

# The Impact of Washback: The New Japanese National University Entrance Exam & Teachers' Perspectives

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Teachers' Perspectives**

This dissertation is submitted in accordance with the requirement for the degree of

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  - ✓ Research Methods for Second Language Education 1 ED50492
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## Abstract

High-stakes tests generally produce strong washback, and its washback effect has been studied in various educational contexts in many countries. Washback is broadly defined as the influence of testing on teaching and learning, and its type and amount vary from context to context in the field of English language teaching. The Kyotsu Test, a unified national test for high school students for university admissions, underwent reform in January 2021 in Japan, and its washback has yet to be empirically investigated. The principal purpose of the present study is to examine the Kyotsu Test's English section and determine what variables influence the various washback effects on teachers' practice. The present study draws on data from interviews with four Japanese private school teachers to obtain rich qualitative data that provided an in-depth understanding of the present situation. The key findings are that the Kyotsu Test impacted the four teachers in different ways. Furthermore, it is important to take into consideration the school context, such as English education school policy and the relevance of the Kyotsu Test for students, as this appeared to trigger the washback factors that influenced teachers and the way they teach. Moreover, teachers' beliefs also seemed to affect how the washback from the Kyotsu Test was manifested in their teaching approach. Finally, based on the findings concerning the washback impact of the Kyotsu Test's, the author suggests a preliminary conceptual framework which helps to understand the Kyotsu Test's washback process and recommends practical considerations that can be adopted in the development of a more positive washback when developing English proficiency tests.

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## **Abbreviations**

BERA: British Educational Research Association

IELTS: International English Language Testing System

MEXT: Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology

NCUEE: National Centre for University Entrance Examinations

TESOL: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

TOEIC: Test Of English for International Communication



## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Kyotsu Test is a national examination that serves as the first step towards admission to universities in Japan and determines test takers' future potential. At the same time, it is a high school achievement test that assesses on a student's performance after studying the national curriculum. Unfortunately, the Kyotsu Test's English section has been inconsistent with the national curriculum for many years, causing students to learn purely in relation to taking a test instead of studying the target language at school (Allen, 2020). Specifically speaking, though the national curriculum has long emphasised four practical English skills – reading, listening, speaking and writing, the Kyotsu Test only had two sections: reading and listening (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2010). Moreover, it contained a good number of independent questions about grammatical and lexical knowledge, contrary to the national curriculum's goal of enhancing reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. To address this issue, the National Centre for University Entrance Examinations (NCUEE) announced the test-making policy in 2019. The Kyotsu Test, including its English section, was finally reformed in January 2021 to resolve the existing disparity between the Kyotsu Test and the national curriculum. As a result, English language teaching in schools has received the washback effect and responded in various ways.

Spratt (2005) reviewed the empirical research and found that washback is a complex and elusive phenomenon involving various agencies. Also, depending on the situation, a washback effect could be beneficial or harmful (Buck, 1988; Alderson and Wall, 1993; Tayeb et al., 2014). In this sense, further studies in various contexts are needed to provide a positive washback effect by improving test development. As per the Kyotsu Test's washback, other than Guest's study (2008), little empirical research has been undertaken (Watanabe, 2013). Additionally, no

empirical research on the washback of the recently reformed Kyotsu Test (January 2021) is available. Thus, it is meaningful to focus on the Kyotsu Test's washback and investigate its nature, and provide insights that allow for a more positive impact on teachers' practice and student learning in future test-making. In line with this study's aim, the author sets the following research questions:

**RQ1. What are teachers' perspectives on the washback effect of the new Kyotsu Test introduced in January 2021?**

**RQ2. Washback can have a range of different impacts depending on several variables. What variables influence the Kyotsu Test's various washback effects?**

Based on the results, the author establishes a preliminary framework for the Kyotsu Test's washback process, which can contribute to future related studies, thereby realising the exam's positive washback effect.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. In this chapter, the author introduced its rationale and aims, from which the research questions were drawn. In the following chapter, the author explains the context: the Kyotsu Test and its English section's reform. Chapter 3 offers a washback-related literature review by presenting landmark studies in the field. The third chapter also introduces the main and subsidiary research questions derived from the literature review. Chapter 4 provides this study's overall design and employed methods, including the related ethical considerations. Chapter 5 presents the identified themes and a detailed analysis of the research questions' findings. Finally, in Chapter 6, the author discusses the findings for further key interpretations, as well as explains the study's limitations, practical implications and future

research recommendations.

## **Chapter 2: The Context: The Kyotsu Test and its English Section's Reform**

### **2.1 Introduction to Chapter 2**

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the Kyotsu Test, with a focus on its most recent reform. Then, it considers the key aspects of the exam's modification that resulted in the washback. Specifically, Section 2.2 introduces the Kyotsu Test and its relationship to the national curriculum within the context of English language teaching in Japan. Section 2.3 provides an outline of its English section's prolonged issue. Finally, Section 2.4 explains the Kyotsu Test's reform in detail to address the issues, leading to the summary in Section 2.5.

### **2.2 Japan's Kyotsu Test and National Curriculum**

The Kyotsu Test is a high school achievement exam based on the national curriculum's course of study. It is a countrywide examination that serves as the first step towards admission to universities in Japan. Moreover, it is a computer-graded multiple-choice test. As part of the reform, its name was changed in 2021 from the Centre Test to the Kyotsu Test. NCUEE is responsible for its administration and operation. According to NCUEE (2021a), about 500,000 applicants, or nearly 50% of same-age students, take the test every January. Following the Kyotsu Test, universities conduct their in-house examinations in February. The Kyotsu Test score has a significant impact on which university exams are taken. As of 2019, Japan has 774 universities, with 20% being national and local public and 80% being private (Obunsha Educational Information Centre, 2019). While national and local public universities must use this two-step admission process, private universities are allowed to employ their own. For example, some private universities do not require the Kyotsu Test score for admission and instead only conduct their own examinations. Notably, it varies widely depending on the private university (Watanabe, 2013).

MEXT has mandated that the current national high school curriculum be completed by the end of March 2022 since the new curriculum will go into effect in April 2022. Its English component will continue the current concept of enhancing practical communication skills such as listening, reading, writing and speaking, together with knowledge of language and culture and positive attitudes towards English communication. Additionally, it highlights its well-balanced approach and sets a new English subject called ‘logic and expression’ to develop communication skills such as debating and engaging in a discussion (MEXT, 2020a).

### **2.3 Prolonged Issue of the Kyotsu Test’s English Section**

The Kyotsu Test is an achievement test designed to rigorously assess the academic abilities included in the national curriculum. However, its English section has been inconsistent for many years (Allen, 2020). First, though the national curriculum has long emphasised four practical English skills – reading, listening, speaking and writing, it only had two sections: reading and listening (MEXT, 2010). Second, Kikuchi’s (2006) content analysis on the reading section revealed that it contained many independent questions about grammatical and lexical knowledge, contrary to the national curriculum’s goal of enhancing reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. Additionally, the Kyotsu Test is used to determine test takers’ future potential. Its pressure tends to push teachers and students to adopt short-term strategies such as memorising massive amounts of information rather than developing a deeper grasp of underlying principles in the national curriculum (Green, 2013). According to Watanabe (2013), this prolonged disparity between the Kyotsu Test’s English section and the national curriculum was caused by some constraints. The first of which is the extremely tight schedule for scoring the Kyotsu Test. Since it must be processed and released without delay, it is unfeasible to include questions requiring subjective answers, such as those in writing and speaking tasks. Next, to avoid any problems, reforming the Kyotsu Test is a time-consuming and complicated

process that necessitates detailed preparation in collaboration with various stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, university admission officers and test-takers. Therefore, there has been a long-standing discrepancy between the Kyotsu Test's English section and the national curriculum. MEXT also saw enhancing high school education quality and achieving a smooth high school-to-university transition, including entrance exams, as urgent concerns. For this reason, understanding the Kyotsu Test's issue is key to improving English language teaching in Japan, which motivated the present study.

#### **2.4 Kyotsu Test's English Section Reform**

In 2016, MEXT announced the Kyotsu Test's reform, including its English section, and developed a roadmap to 2025. They planned to renew the Kyotsu Test's English section in line with the national curriculum by 2021 as the first step. In 2025, they will replace it with external proficiency tests such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Test Of English for International Communication (TOEIC), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Cambridge English test, Eiken test, etc. The new Kyotsu Test's pre-tests were conducted in 2017 and 2018. Moreover, in 2019, NCUEE announced a new test-making policy that focuses on the listening and reading skills required when communicating in various contexts, eliminating any questions simply asking knowledge of grammar and pronunciation (NCUEE, 2019). Then, teachers and students started their preparation accordingly. Using the pre-tests' data, the new Kyotsu Test was finally produced and implemented in January 2021. Until external proficiency tests replace it in 2025, universities have three options for employing the Kyotsu Test during the transition period from 2021 to 2024: using the Kyotsu Test, external proficiency tests or combining them (Allen, 2020). Additionally, universities must choose one of several external proficiency tests to assess candidates' English proficiency. The high-stakes

nature of this test and the unknown future need further scrutiny. Thus, the author addressed and contributed to the relevance of the Kyotsu Test’s reform in this study.

#### 2.4.1 Changes to the Kyotsu Test’s English Section

The Kyotsu Test’s English section evolved into a comprehension exam based on practical skills rather than knowledge in January 2021, although it still consists solely of reading and listening tasks. As shown in Table 2.1, the questions’ language of instruction (Japanese) was replaced by English, and the independent questions requiring grammar and pronunciation knowledge were removed from the reading section. To emphasise comprehension, the reading passages word count was increased by 1,200 words to 5,500 words. Also, 400 words were added to the listening segment, and the types of passages were expanded to include describing contexts and lectures. Notably, in addition to the American accent, Japanese and British accents were introduced. As per the frequency of audio playback, some parts were played only once. Every year, a third-party committee of experts from NCUEE evaluates the Kyotsu Test. They concluded that the reading and listening components reflected the new national curriculum (NCUEE, 2021b).

