
A Comparison of the Kyotsu Listening Test and the Listening Portion of the Sojo International Learning Center Year 1 Placement Test

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All students at Sojo University are required to take an English placement test so they can be grouped for compulsory English communication classes according to their proficiency in English. As most students will have taken the Common Test for University Admission prior to entering university, a comparison of these tests was performed in order to highlight the differences and similarities between the two formats. A discussion of the similarities and differences between the two exams was then also carried out with regards to recommendations for the future development of the placement test.

崇城大学のすべての学生は、必修科目である英語コミュニケーション・クラスで自分の英語力に応じたグループに入るために、英語のプレイスメント・テストを受けることが義務付けられている。大学入学前のほとんどの学生は、大学入学共通テスト、通称「共通テスト」を受験しているため、両テストの比較を行い、その形式の違いと類似点を明らかにした。さらに、今後のプレイスメント・テストの開発を踏まえ両テストの類似点と相違点に関する議論が行われた。

Introduction

This report examines and discusses the similarities and differences between the Common Test for University Admission, more colloquially referred to as the Kyotsu Test, and the English placement test in use at Sojo University. This report will explore to what extent the content and the material tested in the Kyotsu listening test match what is tested in the SILC listening placement test.

Before 2021, students in Japan wishing to enter university often took a test known as ‘The National Center Test for University Admissions’, usually called the Center Test. In this exam the listening component comprised only twenty per cent of the total score. In 2021, however, a new university entrance exam referred to as ‘The Common Test for University Admission’, or the Kyotsu Test, was introduced. The Kyotsu Test is designed to test whether students have gained the skills and knowledge required to form the basis for university education (DNC, 2021). This test highlights the importance of English listening skills in preparing for university-level education, and so the listening component has been increased to 50% of the total score. While some students enter university via special selection routes, such as interview-only selection, the majority of private and national universities require prospective students to take this exam as part of the general intake criteria (National Center for University Examinations, 2024). As a result, most Japanese students who successfully enter a domestic university, including many who enter Sojo University, will have studied for and taken this test.

At Sojo University, English education with the goal of developing communicative proficiency is primarily conducted in the Sojo International Learning Center (SILC) (Rowberry, 2010). When first-year students are placed into classes at the start of the academic year, a test is needed to filter students by proficiency level. Initially, the SILC did not develop its own internal proficiency test to evaluate the level of incoming students; the Visualising English Language Competency (VELC) test was selected. However, this was eventually discontinued due to the financial cost of the test, the time taken to receive results, and the relevance to the goals of the SILC. To overcome these problems, a decision was made to develop an internal test. This placement test has been revised several times since its

first inception so it is more closely aligned with the pedagogical goals of the SILC, and to make allowances for the changing profile of a new generation of incoming students.

It has been argued that in the Japanese context, English is primarily studied to pass various tests (Watanabe, 2021), so the concept of exam washback may be particularly relevant in this environment. Washback is defined as a test's impact on how teachers prepare for and teach classes (Green, 2013). Because many high-school students want to do well on the Kyotsu Test, many teachers will teach accordingly. As a result, even students who may not have to take the Kyotsu Test themselves will still be affected by its influence on teaching style and the skills they develop will skew towards the skills this test encourages. In this way, the Kyotsu Test may have influenced how English is taught in high school language classrooms. An understanding of how the students have studied English and the skills they have consequently developed is necessary for the creation of a placement test that provides a fair and level playing field for all students but that still tests any skills that may be specific to the situation in the SILC.

This report first provides a brief overview of the Kyotsu listening test and the listening portion of the SILC English placement test. It then attempts to match the SILC English placement test items to their equivalents on the Kyotsu listening test. Finally, it briefly discusses the findings and recommendations for the placement test's future.

Listening Teaching

When discussing and comparing the content of the items in the two examinations, it is important to understand what type of listening practice the items may encourage. This will help us understand similarities between the items that go beyond surface-level comparisons. In general, listening teaching can be divided into five different types of study: intensive, selective, interactive, extensive, and autonomous (Rost, 2016).

Intensive: The student focuses on understanding exactly what the speaker says, focusing on the lexis, grammar and syntax.

