

# Improving Assessment in Japanese University EFL Classes: A Model for Implementing Research-Based Language Assessment Practices

## 日本の大学における EFL 科目の評価の改善

### —研究に基づいた外国語評価のモデル—

Edward FORSYTHE\*

フォーサイス・エドワード

#### Abstract:

*Assessments in Japanese university EFL classes largely follow traditional, grammar-translation methodologies. To prepare the students for the 21st century, professors must incorporate assessments based on current research which enable students to learn from the assessments as well as classroom activities. This paper provides a model for a new assessment regimen for an English Conversation course as an example. It will cover the textbook topics and course objectives to be met, current research, a proposed testing regimen, and a recap of how the proposed assessments align with current suggested assessment practices. The suggested assessment regimen will enable English teachers to provide a more engaging and supportive program so that their students can succeed in the global workforce of the 21st century.*

**Keywords:** EFL assessment, Japanese university, summative assessment, formative assessment, classroom assessment, self-assessment, technology in language learning

#### 1. Introduction

Assessment practices in Japanese university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes largely continue practices based in traditional grammar-translation methodologies (Sasaki, 2008). Paper-based tests of reading comprehension and grammar using multiple choice and discrete-point, decontextualized summative assessments are the commonly-used formats. Dynamic, formative, and alternative assessment practices have slowly begun to gain acceptance in the classrooms of the more radical or foreign-educated English professors, but change comes very slowly in Japanese society. However, in order to prepare the students to work in the global society of the 21st century, professors must create curricula which incorporate assessments based on current research and methodology—those which provide an opportunity for the students to learn from the assessments as well as from the classroom activities.

This paper will explain a new assessment regimen for a first-year English Conversation course which uses Oxford University Press' *American Headway Book 1* textbook (Soars, Soars & Maris, 2009). This paper will cover the textbook topics and course objectives to be met, current research upon which the proposed assessment regimen was based, a detailed explanation of the proposed testing regimen and its components, and finally a recap of how the proposed assessments align with current suggested assessment practices. The regimen outlined in this paper

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\*Faculty of Humanities, Hirosaki University (part-time)  
弘前大学人文学部 (非常勤)

will focus on a first-year English Conversation course, but a similar structure can be used to implement a dynamic and more effective assessment program across other EFL courses.

## 2. Curriculum objectives and textbook topics

The course learning objectives for the Freshman English Conversation course (as well as other English language courses) are for students to be proficient in the following topic areas by the end of the first year:

- Self-introductions;
- Basic personal descriptions;
- Greetings and courtesies;
- Expressing likes, dislikes, and hobbies;
- Clear and understandable pronunciation and intonation;
- Talking about one's family and relationships;
- Telling about one's hometown and community;
- Discussing time schedules and time expressions; and
- Performing past-tense narration.

These objective topics were based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL, 2012) proficiency guidelines for the Novice-Mid to Novice-High proficiency levels. The curriculum does not currently include "Can Do" statements advocated by the Council of Europe's (2011) Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR), but the faculty intends to create and implement them in the near future.

In order to facilitate the students' achievement of the established course objectives, the faculty chose to adopt the *American Headway Book 1* textbook for use in the English Language and English Conversation courses. *American Headway Book 1* consists of three parts focusing on basic communication topics: self-introductions; telling about one's past and present; and discussing likes and dislikes. These topics align well with the objectives listed above and will support the students' and faculty efforts toward attainment of the curriculum goals.

## 3. Regarding EFL assessments

Language assessments in Japanese universities have changed relatively little in the past decade and university assessments in general have been much criticized for their negative impact on the Japanese secondary educational system (Murphey, 2013; Sasaki, 2008; Watanabe, 2013; Zeng, 1995). EFL assessments have been primarily grammar-translation-style tests with the majority of EFL programs relying mostly on assessments as a tool with which to determine the student's course grade based on summative mid-term and final examinations. Even with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology's (MEXT) change in focus for Japan's English educational objectives to become more communication-oriented during the early 2000's, universities have opted to rely on commercially produced language examinations such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) or the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) tests as summative assessments of their students' abilities instead of improving their assessment techniques and regimens (Sasaki, 2008). While the TOEIC and STEP examinations may be higher quality assessments produced by professional testing organizations, they only provide a snapshot of a student's linguistic ability on a given day. In order to improve the assessment processes in Japanese university EFL programs, the assessments must be structured in a manner that they regularly provide both a picture of students' abilities as well as feedback for students on how to continue to improve based upon their performance on the examination.

