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English language testing of very young children: The case of Japan

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Abstract: Taking commercial English language tests is becoming common practice among young English learners in Japan. With a specific focus on the *Jidō Eiken* test, this study examines English language test-taking activity by analyzing textual data retrieved from three data sources. *Jidō Eiken* is found to represent a complex phenomenon involving many stakeholders, including very young learners of English who have not fully acquired their first language and adults who often initiate the test-taking. This test-taking phenomenon is embedded in a “testing culture” in which individuals’ ascribed social worth is based on test results, resulting in severe competition. In light of such findings, I discuss how *Jidō Eiken* might be used in the near future, and draw attention to the negative and unintended consequences of the potential scenarios with respect to English language education and language policy in Japan and other contexts in the Asia-Pacific region.

Subjects: Early Childhood; Education Policy; Language Teaching & Learning; Modern Foreign Languages

Keywords: Japan; language testing; primary English language education; English as a foreign language; language-in-education policy

1. Introduction

It is becoming common practice in some Asia-Pacific countries for very young children to take fee-based English language tests. Although the use of tests is still limited in formal schooling, a variety

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Although taking a fee-based English language test is increasingly popular among young learners in East Asia, few studies have investigated the rationales for taking and attitudes toward the tests in Japan. To fill this gap, this study presents the preliminary accounts of various people involved in test-taking through the analysis of textual data in which stakeholders express their experiences and views regarding a test called *Jidō Eiken*. The results show (1) the powerful presence of parents and instructors at private English language schools, who act as main agents in inciting young learners’ test-taking, and (2) that these adults are generally driven by the “testing culture”, in which people are ascribed social worth on the basis of test results, and therefore compete against each other. This study calls for more attention to the involvement of surrounding adults in young learners’ test-taking as an important factor influencing the direction of the official education policy.

of fee-based English language tests have been developed internationally for young learners, such as Cambridge English: Young Learners and the Pearson Test of English Young Learners. These commercially available tests are increasingly taken by young children in East Asia, typically outside of the school system. While the presence of these English language tests indicates the growing popularity of test-taking among young English learners, they raise a number of concerns, such as the reliability of standardized tests as a way of assessing the typically uneven and idiosyncratic language development of young children, and the potential negative backwash effects that these tests might bring. Motivated by such concerns, this study investigates the foundations of young learners' test-taking activity, with the aim of identifying the rationale for taking the tests and attitudes toward them among test-takers, parents, and other important stakeholders. I focus on *Jidō Eiken*, a standardized English language test developed for young learners in Japan, where there is a distinct lack of research on this important social phenomenon. I begin by delineating the background of this study in terms of (1) English-in-education policy in primary schools, (2) the presence of standardized English language tests in and outside of primary schools, (3) testing culture, and (4) academic debates on the use of standardized language tests for young learners. The second and third sections provide the details of *Jidō Eiken* and the methodology of the study, respectively. In the results section, I illustrate people's motivations and perceptions regarding *Jidō Eiken* and the close-knit relationship between *Jidō Eiken* and the testing culture in Japan. In the following section, I depict two potential uses of *Jidō Eiken* and its consequences in relation to education, followed by the conclusions and implications for language-in-education policy.

2. Background: the spread of English language testing for very young children

The global spread of English has been a major factor in the increase in the number of young English learners in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan. Educational authorities in these countries have adopted language-in-education policies that introduce English language education in primary schools. An increasing number of young children study English at home and in private English language schools, even before they officially start learning English in school (Baldauf, Kaplan, & Kamwangamalu, 2010), generally due to the mystification of early childhood foreign language education (Benson, 2008). As a result, assessments for English ability have increasingly been developed for young pupils, resulting in not only the introduction of in-class assessments but also the use of English language tests for primary school pupils as a national initiative. For example, Taiwan (Chern, 2010) and Hong Kong (Qian, 2008) have conducted such tests for the purpose of using the results to improve the quality of teaching. Furthermore, several commercial English language tests designed for young learners have become widely available, including Cambridge English: Young Learners in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Japan; the Pearson Test of English Young Learners in China and Hong Kong; the Junior English Test in China, South Korea and Japan; and the Junior General Tests of English Language Proficiency in China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, to name a few.

