

# The Significance of the Obtainment of the Certificate in the English Proficiency Test (Eiken), and a Proposal of an Effective and Efficient Learning and Teaching Method to Successfully Prepare for Passing: A Strategy for Internalizing Basic Eiken Grammar

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**Abstract** - Upon turning into an independent administrative entity, Kushiro Kosen has set as one of its mid-term educational goals the earning of the pre-second level certificate in the English Proficiency Test (Eiken). Another system, the TOEIC Test, is becoming ever more popular because of its seemingly international image as the major voice calling for a need for English learning, which has been rising in response to trends in this information age. However, the TOEIC test is mostly acknowledged only in Asian countries and not much in the English speaking countries. By contrast, the Eiken test is somewhat comparable to the TOEFL test, which is used worldwide, and Eiken has begun to be considered by international colleges and universities as a favorable qualification for admission. Therefore, in this paper I would like to ponder the significance of the obtainment of an Eiken certificate, and then to put forward some methods for effective and efficient learning and teaching in preparation for the Eiken tests.

**Key words:** meaning of the Eiken test, strategic approach to the Eiken grammar

## 1. What is the Eiken Test?

As most people may know, the Eiken Test is a major English proficiency test in Japan, standing parallel with the TOEIC and TOEFL Tests. Eiken has a relatively long history, having been founded in 1963. The test has included from the beginning, listening and speaking testing tasks as well as reading and writing questions, which makes the test highly comprehensive and helps to earn its high trust as a qualification test in Japanese society. It aims at measuring how well an applicant can communicate in English according to the situation where he or she is, in other words, measuring his or her general practical English abilities.

The test problems in Eiken are created based on practical communicability with its subjects selected from real life areas such as Japanese society, culture, science, politics, and items related to business, the Internet and overseas news. In the interview module there is a component of 'attitude', which judges how positively an applicant tries to convey his or her

or her ideas, opinions and information asked for. This process heightens the practical nature of Eiken as a qualification test. The interview module is designed to measure how much and how well an interviewee can communicate with others by making wise use of the English words and phrases, and knowledge of the real life, which he or she has acquired. The pass-or-fail result of an Eiken test is explained to the applicant by the sectoral scores, displayed in a radar chart for goal averages along with the ratio of correct answers given, so that the applicant will learn his or her strong and weak points. The passing score is disclosed each time a test is taken, so applicants will recognize how comfortably they have passed and how close or far they stand to the passing lines of the tests that they have taken. All these descriptions show that the Eiken is a real objective measuring tool of one's practical command of the English language.

## 2. The Significance of Taking the Eiken Test

As students deepen their English study,

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some need assessments to measure how much progress they have made. Cross-course and in-class tests would do the job, but the Eiken test would be more effective and objective as it evaluates wide variety of people in Japan who take the same levels of tests. What's more, Eiken is a forerunner to other qualification tests in Japan, and the obtainment of a certificate from Eiken while in school will give great meaning to their study for the test. In fact, Eiken was once selected as the best qualification over the computer-related qualifications that working people wished to earn. In this time of globalization, it is clear that we are required to have competency in English at least to the pre-second level in Eiken. With this reality considered, the preparation work for Eiken would be a good appealing point for Kosen College, which aims to offer education useful for the society. And having a clear goal of passing the test can increase students' self-motivation. Success in the first part of the test can be a strong incentive to their further efforts in preparation for the interview section of Eiken. The English language has two roles: as knowledge, and as a communication tool (skill). To acquire practical English one has to improve both of these. Eiken measures applicants from these two angles in a balanced manner as it tests their knowledge in its writing unit, and skill in its listening and speaking units. Especially the speaking component (the interview) gives a great chance for an applicant to learn how much of their English knowledge they can actually use in real life communication.

It takes courage and effort to be tested. The results of the Eiken tests come in the form of pass-or-fail with the scores earned. The TOEIC test, which has increased in recent years in the number of its applicants, marks on a curve, with the applicants receiving their outcomes only in scores. Because of this system applicants take TOEIC with an easier mind. However, conversely speaking, this evaluation method seems less likely to

encourage applicants to study further. Although they can know their progress in their test scores, they feel a lesser sense of achievement than when they have taken Eiken. There also seems to be a trend that TOEIC is a test of global standard. The TOEIC test was produced by the late Mr. Yasuo Kitaoka, former Asian general manager of Time Inc.-cum-president of President Inc. Mr. Kitaoka asked Educational Testing Services (ETS), an American test producer to develop an English test that aimed more at general people. It could be said, though, that TOEIC is not the kind of test which is acknowledged in English-speaking countries in the view of the fact that 90 % of its applicants are Japanese and Koreans<sup>i</sup>. Eiken used to be a completely domestic test, but it was acknowledged in 2004 to be as a certificate of English competency that one can show for entry into colleges and universities overseas<sup>ii</sup>. Currently over two hundred colleges and universities, mainly in Southern California, America, and also the Technical and Further Education colleges (TAFE) and state-run high school in Australia, have recognized Eiken<sup>iii</sup>. Dr. Leon Richard of University of Hawaii, Kapiolani Community College publicly mentioned in 2006 at the yearly conference of American Association of Community Colleges that Eiken is a proper standard test necessary for overseas study because of its good compatibility with the TOEFL test<sup>\*iv</sup>. This comment of his proves that Eiken has developed into an internationally accepted qualification test.