#### 4. The state of assessments in Japanese university English programs

Other than English Conversation courses which may use one-on-one oral interview-style examinations to establish students' grades, many university English courses require students to take a written test or write an essay and submit it slightly before the deadline for course grade submissions, which is approximately two weeks after the final course meeting. In the current situation, students rarely receive the scores of their essays much less feedback on their performance. Because of this, students learn very little from their performance on assessments and this style of assessment is not a learning experience. Students can learn a great deal from assessments and failing to help students take advantage of the information gleaned from their performance is a serious mistake (Allen, Ort, & Schmidt, 2009; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Gillespie, 2012; Kentucky Dept. of Education, 2011a). In the rare cases where students do receive feedback from their assessments, they do not necessarily have training in how to apply the feedback they receive because they are not taught how to apply corrective action autonomously.

#### 5. Recommendations for assessments of the future

Instead of being a one-time snapshot of a student's ability at the end of a course, assessments should be both formative—periodically gauging a student's progress through a unit or topic so that corrective action can be taken in a timely manner—and summative—a final examination which determines whether the student has met the learning objectives of the unit or course (Allen et al., 2009; Çakir, 2013; Gillespie, 2012; Kentucky Dept. of Education, 2011a; Shrum & Glisan, 2005). Using both of these assessment types will provide a more accurate and comprehensive picture of students' true abilities; therefore, it is recommended that professors of English as a Foreign Language courses should work to find ways to implement such an assessment scheme.

##### 5.1 Summative assessments

As indicated above, summative assessments are usually examinations given at the end of a unit of study, semester, or course. They tend to be broad in scope and measure students' performance against a set of course learning objectives. Traditionally, summative assessments in Japanese university English classes are given on the final day of the semester or, in the case of written essay assessments, due just prior to the deadline for grade submissions to the university administrative offices. This practice does not allow students to learn from their performance on these assessments—something that should be changed. When students see their performance on a summative assessment, they know to what degree they have met the learning objectives for that unit or course. If they scored poorly, they see where their knowledge gaps are and can take corrective action to solidify their knowledge. This can only occur if students are given specific feedback on their performance on summative assessments measured against clearly-defined learning objectives (Kentucky Dept. of Education, 2011a). Additionally, summative assessments allow teachers to observe general student performance and provide an indication as to whether or not a class has met all of the learning objectives adequately (Allen et al., 2009; Qu & Zhang, 2013). If an entire class of students fails to meet a specific learning objective, then the teacher can revisit the way in which that objective was taught to ensure that future students are more effectively presented materials to meet the given learning objective. (See Qu & Zhang for a discussion of the pros and cons of various summative assessment question formats.)

##### 5.2 Formative assessments

Formative assessments, also referred to as *classroom assessments*, periodically check the degree to which students are learning the given topic and can be a valuable tool for a teacher to monitor their students' progress. Their use in Japanese university English classes varies widely due to the wide variety of teachers' instructional styles; however, they should be integrated into the instructional process a great deal more often than they are and should become a standard part of English language classes. By definition, formative assessments are less formal and do not require a large block of time to conduct. They can be as simple as asking questions, more structured as

a short quiz, or as non-invasive as the teacher walking around the room while students are working on an activity and taking note of the errors students make (Çakir, 2013; Shrum & Glisan, 2005). The key to successful formative assessments is the gathering of data for the teacher to use in more effectively guiding their instruction while providing timely feedback to students on their performance. If the students demonstrate mastery, then the teacher can move on; if students show that they are having a problem with a specific section, then the teacher can review that material and conduct another formative assessment before moving on to the next subject. If only a few students are struggling with a topic, they can be given extra homework assignments to help them solidify their knowledge in this area. (See Allen et al., 2009, and Shrum & Glisan, 2005, for examples of integrating classroom assessments across a curriculum; and Çakir, 2013, and Shrum & Glisan for a comprehensive list of alternative styles of formative assessments.)