Such test-taking activities among young children should be examined within the broader testing culture. In some Asian countries, people study hard to pass tests because they play an important role in screening people for various academic and employment purposes. Test-taking, therefore, is considered to be a competitive undertaking, rather than merely something that supports one's learning. High-stakes tests have thus become a mechanism for ascribing social worth. Accordingly, test-takers themselves, and other stakeholders such as teachers and parents, invest time, money, and energy into test preparation and test-taking. For example, in East Asia it has become common for students to undertake private supplementary tutoring (Bray, 2001), where they prepare for tertiary entrance examinations outside of formal schooling. This "shadow education" (Stevenson & Baker, 1992, p. 1639) system creates a considerable financial burden on families. Competitive preparation also creates enormous pressure and stress for students, which can damage their psychological and physical well-being (Bossy, 2000). Preparation also often leads to learners mechanically memorizing the test content so that they are able to pass the test, but without gaining any genuine understanding or the ability to put the knowledge into practice (Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004; Ross, 2008). The nationwide test for young English learners can potentially exert pressure on

teachers because the test results can affect schools' reputations and rankings, as is the case in Hong Kong (Qian, 2008). In sum, the phenomenon of an increasing number of young children taking English language tests raises more general questions about the testing culture in East Asia.

Problems pertaining to the testing culture are more pronounced when considering the highly problematic nature of standardized tests for young language learners. For example, Katz (as cited in Shaaban, 2005, p. 35) warns that "the younger the child being evaluated, assessed, or tested, the more errors are made and the greater the risk of assigning false labels to them" Due to young children's vulnerability, standardized tests create much more anxiety and stress for young children than for adolescent students and adults. Pinter (2006) argues that standardized language tests are unsuitable for the language development of young learners, who are unaccustomed to such institutionalized activities as gap filling and vocabulary translation. Instead of standardized tests, Pinter (2006) and Cameron (2001) both recommend multiple assessments, such as combining class observation, portfolios, and peer-/self-assessment. Yet, teachers are often tempted to use standardized tests in a classroom setting because they require less effort in preparation (Pinter, 2006).

In spite of the problems inherent in the testing culture and in the use of standardized tests for young children, commercially available English language tests taken by young children have been the focus of only limited research. Chik and Besser (2011), Choi (2008), and Su (2006) all point out that parents and surrounding adults (e.g. school principals, instructors in private English language schools) are prime initiators of children's test-taking in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea, respectively. With a close focus on "Cambridge English: Young Learners", which officially promote itself as a series of "fun, motivating English language tests" (Cambridge English Language Assessment, n.d.), Chik and Besser (2011) investigated children's test-taking activity in Hong Kong. They found that the strong beliefs held by parents and primary school principals contributed to a test-taking frenzy in which a better score on the test promised an opportunity to enter superior English-medium secondary schools. This results in a multi-faceted competition in which parents and school principals strive to improve young pupils' test-taking performance, while the young learners themselves compare scores and become anxious about lagging behind others pupils. Choi (2008) conducted surveys in private English language schools in South Korea, where about 1 in 10 primary school pupils took an English language test in 2005. Choi found that (1) some children had taken tests which were not primarily designed for young learners; (2) English language instructors at the schools and the children's parents often initiated children's test-taking; (3) the instructors believed that such tests motivated children to study English and improve their English ability; (4) the instructors were extremely sensitive to parental needs, so they recommended test-taking to demonstrate their children's learning progress.

In addition to the paucity of research into fee-based English language tests among young English learners, this phenomenon merits serious consideration as it has important policy consequences. Because tests affect not only individuals who are involved in test-taking but also institutions and language policies (Shohamy, 2008), early childhood test-taking can influence English-in-education policies and consequently learning and teaching practices in classrooms. For instance, in Japan, a commercially produced test, called *Jidō Eiken*, "English qualification test for pupils", provides the impetus for the official introduction of written tests in primary schools (Takahashi & Yanagi, 2011), where, at present, English is currently taught as an experiential rather than academic subject and thus involves no formal assessment (Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science & Technology, 2008). Tests such as *Jidō Eiken*, mainly taken outside of the classroom at the individual's request, put pressure on state education authorities to consider the use of standardized English language tests. Thus, it is crucial to identify the potential policy consequences of commercially produced English language tests that target very young children.

2.1. *Jidō Eiken*

I selected *Jidō Eiken* from a variety of English language tests for young learners available in Japan because of its developer and relative popularity. Developed by Japan's most well-known test

developer, the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) in 1994 (*Jidō Eiken* English Website, n.d.), *Jidō Eiken* attracts over 1.4 million test applicants (*Jidō Eiken* Japanese Website, n.d.-b). The creation of *Jidō Eiken* is closely connected with a STEP-developed English language test called *Jitsuyō Eigo Ginō Kentei*, "Practical English Skill Test", known as *Eiken*. As one of the most widely used and recognized English language tests in Japan, *Eiken* is considered a reliable measure of English proficiency at both the governmental and private institutional level. For example, *Eiken* serves as one of the important criteria for employment, matriculation to higher education, and university graduation (*Eiken* Japanese Website, n.d.-b). *Eiken* is widely viewed as a high-stakes test by adult learners who wish to reap the benefits of having successfully taken *Eiken*.

