words of oral feedback, encouragement or judgment, and the student leaves the test site.
"Redo"

In the case where a student is clearly unprepared for the English I or II oral interview, unable to speak due to nervousness, unable to sustain a conversation for the allotted time, or unable to understand the evaluator's English, a check is marked in the box labeled "Redo" on the feedback form (Appendix 2). At the end of the testing session, the student must contact his or her own English teacher and schedule a "retake" oral interview. This interview is generally conducted within one week after the original test, giving the student a short period in which to practice and prepare. The retest takes place in the office of the student's own teacher. By policy, another KBU English staff member must be present. At this time, the student's teacher acts as the main examiner and the second teacher may interrupt with one or two questions toward the end of the interview. The student is then asked to leave the room, and the two teachers confer and make a decision. In the majority of cases the student is able to perform smoothly in the retest examination when the examiner is the student's own English teacher. Students who are nervous are given individual encouragement in the case of a retest, and an attempt is made by the teacher to provide a relaxed and warm atmosphere.

Preparation:

From the first year the test was conducted, teachers could use their own discretion in preparing students for the first year oral interview. Some had students practice for ten minutes at the beginning of each class in the second semester, with a classmate in the role of examiner, then switch roles after five minutes. Some teachers scheduled at least one formal 5-minute practice session with all their own students before the test. Students had a chance to study model conversations and in some cases to practice their talks regularly in class. Most teachers provided handouts with an explanation of the testing procedures and suggestions for preparation.

English II: Original Curriculum

In the original curriculum the English II oral examination, which was administered to second-year students at the end of the year required a different form from that of the first year. Several considerations helped shape the second year test. The first was a practical matter of logistics. The program was already work-intensive, but looking ahead, it was in danger of becoming unwieldy from the standpoint of logistics. The testing time would triple for teacher-examiners in the second year, allowing five minutes for first-year students and ten minutes for those in the second year.

This fact coupled with the inclination to make the second year test appropriately challenging and reflective of the fact that students had had more practice in conversing with classmates, led to the decision to configure the second year test in the form of a conversation between two students, giving them a chance to demonstrate increased aware-
ness and skill in the dynamics of a communicative exchange. Depending on the nature and length of the conversation between the two students, the evaluator could interrupt with questions if the conversation was not successfully sustained for the ten-minute interval of the test, or if the exchange appeared to be memorized. However, the main role of the teacher in the English II examination became that of assessor.

Prior to the English II test, students select a partner and choose three topics as in the first year. In like manner the three topics are written on the feedback form before the test and presented to the examiner (a KBU teacher other than the students’ own), who selects one topic at the beginning of the test. Students then begin their conversation, while the evaluator sits slightly apart. Generally, students should greet each other appropriately and engage in conversation as classmates or friends, ending the conversation appropriately. If the evaluator intervenes, either one or both candidates may be addressed. When the end of the test is announced, the evaluation form is quickly filled out and the teacher may give a brief comment. It is possible that one member of a team of candidates could pass and the other be asked to re-take the test, in which case the student is scheduled singly or with a willing partner at the teacher’s discretion. The teachers encourage all students to work with one partner. However, in some cases, an odd number in the classroom or group dynamics necessitate three members per group. In such cases the students are advised to prepare for a fifteen-minute conversation. It has been noticed that the two or three person interview empowers almost all students, and self-confidence is gradually attained by most. Group work in this case proves to be quite effective, as students help each other along in completing this task.

**English III: Original Curriculum**

In English III, in order to give students the opportunity for as authentic an experience as possible, it was decided to hire native speaker faculty from other institutions in the Kansai area as examiners, while KBU teachers served in the capacity of coordinators, administrators and hosts to foreign faculty. Although in the first and second years students were evaluated by teachers other than their own, it was felt that the situation of talking with a complete stranger whose first language was English could increase incentive and confidence to a greater degree, as even in the third year most students indicated that they had had little or no opportunity to use English with native speakers outside of class. (Exceptions included those who had had a homestay experience in a country where English was spoken, a small number of students with foreign friends, and in the case of anthropology students, limited opportunities during short fieldwork trips in the third year).

The help of twelve faculty members was solicited among faculty from such institutions as Kansai University of Foreign Languages and Kyoto University of Foreign Languages. All potential examiners were required to submit a resume to KBU, and all those selected had many years of experience in English as
a Second Language in institutions of higher education. All were mature teachers and received training before the test wherein they were asked to be as supportive as possible, and while allowing the student the maximum speaking time, to show encouragement as well.

The English III oral test was thus determined to be a 15-minute exchange in which the student was required to talk about a topic closely or loosely related in some way to his or her academic field. In the case of anthropology, a large number have chosen to describe their fieldwork experiences, while psychology majors have selected from a broader variety of topics related to their studies or individual experiences. As third year students are at the end of the academic year giving thought to their Senior Thesis, a number choose it as the theme of their talk. Again, each examiner interrupts at some point to ask questions and develop a communicative exchange. (See Appendix 1 for test configurations.)

“Redo” in English III

If the outside examiner determines that the student cannot fulfill the requirements for passing the test, either through lack of preparation, anxiety, or inability to sustain the conversation for the required period for any reason, the student is presented a “yellow card” with the signature of the evaluator, and the student must schedule a retest with his or her own teacher within a week of the original test at the discretion of the teacher. The procedure is the same as for English I and II, with a second KBU teacher in attendance, with whom a conference is held at the end of the retest. As previously mentioned, failing the oral test is not considered a criterion for failing the course, whereas failure to appear and take the test can mean failure of the course.