Selective: The student focuses on understanding the main points or obtaining the important information.

Interactive: The student communicates with other students to get some necessary information.

Extensive: Students listen to a large amount of material and perform various tasks focused on understanding the meaning.

Autonomous: Students decide what content they want to listen to by themselves and how they will interact with others.

Each item on the test may encourage teachers to prepare students using a particular style of listening teaching. Thus, it may be possible to determine whether the items in each exam, while apparently different, encourage the use of the same fundamental listening practice.

This paper will mainly focus on comparing the content of individual items on the two tests and how this impacts students and their ability to perform well. However, when looking at both tests on a macro scale, it is important to compare the qualities of the exams using previously established systems of reference. Green (2014) describes four broadly accepted qualities that make up useful assessments: practicality, reliability, validity, and beneficial consequences. This paper has interpreted the four qualities to have the following meanings:

Practicality: to what extent the resources required to create and complete an assessment are readily available.

Reliability: the test's ability to produce consistent and dependable results.

Validity: a test that measures what it claims to measure.

Beneficial Consequences: a test that has positive effects or results.

A thorough analysis of all four points is beyond the scope of this article, as the focus is on comparing individual items and asking whether they can be matched across tests. However,

this paper will briefly discuss the differences between what is practical for each exam, which may help explain some differences between the items on each test, specifically regarding the digital medium. In this context, what is practical for the Kyotsu Test, a national exam, will likely be very different to what is practical for the SILC English placement test, and an investigation of practicality may lead to comparisons that may otherwise go unnoticed.

Comparison of the Tests

All the Kyotsu listening test items are multiple-choice, a technique usually viewed as testing a bottom-up listening strategy (Richards, 2008). Students answer the questions by listening to the audio on headphones and highlighting the correct answer on a worksheet separate from the question booklet. Despite being taken on paper, the test is computer-graded (Umetani, 2022) and runs for thirty minutes. The SILC placement test is also multiple-choice and graded automatically without a human marker. However, unlike the Kyotsu listening test, the test is taken on a digital device such as a laptop or tablet, rather than on paper. It is not easy to make a comparison of length between the two tests, as the SILC placement test runs for one hour and ten minutes in total, and includes a reading section of twenty-five items as well as three listening sections (of which there are forty listening items in total). The reading section of the Kyotsu test is independent from the listening, and students have eighty minutes to answer the reading questions, and thirty minutes to do the listening section.

The 2024 Kyotsu listening test had six sections, three of which had one or two subdivisions of questions (Table 1).

Table 1

Breakdown of Kyotsu Listening Test Question and Answer Types

Section	Question type	Answer type
Part 1A Questions 1 to 4	One English sentence	Choose the correct sentence
Part 1B Questions 5 to 7	One English sentence	Choose the correct picture / Choose the correct part of a picture
Part 2 Questions 8 to 11	Short conversation	Choose the correct picture / Choose the correct part of a picture
Part 3 Questions 12 - 17	Short conversation	Choose the correct sentence
Part 4A(1) Questions 18 - 21	Short monologue	Put the pictures in the correct order
Part 4A(2) Questions 22 - 25	Instructional monologue	Fill in the blank parts of the table (multiple choice)
Part 4B Question 26	Four individual monologues	Choose the speaker that matches given criteria
Part 5 Questions 27 – 33	Monologue	Fill in the blanks on a worksheet (multiple choice), listen for specific information
Part 6A Questions 34 - 35	Pair conversation	Identify the opinion of each speaker and the decision made by the speakers
Part 6B Questions 36 - 37	Large group conversation	Identify which of the speakers' opinions match certain criteria

After examining the test items and content, based on the length of the audio and the type of questions asked, it is also possible to guess what kind of listening practice each question in the Kyotsu listening test may encourage. It is worth being clear that this is not an indication

of the type of listening practice that teachers do, in fact, carry out in the classroom, but just a consideration of what is most likely encouraged (Table 2).