Although not designed for young learners, 206,849 primary school pupils took *Eiken* in 2012 (*Eiken* Japanese Website, n.d.-a), including many younger than 11 years, whereas compulsory English language education begins in Year 5 of primary school. Due to the increasing number of pre-schoolers taking *Eiken*, STEP created *Jidō Eiken* in 1994 (Yomiuri, 1995). Individuals taking *Jidō Eiken* range from very young children aged under three to middle school pupils (*Jidō Eiken* Japanese Website, n.d.-b). Although *Jidō Eiken* is external to the formal schooling under the current education system, STEP offers *Jidō Eiken gakkō ban* "specially customized *Jidō Eiken* for schools". This implies that several primary schools and local education authorities have used *Jidō Eiken* as an objective means of assessing English proficiency (*Jidō Eiken* Japanese Website, n.d.-a).

Although some educational institutions make use of *Jidō Eiken* as an objective measurement, STEP does not provide information about the test's validity or reliability, which raises the question of whether *Jidō Eiken* and other STEP-developed tests are appropriately designed to assess English proficiency. Indeed, STEP promotes *Jidō Eiken* as a learning enhancement tool. Because failure on tests is believed to hinder a child's motivation (*Jidō Eiken* English Website, n.d.), STEP issues a *Jidō Eiken* certificate with the percentage of correct answers instead of a pass or fail. The stated goals of *Jidō Eiken* are to cultivate children who

- (1) are familiar with and have an interest in the English language;
- (2) enjoy actively taking part in English communication;
- (3) are aware that English can be used as a tool for communication with people from all over the world, and understand various lifestyles and cultures around the world; and
- (4) strive to become internationally minded individuals with a broad outlook on life. (*Jidō Eiken* English Website, n.d.).

These explicit goals still need to be scrutinized, as STEP treats *Jidō Eiken* as though it enhances overall English communication. In fact, it only assesses listening ability, requiring test-takers to listen to English words, phrases, sentences, or dialogs, and then choose the correct answer from a set of choices with the help of illustrations and, for the higher levels, sometimes written texts. *Jidō Eiken* has two formats (a paper-and-pencil and an online version), which differ in test dates (three times a year vs. on-demand), answer format (pencil mark vs. mouse click) and content, and three different levels (Gold, Silver, and Bronze, with Bronze being the easiest). The child-friendly formats and multiple-level system make it possible to attract young learners ranging in ability from beginner to advanced, and in age from pre-school to primary school pupils. The test fee and duration of *Jidō Eiken* also vary: the paper-and-pencil format Bronze level costs JPY2,500 (approximately USD25) for 30 min, the Silver level costs JPY2,700 (approximately USD27) for 35 min, and the Gold level costs JPY2,900 (approximately USD29) for 45 min, while the online version costs JPY200 less for each level with the same time duration.¹

Although *Eiken*, *Jidō Eiken*, and many other English proficiency tests are widely available and taken by a large number of people in Japan, there has been little research to identify who takes the tests and for what reasons. This study, therefore, takes *Jidō Eiken* as an example, to identify the stakeholders involved in taking *Jidō Eiken*, their rationale for doing so and their attitudes toward the

test. Hence, this study addresses two research questions; (1) Why is *Jidō Eiken* being taken? and (2) What do stakeholders think about *Jidō Eiken*?

2.2. Methodology

I analyzed textual data to gain insights into the thoughts and attitudes of the stakeholders engaged in *Jidō Eiken*. The textual data were collected between June and September 2011 from three sources: (1) the *Jidō Eiken* official website (JEO), (2) magazines, and (3) online discussion forums. Because the aim of this study was to represent the voices of stakeholders who had taken *Jidō Eiken* themselves or who had encouraged their children or students to take it, it was necessary to collect the data such as personal vignettes and anecdotes. The three data sources were selected because all of them contain testimonials, interview excerpts, and online postings from stakeholders expressing their views and experiences regarding *Jidō Eiken*.

The first data-set consists of 40 testimonials posted on the *Jidō Eiken* official website, in which parents, test-takers, and English language instructors at private English language schools expressed their impressions and experiences of *Jidō Eiken* (16 parents, 20 test-takers, and 4 English language instructors in private English language schools). Second, three widely read English language learning and parenting magazines were chosen: *Kodomo Eigo* (KE), “English for Children” (pp. 13–15, June 2007 issue), *Kodomo Eigo Katarogu* 2011 (KEK), “English for Children Catalogue 2011” (p. 41, February 2010 issue), and *edu* (pp. 37–43, February 2011 issue), because they contained either coverage or a feature article on *Jidō Eiken*. They included testimonials from or interview excerpts with parents and English language instructors. Third, postings on the following popular online discussion boards were gathered: Yahoo! *Chiebukuro*, “Pearls of Wisdom” (YC), OKWave Inter-edu.com (Inter-edu), and the Benesse education information sites (Benesse). As anyone with an Internet connection can exchange opinions online, these data sources include perceptions and experiences regarding *Jidō Eiken* from a wide range of individuals. Using the search function with the keywords “*Jidō Eiken*”, postings in which people engaged in substantive discussion of *Jidō Eiken* were retrieved. The postings covered the 2003–2011 period, with a total of 76 threads and 386 postings. Although the user profiles on the discussion boards are not normally disclosed for privacy reasons, people often divulge their personal information in their postings by, for example, stating their children’s ages. In fact, most of the selected postings were from parents, and some were from those presenting themselves as English language instructors.