### **5.3 Student self-assessments**

Teachers are not the only ones who should be conducting formative assessments, the students should be self-assessing to measure their own progress (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). When provided with a detailed list of criterion-referenced learning objectives, students can easily track their own progress and know what areas they need help with (Council of Europe, 2011; Gillespie, 2012; Kentucky Dept. of Education, 2011a). These self-assessment goals or objectives are often listed as “Can Do” statements which coincide with the learning objectives of a given topic, such as the following self-assessment item from the Council of Europe’s CEFR: “I can express likes and dislikes using simple language such as ‘I (don’t) like...’” (p. 252).

Beyond the “Can Do” statements, a rubric can be developed to provide students with the teacher’s expectations for levels of language performance. A rubric would clarify what is acceptable performance, and what criteria beyond the acceptable level would result in higher proficiency in a task. Providing a rubric gives the students more ownership of their education, as they become the arbiter of what level of attainment they are willing to settle for as well as allowing them to set study goals for their subjects—students who plan to succeed, do (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009).

## **6. Proposed assessments for English Conversation I**

In order to better prepare students to meet the course objectives, it is necessary to implement a system of formative, summative, and student self-assessments in the Freshman English Conversation I course. The following paragraphs will identify what formative and summative assessments can be implemented throughout the course to provide specific feedback on student performance. Each unit will be discussed with a statement of the unit objectives and types of recommendations to be employed along with the *American Headway Book 1* textbook.

### **Section 1, Unit 1: Hello Everybody!**

Unit 1 deals with basic introductory skills such as stating one’s name and a brief statement about oneself. Students practice subject-verb agreement and the use of contractions. At the end of the first unit session, the teacher could require students to introduce themselves and a student partner prior to them departing the classroom. This formative assessment will demonstrate to the instructor that the students have met the first learning objective and will identify students who may have difficulty with the unit’s grammar points.

### **Unit 2: Meeting People**

Unit 2 focuses on meeting others and telling about one’s family, as well as descriptions of people and the grammar points of possessives and question asking and answering. At the end of this lesson, the students could be assigned to tell a partner about their family and then answer one or two questions from their partner. While students are performing this task, the teacher should circulate among the students to listen for common errors and provide feedback as necessary. In doing so, the teacher can identify common errors to be readdressed prior to dismissal.

### **Unit 3: The World of Work**

Unit 3 prepares students to discuss their occupation and focuses on introducing a wide variety of occupational-related lexicon to the students. These words can be used in a game where the students in groups try to get a person to guess a job by saying the words or phrases associated with that occupation. The instructor can listen for instances where the students have difficulty identifying specific occupations and their related terms so that these jobs can be reviewed.

### **Unit 4: Take it Easy**

Unit 4 teaches students to discuss their likes and dislikes as well as to talk about their hobbies. In this lesson, the teacher can have the students tell the instructor what their hobbies are prior to departing the class; this will help the instructor ensure that the students adequately grasp the grammar points necessary to discuss hobbies. Following Unit 4, the students should be given a self-assessment checklist of “Can Do” statements which help the students recognize their progress as well as the areas in which they need to review the material again. Some examples of the “Can Do” statements are:

- I can introduce myself to another person.
- I can ask questions of another person.
- I can talk about my family.
- I can describe my family members.
- I can tell others about my current occupation.
- I can tell others about my dream job.
- I can describe my hobbies and give details about why I like to do this hobby.

To complete the first section, the students will complete a summative assessment in which they create a video self-introduction during which they tell about themselves; their family; their likes, dislikes, and hobbies; and about their current or future occupations. The teacher will provide feedback using a rubric which assesses the students’ grasp of appropriate grammatical structures, their use of vocabulary associated with the given topics, and their general fluency and pronunciation while providing pointed feedback on how to improve in these areas.

### **Section 2, Unit 5: Where Do You Live?**

In Unit 5, students learn how to talk about their hometown and how to describe places and give basic directions. The teacher should have students work in pairs to practice telling about their hometown and then perform an information gap activity where each person tells the other how to find a place on a map (each partner has different places marked on the map). While the students perform these activities, the teacher should move around the classroom listening for common errors which require addressing with the entire class. As a short, formative assessment, before the students depart, they must tell the teacher where they are from and one interesting thing about that place.