Table 2

Breakdown of Listening Practice Encouraged in the Kyotsu Listening Test

Section	Listening practice
Part 1A	Intensive listening
Questions 1 to 4	
Part 1B	Intensive listening
Questions 5 to 7	
Part 2	Intensive listening
Questions 8 to 11	
Part 3	Intensive listening
Questions 12 – 17	
Part 4A(1)	Selective listening
Questions 18 – 21	
Part 4A(2)	Selective listening
Questions 22 – 25	
Part 4B	Selective listening
Question 26	
Part 5	Selective listening
Questions 27 – 33	
Part 6A	Selective listening
Questions 34 - 35	
Part 6B	Selective listening
Questions 36 - 37	

Concerning the difficulty of the test items, on the 2024 Kyotsu listening test the questions start from a low level and get steadily more difficult throughout the test. According to Benesse, a Japanese company which produces mock exams for the Kyotsu listening test, the questions start at CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) A1 level and peak at CEFR B1 (Benesse, 2021), although to the best of the author's knowledge, this has not been confirmed officially by the National Center for University Entrance Examinations. For this reason, a simple analysis using VocabKitchen CEFR Profiler an online service that identifies the vocabulary level compared to the CEFR scale, was undertaken to understand how far this holds true (Table 3).

Table 3

Kyotsu Listening Test Vocabulary Analysis

Section	CEFR A1	CEFR A2	CEFR B1	CEFR B2	Other
Part 1A	83%	14%	0%	0%	3%
Part 1B	79%	14%	2%	0%	5%
Part 2	80%	9%	4%	1%	7%
Part 3	77%	10%	2%	1%	9%
Part 4A(1)	62%	13%	4%	7%	13%
Part 4A(2)	67%	7%	11%	4%	10%
Part 4B	74%	12%	6%	1%	7%
Part 5	65%	10%	13%	6%	6%
Part 6A	75%	9%	6%	1%	10%
Part 6B	69%	12%	6%	0%	12%

From Part 4A(1) onwards, a jump in vocabulary level can be identified, with a higher percentage of B1 vocabulary and the introduction of B2 level vocabulary. This supports Bennese's claim to some extent.

The SILC placement test also underwent the same type of analysis. Unlike the Kyotsu listening test, it consists of only three listening sections with no subdivision of questions (Table 4).

Table 4

Breakdown of SILC Placement Test Question and Answer Types

Section	Question type	Answer type
Part I Questions 1 – 19	One Sentence to shorter monologue	Choose the correct sentence to reply to the question
Part II Questions 20 - 39	One Sentence to shorter monologue	Choose the word/sentence which completes the audio
Part III Question 40	Prolonged monologue	Fill in the blank parts of the table

As with the Kyotsu listening test, it is also possible to identify which type of listening practice each test item encourages (Table 5).

Table 5

Breakdown of Listening Practice Encouraged in SILC Placement Test

Section	Listening practice
Part I Questions 1 – 19	Intensive listening
Part II Questions 20 – 39	Intensive listening
Part III Question 40	Selective listening

No data is available regarding the difficulty of the 2024 SILC placement test questions compared to any officially defined English criteria. However, as with the Kyotsu listening test, the following levels were determined after an analysis using the VocabKitchen CEFR Vocabulary Profiler (Table 6).

Table 6

SILC Placement Test Vocabulary Analysis

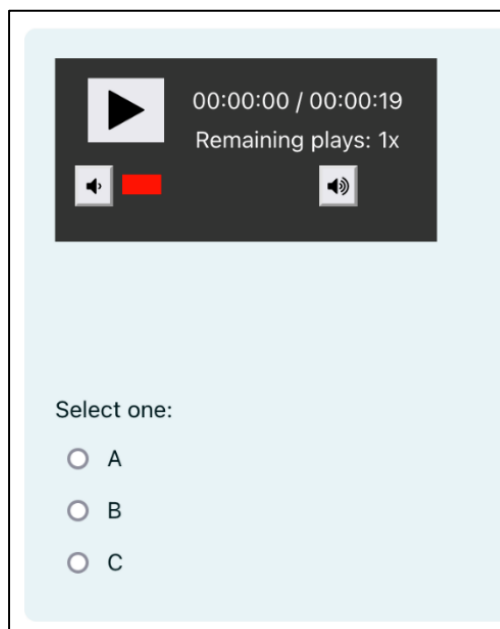
Section	CEFR A1	CEFR A2	CEFR B1	CEFR B2	Other
Part I	79%	10%	5%	2%	5%
Part II	80%	14%	3%	1%	3%
Part III	70%	17%	5%	1%	7%