Table 2.1 Changes to the Kyotsu Test’s English Section (Toshin, 2021)

Reading Section		
Items	2021 (new test)	2020 (old test)
Language of instruction for questions	English	Japanese
Questions on grammar and pronunciation	No	Yes
Total number of English words	5,500	4,300
Listening Section		

Items	2021 (new test)	2020 (old test)
Type of passages	monologue, dialogue, describing contexts and lecture	monologue, dialogue
Frequency of audio playback	single and double play	double play
Total number of English words	1,500	1,100
Accent	American, British and Japanese	American

#### 2.4.2 Substitution of External Proficiency Tests for the English Section

Since the announcement in 2016, stakeholders have been intensely arguing about the implementation of external proficiency tests in place of the Kyotsu Test. They centred on how to address issues such as students' serious concerns about being able to take external proficiency exams without difficulty and how to resolve regional and economic disparities among students nationwide (Otsuka, 2020). There was specific concern that some students from affluent families might be able to afford to take the tests more frequently, thereby creating unfair situations among students. Additionally, as they were uncertain, some universities struggled to choose which of the three given options to adopt during the 2021–2024 transition period. As a result, MEXT was compelled to postpone the January 2021 introduction of external proficiency tests and established an expert committee in December 2019 to find a solution. The group solicited and submitted their final opinion to the MEXT in July 2021, stating that eliminating regional and economic disparities among students nationwide and ensuring the Kyotsu Test's fairness when implementing external proficiency tests would be difficult. In August 2021, MEXT announced its final decision not to employ external proficiency tests, and that speaking and writing skills should be assessed in individual university exams. This outcome implied that



the gap between the Kyotsu Test and the national curriculum remains unsolved. Nonetheless, this study on the Kyotsu Test’s washback should be able to address its consequences.

**2.5 Conclusion to Chapter 2**

This chapter provided an overview of the Kyotsu Test, including the reasons for its delayed revision and why it still only includes the reading and listening sections. The Kyotsu Test’s key changes are illustrated in Figure 2.1, with an emphasis on the relationship between the exam and the national curriculum.

As shown in Figure 2.1, before the reform, there was a teaching content gap between the Kyotsu Test and the national curriculum. The gap is divided into two aspects. Gap 1 relates to the knowledge-oriented questions on grammar and pronunciation. These were specifically taught in line with students’ Kyotsu Test preparation, which was supplementary and unrelated to the national curriculum. Gap 2 pertains to the speaking and writing skills that have yet to be covered in the Kyotsu Test. The recent reform is supposed to resolve Gap 1 but does not address Gap 2. Since speaking and writing skills are not yet assessed in the Kyotsu Test and MEXT decided not to employ external proficiency tests in the future, students might be demotivated to learn them. Otherwise, as MEXT expects, more universities might assess speaking and writing skills in individual university exams in future. It has to be carefully monitored.

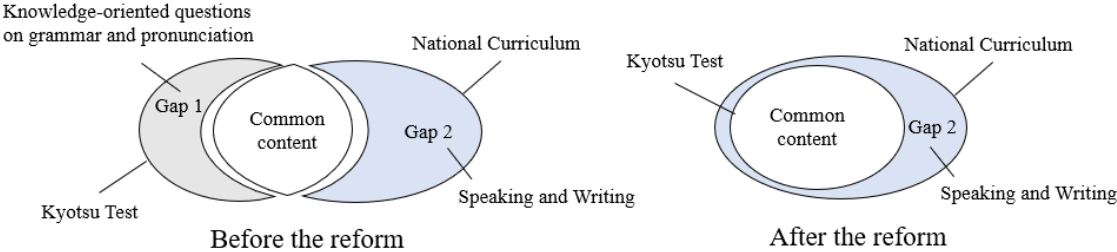


Figure 2.1 Teaching Content

The following sections will discuss this change’s washback.

## Chapter 3: The Literature Review: The Kyotsu Test and Washback

### 3.1 Introduction to Chapter 3

This chapter offers a washback-related literature review by presenting landmark studies in the field that led to this study's research questions. However, a great deal of the research seems to have been undertaken between 1990-2005, and few studies have taken place in recent years. It starts by defining *washback* in Section 3.2, then underscores the affected areas in Section 3.3 and the influential factors in Section 3.4. Finally, Section 3.5 presents the relevant washback studies and this paper's two primary and four subsidiary research questions.

### 3.2 Definition of Washback

Examinations have been shown to affect teaching and learning in the classroom. It is commonly described as *washback*. Pan (2009) states that washback has both a narrow and broad definition. The narrower definition focuses on its effects on teaching and learning, while the broader meaning extends beyond the classroom to educational systems and society. This study centres on its impact in the classroom, applying the narrow definition. The washback definitions are as follows:

[It is] the influence of testing on teaching and learning.

Bailey (1996: 259)

Teachers and learners do things they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test.

Alderson and Wall (1993: 117)

This influence of the test on the classroom (referred to as washback by language testers) is, of course, very important; this washback effect can be either beneficial or harmful.

Buck (1988: 17)

First, depending on the situation, a washback effect could be beneficial or harmful (Buck, 1988; Alderson and Wall, 1993; Tayeb et al., 2014). For example, teachers and students are more driven to achieve their goals when they receive positive washback (Anderson and Wall, 1993). A creative and innovative test can also bring advantageous changes to a syllabus (Davies, 1990). On the other hand, in the case of negative washback, the test narrows its focus to specific curricular content, and students learn test language instead of targeted language (Shaomy, 1992). Additionally, if washback has negative effects, the tests may cause a disconnect between the learning contents and the course objectives (Cheng et al., 2005). Notably, Cheng and Watanabe (2004) conceptualised washback as having the dimensions of specificity, intensity, length, intentionality and value or direction to better understand that washback varies in each situation. Also, Spratt (2005) reviewed empirical studies on washback and found that the occurrence, strength and kind of washback effect differed widely. This highlights the importance of this study in clarifying the nature of the Kyotsu Test's washback.

The areas affected by washback will be discussed in the following section.

### **3.3 Areas Affected by Washback**

Washback affects various aspects of English language teaching. Pizarro (2009) conducted an empirical study on Spanish English teachers' washback effect on the Spanish University Entrance Examination and focused on several areas in teaching and learning such as curriculum,

materials, teaching approach and attitudes. By reviewing related studies, Spratt (2005) grouped washback effects into the following categories: curriculum, resources, teaching methods, feelings and attitudes and learning. Moreover, the Kyotsu Test's washback is expected to occur in various areas since it is a high-stakes test and a focal point for stakeholders. The following sections discuss the washback studies relevant to the said groupings, leading to this study's main area of focus.

### **[Curriculum]**

According to Cheng's (1997) research findings on the washback of the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, after implementing the revised exam, the read-aloud activity was replaced by role-playing and discussion tasks. In addition, Read and Hayes (2003) studied the IELTS preparation courses' washback and discovered that such courses differed in terms of teaching content and approach, resulting in washback variations.

### **[Materials]**

Shohamy et al. (1996) noted that low stake materials, such as Arabic language tests, are rarely published and available on the market. In Japan, Watanabe (2000) found that some teachers try to enhance the quality of their lessons by utilising a variety of self-made materials. Nahdia (2017) conducted a washback study on the national examination in Indonesia and discovered that teachers attempted to prepare students using various materials.

### **[Teaching Approach]**

Alderson and Wall (1993) investigated the Sri Lanka case and concluded that the exam did not impact the teaching method as expected. In addition, Pan (2013) conducted a case study on the washback caused by Taiwanese tertiary institutions' test exits and found that the test exit

requirement resulted in minimal changes in teaching. On the other hand, Nahdia's (2017) case in Indonesia showed a modification in the teaching approach.

### **[Attitudes of Teachers and Students]**

According to Shohamy et al. (1996), both teachers and students expressed negative feelings towards the Arabic exam due to its lack of importance. Furthermore, Watanabe (2000) noted that an exam class's atmosphere depends on the teacher's attitude towards exam-oriented teaching. Also, Mahmoudi (2013) found that some teachers had positive attitudes towards the Iranian National University Entrance Exam while others have negative ones.

To summarise, the related studies found varied washback effects in the categories of curriculum, materials, teaching approach and attitudes of teachers and students. This implies that washback is a complex and elusive phenomenon involving various agencies (Spratt, 2005). In this study, the factors related to the agencies involved and the complexity of the Kyotsu Test's washback effect were examined through interviews with English language teachers. Consequently, the teaching approach among those areas appeared to be an important construct for the teachers.

### **3.4 Factors that Influence Washback**

As shown above, the occurrence of washback differs significantly, leading to the existence of factors that influence it. Spratt (2005) analysed empirical studies of exam washback in English language teaching and grouped the factors influencing it into four main categories: teacher-related aspects, resources, the school and the exam (see Appendix 1). The following sections discuss the washback studies relevant to the said groupings, leading to this study's main area of focus.

### **[Teacher-related factors]**

According to Spratt (2005), it includes beliefs, attitudes, educational levels and experience and personalities. Smith (1991) conducted an empirical study at the elementary school and found that the teachers' beliefs about the reliability of the exam could affect teachers' test preparation for students. Furthermore, Watanabe (2000) investigated the washback of the Japanese entrance examinations through classroom observations and teachers interviews and indicated that the teachers' beliefs about the best teaching method, which originated from educational background, overrode test effects.

### **[Resources]**

Resources refer to the availability of customised or supporting materials for teachers. Cheng (1997) researched the washback of the certification exam in Hong Kong and found that teaching materials were not available as expected. According to Watanabe's research (2000), the teachers used a variety of materials, including self-made teaching materials, in a classroom where the tasks are taken from the past exams. Additionally, Tsagari (2009) analysed First Certificate in English-Cambridge ESOL students' diaries and found that the syllabus of the exam textbook was used to determine the teaching content due to the absence of any official course syllabuses.