### **Unit 6: Can You Speak English?**

Unit 6 teaches students how to state their own capabilities as well as how to fill out questionnaires or answer questions in an interview. Students also learn how to ask questions in order to obtain information. A formative assessment exercise would be to give the students a list of a wide variety of actions—such as climbed a mountain, plays an instrument, lived overseas—and have the students find a classmate who has performed one of these actions. They should also be required to write one interesting point about that person performing the given task so that the students are required to ask more in-depth questions and respond in a more complex answer than yes or no. The teacher should participate in the activity as well so that they can assess students’ ability to ask questions and provide immediate feedback.

**Unit 7: Then and Now**

Unit 7 focuses on teaching students how to tell about activities which occurred in the past. The teacher can have the students answer questions about what they did recently as a formative assessment prior to departing the class. This will allow the teacher to assess whether or not the material requires reviewing at the beginning of the next class.

**Unit 8: A Date to Remember**

Unit 8 continues the past tense narration practice and reviews time expressions. Students should be tasked to tell a partner about a trip they have taken in the past and the partner must ask questions about the story. The teacher should circulate to listen for common errors which need to be reviewed by the entire class as well as provide feedback as necessary. Following Unit 8, the students should be given a self-assessment checklist of “Can Do” statements which help the students recognize their progress as well as the areas in which they need to review the material again. Some examples of the “Can Do” statements are:

- I can talk about my hometown.
- I can describe a place in my hometown.
- I can answer questions about my abilities, such as, “Can you speak English?”
- I can ask questions to obtain specific information about a person.
- I can tell about an event which occurred in the past.
- I can talk about events using grammatically correct time expressions.

To complete the second section, the students will complete a summative assessment in which they create a PowerPoint slide presentation about their hometown, including one interesting event which occurred there. The teacher will provide feedback using a rubric which assesses the students’ grasp of appropriate grammatical structures, their use of vocabulary associated with the given topics, and their general fluency and pronunciation while providing specific feedback on how to improve in these areas.

**Section 3, Unit 9: Food You Like**

Unit 9 focuses on food-related lexicon and describing the foods one likes and dislikes. The teacher can have the students play a game in groups in which they try to get their partners to guess their favorite and least favorite foods by giving verbal clues. The teacher should move around the classroom to listen for common errors which require reviewing with the entire class.

**Unit 10: Looking Good!**

Unit 10 teaches students about describing other people in depth including appropriate language for clothing, appearances, and personal characteristics. Students can be assigned to describe a famous person to a partner to try to get them to guess the correct person while the teacher listens for appropriate vocabulary and grammar usage and provides feedback as necessary.

**Unit 11: Life’s an Adventure!**

Unit 11 introduces the future tense and comparative and superlative adjectival forms. As a formative assessment to check the students’ understanding of these complex grammatical items, the students could be required to tell the instructor what their goal is for the future. This activity would demonstrate the students’ level of mastery of these skills and allow the teacher to identify necessary materials which require review.

**Unit 12: Have You Ever?**

Unit 12 instructs students in the use of present perfect and past simple tenses for use in past narrations as well as how to ask questions about another person’s previous experiences. The teacher should have the students each write something they have done in the past on a piece of paper and then collect and redistribute the papers to different people. The students then must find the person who did the activity written on the paper by using the

proper questioning techniques. The teacher should listen to proper grammar use and provide immediate feedback where necessary and review materials which are commonly mistaken.

Following Unit 12, the students should be given a self-assessment checklist of “Can Do” statements which help the students recognize their progress as well as the areas in which they need to review the material again. Some examples of the “Can Do” statements are:

- I can tell what foods I like and dislike.
- I can eat a meal with an English-speaking family using the proper words and phrases to ask for food or to eat according to the country’s customs.
- I can describe people, including physical descriptions and personality characteristics.
- I can compare two or more items using proper grammar and lexicon.
- I can talk about activities in the future.
- I can ask questions about other people’s experiences in the past.