Labor and Financial Considerations

Administering the oral test is highly labor-intensive. In the 1999-2000 academic year the five-member staff spent a total of 28 hours testing English I and II students. In addition to conducting the test, one teacher spent 4 hours recording and dispersing the data, and all teachers conducted retake tests over the following week. In the case of the English III test, in 1999 12 outside examiners spent four and one half hours testing the English III students. All KBU teachers served in various capacities all day on the testing day, welcoming and briefing the guest evaluators, setting up the classrooms, serving on duty in the holding rooms for students awaiting the test, facilitating the flow of students to the examination rooms, and serving coffee and meals to the examiners, distributing honoraria, setting up the classrooms and returning them to their original state, and collecting data at the end of the test.

In 1999 the rate paid to outside examiners was comparable to that paid for oral interview examiners for the EIKEN test, in addition to transportation and two complimentary light meals. Expenditures for the English III final oral test totaled more than 50% of the English staff’s annual budget.
Subjective Observations on Students' and Examiners' Attitudes

In the first year when only the English I oral test was administered, there was a level of anxiety among students before and after the test. This may have been partially due to the fact that the oral test was a new experience for staff as well as for students. A second probable reason concerns the fact that, as there were no upperclassmen in the first year, and therefore no precedent had been established, students did not have the opportunity to hear about the testing experience from their seniors, as would normally be the case in a Japanese university environment. In the second year, however, several students wrote in their English journals of their positive reactions to the test and their pride in completing it successfully. Before the English II test in the second year there was less confusion among students in preparing for the second level test, and no major negative incidents were reported among first year students.

The first English III test in 1998 also produced an atmosphere of nervousness prior to the test. As students waited in groups outside the respective doors behind which they were to meet an unknown foreign examiner, KBU teachers tried to put them at ease with reminders and jokes. After the test a number of candidates left the examination room with smiles and excited proclamations of “I passed!” In the classroom the following week, and in impromptu discussions with their teachers, many students recounted their experiences in the test room enthusiastically. Outside examiners, asked for their feedback after the English III test the first year, were unanimously enthusiastic. In the second year, all the same examiners gladly returned except two who had left Japan. The experience of having administered the test the year before resulted in stability and a more smoothly administered test in the second year.

Examiners were positive in their subjective evaluations of KBU students, stating that their conversations were meaningful and interesting, and had substance. Their objective evaluation also seems to back this up in the fact that in over two hundred forty English III students examined in 1999, fewer than twenty students were required to redo the examination with KBU faculty members.

The Oral Test in the New Curriculum

From April, 2000 the New Curriculum went into effect, creating changes in the English Program. The program became a 2-year compulsory course, which will also include electives for upper-class members in the future. In the first term for first-year students, English is offered as a one-term class, with two separate 90-minute sessions per week. There are two options in English I. A student may sign up for two periods of Communication per week, or for one period of Reading, and one of Communication. Whichever stream the student chooses, a course is completed in one term. For students who choose Commu-
nication/Communication (Communication class twice a week), an oral test of five minutes can be taken with the student’s own teacher at the end of the term. As the number of classroom hours for Communication/Communication students are doubled, students in this stream will be expected to take a 10-minute test at the end of English IIA and IIB (1st year, second term course), with a teacher other than their own. At the end of English IV (second semester of the second year), all students will take the 15-minute oral test with an outside examiner.

Not all criteria have yet been decided for the new curriculum students, but it is significant that at the end of the initial curriculum’s four-year cycle, all teachers were in agreement that the basic communicative goal of 15 minutes should remain as the focus of the Communication course. A second creditable observation is that the test is meaningful to students as an indicator of their increased ability to communicate in English. Most students practice and prepare for the test. The response at the end of the third year test has been strongly positive. For those students who do not have good communication skills, the safeguard which was established in the old curriculum still holds true - that is, a student can pass the course without passing the oral examination, but must make an effort and must participate in the test.

Now that the new curriculum is in effect, a report is intended in the coming academic year to record objective information regarding the test, to assess attitudes of teachers, examiners, and students, and to make recommendations for the future of the oral testing program.
APPENDIX 1

Basic conversation model:* 

![Diagram of basic conversation model]

English I oral test model:  
Evaluator: An in-house teacher other than the student’s own  
Time: 5 minutes (evaluator assumes secondary speaking role)

![Diagram of English I oral test model]

English II model:  
Evaluator: An in-house teacher other than the student’s own  
Time: 10 minutes

![Diagram of English II model]

English III model:  
Evaluator: a senior staff member from an outside university  
Time: 15 minutes (evaluator assumes secondary speaking role)

![Diagram of English III model]

*adapted from Underhill, p. 2-3
APPENDIX 2

The following rating scale was employed for English I oral interviews. Students present the form at the start of the test, with the three topics designated. The evaluator selects one of the three topics at the beginning of the interview. A similar form and the same criteria are used for English II with slight variations on form to accommodate the differences in the test procedure.

Name ________________________  Student Number ______

English I Final Oral Examination

Write down 3 topics you would like to talk about with the examiner. The examiner will choose one of the topics for you to discuss.

Topics:
1. __________________________________________________
2. __________________________________________________
3. __________________________________________________

Evaluation:
The examiner will be looking at the following points to evaluate your English conversation/communication skills:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Flow of conversation</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Two-way conversation skills</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Clear pronunciation</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sentence structure</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Appropriateness</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examiner’s signature________________________ Pass ☐ Redo ☐
References


Kyoto Bunkyo University (1999) [English Language Brochure]. Kyoto: Kazuhiko Higuchi.