While the use of three data sources contributes to data triangulation and fuller understanding of the phenomenon under study, it is important to consider the orientation of each data-set with respect to *Jidō Eiken* and STEP. As texts construct particular representations depending on the context in which they are produced (Atkinson & Coffely, 1997; Flick, 1998), contextual factors such as where the texts appear, how they are created, and who published them are important. For example, a business relationship between a data source and STEP would be likely to influence the content of the data. Of the data sources for this study, the *Jidō Eiken* official website and the three magazines were most likely to be influenced by the viewpoints of STEP. The official website is where STEP primarily posts information about *Jidō Eiken*, and the three magazines have a business relationship with either STEP or *Jidō Eiken*.² Thus, although the data collected from both sources consist of personal accounts, they are likely to serve STEP’s business intention, which is to make *Jidō Eiken* attractive to would-be consumers of the test. In contrast, the online discussion boards are public and thus contain a greater variety of topics and opinions than the other two data sources (see Table 1). Although it is impossible to determine whether specific posts are free of the promotional aims of *Jidō Eiken*, at the very least, the discussion boards obviously include accounts from people who do not have a promotional connection to STEP.

Qualitative content analysis was used to interpret and describe the textual data, involving multiple readings and coding of the data. Rather than using preconceived codes, codes emerged inductively from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coding procedure began with the labeling of significant phenomena or topics in the data that captured key thoughts or concepts. The generated codes were

Table 1. Distribution of generated codes, their frequency, and location

Umbrella code	Code	The official website (number of codes identified)	Magazines (number of codes identified)	Discussion forums (number of codes identified)
Motivations	Relationship between <i>Jidō Eiken</i> and private English language schools	✓ (11)	✓ (9)	✓ (15)
	Interests in <i>Jidō Eiken</i>	✓ (13)	✓ (3)	✓ (16)
	Reasons for taking <i>Jidō Eiken</i>	✓ (28)	✓ (5)	✓ (29)
	Concerns about children's English learning	No data	No data	✓ (7)
Perceptions	Positive references toward <i>Jidō Eiken</i>	✓ (61)	✓ (22)	✓ (36)
	Negative references toward <i>Jidō Eiken</i>	✓ (13)	No data	✓ (27)
	Indifference toward <i>Jidō Eiken</i>	No data	No data	✓ (5)
Testing culture	Concerns about other test-takers of <i>Jidō Eiken</i>	No data	No data	✓ (6)
	Diverse age of Eiken test-takers	✓ (17)	✓ (3)	✓ (28)
	<i>Jidō Eiken</i> as a serious test	✓ (15)	✓ (11)	✓ (52)
	Comparisons between <i>Jidō Eiken</i> and other tests	No data	✓ (1)	✓ (26)
	General references to Eiken	✓ (8)	✓ (8)	✓ (21)
	Positive references to Eiken	✓ (20)	No data	✓ (9)

then elaborated through comparison and linking of the codes. This process established the uniformity and variance of the grouped codes, which were finally grouped into umbrella codes that recurred across the data.

While reading and coding the data multiple times, I sensitized myself to the different orientations of three different data sources mentioned above. However, the generated codes did not overly reflect such orientations, with some vivid differences between the first two data-sets (JEO and magazines) and the third (online discussion forums) (see Table 1). In fact, the greatest diversity was found in the data from the online discussion forums, which contained a wider variety of topics and opinions than the other two data sources.

2.3. Findings

The analysis generated 13 codes grouped into 3 umbrella codes. Table 1 shows the names of the codes and their frequency across the data. As it was largely possible to identify “whose” motivations and perception were represented in the data through the analysis, the next section first describes the stakeholders involved in *Jidō Eiken*. This is important for the subsequent section, which illustrates the three umbrella codes, that is, (1) stakeholders’ motivations and (2) perceptions toward *Jidō Eiken*, which are connected to (3) testing culture in Japan.

2.4. Stakeholders

The findings illustrate that *Jidō Eiken* is not only taken at a child’s request, but frequently at the request of other stakeholders, namely English language instructors in private English language schools and parents, who have control over matters such as test administration and testing fees.

