

Preparing students for the Eiken interview test

英検受験者の為の面接試験対策

Keywords

Eiken test, top-down processing, bottom-up processing, narration, opinion stating 英検、トップダウン、ボトムアップ、ナレーション、意見の言明

The Eiken test (short for *eigo noryokushiken* or “test of English proficiency”) is one of the most popular English ability tests for junior and senior high school students in Japan. It is administered tri-annually and consists of five standard levels and two pre-levels (pre-second and pre-first). Each test includes sections for vocabulary and grammar, reading comprehension, and listening. Levels three and above also include an interview exam for those students who pass the initial written portion of the test. Since students tend to put most of their preparation into the written part, it is important teachers help their students prepare adequately for the interview. This article focuses on listening strategies, narrative skills, and opinion stating skills that students can learn and use in order to improve their performance.

英検（英語能力試験または‘test of English proficiency’）は日本の中高生に最も人気のある英語能力試験の一つである。一年に3回実施され、5つの標準レベルから成り立ち、2つの準レベルもある（準2級と準1級）。それぞれのテストはボキャブラリー、文法、リーディングとリスニングから成り立っている。3級以上では一次の筆記試験に合格した生徒を対象に、面接試験も実施されている。生徒は準備学習のほとんどを筆記試験対策に充てる傾向がある為、教師が面接試験対策を適切に講じることは重要である。本論ではリスニング対策、話術スキル、意見の言明スキルに焦点を絞り、生徒の能力改善を図る。

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THE Eiken test is one of the most popular non-mandatory ability tests for students in Japan, and as such plays an important role in the academic lives of many Japanese teenagers. However, unlike nearly every other test they take, the Eiken includes an interview portion. The interviews for the third through pre-first levels share a roughly common pattern:

1. Students are given a card with a short reading section and a series of pictures on it. They have twenty seconds to go over the passage before reading it aloud and answering a comprehension question.
2. Students are then given another twenty seconds to prepare a story (or answer questions) describing the events depicted in the series of pictures on their card. Students must begin their story with the sentence provided.
3. Once the narrative portion is complete, students are instructed to turn their cards over. The interviewer then asks two prepared opinion questions, which the students are expected to answer immediately and with as little hesitation as possible (Obunsha, 2008).

The interview score is based on a maximum possible score of thirty-three points broken up into the following categories:

- Reading (5 points)
- Q & A (25 points)
- Attitude (3 points)

Teachers can better prepare their students for the Eiken interview test by focusing on listening strategies, narrative skills, and opinion stating skills.

Teaching listening strategies

Although listening skills are naturally not the first issue that comes to students' minds when preparing for the interview portion of the Eiken test, they are a very necessary component. Students tend to have a great deal of trouble deciphering just what is being asked of them, understandably so given the anxiety they must feel under the interview conditions. Moreover, both top-down and bottom-up processing skills are involved in the interview, as discussed below.

Top-down processing uses background knowledge and context to aid comprehension. In the Eiken interview, students will use this kind of processing for the question regarding the short reading section. These questions almost always include at least a recognizable re-phrasing of the reading itself, and in some cases are even direct quotations from the readings. Therefore, a good amount of necessary background knowledge will already be present in the students' minds, and they will only need to recognize in the question some of the key words they have just read (and still have in front of them on the card). To help students with this kind of listening, point out some of these features and encourage students to make the appropriate inferences based on the main nouns and verbs they hear in the question. This can be done by going through the reading section and underlining each sentence's subject, object (where applicable), noun phrases, and main verbs. Once these elements have been singled out, students can then go through the listening process by focusing sentence by sentence on the reading section while you repeat the question until they have located the question's reference point and answer. Given the strong connection between reading and listening skills (Murphy, 1996, p. 106), helping students seek out key words to aid in comprehension is a small but positive step towards building listening ability.

For the third and fourth questions of the interview test, the shift to a bottom-up approach is necessary. This tactic involves processing and analyzing the linguistic signal itself, as well as using relevant knowledge to make sense of language under reciprocal and temporal constraints (Rost, 1990, p. 154). This ability to process information from the base linguistic signal, aided by students' relevant knowledge, will be all that students have to go on during the latter portion of the interview test. It is therefore important for students to keep in mind the topic they have just read despite the frequency of unrelated questions on this part of the test. Reminding students to focus on the six *Wh-* question words as well as key words they have already been dealing with is also a helpful thing to do. In addition, students can be taught polite requests such as, *Pardon me?* or *Once more, please?* as coping strategies should they get stuck. Perhaps the most important strategy for teachers to stress is the need for tolerating ambiguity, of being okay with not understanding everything. Rather, students need to focus on the main ideas and words they can understand.