### **[School-related factors]**

Furthermore, school-related aspects involve culture and atmosphere. Shohamy et al. (1996) investigated the washback of the new national tests introduced into the Israeli education system. Then, they noted that the pressure from administrators could affect teachers' approach in a classroom. Watanabe (2000) and Cheng and Watanabe (2004) pointed out school culture and

atmosphere as influential factors by illustrating the example that there were some cases where teachers kept using listening materials even if the target exams did not have a listening test. Also, Tsagari (2009) discovered that the test-oriented class with increased homework and intense test preparation demotivated students, leading to the negative impression that they would fail in the test.

### **[Exam-related factors]**

Exam-related factors include proximity, stakes, purpose, format and familiarity. For example, Gashaye (2021) researched the washback effect of the Ethiopian National English Examination and found that students' ambition for success in the exam, awareness of the exam and teachers' exam-oriented teaching led to the failure of the syllabus implementation. Furthermore, Li and Abrar-ul-Hassan (2021) studied the washback of the College English Test in China and pointed out that its test format change might have influenced both the positive and negative washback effects.

As previously mentioned, washback may occur as a consequence of interactions between the factors, as well as connections between the factors and the teaching and learning contexts (Spratt, 2005). In this study, through interviews with teachers, the author attempted to examine the Kyotsu Test's washback and identify the aforementioned factors that significantly influence their teaching approach.

### **3.5 Kyotsu Test's Washback**

The Kyotsu Test is a unified national examination that serves as the initial step towards admission to Japanese universities. It is considered a high-stakes test with a possibly strong washback effect. Cheng (1997: 39) stated that 'traditionally, tests come at the end of the

teaching and learning process'. However, with the advent of high-stakes public assessments nowadays, the direction seems to be reversed. Indeed, there are now more test-coaching institutions and studying materials available in Japan. Thus, the Kyotsu Test's washback effect exists even at the social level and is the central concern of all stakeholders.

The Kyotsu Test's washback study is significantly meaningful for all stakeholders, and further studies should be conducted for future test-making. Historically, language testing stakeholders have focused on test design concerns, with little attention paid to the consequences of using tests, presumably because design matters are more clearly controlled by developers (Green, 2013). Messick (1996: 252) also suggested that 'test developers, rather than seeking washback as a sign of test validity, seek validity by design as a likely basis for washback'. Hence, the Kyotsu Test's washback should be further investigated and shared with NCUEE. Although NCUEE has a third-party expert committee that has positively rated the Kyotsu Test's achievement of targets (NCUEE, 2021b), it seems that it is not based on investigations of school practices. Luxia (2007) studied the writing task in China's National Matriculation English Test and found that the exam impacted what teachers taught in a classroom, although the test makers had no intention of doing so. Thus, test developers, including NCUEE, must incorporate washback research findings into their own processes.

Moreover, researchers need to concentrate on washback studies related to the new Kyotsu Test. Guest (2008) did a comparative analysis of the Centre Test's English section by comparing the 1981 and 2006 versions. His study revealed that the 2006 test is far superior on several standard measures of test validity, and students must develop more practical skills to pass such tests, leading to a positive washback effect. However, other than Guest's (2008) study, little empirical research has been undertaken (Watanabe, 2013). Additionally, no empirical research on the



washback of the recently reformed Kyotsu Test (January 2021) is available. Thus, the Kyotsu Test's washback study needs to be conducted urgently now.

### **3.6 Conclusion to Chapter 3**

This chapter reviewed literature and studies related to the Kyotsu Test's washback. The literature review indicated that a washback differs considerably in each case due to the intricate interactions between factors and contexts, necessitating further research. Particularly, the Kyotsu Test is a high-stakes exam that impacts the future of many students who rely on it to determine their future course, possibly leading to a substantial washback effect. Additionally, relevant washback studies on the Kyotsu Test are limited, and research on its recently revised version is not yet available. As previously said, washback may occur in several areas, but this study focuses on teachers because they determine the teaching approach in a classroom, which is identifiable and crucial. Overall, this study discerned the relevance and forms of washback effects brought into classrooms by understanding teachers' perspectives through interviews. Furthermore, by carefully analysing the findings, the author attempts to identify the agents that significantly impact the washback effect, leading to the preliminary framework of the Kyotsu Test's washback process for future test development. Finally, additional research can be suggested to provide an agenda for test creators who must incorporate washback research findings into their own practices.

The following two main research questions have been developed to guide the present study:

**RQ1. What are teachers' perspectives on the washback effect of the new Kyotsu Test introduced in January 2021?**

**RQ2. Washback can have a range of different impacts depending on several variables. What variables influence the various washback effects of the Kyotsu Test?**

To ensure a more explicit focus on each primary research question, the following subsidiary research queries were formulated.

**RQ1a. What are teachers' perspectives on the Kyotsu Test's overall changes introduced in January 2021?**

**RQ1b. What are teachers' perspectives on the specific changes of the Kyotsu Test?**

**RQ2a. Does the school context cause the different washback effects of the Kyotsu Test?**

**RQ2b. Do the teachers' beliefs cause the different washback effects of the Kyotsu Test?**

A qualitative study was undertaken to examine the Kyotsu Test's washback effect and answer the above-mentioned questions. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology adopted to investigate the impact of the Kyotsu Test.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction to Chapter 4

This chapter presents the research methodology, which includes this study's rationale, participants, data collection and analysis, validity and reliability and ethical considerations. Section 4.2 outlines the research design, while Section 4.3 details the research tools used in this study. Moreover, Sections 4.4 and 4.5 discuss the participants and the employed data analysis methods, respectively. The chapter concludes with an explanation and discussion of the study's credibility and ethical implications in Sections 4.6 and 4.7.

### 4.2 Research Design

This study employed qualitative research methods and an explanatory case study since its topic has yet to be fully discussed in previous research (Heigham, 2011). An exploratory case study, according to Heigham (2011), is often used for qualitative investigations and defines questions and hypotheses. A washback differs per case due to the interaction of distinct factors, which requires restricting the focus of the potential variables through interviews (Dornyei, 2007). Following the same concept, this study's first step aims to identify the key aspects of the washback that occurred. As shown in Figure 4.1, the author conducted interviews with four participants before analysing the data using open, axis and selective codings.

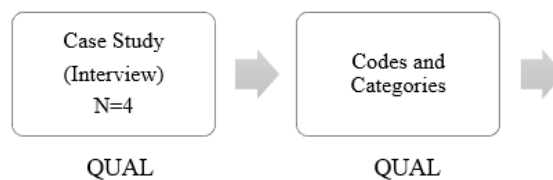


Figure 4.1 This Study's Research Design Concept

As indicated in Figure 4.2, the author plans to use this study’s key findings in the future to develop a questionnaire for a larger sample of school teachers. The author will then conduct a quantitative analysis of the qualitative results. Finally, after interpreting qualitative and quantitative data, the author will propose a valuable framework for future test-makers.

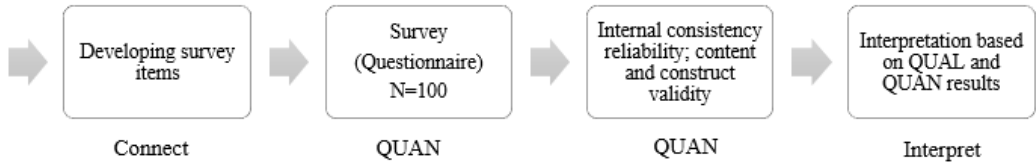


Figure 4.2 Future Study’s Research Design Concept

**4.3 Data Collection Methods**

In this study, the author gathered data through in-depth semi-structured online interviews. In-depth interviews are one of the most effective methods for discovering how people think and behave (Johnson, 2002). Also, Guion et al. (2011) noted that it can be used for various purposes, including identifying issues and selecting the most appropriate data collection technique to elicit a depth of information from relatively few participants. Based on this study’s context, the author conducted an in-depth interview with four teachers to determine the kind of washback they had and its cause. Moreover, the semi-structured format generally allows interviewees to elaborate on specific issues under the interviewer’s guidance and direction (Dornyei, 2007). Considering the process of identifying the factors causing the washback, such flexibility would be favourable to the interviewers. At the same time, interviewers must have an adequate understanding of the targeted field and construct a diverse set of questions to ask during interviews. Before conducting them, the author was already familiar with Japan’s English education system and had obtained sufficient knowledge of the washback phenomenon from intensive research of landmark articles and books. Thus, the semi-structured format was the best fit for this study.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the author led online interviews via Zoom rather than face-to-face interviews. Online interviews have the potential to overcome the time and financial constraints, geographical dispersion and physical mobility boundaries of research observed in conventional face-to-face interviews (Cater, 2011). Archibald et al. (2019) researched the feasibility of using Zoom to collect qualitative interview data in the health context and found that most participants were satisfied and recognised Zoom as an alternative to traditional interviewing mediums, despite some technical difficulties. On the other hand, Janghorban et al. (2014) and Cater (2011) expressed concern that webcams do not show each participant's entire figure, making it difficult to observe all their body language. Due to possible technical difficulties and limited access to the participant's body language when using Zoom, the author arranged for Skype and similar resources to be used as backup tools in this study. Also, before starting the interviews, the author checked the position of the participants' webcams.

The author attempted to conduct the pilot study to raise its chances of success. Furthermore, Heigham and Croker (2009) noted that the interview method in qualitative research requires a trial interview following adequate preparation. Some research studies also conducted two or three trial interviews as part of their pilot study to ensure a suitable technique for qualitative inquiry to seek participants' insights. However, the author found it impossible to find the participants for the pilot study due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 and the study's limited timeline. Thus, the author reviewed the recorded interviews carefully each time and modified the way of inquiry for the next interviews.