Private English language schools are one of the driving forces behind children taking *Jidō Eiken* due to their involvement in test administration and their active promotion of *Jidō Eiken*. Although pupils who attend private English language schools are not the majority, it is reported that about 20% of primary school children below Year 4 have already begun learning English privately (BERDC, 2006) and that 14% of parents surveyed answered that their children (from infants to pre-schoolers)

have received some form of private English language education (BERDC, 2005). Indeed, many private English language schools administer *Jidō Eiken*, and some even include it in the curriculum as “the final event of the year” [English language instructor, KE, p13].³ They also promote the test by distributing “a flyer of *Jidō Eiken*” [Test-taker, JEO] or directly “recommending *Jidō Eiken*” [Parent, Benesse, 6 February 2010 16:04] to their students and parents. Such recommendations directly result in children taking *Jidō Eiken*, e.g.:

My child took the Bronze level of *Jidō Eiken* as the English language school asked him/her to do so. [Parent, YC, 10 March 2010 16:27]

While private English language schools can influence only their students, parents are likely to have a more significant and direct influence on whether their children take *Jidō Eiken*. The causative verb *saseru* in Japanese, “to have someone do,” occurs frequently in the online parental accounts, which shows that parents have a keen interest in *Jidō Eiken* and consequently initiate their children’s test-taking activities. The following is one such example:

I want to have my child try STEP’s *Jidō Eiken*; however, the website said it’s for pupils above primary school if they take *Jidō Eiken* at a public test site. Do you think a preschooler would be denied when applying? Do you think it is possible for my child to lie about his/her age and take *Jidō Eiken*? [Parent, OKWave, 7 April 2005 13:58]

2.5. Motivations, perceptions, and testing culture

In the context of Japan, where English is not formally taught and assessed, whether private English language schools and parents drive young learners to take *Jidō Eiken* mainly depends on their perceptions of the test. People value its child-friendliness, describing it as “easy-to-follow” [Parent, Benesse, 6 February 2010 16:33], “not boring” [English language instructor, KE, p. 13], and “not demotivating for children” [Parent, JEO]. In contrast, some criticize the test for being too child-friendly and lacking substance, while others claim that it includes difficult contexts for pre-schoolers to comprehend, such as school subjects and activities typically introduced in primary school. These rather negative perceptions may lead the stakeholders not to encourage young learners to take *Jidō Eiken*.

While *Jidō Eiken* itself is perceived as a pedagogical tool either positively or negatively, taking *Jidō Eiken* has diverse meanings, depending on how the stakeholders want to make use of the test or how they think it will benefit the young children taking it. For instance, private English language schools may encourage children to take *Jidō Eiken* to motivate their English learning. In fact, some schools use *Jidō Eiken* because it “allows children to experience an achievement” [English language instructor, KE, p. 15]. Likewise, taking *Jidō Eiken* is considered to be “a reward for learning English” [Parent, Inter-edu, 24 October 2008 8:39], while some believe that “taking *Jidō Eiken* serves to increase children’s confidence” [Parent, OKWave, 7 April 2005 13:58]. *Jidō Eiken* gives children a special experience, such as an achievement or reward that they may be unable to receive in formal schooling or private English language schools.

Another prominent reason for encouraging children to take *Jidō Eiken* is closely connected to Japan’s testing culture: to outwit rivals and win the testing competition. Similar to other high-stakes tests in Japan, *Jidō Eiken* is considered by some to be a competitive test for children. Some parents express their comments and concerns over other test-takers’ *Jidō Eiken* level and appropriate age, such as:

There are many children at the age of three studying for *Jidō Eiken*, so it’s late for children at the age of five to take *Jidō Eiken*. [Parent, OKWave, 24 September 2008 17:18]

Would it be true that most of the test-takers are pre-schoolers? [Parent, Inter-edu, 23 October 2008 21:28]

A typical concern is raised by the parent of a 10-year-old child with 6 years of English language learning experience who took the Bronze level *Jidō Eiken*. The parent wants to know whether it is the appropriate level for the child. As the test is a competition for the parents as well as the children, this particular parent is concerned about losing face, saying that “if I tell my friends [that my child took the Bronze level] whose children also learn English, they may be surprised and I may be embarrassed” [Parent, YC, 10 March 2010 16:27]. Such statements confirm the competitive testing culture in Japan, one in which earlier test-taking is believed to be somehow advantageous.

Because early test-taking is seen as an important factor in winning testing competitions to gain primacy over others, getting children ready for test-taking as early as possible is also seen as an essential preparation for the competition. Private English language schools and parents start teaching children “how to write their name in Japanese and in English” [Parent, YC, 11 June 2007 20:55] and “how to sit for long periods of time” [English language instructor, KE, p. 15], for example, to prepare children for *Jidō Eiken*. Parents and English language instructors are also keen to see their children/pupils achieve a certain score or level of *Jidō Eiken*. Parents in particular use a variety of test-taking aids such as “past versions of *Jidō Eiken* tests” [Parent, YC, 14 March 2010 1:23] and “commercially available English textbooks” [Parent, Inter-edu, 24 October 2008 21:34]. Private English language schools also offer “mock tests” [English language instructor, KE, p. 13] and their own “*Jidō Eiken* preparation courses” [Parent, Benesse, 6 February 2010 16:33] to education-conscious parents and children.