The vocabulary is around the same level in all parts except for Part III, which has the highest CEFR A2 vocabulary percentage. The higher frequency of pronouns in Part III can explain the increased 'other' percentage. Given the near absence of CEFR B2 vocabulary and the relatively modest amount of CEFR B1 vocabulary, the SILC placement test would seem to align vocabulary-wise with the earlier parts of the Kyotsu listening test.

As the primary purpose of this paper is to compare the SILC placement test with the Kyotsu listening test, each part of the SILC exam will now be examined in more detail. Taking an example of the type of questions in Part I, we can see the student is faced with the following screen:

Figure 1

SILC Placement Test Question 1 (Sojo University, 2024)



The student hears:

Speaker 1: Excuse me, could you tell me where the city hall is?

Speaker 2: Answers. A.

Speaker 3: It's in Kumamoto.

Speaker 2: B.

Speaker 3: I'm sorry, I don't work at the city hall.

Speaker 2: C.

Speaker 3: It's just up there, on the left.

The audio is read by three different speakers: one speaker reading out the question, one speaker reading out A, B, and C, and the final speaker reading the replies. As shown in Figure 1, the student is not provided with any text besides the question instructions and the letters A, B, and C. This means the student is expected to listen to and comprehend both the question and answer. This may add a level of difficulty compared to the Kyotsu test, where the student is only expected to listen to and understand the question and is provided with the answers in written format.

While Part I of the SILC placement test does not have a direct equivalent question on the Kyotsu test, it is very similar in style to the second question of the previous university entrance examination, the Center Test. Below is an example question taken from the Center Test:

Figure 2
Center Test Question 2 (Toshin, 2020)

第2問 (配点 14)

第2問は問7から問13までの7問です。それぞれの問いについて対話を聞き、最後の発言に対する相手の応答として最も適切なものを、四つの選択肢(①~④)のうちから一つずつ選びなさい。

問7

- ① Oh, it's already baked.
- ② Oh, it's so tasty.
- ③ Oh, that's a secret.
- ④ Oh, that's a walnut.

The student hears:

Speaker 1: This muffin is delicious! What's in it?

Speaker 2: Well, I baked them with fresh blueberries and walnuts.

Speaker 1: I notice another flavor too. What is it?

This item may be easier than the Placement test in two ways: The instructions are provided in Japanese, and the answers are written in English for students to read. One part that is more difficult is that the questions are generally longer than those on the SILC test. This may be partly because this is the second question on the Center Test but the first on the SILC placement test.

In Part II of the SILC placement test, students are faced with a similar screen to that in Part I (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Part 2 Question 1 (Sojo University, 2024)

00:00:07 / 00:00:07
Remaining plays: 0

☐ ☐ ☐

Select one:

- ☐ foot
- ☐ body
- ☐ hand
- ☐ finger

The only difference is that instead of A, B, and C, students are faced with four different words, in this example: foot, body, hand, and finger. The student hears the following audio: “He broke the little toe on his right (*beep*) so badly that he couldn’t walk for a month.” The student is expected to listen to the audio and identify which of the four words provided best fits in the gap in the sentence where the beep occurs. This question does not have a direct equivalent on the Kyotsu test, but it is most similar to question 4A(2), which provides six choices the student has to place into a table (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Kyotsu Test Section 4A(2) (Toshin, 2024)

問22～25 あなたは、留学先の大学で、アドバイザーから夏季講座のスケジュールの説明を聞いています。次のスケジュールの四つの空欄 ～ に入れるのに最も適切なものを、六つの選択肢(①～⑥)のうちから一つずつ選びなさい。選択肢は2回以上使ってもかまいません。