To summarize, the Eiken test is an accessible test to boost students' motivation for English study, and an objective exam in terms of measuring knowledge and skill. Also the students can learn English for global practice as the test has established its status as a certificate test for study at educational institutes abroad. It would be no good if passing an Eiken test became a goal itself, but it is of considerable meaning that the students use Eiken as a pacemaker and a good

supplement for their English study.

### 3. The Effective Teaching & Learning Approaches for Success in Eiken

In the previous section, I have argued for the importance of Eiken study. Now this chapter I would like to put forward strategic approaches toward teaching the English grammar necessary to pass the test. These strategies are based on what I have implemented in class for some years at both private and public schools and in the last two years at Kushiro Kosen.

First of all, it is needless to say that memorizing English words and phrases for the pre-second and second levels tests is of basic importance. You can not guess the meanings of English sentences, let alone read them, without knowledge of the basic vocabulary. There are always some problems related to phrasal verbs in every round of the test. Those problems should be considered bonuses as you automatically get scores for remembering the phrasal verbs correctly. The effort to improve Kosen's first and second graders' vocabulary power has been done by conducting a series of vocabulary quizzes across the courses, but it is sorry to say that the students do not retain memory after taking the quizzes. To counter this, it is important to implement vocabulary drills and reading exercises in class so their memorized vocabulary will be reinforced.

More important is to know what grammar items are requisite to pass Eiken. These grammar items are: the perfect form, relative pronouns, infinitives, participial construction, auxiliary verbs and the subjunctive. A firm foundation in these grammar items helps examinees to earn high marks in Question One of both the pre-second- and the second-level tests. There are twenty five problems in Question One, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the more scores you get in Question One, the closer you are to success in the test,

since passing marks for both of the tests are usually between forty two and forty five problems correct. Grammatical problems comprise seventy to eighty percent of the twenty five in Question One, and the rest are about phrasal verbs. Knowing the grammar rules and words and phrases secures you high scores, so the key to success is answering right as many of these problems as possible.

For the college students to learn more effectively and efficiently the grammatical items mentioned above, I would like to suggest changing the order of the grammatical items to be taught, not in the progression in the current text book. I would like to present a strategic order that I have practiced for two years since I started teaching here at Kushiro Kosen. The order is: present perfect, past perfect and future perfect forms, relative pronouns and adverbs, infinitives, including plain infinitives, followed by participial construction. After that would come auxiliary verb, including auxiliary verbs + have + past participle, followed by the subjunctive.

The reason for learning perfect forms first is to make the students perceive the English sense of time elapse. Especially the future perfect form has a high frequency in the Eiken tests. It becomes easier to teach and learn relative pronouns and adverbs after mastering perfect forms. Let's look at this instance. Here is a sentence: "I lost the pen which (that) I had bought the day before." It would be very difficult to teach the relative pronouns "which/that" when students do not understand the lapse of time between an action 'had bought' and an action 'lost'. With the order reversed, it could be much easier to teach and learn relative pronouns and adverbs with the knowledge of the perfect tense.

Infinitive and plain infinitive are requisite grammar items for any kind of English examination. Plain infinitives should be given high priority as they are used in some form in every round of the Eiken tests. The students would feel it relatively easier to learn

participial construction more comfortably after being introduced to the perfect tense and infinitives. The mastering of exceptional instances as well as basic participial construction patterns would be a good tactic since it is a common formula to use exceptional grammar rules in the exams. Lastly auxiliary verbs and the subjunctive should be taught as in one unit. This is because the subjunctive sentences always carry an auxiliary verb + plain verb, or auxiliary verbs + have + past participle in them. Advance knowledge of auxiliary verbs could help the students to understand the subjunctive more quickly, clearly, and properly. The possibility of the students forgetting the meanings and functions of auxiliary verb is quite strong when these two grammar items are taught separately with some time space between them, and extra time may be unnecessarily required to review auxiliary verbs.

I have coached for Eiken in the above order of grammar parameters for the past two years here at this college, and what I have given most emphasis to is implementing drills and exercises repeatedly so that the learned grammar will firmly fixate in the students' memory. I give my students consistently similar problems, created as necessary according to the level of each course. Of course, the practice problems I make are oriented to the testing style and trend of the Eiken tests, and I use repetition drills as a very effective task for basic and upper-basic levels of students. And it is advised that applicants study and analyze the past questions thoroughly in order to grasp recent trends and counter-responses. This advice vindicates the fundamental importance of tackling target grammar exercises.

The outcome of my Eiken teaching (to the current fourth-year students in the Architecture and Information Engineering courses) after my first year of work at the college was that 41 out of all the 77 second-year passers of the pre-second level test were

students I had taught. This result seemed to support the efficiency and effectiveness of my suggested strategic method to master the Eiken grammar. And I sincerely hope that this presentation of my tactics will be of use in teaching and learning for Eiken.

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<sup>i</sup> Kiyoto Hinata.

<http://tottocobhinata.cocolog-nifty.com/bizieisakicho/toeic/in>, Aug. 6, 2006

<sup>ii</sup> "Eiken Guide 2006". Japan Eiken Association. p.5

<sup>iii</sup> Leon Rechar. Speech at the annual conference of American Association of Community Colleges in Eiken News online. <http://www.eiken.or.jp/news/backno.41.html>. May 12, 2006

<sup>iv</sup> The test takes place worldwide, and although it is created by the same test-producing company (ETS) as TOEIC, its purpose is academic, to measure the abilities of non English-speaking applicants who wish to enter colleges and universities in English-speaking countries across the world. The test entails grammar structure, reading, writing and listening.

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