Teaching narrative skills

The picture sequencing of the narrative section (question two) is fairly straightforward. After being reminded to use the simple past and past continuous tenses when telling their stories, the main problems students face are the limited preparation time (20 seconds) and vague instructions regarding how much should be said to retell the story pictured. To help students overcome these problems, advise them to handle the task bit by bit, at a rate Hunt (1966, p. 735) defines as one t-unit per picture (one main clause plus any attached or embedded subordinate clauses). Given the very limited preparation time, students are best served by focusing mainly on describing what is happening in the pictures on their cards. This naturally includes any speech bubbles provided as well as the main actions of each picture. Students can be encouraged to be more creative when reporting the pictured speech or thoughts by using terms such as *exclaimed*, *wondered*, *pondered*, or *remarked*. Moreover, since subjects are often omitted in the Japanese language, students should be extra careful to note exactly who is doing what in each picture, using the characters' names when provided or even by making up their own names. Finally, as Skehan and Foster (1999) have noted, actual performance is dependent on the decisions students make in prioritizing fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Since it is unlikely all three of these aspects can be achieved simultaneously, complexity should almost certainly be prioritized last, with fluency being the highest priority for those students who tend towards long silences.

As with any kind of storytelling, a major part of the narrative portion of the test is connecting the pictures using transitions and sequencing terms. The test itself often provides these within the pictures. Repeating them acts as a coping strategy of sorts, providing students with valuable thinking and planning time (Foster, 1996). Preparing students with a utilitarian stock of phrases such as *after that*, *then*, *next*, and *later*, is a good idea for times when transitional elements are not provided. In the interests of both fluency and accuracy (but at the expense of complexity) students can even be encouraged to use the same transitional phrase between all of the pictures in the sequence. Although not ideal, this type of language use is both in keeping with the research on planning time and complexity and adequately handles the task within the confines of the Eiken narrative.

Students can also be encouraged to avoid lengthy pauses while telling their story. As the data extract in Figure 1 exemplifies, delivering a smooth narra-

tive is a big challenge (numbers within parentheses indicate time in seconds; see Appendix for full transcript).

5. Interviewer: Okay. Now, please look at the picture and describe the situation. You have twenty seconds to prepare. Your story should begin with the sentence on the card. (20) Okay? Please tell me the story.
6. Learner: **One day, Mr. and Mrs. Sasaki were watching a TV program about using rainwater.** (2) Mrs. Sasaki (1.5) asked her husband, "**How about buying a rainwater tank for our house?**" (2) **The next day** (2) her husband bought a (2.5) magazine about rain...(1) rainwater tank and she...(3) she...looking forward to pour... pouring water to some flowers by using that tank. **One month later** (3) they (1.5) decided to...(2.5) they bought a rainwater tank and her husband (3) also thought he's looking forward to (2) wash his car.

Figure 1. Narrative portion excerpt of a learner's Eiken test practice session

In this sample, the overall level of accuracy was high, but at the expense of frequent pauses. Linking the pictures together went smoothly given the clearly identifiable transitional phrases provided (indicated in **bold font**). However, the semi-long pauses (2 and 3 seconds respectively) after the provided language is a clear indication that the learner was mulling over what to say next during this time. In general, encouraging students to use the coping strategy cited previously of simply repeating the provided transition would be one good way to improve fluency in this situation.

Teaching opinion stating skills

Opinion stating is one area where students routinely seem to have difficulty during the Eiken interview test. Given the sudden shift from the highly structured reading comprehension and narrative questions to a free response format, it is common for students to panic. This naturally affects their fluency, as a sign of non-fluency is speech peppered with many hesitations and other manifestations of groping for words (Schmidt, 1992, p. 358).

How then can students become more fluent in expressing their opinions? The answer is to make it more automatic. Schmidt (1992, p. 360) identified automatic speech as being:

- Fast
- Effortless
- Not limited by short-term memory capacity

This automatization can best be strengthened by repetition of similar patterns. It is therefore extremely valuable to quiz students frequently on their opinions by using the typical Eiken standard question, *What do you think about that?* Simple response structures, such as *I think...because...* can be easily mastered by most students. Additionally, *Yes/No* questions could be practiced using a similar pattern, with students answering either *Yes/No because...* or even with the same *I think...because...* structure. By reinforcing these patterns in students' minds again and again well before they begin to prepare for the Eiken interview, students can approach (or ideally achieve) automaticity of the necessary language. They would thus be able to focus the lion's share of their mental energy on the processing and answering of the question itself rather than the language used to communicate that answer (Schmidt, 1992, p. 361).

The data extract in Figure 2 indicates a noticeable increase in fluency, demonstrated by the learner's shorter and less frequent pauses on the two opinion questions. Whereas the narrative response (shown above in Figure 1) has nine significant pauses of 2 seconds or more, the first opinion question has only three, and the second none.

7. I: Okay. Please turn over the card and put it down. Some people say that more people will buy bottled water in the future. What do you think about that?
8. L: Uhh...(1.5) I think it's not good because (1) uh, they (2) usually [*clears throat*] throw them away (1) and (1) because of it (1.5) the environment (1) get (3) dirty. (1.5) So (2.5) I think they should not buy (1) more bottled water.
9. I: Okay. Today many elementary schools in Japan are teaching English. Do you think all elementary schools should teach English?
10. L: No.
11. I: Why not?
12. L: Because [*clears throat*] in elementary schools teachers don't have a cer...cer...certification (1) of English so (1) they cannot teach it to, teach English to children (1.5) with proper knowledge.