For data collection purposes, the interviews were accomplished individually, online and in Japanese based on the procedures described above. The sample interview questions can be found in Appendix 2. Each respondent's interview lasted around one hour and, with the

participants' consent, were recorded using a digital voice recorder. After the interview, the author contacted them by email or short message services if any additional inquiries.

#### **4.4 Participants**

Four English language teachers from different private schools – junior high and high schools – in Japan participated in the study. The author selected four participants based on their relevance to the study's purpose and their accessibility during the targeted timeframe. Although having respondents from the same school is vital for ensuring reliability and validity, the author found it impossible to do so due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 and the study's limited timeline. Thus, the participants came from various schools; this investigation likewise prioritised identifying the differences between school contexts to discern the probable causes generating washback as much as possible. Moreover, to determine the washback effect caused by the Kyotsu Test, the participants' schools must have students who are required to take the said exam for university entry. Additionally, anticipating the difficulty in finding participants due to the prolonged pandemic, the author started recruiting early. The pre-arranged time allowance aided the author in recruiting an alternate participant when one of the respondents declined the interview due to a sudden increase in work. Lastly, since one of the participants is the author's high school friend, all measures were taken to avoid any conflict of interest – the questions were consistent, and the interviewee was asked to be honest. The author's close relationship with this specific participant allowed for a more trustworthy and insightful exchange of ideas. The four participants are profiled in greater detail in Table 4.1 below.

##### **[Participant A]**

He majored in English at a Japanese university. After graduating, a working holiday in Canada and a part-time job at a cram school for entrance exams in Japan led him to his current school,

where he has been teaching for six years. It is a university-affiliated private junior high and high school. About 8% of students take the Kyotsu Test and prepare for it at school. He teaches advanced third-year high school students for a national and public university that requires a Kyotsu Test score. He consults with other English teachers when deciding on a teaching approach.

### **[Participant B]**

She majored in English at a Japanese university and spent a year in the United Kingdom as part of a university exchange programme. Following graduation, she went on to study and earn a master's degree in English education in Japan. She has worked in her current school for three years. It is a private junior high and high school that sends students to top universities, with about 95% of them taking the Kyotsu Test. However, her school has not placed a high priority on exam preparation. Meanwhile, the school has strictly implemented an English education school policy that specifies teaching English using only the English language and via extensive reading. As the subject's head, she teaches English to third-year junior high school students. She has not yet overseen high school students who take the Kyotsu Test and may only have limited knowledge on the details of her school's test preparation. Nonetheless, she answered the interview to the best of her ability. She can independently choose a teaching strategy, but she must first adhere to the school's English education school policy.

### **[Participant C]**

She studied international relations at a Japanese university. After graduation, she moved to the United Kingdom to pursue a master degree in TESOL. She has now been teaching English in Japan for three years. Her school is a private junior high and high school. Many of her students enter the university affiliated with their high school, as well as other private universities that do

not require the Kyotsu Test score. Thus, the school has neglected to prepare for the Kyotsu Test. However, many students take the Kyotsu Test for practice and a chance to enter universities that require the score. She teaches English to first- and third-year high school students. She seems to be free to select her teaching approach.

**[Participant D]**

He studied English literature and earned a master’s degree in Japan. During his university years, he worked part-time at a cram school dedicated to university entrance exams. For twelve years, he has worked as an English teacher in Japan. His current school is a private junior high and high school, which sends students to high-ranking universities. All the students take the Kyotsu Test, which has been the school’s focus. Though he currently teaches first-grade junior high school students, he taught third-year high school students last year; he used his experience as a basis to answer the interview questions. His school expects him to devise his teaching strategy.

Table 4.1 Participants’ Key Information

Participant	A	B	C	D
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Male
Teaching experience (year)	6	3	3	12
Special academic background or teaching experience	Cram school in Japan	English Education in the UK (exchange programme)	MA TESOL in the UK	Cram school in Japan
School	Private integrated junior and high school (junior high school 3 years + high school 3 years)			



Teaching position	High school	Junior high school (no teaching experience in high school)	High school	Junior high school (High school last year)
Percentage of students that take the Kyotsu Test	8%	95%	Most of the students (exact number not available)	100%
School's preparation for the Kyotsu Test as a whole	Highly focused (for students who take the Kyotsu Test)	Less focused (bare minimum)	Not focused	Highly focused
Process in changing a teaching approach	Consultation among teachers	Allowed to decide by herself	Allowed to decide by herself	Required to decide by himself
Others	-	- Many students enter top universities. - English education school policy of teaching English using only the English language and extensive reading	- Many students attend the university linked to their high school and private universities that do not require the Kyotsu Test.	- Many students enter top universities.

## 4.5 Data Analysis Methods

The author employed content analysis methods to analyse the data gleaned from the interviews. According to Allen (2017), content analysis is a relatively safe process for examining interview subjects because errors are more easily fixed, and entire projects are not lost. Though it can be time-consuming, the author accomplished it through proper time management.

Transcribing is the first and one of the essential steps in content analysis. Braun and Clarke (2013: 162) expressed that ‘the transcript is the product of an interaction between the recording and the transcriber, who listens to the recording and makes choices about what to preserve and how to represent what they hear’. However, it is a lengthy process. Considering the time constraints, the author conducted tape analysis by taking notes while listening to the recordings rather than transcribing the entire content (Dornyei, 2007). Taking notes required the author to be extremely careful not to make any errors, as even minor ones can cause a critical change in data interpretation. In this regard, Poland (2002) specified four common types of transcription errors: sentence structure errors, quotation mark errors, omission errors and mistaken word errors.

Afterwards, the author performed open, axial and selective codings. Open coding needed careful consideration before eliminating surrounding data, as it might alter the meaning of the interview extracts (Bryman, 2012). Also, Braun and Clarke (2006: 89) stated that ‘the researcher should not smooth out or ignore the tensions and inconsistencies within and across data items’. It is critical to retain accounts that depart from the dominant story in the analysis; thus, these must not be ignored during open coding. For this reason, the author did not remove the surrounding information that may provide key aspects in this study, but rather kept it in a proper spot for quick reference. Moreover, axial coding, which is the process of relating

categories and sub-categories via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking, assisted in identifying the categories' relationship and potential theme (Williams and Moser, 2019). Specifically, the author made connections between open coding categories to organise them into broader concepts (Dornyei, 2007). During the process, the author exercised caution, from returning surrounding information to reanalysing the existing data and re-examining the newly established connections between the categories (Creswell, 2005). Additionally, the author encountered some codes that were difficult to classify with precision and kept them with all the possibilities until there was a good indication to categorise. This led to selective coding, which is the final stage of the coding process. According to Dornyei (2007), selective coding is the process of choosing a central category to focus on for the rest of the study. The author drafted the storyline from a broad perspective while carefully reviewing and sorting through memos to ensure coherence throughout the study (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

As a result, the author was able to determine four themes: (a) teachers' perspectives on overall Kyotsu Test changes, (b) teachers' perspectives on specific Kyotsu Test changes, (c) school context as a factor influencing the washback effect and (d) teachers' beliefs as factors impacting the washback effect. Each theme had several sub-themes, with data extracts showing the key aspects of the analysis.

#### **4.6 Trustworthiness**

To secure this study's trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Dornyei, 2007), the author focused on four criteria. First, as per credibility, the author conducted member checking by sharing the key findings with the participants following the saturation point (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the author attempted a peer debriefing, but no peers who could understand Japanese were available. Thus, the author did not pursue further process since credibility

checking is potentially limitless, which must be considered in terms of practicality (McLeod, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2013). Next, as for transferability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasised the importance of detailed description for readers to be aware of the results' safe transfer. For this reason, the author used a lengthy description that provided detailed context information. Moreover, dependability was addressed by participant verifications to minimise possible bias due to the author's immersion in the research context. Finally, confirmability was secured by saving all the records and original resources in a designated location, assuming the university's confirmability audit.

#### **4.7 Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative research frequently focuses on people's private thoughts and the treatment of sensitive information. In this sense, interviews are regarded as an intrusion into participants' private lives (Cohen et al., 2007). Thus, ethical considerations should be prioritised throughout the research process. There are sensitive issues in educational research, and Allmark et al. (2009) emphasised the importance of privacy and confidentiality in interview research. For this reason, the in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face online, with great care taken to ensure anonymity. The author replaced the participants' names with pseudonyms. Furthermore, data were managed with extreme care to ensure that the participants would not be associated with the research materials or identifiable in any subsequent report produced by the author. Additionally, the raw data, including the interview transcripts and the study-related memos, were kept safe in line with the Data Protection Act (1998) and only accessible to the study's supervisor and author. The university may access the study solely for examination reasons; however, if the subject of publication arises later, participants' consent will be requested (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018).

Before the interview, the author obtained informed consent from all participants using a written consent form that included information about the study's risks. The author explained the purpose of informed consent by email or verbally to avoid misunderstanding of the concept and unexpected interviewee withdrawal. As per BERA (2018), the author, nevertheless, informed the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at their discretion.

#### **4.8 Conclusion to Chapter 4**

This chapter discussed the overall design and methodologies used in this research, as well as the rationale behind the data collection and analysis approaches. The next chapter presents the analysis results for each study topic.

## **Chapter 5: Findings and Data Analysis**

### **5.1 Introduction to Chapter 5**

This chapter presents the findings' analysis, which is divided into four sections. In Sections 5.2 and 5.3, the results of the interviews are reported in accordance with the subsidiary research questions derived from RQ1 and RQ2, respectively. The concluding section provides a summary and some broad conclusions that will lead to this study's discussion in the succeeding chapter.