With the effort that many parents and English language instructors at private English language schools invest in test preparation, *Jidō Eiken* is used as a gage of children’s English ability and their progress in learning English. For example, a parent whose child has not reached the official starting age of primary English language education states that “there is no opportunity to check my child’s progress in learning English” [Parent, JEO]. Because English is not formally assessed in primary schools and many private English language schools, an English language instructor recognizes that “parents’ need for gauging their children’s development in English learning” [English language instructor, JEO], implying that *Jidō Eiken* is seen to fulfill such a need. In addition, parents use the results of this test to determine whether their investment in private English language schools is paying off. The following is an example of the often-expressed parental concern about whether the schools are making a difference in increasing their child’s English language competence:

At first I was thinking that English conversation school would get my son used to English. But it has been five years since then. These days, I cannot help myself questioning the efficacy of the school ... I am wondering if *Jidō Eiken* is good [for that purpose]. [Parent, Benesse, 6 February 2006 16:04]

As a result, it is not surprising that many stakeholders become score-focused or level-conscious. One parent, for example, comments that “I was shocked by my child’s terrible score on *Jidō Eiken*. ... How do you prepare at home?” [Parent, Inter-edu, 7 March 2008 12:04]. The findings show that parents and English language instructors aspire to see their children and students “move up to the next level of *Jidō Eiken*” [English language instructor, KE, p. 13] and obtain higher scores, usually above 80%, which STEP recommends before taking the next level (*Jidō Eiken* English website n.d). For some parents, an 80% accuracy rate is considered a “passing mark” [Parent, YC, 7 July 2009 14:55]. Therefore, many children take *Jidō Eiken* multiple times until they “get 80% correct” [Parent, YC, 25 September 2007 9:58] or “step by step” [Parent, YC, 25 September 2007 11:32] to complete each level of *Jidō Eiken*. Indeed, children, parents, and English language instructors often referred to the satisfaction of getting a high score, or seeing a test-taker receive a high score.

For some, *Jidō Eiken* is considered a serious test that children prepare for. However, this may not necessarily hold true for everyone. *Jidō Eiken* is taken by young children who have few or no prior test-taking experience. Thus, taking *Jidō Eiken* is considered useful “to get children used to test-taking” [Parent, Benesse, 6 February 2010 21:26] or to let them experience “a feeling of tension”

[English language instructor, JEO] created by the test-taking environment. In this case, *Jidō Eiken* is conceived as a starting point for joining the testing competition.

In other cases, *Jidō Eiken* is dismissed and other tests, most notably *Eiken*, are considered “better” or more serious tests. Many children take *Jidō Eiken* in preparation for *Eiken*, as many consider *Jidō Eiken* to be a “practice test for *Eiken*” [Non-specified contributor, YC, 30 November 2009 21:11]. *Eiken*’s primacy over *Jidō Eiken* is typically pronounced in relation to its wider recognition as a credential test. In fact, there are no negative comments about the pedagogical usefulness of *Jidō Eiken*, although some people are highly critical of its use as a qualification test. The following brief excerpts illustrate the belief that standardized English language tests provide certification of one’s English ability, beyond their use as a tool for learning English:

Jidō Eiken is completely useless when the test-takers become adults. [Non-specified contributor, YC, 28 January 2005 14:38]

Having the Gold level of *Jidō Eiken* is not a significant plus beyond its private use. [Non-specified contributor, Inter-edu, 23 October 2008 23:33]

The belief in credentials becomes even clearer when people compare *Jidō Eiken* with *Eiken*. As *Eiken* is a well-known, widely taken high-stakes qualification test, it is considered “meaningless and wasteful to stop after taking only *Jidō Eiken*” [Parent, Benesse, 8 February 2010 14:26]. Therefore, a hierarchical relationship between the two tests has emerged, with *Jidō Eiken* criticized as the less valuable or inferior credential, as in the following:

I recommend taking *Eiken* rather than taking *Jidō Eiken* if you want to obtain something valuable for your child’s future. [Non-specified contributor, YC, 10 December 2004 17:54]

In fact, most children, parents and private English language schools aspire to take *Eiken* after *Jidō Eiken*, and many do so. Furthermore, some parents regard it as normal practice that many pre-schoolers take *Eiken*, commenting “You have to acknowledge this truth” [Parent, Inter-edu, 4 August 2010 19:19], while others view it as a status symbol. One parent, for example, comments that “I cannot believe pre-schoolers can take *Eiken* with such difficult questions. Your child is great!” [Parent, Inter-edu, 25 October 2008 12:04]. Thus, while *Jidō Eiken* is viewed by some as an inferior and a less widely recognized qualification, *Eiken* is shown to hold a solid position in the English language test-taking market in Japan.