To complete the Section 3, the students will complete a summative assessment in which they create a commercial for their favorite restaurant in their hometown. In the video, the students must describe their favorite menu item and tell why it is better than the other items. The teacher will provide feedback using a rubric which assesses the students’ grasp of appropriate grammatical structures, their use of vocabulary associated with the given topics, and their general fluency and pronunciation while providing specific feedback on how to improve in these areas.

## **7. Scoring and measuring students’ progress**

Having students complete a self-assessment after each section helps to put the onus on them for meeting the course’s learning objectives. The “Can Do” statements are a personal affirmation of one’s ability to perform an expected task, and students prefer to know precisely what the standards are and what is expected of them (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Kentucky Dept. of Education, 2011b). Knowing what their goals are helps students to manage their own learning and empowers them to decide how best to personally meet the learning objectives they are given (Gillespie, 2012; Kentucky Dept. of Education, 2011a & 2011b). The teacher should also collect a copy of the students’ self-assessments so that the teacher can see how students gauge their own progress and whether each skill has been adequately understood by a majority of the class and or needs to be reviewed or re-taught.

The formative assessments incorporated into each lesson assist the instructor in verifying that the students are learning the material and allow for more immediate remediation to correct a knowledge gap prior to the summative examination. Formative assessments are key to timely correction and better understanding of the material by the students, and using a variety of formative evaluation formats keeps the class exciting and lively (Allen et al, 2009; Çakir, 2013; Shrum & Glisan, 2005; Qu & Zhang, 2013). Finally, the summative assessments following each section allow the students to demonstrate their mastery of the material in an engaging format while providing the instructor with a picture of the entire class’ level of learning. Having three graded, summative assessments spread throughout the course with one building on the skills of the previous assessment provides a more accurate picture of the students’ true abilities instead of the existing assessment model of having one major examination at the end of the course (Çakir, 2013; Shrum & Glisan, 2005; Qu & Zhang, 2013). The grades determined from the rubrics used in the summative assessments give a score that is more accurately represents the student’s abilities (see Shrum & Glisan for information about creating rubrics and details about converting rubric scores into course grades). The summative assessments also identify general areas where students did not perform as well as expected so that the instructor can review the teaching materials and methods in an effort to improve the students’ learning experience. Summative assessment feedback is necessary and highly beneficial for both students and teachers.

## 8. Conclusion

Assessment methods and education in general are slow to change in Japanese society. Japan is reticent to adopt new fads or emerging trends until research and time have proven their effectiveness: The idea of “flipped classrooms” has spread throughout the western education world but it has barely been discussed among Japanese educators. Following this, language assessment in Japanese universities remains generally associated with traditional, grammar-translation methodologies. Sasaki (2008) revealed how the trends of language assessment in Japan have remained relatively constant, and because of this, students do not benefit as much as they could from engaging, dynamic, formative and summative assessments.

In order to introduce a regimen of EFL assessments which benefit both the teachers and the students, one must explore the recent research of the many authors cited herein: Qu and Zhang (2013) and Shrum and Glisan (2005) for appropriate uses and examples of formative and summative assessments; Allen et al., (2009) and Çakir (2013) for suggestions of how to employ alternative and classroom assessments; and Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) and Kentucky Dept. of Education (2011a) for examples of how to employ student self-assessments in the language classroom. This paper has combined the suggestions of these and other researchers to create an assessment regimen for a Japanese university English Conversation course which includes regular formative assessments to help the instructor gauge student learning of the concepts being taught, student self-assessments within each section to empower students to take responsibility for their own meeting of the curriculum objectives, and frequent summative assessments to give teachers a more thorough picture of students’ abilities than a single, end-of-course exam would allow. Finally, clearly displayed lesson learning objectives and student self-assessments were created based on the Council of Europe’s (2011) CEFR “Can Do” statements can be employed to place the onus on the students for meeting the standards and objectives of the course. As demonstrated in Kentucky Dept. of Education (2011b), students prefer to know exactly what is expected of them and what the short- and long-term educational goals are so that they can assess themselves and take the steps necessary to meet the standards they have yet to attain. In implementing such an assessment regimen across all English language courses, in fact across all courses in Japanese universities, the students will receive a strong, standards-based, dynamic, and engaging education and will be better prepared for employment in the 21st century.

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