### **5.2 RQ1. Teachers' Perspectives on Washback Based on the Revised Kyotsu Test**

This section focuses on teachers' perspectives, highlighting both overall and specific changes. As previously stated, NCUEE made a significant reform on the Kyotsu Test, emphasising listening and reading comprehension skills necessary in various situations rather than knowledge by eliminating any questions simply asking an understanding of grammar and pronunciation (NCUEE, 2019). In other words, the revised Kyotsu Test now features a new concept and its related questions, which this study used as bases to analyse the extracted data.

#### **5.2.1 RQ1a. What are Teachers' Perspectives on the Kyotsu Test's Overall Changes?**

The data revealed that all participants had a similar impression that the new Kyotsu Test questions tended to focus on English skills rather than knowledge and that these changes were now more comparable to external proficiency tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC. In this regard, NCUEE's goal of aligning with the national curriculum is seemingly reflected, as recognised by the teacher participants in this study.

Extract 5.1

*The new Kyotsu Test requires the ability to comprehend graphs and charts. It is now comparable to TOEIC. (Participant A)*

Extract 5.2

*The ability to use English skills appropriately for communication in various situations is assessed in the new Kyotsu Test. (Participant B)*

Extract 5.3

*The Kyotsu Test seems to have significantly changed this time. (Participant C)*

Extract 5.4

*The revised Kyotsu Test now has a question style similar to TOEFL. (Participant D)*

As indicated in Extracts 5.1–5.4, the new Kyotsu Test requires students to *comprehend graphs, charts and communication* relevant to *various situations*, as well as provide more authentic input. The Kyotsu Test appears to have evolved in a manner appreciated by teachers. However, the participant comments in Extracts 5.1–5.4 highlight the need to study whether the Kyotsu Test has been sufficiently modified to be consistent with the national curriculum. To illustrate, Participant A used *TOEIC* as an example, whereas Participant D used *TOEFL*, leading to *different perceptions*. Since the *TOEIC* and *TOEFL* were designed for different targets, the Kyotsu Test may mislead teachers in terms of test concepts. Thus, in further studies, it is important to examine whether these disparities stem from the Kyotsu Test issue.

Interestingly, some participants described the new Kyotsu Test as being more in line with what they teach in their classrooms than before. They also expressed an interest in possible adjustments to each university's in-house exams as the second step in admission.

Extract 5.5

*I am interested in the possible changes of each university exam in the future due to the new Kyotsu Test. We must consider them when deciding on a teaching approach. (Participant A)*

Extract 5.6

*The Kyotsu Test has changed, resulting in a target similar to ours. Our students may have a stronger connection to the new Kyotsu Test questions than they did previously. (Participant B)*

Extract 5.7

*The Kyotsu Test has changed, synchronising to some extent with what I have taught in the classroom. (Participant D)*

Extract 5.8

*Despite the revision of the Kyotsu Test, I think that each university would not change its in-house admission exams largely. (Participant D)*

As stated in Extracts 5.6 and 5.7, the new Kyotsu Test addressed teaching inconsistency to some extent by adhering more closely to the national curriculum. Teachers and students are *better familiar with the Kyotsu Test questions*. The Kyotsu Test appears to have evolved in a manner



appreciated by teachers, indicating that this change is easing the burden on some English teachers because they are no longer required to teach material that is irrelevant to the national curriculum. However, this raises the additional question of how teachers might use their spare time. It could lead to the improvement of English language teaching in the classroom and must be studied further. Also, as demonstrated in Extracts 5.5 and 5.8, the participants showed concern that the Kyotsu Test's alterations would cause universities to change their in-house admission exams accordingly. Indeed, universities may believe that their internal assessments should be revised to compensate for what the Kyotsu Test cannot appropriately measure (Watanabe, 2013). This should influence classroom instruction, and each university admission exam adjustment should be further researched. The next section will investigate teachers' perceptions on more specific Kyotsu Test changes.

### **5.2.2 RQ1b. What are Teachers' Perspectives on the Kyotsu Test's Specific Changes?**

#### **Reading Section**

Because of the changes in the reading section, the participants were placed in various situations. Particularly, the reform appears to have created opportunities for teachers to reflect on how they should teach grammar in the future.

#### **[Discontinuation of Questions Requiring Grammar and Pronunciation Knowledge]**

Extract 5.9

*We had an internal discussion on which textbook to use next year and agreed that teaching grammar should still be important. I think that students need to learn grammar well sooner or later because they cannot avoid writing activities. Each teacher keeps responding to the changes flexibly for the time being, but more*

*consideration needs to be given to how to teach it systematically as part of the Kyotsu Test revision. (Participant A)*

Extract 5.10

*This change would have no impact on our teaching because we did not teach grammar as preparation for tests that demanded thorough grammar knowledge based on the school policy. (Participant B)*

Extract 5.11

*A lot of students enter the university affiliated with their high school and private universities that do not require the Kyotsu Test score. Thus, the school has not prepared for the Kyotsu Test. (Participant C)*

Extract 5.12

*Grammar is still the foundation of output activities. Thus, I kept addressing questions that require students to fill in the blanks, rearrange sentences and compose sentences in the classroom. However, I stopped using multiple-choice questions because they contribute far less to output activity. (Participant D)*

A seen in Extracts 5.9 and 5.12, Participants A and D reconfirmed the importance of grammar instruction, describing it as *the foundation of output activities*; this indicates their beliefs as teachers. In Japan, English tests have focused on grammatical and lexical knowledge, originating from the translation method that was used in mainstream English education in Japan (Butler and Iino, 2005). Due to the convenience of the test procedure and test-taker scale, it has taken many years to shift to practical English. In other words, the ‘juken eigo’, which is English

for 'entrance examination', has been still the student's primary goal, rather than practical English skills. In this sense, the Kyotsu Test reform this time would have significantly impacted school practices.

On the other hand, it did not provide an opportunity for Participants B and C to reflect on grammar teaching and adjust their teaching approach. As shown in Extract 5.10, Participant B stated that she does *not teach grammar as preparation for tests due to school policy*, denoting that the school policy overrides the Kyotsu Test's impact. In Extract 5.11, Participant C expressed that *the school has not prepared for the Kyotsu Test because many students enter the university affiliated with their high school and private universities that do not require the Kyotsu Test score*. This implies the importance of the Kyotsu Test as a key factor for students.

Furthermore, Participant D has a clear strategy for the new Kyotsu Test. On the other hand, Participant A needs more time to consider how to respond officially, although individual teachers are facing it by themselves for the time being. As per Participants A and D, the difference in how quickly they modify their teaching approach could be due to the degree of freedom and responsibility they have in making a choice. According to Li and Abrar-ul-Hassan's (2021) washback study of the College English Test in China, it took one-and-a-half years after the reform to confirm the positive washback effects. This finding denotes the importance of the investigation's timing and how long it takes for the teaching method to be reflected in teachers and schools.

### [Increased English Word Count in Reading Passages]

#### Extract 5.13

*For the time being, we are going to respond to this development flexibly by following textbooks, etc. (Participant A)*

#### Extract 5.14

*We have already been focusing on extensive reading for years as part of our school policy, and it would suffice. Hence, we would like to increase the number of opportunities for students to discuss and debate. (Participant B)*

#### Extract 5.15

*In response, I have increased the time allotted for reading practice in lessons, which is comparable to the internal tests. (Participant D)*

As shown in Extracts 5.13 and 5.15, Participant A believes *that the teaching approach should be modified in some way*, and Participant D has already *changed* it because they recognise the necessity to alter their teaching approach as the number of English words in reading passages increases. The reading passages word count has been increased by 1,200 words to 5,500 words, which is a significant change. Meanwhile, Participant B had no intention of exerting more effort because her school had already done enough reading activity *based on her school's policy*. On the other hand, this change elicited no response from Participant C. Teachers responded differently, prompting further study on a large scale of instructors to investigate the extent to which this change triggers them to reflect on reading comprehension strategy.

## **Listening Section**

The participants' responses to the changes in the listening section vary. Compared to the reading section, it would have less effect on them. Interestingly, three participants did not convey any notable responses to the inclusion of various accents, although they recognised its importance.

### **[Increasing the Number of English words, Expanding Passage Types and Playing the Audio Only Once]**

Extract 5.16

*We have not discussed the strategy as a whole, and each teacher is considering it. Also, we need to see what new textbooks for listening practice are like. (Participant A)*

Extract 5.17

*Current textbooks already have passages about various contexts, which would suffice. In listening practice, I only play the audio once according to the Kyotsu Test modification. (Participant D)*

As demonstrated in Extracts 5.16 and 5.17, Participant D recognised and responded to the change in the Kyotsu Test, while Participant A needed further consideration. Interestingly, both mentioned *textbooks* in their comments, implying that these may affect listening practice in the first place. Likewise, in the reading sections, Participants A and D frequently referred to *textbooks* in their interviews. This denotes the importance of studying how *textbooks* influence teachers in this context. MEXT censored textbooks used in the classroom for their alignment with the national curriculum. As previously explained, the new national curriculum, which will go into effect in April 2022, will operate on the same principle as the previous one. However,

textbooks do not always fit teaching approaches, leading to negative washback (Cheng, 1997). In this sense, the extent to which publishers consider the new Kyotsu Test and revise textbooks could be crucial.