Summer Class Schedule

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1st	Social Welfare	<input type="text" value="23"/>	Biology	Social Welfare	World History
2nd	<input type="text" value="22"/>	Business Studies	Environmental Studies	<input type="text" value="24"/>	<input type="text" value="25"/>

① Biology
 ② Business Studies
 ③ Environmental Studies
 ④ Languages
 ⑤ Math
 ⑥ World History

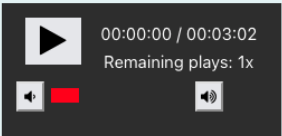
The student hears:

Here’s your schedule for this year’s summer classes. Monday and Thursday will begin with Social Welfare classes. Immediately after the Monday Social Welfare class, you’ll have Math class. On Tuesday and Wednesday, you’ll hear lectures about ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire during the first period. These lecturers will be followed by Business Studies on both days. On Wednesday, you’ll have Biology first period, and second period will be Environmental Studies. Finally, after Social Welfare on Thursday, you’ll have French or Spanish class.

The vocabulary analysis suggests that the question is set at a higher level in the Kyotsu listening test than in the SILC placement test and is, as will be highlighted later, much closer to Part III of the SILC test. In Part II, the audio is typically over within ten seconds, whereas Question Four of the Kyotsu test lasts around a minute.

Part III of the SILC placement test is the most challenging section and the easiest to compare directly to the Kyotsu listening test. Students are faced with the screen in Figure 7.

Figure 5
SILC Placement Test Part III (Sojo University, 2024)



00:00:00 / 00:03:02
 Remaining plays: 1x

各空白をクリックして選択肢から正しい答えを選びなさい。

Weekly Timetable

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9:00-9:45	Grammar practice ▾	Presentation skills	Listening skills	▾	▾
9:45-10:30	Language laboratory	▾	▾	Life in Britain	▾
11:00-12:30	Speaking skills ▾	Vocabulary development	Speaking skills	▾	Weekly review
lunch					
13:30-15:30	Walking tour of city	▾	Visit to sports centre	Project work	Film Club - Spiderman
15:30-18:00	▾				

This question is very similar in style to question 4A(2) in the Kyotsu listening test. Students are expected to listen to a monologue and extract information. However, the vocabulary analysis highlighted that the 2024 Kyotsu listening test question had more CEFR B1 vocabulary, whereas the 2024 SILC test had more CEFR A2 vocabulary. Two other significant differences between this question and question 4A(2) are the length of the audio (the SILC test is significantly longer) and that the SILC test is carried out on a computer while the Kyotsu test is on paper.

It may be possible to argue that Part II and Part III of the SILC placement test are related in style and that Part III is merely an extension of the skills required in Part II. Both sections involve choosing the correct word or phrase to fit the section, but Part III is much longer. Part II is more geared towards encouraging intensive listening practice due to the short length of the passages. In contrast, Part III leans closer to encouraging selective listening practice due to the longer nature of the passage.

Discussion

When discussing what is practical for each exam, it is essential to remember that the Kyotsu listening test was developed for high school students across Japan, whereas the SILC placement test was explicitly designed for students of Sojo University and their specific needs and requirements.

The Kyotsu listening test has the resources of a major organisation responsible for designing a test to be taken by high school students across all of Japan. On the other hand, the SILC only has the resources of one university English department. Some things are more practical for the smaller test than the larger one. One of the most obvious difficulties with computer-based testing is the need for all test takers to have computer access, which is very difficult to achieve for a national exam. However, all students in the SILC are required to bring a laptop to classes as a general policy, which means that the placement test can take advantage of the digital format and all its potential benefits, such as more attractive tests,

more engaging and authentic tasks, and better efficiency (Carr, 2011), in ways that a national test cannot. The placement test could be redesigned to take advantage of this ability to be more versatile in its format and create a more engaging test for students.