3. Discussion

The field of language testing recognizes that assessment can be used for purposes other than the obvious and intended ones (Hughes, 1989; Shohamy, 2001). Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that the use of *Jidō Eiken* can be quite different from that which STEP publicly recommends. Indeed, many children are not necessarily self-motivated in taking *Jidō Eiken*, in hope of, for example, “becoming familiar with and interested in the English language” (*Jidō Eiken* English Website, n.d.). Like previous studies in Hong Kong (Chik & Besser, 2011), Korea (Choi, 2008), and Taiwan (Su, 2006), the test-taking is mostly motivated by adult stakeholders, namely parents and English language instructors in private English language schools. The rationales for encouraging children to take *Jidō Eiken* are found to be inseparable from the surrounding adult stakeholders’ perceptions about English language tests embedded in the testing culture. Young learners’ test-taking activity is not driven simply by a pedagogical point of view, but by a competitive point of view that *Jidō Eiken* gives children a great advantage over others. While some adults use *Jidō Eiken* for pedagogical purposes, such as providing children with a feeling of achievement and reward or gaging their English ability and learning progress, others are caught in the logic of a competitive testing culture. For example, parents themselves compete with each other over whose children receive what scores on what levels of *Jidō Eiken* at what age, and invest in preparation for *Jidō Eiken* or choose a more prominent test such as *Eiken* in lieu of *Jidō Eiken*. Furthermore, English language instructors

maintain and exploit such logic. Their active promotion of *Jidō Eiken* and preparation courses reflects the fact that the instructors are indeed pressured to cater to the needs of educationally conscious parents. At the same time, however, the testing culture creates ample business opportunities for private English language schools, appealing to parents who wish to see the cost-benefit performance of private English language education in improving their children's English language ability, and notably their scores on *Jidō Eiken*.

The findings reveal that adult stakeholders are actively involved in children's test-taking as they believe that taking *Jidō Eiken* enhances children's motivation in English learning and, more importantly, lets them win the competition. This grass-roots participation is shown to have been powerful in the push to make English language education compulsory in primary schools in Japan (Sato, 2009). Therefore, it is essential to explore the uses that *Jidō Eiken* is being put to as a national initiative and their potential effects, and to do so against the backdrop of Japan's testing culture—one that is known to have had an adverse effect on people's lives in general, and on learning and teaching practices in particular (Ross, 2008; Shohamy, 2001). Careful consideration must also be given to how standardized English language tests such as *Jidō Eiken* might be integrated into language policies in Japan.

Standardized tests often play a prominent role in educational reforms due to their cost-effective and politically visible nature (Shohamy, 2001). Indeed, *Jidō Eiken* can be easily adopted for official use in two ways. First, because *Eiken* was used for researching the English proficiency of middle and high school students (Seihoku Publishing Company, 2012), *Jidō Eiken* might be used to measure the effects of recent educational reforms that introduced English language education into primary schools. In fact, several local boards of education in Japan now use *Jidō Eiken* to compare educational outcomes with those in other municipalities (*Jidō Eiken* Japanese Website, n.d.-a). Second, *Jidō Eiken* could also become a substitute for official in-class assessment. Although it is not easy for policy-makers to adopt commercially produced English language tests for official use in public schools, these tests are already used at the discretion of some primary school teachers in Japan (Benesse Educational Research & Development Centre, 2010). Thus, teachers may use such tests as part of their in-class assessments (e.g., Takahashi & Yanagi, 2011).

Although introducing *Jidō Eiken* into the school curriculum may be tempting for policy-makers, there are many ways that standardized English language tests for young learners may have unintended and negative outcomes. First, because its construct validity is uncertain, it is not known whether *Jidō Eiken* can be of learning assistance to children (Stobard, 2003). With *Jidō Eiken*'s emphasis on "fun," it is hard to judge whether it is useful for children's English learning.

Perhaps more significantly, if *Jidō Eiken* is officially sanctioned in Japan, where the testing culture has a strong hold, it could become a high-stakes test. Because official language tests can affect people's lives directly (McNamara, 2000; Shohamy, 2001), the official introduction of *Jidō Eiken* may create a situation in which pupils, teachers, and parents must take *Jidō Eiken* seriously. Some parents have what might be termed a score- or level-conscious mindset; they are anxious when their children are unable to achieve a better score or level, and this manifests itself in having their children prepare for *Jidō Eiken*. In addition, the belief that early test-taking provides advantages over other children, and the frequently expressed concern for other test-takers' level and age, attest to the competitive nature of *Jidō Eiken* as a test-taking activity. These findings suggest that *Jidō Eiken* could turn into a high-stakes test for very young children in Japan.