### **[Using Various Accents]**

#### Extract 5.18

*We have not discussed the strategy as a whole. I have not paid much attention to the change of accents. To some extent, workbooks and textbooks already feature the British accent, etc. This would be enough. (Participant A)*

#### Extract 5.19

*Various accents should have been highlighted more prominently and earlier. Considering real-world communications, this is quite a natural change. I would like students to understand it well. We do not stick to American English. My students mainly listen to British English since we are now using a textbook published in the UK. (Participant B)*

#### Extract 5.20

*As per the various English accents, I have not given it much attention and have not exposed students to it. Also, I am concerned that students will find it difficult to distinguish between distinct English dialects. (Participant C)*

#### Extract 5.21

*For the time being, an American accent is a good model for students to learn, and it would suffice for now. (Participant D)*

As shown in Extracts 5.18–5.21, although they recognised its importance, Participants A, C and D did not convey any notable responses to the inclusion of various accents, unlike Participant B. Interestingly, according to the British Council (2021), the correct answer rate to English questions with British accents in the new Kyotsu Test was still half that of questions with American accents, implying that further exposure to various English dialects is necessary. However, teachers have yet to respond. In this regard, Matsuda (2009) argued for the necessity of teacher preparation programmes focusing on English language diversity. Her research revealed that more than half of a group of 95 pre-service teachers in Japan believed that they should be exposed to other English dialects other than American and British. Chiba et al.'s (1996) research on Japanese students suggested that increasing familiarity with different English varieties should be one of the primary pedagogical methods used because it can lead to acceptance of non-native varieties. Also, Galloway (2013 and 2014) researched Japanese students' preferences for various English dialects used globally. This should prompt further investigation into why teachers do not see a compelling need to teach using various English dialects in the rapid globalisation.

### **5.2.3 Summary - Teachers' Perspectives on Washback Based on the Revised Kyotsu Test**

Overall, the data revealed that all the participants had a similar impression that the new Kyotsu Test questions focused on English skills rather than knowledge. In this regard, NCUEE's goal of aligning with the national curriculum is seemingly reflected, as recognised by the teacher participants in this study. Looking at each participant, Participant A perceived the need to adjust the teaching approach, and Participant D has already done so. Specifically, discontinuing the grammar questions would have had a greater impact on both teachers. Meanwhile, Participants B and C did not express any desire to alter their teaching approach. Generally, the teaching approach includes method and content; however, it seems that the Kyotsu Test alteration only

impacted teaching content at the time of this study. The results indicate that some factors differentiate participant responses, which will be discussed further below.

Notably, the above findings have led to the following key aspects requiring future research of the Kyotsu Test's washback: (a) whether the new Kyotsu Test was sufficiently revised to be aligned with the national curriculum this time, (b) whether having more consistency between the new Kyotsu Test and the national curriculum raises the efficiency of classroom teaching, (c) whether the new Kyotsu Test causes a change in each university admission exam and how this affects classroom teaching, (d) how the new Kyotsu Test's large increase in reading passages word count influences classroom teaching, (e) how the washback effect of the Kyotsu Test changes over the time, (f) how the new Kyotsu Test influences textbook content and its impact on classroom teaching and (g) how the concept of including various English accents in the new Kyotsu Test influences classroom teaching.

### **5.3 RQ2. Factors Causing the Kyotsu Test's Different Washback Effects**

During the interviews, all the participants recognised the Kyotsu Test's revision. However, as previously described, they responded differently to the change, implying that certain factors induce a distinct washback effect. Spratt (2005) classified factors influencing a washback effect into four categories: teacher-related factors, resources, the school and the exam. However, a comprehensive explanation of these four categories is beyond the scope of this study. Its findings suggest that school context and teacher beliefs are the dominant key factors in the Kyotsu Test's washback effect in Japan. This part analyses the above-mentioned disparities in perceptions in terms of school context and teachers' beliefs in Japan's private school context.



### **5.3.1 RQ2a. Does the School Context Cause the Kyotsu Test's Different Washback Effects?**

The study's key findings suggested that the school context had an overriding impact on the Kyotsu Test's washback effect. Particularly, the interviews revealed that Participants A and D experienced its washback effect, while Participants B and C did not. The sections below scrutinised the school context information obtained from interviews and school websites to explain this difference.

#### **[Context of Schools A and D]**

School A emphasises global education, which it accomplishes through exchange programmes and short-term study-abroad opportunities. However, no other English education school policy, such as English as the medium of instruction, is available. Students can choose from several courses at the school, and about 8% of them take one to enter national and public universities that require the Kyotsu Test score. Participant A teaches them English.

School D does not have a specific English education school policy. It is a superior private junior high and high school institution, with all its students taking the Kyotsu Test. It always ranks high in terms of the number of students who passed the top universities' exams, which is regarded as the most central indicator of school performance. Teachers, including Participant D, have complete control over what they instruct their students.

After careful examination of the contexts, it is found that both participants who experienced washback effects are responsible for teaching students who take the Kyotsu Test, and their schools do not strictly enforce the English education school policy.

### **[Context of Schools B and C]**

School B has a strict English education school policy. The school prominently highlights teaching English solely in English and through extensive reading, and it strongly implements these methods for all students. It is an excellent private junior high and high school institution, with about 95% of students taking the Kyotsu Test. Many of them attend prestigious universities. However, according to Participant B, even their high school teachers provide minimal support for the Kyotsu Test preparation in class because prioritising their English education school policy is thus far their best teaching practice.

School C offers an English intensive course to a small number of students who aim to study abroad in the future, but it does not have an additional English education programme. Many students take the Kyotsu Test only as practice and for possibly being admitted to universities that need the score. Many students enrol in the university affiliated with their high school and private universities that do not require the Kyotsu Test score. Thus, the school has neglected to prepare for the Kyotsu Test.

The Kyotsu Test is crucial for School B students, and the washback towards School B teachers, including Participant B, was expected. However, they did not appear to have experienced the washback effect. School B has a distinct English education school policy that teachers must follow and prioritise as their best teaching practice. On the other hand, School C does not provide specific preparation for students since they attend universities that do not require Kyotsu Test scores for admission.

Table 5.1 summarises the key aspects of the school contexts from the analysis as above. When comparing Schools A and D to School B, it can be concluded that the difference in English

education school policy results in a disparity in washback. Similarly, when Schools A and D are compared to School C, a washback difference could be attributed to variations in the importance of the Kyotsu Test for students. Thus, a school’s English education school policy and the Kyotsu Test’s relevance for students’ collegiate futures could be strong indicators of washback in a private school in Japan.

Table 5.1 School Contexts’ Key Aspects

Context	School A	School B	School C	School D
Importance of the Kyotsu Test for students	Important (Some portion of students enter public and national universities.)	Important (Many students enter top-class universities.)	Not important (Many students enter the university linked to their school, as well as private universities that do not require the Kyotsu Test.)	Important (Many students enter top-class universities.)
English education school policy	No rigid policy	Rigid policy (Teaching English solely in English and through extensive reading)	No rigid policy	No specific policy
The school’s preparation for the Kyotsu Test	Highly focused (for students who take the Kyotsu Test)	Less focused (bare minimum due to rigid policy)	Not focused	Highly focused

Washback on participants	Yes	No	No	Yes
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Interestingly, Kawaijuku Educational Institution conducted the questionnaire among high school students who took their mock test of the new Kyotsu Test in January 2021. As a result, 42.5% answered they need the exam preparation for the new Kyotsu test (Kawaijuku Educational Institution, 2021). The students of School B might not be exceptional. In this regard, Participant B answered that School B would keep bare minimum preparation of the Kyotsu Test even if some students feel the anxiety of the Kyotsu Test. It indicates the solidarity of School B's English education school policy. At the same time, it leads to the necessity of further study about the students' attitudes affected by the Kyotsu Test's washback.

### 5.3.2 RQ2b. Do the Teachers' Beliefs Cause the Kyotsu Test's Different Washback Effects?

As previously stated, Participants A and D experienced the washback effect, which caused them to adjust their teaching strategy. This part delves deeper into the influence of teachers' beliefs on the washback effect by analysing their comments.

#### [Participant D]

Extract 5.22

*Grammar questions have been discontinued. So, simply speaking, I would not have to do the practice at all. But the reason I keep doing it is that it contributes to output activities. Also, learning grammar arouses students' linguistic interest. I recommend that students join the International Linguistics Olympiad, which is a competition for linguistic competence. (Participant D)*

Extract 5.23

*Now, the Kyotsu Test has no grammar questions, which means no output questions. At least, questions involving the rearrangement of sentences should have remained. The in-house university exams have high-level output questions, such as composing difficult English sentences. The middle- and low-level output questions are nowhere to be seen. It might cause students not to study English daily conversations that correspond to the middle- and low-level output activities. (Participant D)*

Extract 5.24

*In terms of whether the Kyotsu Test is required for the admissions process to universities, I think it should be. Students must take tests twice – the Kyotsu Test and the universities' in-house test – to enter national and public universities. It would be favourable since it would allow for a more accurate and diverse assessment by taking multiple test opportunities. (Participant D)*

As indicated in Extract 5.22, Participant D's strategy of continuing to undertake grammar practice for the Kyotsu Test stems from his teaching belief that *output activities* are built on grammar practices and exposure to which enhances students' *linguistic interest*. Notably, he recommends that the students join *the International Linguistics Olympiad*. This indicates that he has considered and faced the rationale of grammar teaching for years. In Extract 5.23, he was also concerned that it would limit students' opportunities to study the *middle- and low-level output questions*, which could in turn change his teaching approach. This suggests that he pursues the consistency of teaching contents and their assessment in practice to improve English language teaching. In addition, Extract 5.24 denotes that he regards the Kyotsu Test as valuable not only for admission exams but also for achievement tests because *it allows for a more*

*accurate and diverse assessment through multiple testing.* The Kyotsu Test alteration influenced his beliefs about grammar teaching and the purpose of the Kyotsu Test, resulting in his responses above.

As explained in Extract 5.9, Participant A emphasised the importance of grammar instruction. During the interview, he made the following interesting remark.

Extract 5.25

*I would like students to have fun with the grammatical analysis process in the same manner I did when I was in high school as if it were a puzzle. (Participant A)*

Extract 5.25 indicates that his high school education may have impacted his current teaching beliefs and response to the new Kyotsu Test. As shown in Extracts 5.22–5.25, the teachers' beliefs of Participants A and D are based on their background, leading to different responses.