We must remember that there may still be drawbacks to the digital-based nature of the placement test. Nowadays, many major English proficiency tests are available in computer-based or other digital formats (such as the EIKEN S-CBT or the TOIEC IBT). Some of the more test-experienced students may be familiar with this test-taking format. Despite this, far more students are likely to be familiar with the paper-based style of the Kyotsu test, partly because of the broad commercial availability of study guides and mock exams but also because it is a much larger and well-known test with no digital-based equivalent yet to reach the same scale in Japan. As such, paper-based tests may still be more familiar to students across Japan, which could lead to issues of fairness regarding differing levels of familiarity with IT among students taking the placement test. Suppose some students perform better on the test due to familiarity with IT rather than familiarity with English. In that case, this could cause test reliability and validity issues, which may be less of a problem with the paper-based Kyotsu test. A detailed examination of this would be worthwhile in future research. It is also important to keep in mind that this situation may be reversed in the future if and when major tests change over to a digital format.

Students taking the SILC placement test can also answer the questions in any order they choose. This differs from the Kyotsu listening test, where students must answer in the prescribed order at the same pace as other students. Thus, students taking this test have greater flexibility and control than those taking the Kyotsu listening test.

Regarding the actual questions themselves, Table 7 summarises the styles and comparisons of question difficulty between the SILC Placement test and the Kyotsu listening test.

Table 7

SILC Listening Test and Kyotsu Test Comparison Summary

Sojo University placement test listening parts	Equivalent style on Kyotsu listening test	Rough equivalent English level on Kyotsu listening test
Part I	None*	Question One
Part II	Part of Question 4A(2)	Question One
Part III	Question 4A(2)	Between Question 4 and Question 5

* Part I, as noted before, is similar to Center Test Question 2

Regarding question format, it may be possible to argue that the SILC Placement test should be more similar to the Kyotsu listening test in style and content. The question style in Part I is not found at all in the Kyotsu listening test, and while both Parts II and III are loosely comparable to the second part of Question 4A, neither section is a perfect match. This difference in style between the two tests may impact students' ability to perform well on the exam. However, the general teaching styles that both exams appear to encourage are matched, as the Kyotsu listening test is split around 50/50 between encouraging intensive listening and selective listening, which is also somewhat true for the SILC placement test at 66/33. While it is generally not expected that students will study and revise for placement tests, the washback effect may have directly or indirectly caused students to study English to pass the Kyotsu listening test. Thus, their study focus on intensive and selective listening will help them in both tests.

The difficulty of the Sojo University placement test and the Kyotsu listening test was also compared. Based on the brief analysis undertaken in this report, the three parts of the Placement Test would likely be equivalent to the first three sections of the Kyotsu listening test – with vocabulary mainly between CEFR A1 and A2 levels. In the Kyotsu listening test,

the audio length in succeeding questions increases much more gradually than in the Placement Test. For example, the audio in the last question of Part II in the Placement Test is around twenty seconds long, with the audio of the only question in Part III being around three minutes long. This means that students come across a relatively sudden difficulty jump in the SILC placement test, something which does not happen to the same extent in the Kyotsu listening test. There may be a better way to manage this sudden jump in question length on the SILC placement test.

Finally, while this has not been stated officially, if one of the purposes of the test is to familiarise students with the new digital medium used throughout the year at SILC, then using question styles that the students are otherwise familiar with might be a fairer assessment of both their listening abilities and their abilities to use the digital medium. However, on the other hand, if the SILC test were too similar to the Kyotsu listening test and the goal of the test is not to test the student's familiarity with the digital medium, then it may beg the question as to why the university does not use the results from the Kyotsu listening test itself to determine the appropriate class for students and instead has them take a new test – although this argument may be dismissed by the fact that not all students will have taken the Kyotsu test.

Conclusion

In this report, the SILC placement test and the Kyotsu listening test have been analysed, and the differences and similarities have been compared. While the SILC placement test does share some similarities with the Kyotsu listening test and its earlier incarnation, the Center test, several significant differences may impact students' ability to perform well on the placement test. These differences may or may not be relevant depending on what the test seeks to examine.

It is this author's opinion that the SILC Placement Test may benefit from a slight increase in the variety of questions, especially to take advantage of the digital format with all its greater flexibility. Adding or changing a section or two to more closely resemble the skills tested on the Kyotsu listening test might also provide more familiarity to students who have not had the chance to prepare for this test specifically but have been preparing for the listening section in the Kyotsu listening test.

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