Such test-taking activities among young English learners may have other troublesome consequences for their education. For instance, concerns about equity should be raised in terms of children's access to *Jidō Eiken* and to related information and financial resources. Even if *Jidō Eiken* is introduced as a fee-free test, it still has the potential to benefit those with the financial resources to acquire preparation tools and to discriminate against those with insufficient resources, because high-stakes tests usually require test-takers to prepare carefully in and outside of the classroom.

Because such tests are known to place excessive burdens on test-takers, their families and teachers, *Jidō Eiken* has the potential to generate anxiety and fear, thus threatening the well-being of those involved, and leading to financial concerns for those funding the test-taking activity. Even though parents often consider *Jidō Eiken* to be a tool to motivate their children to learn English, from the child's perspective it can become a high-stakes test, in the sense that the test scores are easily translated into the "approval or disapproval of parents" (Shohamy, 2001, p. 123). Finally, the effects of *Jidō Eiken* on classroom practice should also be considered. Because high-stakes tests can have the effect of narrowing the range of knowledge that is taught to pupils (Ross, 2008; Shohamy, 2001), *Jidō Eiken* may reduce teachers' autonomy in teaching English, with the result that pupils may not learn using sound pedagogical methods. High-stakes tests are also known to foster learning for tests, so that pupils may only acquire a "test language" (Shohamy, 2001, p. 110) that has limited connection to real-world English. Such a possibility would be in direct contradiction to the language-in-education policy currently in place in Japan, which advocates the acquisition of communicative English (Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science & Technology, 2008).

4. Conclusion and implications

This study sheds light on the social phenomenon of very young children taking standardized English language tests in Japan through the *Jidō Eiken* examination. Through a qualitative analysis of textual data retrieved from three sources, I have presented a preliminary account of the rationale for children taking this test and the attitudes of stakeholders toward the test. The findings show that powerful stakeholders, who are primarily parents and English language instructors, often drive children to take *Jidō Eiken*. These stakeholders hold a variety of beliefs about and motivations toward *Jidō Eiken*. Finally, I argue that early childhood test-taking is linked with Japan's testing culture, in which tests are used as a social tool to screen people for various academic and employment purposes, rather than as a pedagogical tool to assist learning. Given that English is not yet formally taught and assessed in primary schools, the testing culture can explain why adult stakeholders see much value in tests such as *Jidō Eiken* and *Eiken*, which enable children to enter smoothly into the testing culture.

This type of testing culture and early childhood English language test-taking activity is not just specific to Japan, but is also applicable to the other East Asian countries. Standardized English tests may soon be developed for very young learners as national initiatives, or ready-made and internationally recognized tests such as "Cambridge English: Young Learners" and the "Pearson Test of English Young Learners" may be officially adopted by several countries in the region. This development raises the possibility that such English language tests may turn into high-stakes tests, which has significant implications for educational practice.

Before English tests for very young children are adopted, serious thought is needed among policy-makers and others involved in test-taking activities. This study, and those by Choi (2008) and Chik and Besser (2011), have shown that current early childhood English language test-taking is boosted at the grass-roots level. Parents and English language instructors are the ones inciting the test-taking activities among young children, despite the fact that such tests have not been validated and have not been given official status. What drives these stakeholders in test-oriented societies is the belief that tests are a useful instrument for gauging and representing not only one's language ability but also one's social worth. Consequently, tests are believed to increase learners' motivation and coordinate desired learning behavior. This grass-roots participation, together with the commitment of the private English language education industry to maintaining and reinforcing the testing culture, are crucial factors that researchers and policy makers need to recognize. Indeed, the present study faced a fundamental constraint in the data-sets. Therefore, further research is needed to expand this baseline research to understand stakeholders' profiles and motives in detail, and to identify any potential negative effects of the tests and their subsequent influence on language-in-education policy. In this way, researchers can play a vital role in ensuring that early childhood English language test-taking receives careful critical analysis as an important social and educational issue.

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Notes

1. There was a price increase in 2014. As of 2011, the stated price for paper-pencil test was JPY2,000 (approximately USD20) for Bronze, JPY2,200 (approximately USD22) for Silver, and JPY2,400 for Gold.
2. ALC, the publisher of KE and KEE, has produced a number of textbooks regarding preparation for *Jidō Eiken*, which indicates its business connection with STEP. Similarly, edu advertised a 15-day trial of the *Jidō Eiken* learning kit developed by STEP free of charge.
3. The names of the data sources and additional information (page numbers, or posting dates and times) are provided at the end of each excerpt from magazines and online discussion forums, except the data from the *Jidō Eiken* official website, all of which is fitted into one webpage.

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