### **5.3.3 Summary - Factors Causing to the Kyotsu Test's Different Washback Effects**

The above analysis confirmed that a school's English education school policy and the Kyotsu Test's relevance for students' academic future could be strong washback indicators in terms of the Kyotsu Test. Also, the washback cases of Participants A and D imply that teachers' beliefs are one factor that differentiates the washback effect.

## **5.4 Conclusion to Chapter 5**

Through the revised Kyotsu Test, this chapter clarified teachers' perspectives on washback. By analysing the differences in their opinions, the author attempted to confirm the factors triggering the washback. As a result, it has been proven that the school context, specifically the English

education school policy and the significance of the Kyotsu Test for students, may play a vital role in the process of eliciting washback. It has also been observed that teachers' beliefs appear to be reflected in the washback effect. This chapter's findings will be reviewed in the subsequent section to develop an agenda for test creators who must integrate washback research findings into their practices.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction to Chapter 6

As previously mentioned, a preliminary study involving a small-scale interview may not precisely represent the Kyotsu Test's washback phenomenon. However, in this chapter, the author goes a step further to explore the findings that will lead to future studies. Section 6.2 examines in a more in-depth and critical manner the relevance of the research findings. Moreover, the limitations of the present are presented in Section 6.3, while its implications and conclusion are found in Sections 6.4 and 6.5, respectively.

### 6.2 Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the washback of the Kyotsu Test's English section and determine what variables influence the various washback effects on teachers' practice, leading to the preliminary framework of the Kyotsu Test's washback process for future test development with a positive washback effect. The findings revealed that the new Kyotsu Test had varied impacts on private school teachers. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that a school's English education school policy and the importance of the Kyotsu Test for students are washback triggering factors and that teachers' beliefs affect how washback manifests in a teaching approach. The author examined the results and attempted to add key interpretations for the preliminary framework of the Kyotsu Test's washback process as below.

First, the author revisited a particular aspect of the English education school policy. Watanabe (2000) and Cheng and Watanabe (2004) emphasised the *school atmosphere* as a school-related factor that influences washback by illustrating the teacher who kept using listening materials even when the target exams did not include a listening test. He wanted students to learn listening skills applicable in real-life situations. Also, his school held a variety of school activities, such



as inviting foreign students and hosting international concerts, and so forth. These findings support Cheng and Watanabe's (2004) conclusion that the school atmosphere could outweigh the test's impact and improve students' authentic language skills. The author could not confirm his school's English education policy in the descriptions of Watanabe (2000) and Cheng and Watanabe' (2004) studies, but the *school atmosphere* can be interpreted as an *implicit school rule or policy*. It means that Watanabe's (2000) and Cheng and Watanabe's (2004) findings are consistent with that of the present study, demonstrating the importance of 'atmosphere' or what the author refers to as 'context'.

In this study, School B is a good example with its strict English education school policy, which outweighed the impact of the new Kyotsu Test. However, few private schools, such as School B, have such an exacting English learning policy for the whole school. As of May 2020, private high school students account for about 30% of all students in Japan (MEXT, 2020b). Private schools have varying education policies, whereas public schools offer relatively uniform education due to public education's neutrality. Notably, due to Japan's declining birth rate and the high demand for English education in an era of rapid globalisation, schools have been promoting their English education programme and its implementation to attract students. Some private schools, such as School C, offer several distinct courses to students. In School C, there are a number of courses that focused on specific aims, such as one course for a small number of students (approximately 20 students) who intended to study abroad in the future. According to the Promotion and Mutual Aid Corporation for Private Schools of Japan (2019), when choosing a high school, a growing number of students and their parents opt for private schools with unique educational goals. Thus, a school's English education school policy could be an essential washback factor in the current context.

Second, this study confirmed the significance of the Kyotsu Test for students as one of the influential factors, which mirrors the research result of Shohamy et al. (1996). In empirical research, Shohamy et al. (1996) compared the washback effect of the Arabic and English language tests in empirical research. They found that since the Arabic language test was not a high-stakes exam for students and parents, there was no significant washback impact, leading to decreased pressure on teachers to achieve results. On the other hand, the high-stakes English language test revealed the opposite. Thus, the degree of importance of a test for students may induce variations in teacher washback sensitivity. This is evident in the cases of Schools A, C and D. Also, some studies recognise this phenomenon as an *area affected by washback* by focusing on their attitudes (Spratt, 2005). However, it would be meaningful to recognise this phenomenon as an *influential factor affecting washback effect* by focusing on the importance of a test for students, especially when considering the *washback process* in this study.

While the Kyotsu Test's importance for students is one of the most critical factors eliciting the washback effect, the number of students who take the exam does not always imply its relevance. In the case of School C, most students enter the university affiliated with their high school or other private universities that do not require a Kyotsu Test score. As a result, School C, including Participant C, place little importance on Kyotsu Test preparation. However, students take it for practice or as a safety net to have more university options. Thus, it is essential to assess the degree to which the students value the Kyotsu Test by examining multiple information sources rather than focusing solely on the number of students taking the national exam.

Third, teachers' beliefs uniquely influence washback. Participants A and D experienced the Kyotsu Test's washback, which, in their opinions, was distinctly reflected in their teaching

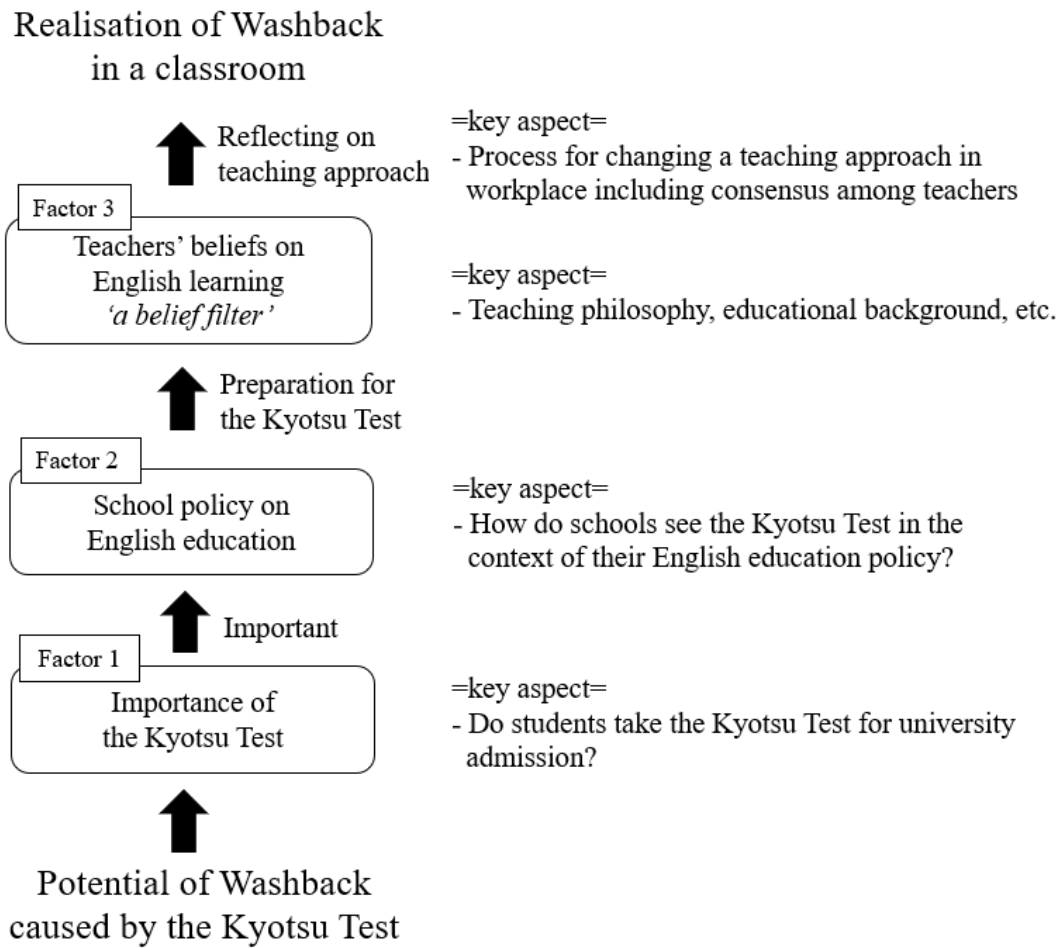
approach, especially when teaching grammar. As shown in Extracts 5.22 and 5.23, Participant D highlighted piquing students' linguistic interest via the International Linguistics Olympiad and was concerned about the learning area not being assessed in university admission. Also, Participant A would like to share his enjoyment of the grammatical analysis process based on his high school learning experience, as stated in Extract 5.25. The rationale for changing the teaching approach indeed varies between teachers. Spratt (2005) reviewed the empirical studies and noted that teachers' beliefs, attitudes, educational levels and experience and personalities could influence the washback effect. Furthermore, Watanabe (2000) investigated the washback of Japanese entrance examinations through classroom observations and teachers interviews, finding that the teachers' beliefs about the best teaching method, which originated from their educational background, overrode test effects. These studies corroborated this study's results. According to Pajares (1992), teachers' beliefs serve as *a filter* through which they interpret new information; hence, the author suggests that teachers have '*a belief filter*' that allows them to process the washback impact encountered.

Finally, human relationships, collaborative professional atmospheres, professional acknowledgement of those involved in a workplace and the process of changing the teaching approach should be thoroughly examined. In this study, Participant A stated the necessity of consulting with other teachers before changing the teaching approach, denoting the importance of human relationships at school. Each English teacher in a school has their own English education philosophy, which may lead to disagreements about the teaching approach. Moreover, English teachers should take a consistent and similar approach to avoid confusing students; however, younger English teachers in Japan tend to follow the senior English teachers' methods. Ogura (2014) studied 131 English teachers from 2010 to 2012 and found that even if English teachers want to only use English when teaching the language, there are other possible

reasons why they are unable to do so, such as senior teachers who are not supportive. The researchers have focused on the pressures from principals and administrators, but they have not investigated it yet. Thus, the school process for changing a teaching approach and teacher politics should be carefully observed.