Figure 2. Opinion question excerpt of a learner's Eiken test practice session

More research is needed to confirm these findings, but it appears that in this case at least, significant automatization had occurred. This data serves to reinforce the idea that developing automatic responses results from the strengthening of nodal connections, which are in turn a result of repeated exposure and practice (Schmidt, 1992). The old adage *practice makes perfect* is certainly applicable here.

Conclusion

The Eiken test remains one of the most commonly used and universally recognized English language ability tests in Japan. When studying for the Eiken it is tempting for both student and teacher alike to ignore the interview section of the test until the written portion has been passed, reasoning that if students fail to pass the first portion of the test they will not need to prepare for the second (interview) portion. However, in light of the preparations necessary to successfully pass the interview test, teachers would be well advised to begin its study concurrently with that of the other sections. Particularly, the listening section has excellent crossover potential as the techniques discussed above involving top-down and bottom-up processing skills could be used in both parts. Moreover, as Japanese learners tend to struggle with fluency it is necessary for a great deal of practice to be done beforehand to aid in the automatization of the language (Schmidt, 1992). Additionally, teaching coping strategies such as repetition (Foster, 1996) will help students bargain for time under the constraints of the interview setting. Finally, it should be noted that all of the skills taught with the explicit goal of passing the Eiken interview test are also all widely applicable outside of that narrow setting. Students who are able to understand what is being said to them and answer appropriately will have taken a great stride forward in their L2 communicative abilities.

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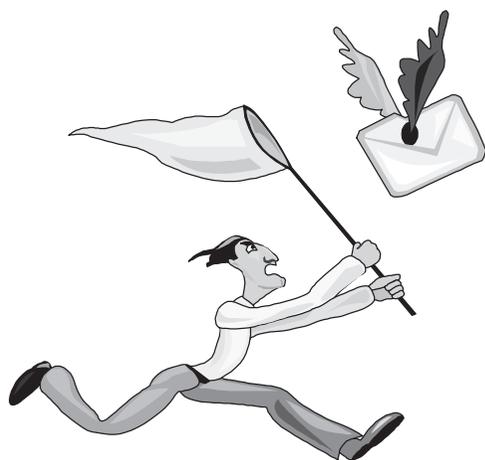
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Appendices

The appendices for this article can be downloaded from <jalt-publications.org/tlt/resources/2009/0908a.pdf>

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Appendix: Transcript of spoken data from a sample learner

Learner profile

The sample learner was a seventeen year-old female in her third year of high school. She attended a local public high school and had been studying English at school for five and a half years. Additionally, she had been attending weekly lessons at a private *juku* (cram school) for three years. The learner was highly motivated and expressed a keen personal interest in English. Moreover, the student had already passed the second level of the Eiken test, which was administered at a local school for students taking it on a voluntary basis. The Eiken interview test used for this recording was taken from the *Eiken Zenmondaishyu 2nd* level text (Obunsha, 2008, p. 90-91).

Notes:

- Level of practice test: 2nd grade
 - Date of recording: 25 July, 2008
 - Text in **bold font** indicates language taken directly from the test card, including the opening sentence, direct speech, and transition phrases
 - Numbers within parentheses indicate length of pauses in seconds. Example: (2) = 2 second pause
 - The recording starts after the student has read the passage
1. Interviewer (I): Okay. According to the passage, why are some researchers encouraging people to use rainwater more effectively?
 2. Learner (L): (6.5) Pardon?
 3. I: According to the passage, why are some researchers encouraging people to use rainwater more effectively?
 4. L: (2) Because they are worried about how climate change will affect this supply.
 5. I: Okay. Now, please look at the picture and describe the situation. You have twenty seconds to prepare. Your story should begin with the sentence on the card. (20) Okay? Please tell me the story.
 6. L: **One day, Mr. and Mrs. Sasaki were watching a TV program about using rainwater.** (2) Mrs. Sasaki (1.5) asked her husband, "**How about buying a rainwater tank for our house?**" (2) **The next day** (2) her husband bought a (2.5) magazine about rain...(1) rainwater tank and she...(3) she...looking forward to pour...pouring water to some flowers by using that tank. **One month later** (3) they (1.5) decided to...(2.5) they bought a rainwater tank and her husband (3) also thought he's looking forward to (2) wash his car.
 7. I: Okay. Please turn over the card and put it down. Some people say that more people will buy bottled water in the future. What do you think about that?

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9. I: Okay. Today many elementary schools in Japan are teaching English. Do you think all elementary schools should teach English?
10. L: No.
11. I: Why not?
12. L: Because (clears throat) in elementary schools teachers don't have a cer...cer...certification (1) of English so (1) they cannot teach it to, teach English to children (1.5) with proper knowledge.
13. I: Okay! Thank you.