The interpretations presented above resulted in the washback process structure depicted in Figure 6.1. The revised Kyotsu Test elicited the potential of washback, which influenced and was realised in classroom practice. In Figure 6.1, the author outlines three key factors that generate the Kyotsu Test's washback; however, it should be noted that all these conditions may not be present in all schools. To illustrate, Factor 1 (the importance of the Kyotsu Test) was irrelevant to Participant C as her school did not require her students to take the national exam for admission purposes. Moreover, because school policy prioritised teaching English through extensive reading and English as the sole means of instruction, Factor 2 (the school policy on English education) caused a negligible washback effect on Participant B. On the other hand, Participant D adjusted his teaching approach as a result of the revised Kyotsu Test, reflecting Factor 3 (the teachers' beliefs on English learning). Since all three triggering factors were present in the case of Participant D, washback occurred in the classroom. Additionally, while Participant A experienced the washback effect and temporarily modified his teaching approach, he needs more time to confer with other teachers and finalise how the Kyotsu Test revisions will impact his teaching.

Figure 6.1 Washback Process Framework



In conclusion, the study established the preliminary framework of the Kyotsu Test's washback process based on small-scale interviews. This framework should be verified and revised through further studies with a larger sample of private school teachers using a questionnaire; the author will then examine the qualitative results through quantitative analysis in the future. Also, while this study focused on private schools, it should be expanded to include public schools. Public schools may be less diverse and use the same framework.

### 6.3 Limitations

The study discovered interesting findings; however, some limitations may have influenced the overall results. The main limitation is its small sample size. Because of the constraints imposed by COVID-19 and the study's limited timeline, only four teachers participated. Although having respondents from the same school is vital for ensuring reliability and validity, the author found it impossible to do so for the same reason above. Nonetheless, by allocating the author's resources to the four participants, the author was able to obtain richer data and deeper insights on the themes of this study.

One of the participants is the author's high school friend, which could have caused a conflict of interest. Nevertheless, all measures were taken to avoid any such conflict of interest – the questions were consistent, and the interviewee was asked to be honest. Furthermore, the author's close relationship with this specific participant enabled a more trustworthy and insightful exchange of ideas.

Participant B no longer teaches high school students and has yet to supervise high school students taking the Kyotsu Test. Although she stays in the same teacher's room as high school English teachers and communicates closely with other teachers, she may only have limited knowledge of the details of her school's test preparation. Nonetheless, she answered the interview to the best of her ability.

The washback effect may change over time due to various factors such as the language test status and the uses of the test, as previously discussed. The revised Kyotsu Test, which was recently introduced in January 2021, has had an impact on the school environments; however,

the full ramifications of its reform may take longer to surface. In this sense, a longitudinal study is necessary to validate the outcome of this study.

This study has examined the washback from the Kyotsu Test, taking as its specific focus on teachers. However, publishers, students, parents, and local education authorities are involved in the washback's dynamic and interactive process, each influencing the other in varying degrees of quantity and quality. Thus, it is necessary to broaden the focus on the influencing factors and the areas affected by the washback to have a clear picture of the Kyotsu Test's washback process.

For the above reasons, this study's findings cannot be generalised in a broader context. However, useful implications in the field of the Kyotsu Test's washback can be made as long as a specific set of circumstances and this study's limitations are well-considered.

#### **6.4 Implications**

The Kyotsu Test is an achievement test that rigorously assesses academic abilities in line with the national curriculum. NCUEE should improve the Kyotsu Test in a timely manner based on the washback investigation that has been undertaken and should also attend to washback in a far more rigorous manner. At least, it is assumed that when the national curriculum changes in future, the Kyotsu Test must also change accordingly to maintain a positive washback effect. Moreover, the Kyotsu Test has a significant impact on students' futures because its score is used for university admission. Thus, it is critical to capture an overview of the washback nature and mechanism so that the NCUEE can account for the washback effect when revising the Kyotsu Test in the future. However, as shown in Chapter 3 of the Literature Review, research on the washback effect of the Kyotsu Test is scarce. Moreover, since its revision was only

introduced in January 2021, any related studies are yet to be undertaken. In this sense, this study contributes significantly to future studies, or at least to the researchers' knowledge, as it is the first step towards further research on the washback phenomenon of the Kyotsu Test.

Though this research is still a preliminary study with limitations, the author developed the washback process framework based on the overall findings. This framework must be modified through further studies, which will then allow the NCUEE to map out a comprehensive picture of Japanese high schools' possible washback effect and develop a strategy to incorporate a positive washback into school practice via the Kyotsu Test. Specifically, the school context, which includes English education school policy and the importance of the Kyotsu Test for students, can be sufficiently investigated through a study of the information currently available to the NCUEE and MEXT. For example, they may analyse the high school profile information across Japan, such as school policy and university admission. If necessary, the NCUEE, as the agent authority of MEXT, may distribute questionnaires to high schools to elucidate teachers' beliefs. Additionally, they may approach some teachers and schools who may have a key role in the test development process for further clarification. Overall, this research would help the NCUEE develop the Kyotsu Test by providing its preliminary washback mechanism framework. Lastly, while this study focused on the Kyotsu Test's English section, the findings could be applied to its other subject sections.

## **6.5 Recommendations for Further Research**

This study identified some potential topics for future research as described previously. Above all, the author would like to recommend the following research.



First, this study's results must be verified in subsequent studies with a larger sample of private school teachers using a questionnaire. Also, while this paper focused on private schools, it should be expanded to include public schools as well. This would lead to an improved framework for the Kyotsu Test's washback process and better usage for the NCUEE. Furthermore, it is critical to focus on other influencing factors and areas affected by the washback to have a comprehensive understanding of the Kyotsu Test's washback process.

Additionally, it would be important to investigate how the inclusion of various English accents in the new Kyotsu Test influences classroom teaching. As shown in Extracts 5.18–5.21, although they recognised its importance, three of the four participants did not convey any notable responses to including various accents. In the context of English's significant role as an international language, the teachers' lack of reaction would be an unexpected outcome for the NCUEE aiming to instil the importance of various English dialects in English learners. Thus, the washback must be thoroughly investigated, which will contribute to the next action in resolving this issue.

## **6.6 Conclusion of the Study**

Through small-scale interviews of four private school teachers, this study investigated the washback of the Kyotsu Test, which was reformed in January 2021. Its findings confirmed that a school's English education school policy and the relevance of the Kyotsu Test for students are triggering factors of washback, and teachers' beliefs affect how the washback manifests in a teaching approach. Lastly, the author proposed a preliminary framework of the Kyotsu Test's washback process for the test developer to provide its positive washback effect.

It has also been a meaningful opportunity for the author to delve into and discuss the Kyotsu Test and its washback, as he starts his career as an English teacher in Japan and encounters it during school practice. Furthermore, the author was able to develop research skills in terms of sampling, data collection procedures, etc. and overcame unexpected challenges caused by COVID-19. Finally, although the study was conducted with a small number of participants in a specific context, it should be considered as establishing a landmark for future studies on the washback phenomenon of the Kyotsu Test. For these reasons, the author is confident that this study's results can be generalised to similar contexts and contribute to English education in Japan.

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## Appendix

Appendix 1: Factors identified by empirical studies as affecting degrees and kinds of washback (Spratt 2005: 29)

Teacher-related factors	Resource, the school, the exam
<p><i>Teacher beliefs about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the reliability and fairness of the exam</li> <li>● what constitute effective teaching methods</li> <li>● how much the exam contravenes their current teaching practices</li> <li>● the stakes and usefulness of the exam</li> <li>● their teaching philosophy</li> <li>● about the relationship between the exam and the textbook</li> <li>● their students' beliefs</li> </ul> <p><i>Teachers' attitudes towards:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the exam</li> <li>● preparation of materials for exam classes</li> <li>● lesson preparation for exam classes</li> </ul> <p><i>Teachers' education and training:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers' own education and educational experience</li> <li>● the amount of general methodological training they have received</li> <li>● training in teaching towards specific exams and in how to use exam-related textbooks</li> <li>● access to and familiarity with exam support materials such as exam specifications</li> <li>● understanding of the exam's rationale or philosophy.</li> </ul> <p><i>Other:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● personality</li> <li>● willingness to innovate</li> </ul>	<p><i>Resources:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the availability of customised materials and exam support materials such as exam specifications</li> <li>● the types of textbooks available</li> </ul> <p><i>The school:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● its atmosphere</li> <li>● how much the administrators put pressure on teachers to achieve results</li> <li>● the amount of time and number of students allocated to exam classes</li> <li>● cultural factors such as learning traditions</li> </ul> <p><i>The exam:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● its proximity</li> <li>● its stakes</li> <li>● the status of the language it tests</li> <li>● its purpose</li> <li>● the formats it employs</li> <li>● the weighting of individual papers</li> <li>● when the exam was introduced</li> <li>● how familiar the exam is to teachers</li> </ul>

## Appendix 2: Interview Basic Questions

### Teachers' Background and Belief:

- Teaching experience
- Special academic background
- Teaching position
- Teaching philosophy etc.

### School Context:

- Percentage of students that take the Kyotsu Test
- School's preparation for the Kyotsu Test as a whole
- Process in changing a teaching approach
- Importance of the Kyotsu Test for students
- English education school policy etc.

### Teachers' Perspective:

- Kyotsu Test's Overall Changes
- Kyotsu Test's Specific Changes
  - Discontinuation of Questions Requiring Grammar and Pronunciation Knowledge
  - Increased English Word Count in Reading Passages
  - Increasing the Number of English words, Expanding Passage Types and Playing the Audio Only Once in Listening Section
- Using Various Accents etc.