Learning-Oriented Assessment in a Testing-Oriented Culture

Paul Wicking

Nagoya University

The last decade has witnessed increasing attention being paid to the way in which assessment promotes learning in various cultural contexts. Even so, there has been very little scholarly discussion coming from Japan, where it appears that methods of assessment are oriented around high-stakes summative testing. One theoretical model of formative assessment that is gaining traction worldwide is learning-oriented assessment (LOA). Although LOA has been tried and tested in the Hong Kong context for implementation in Confucian heritage cultures, its suitability for Japan has not yet been explored. There are three core components of LOA praxis: learning-oriented assessment tasks, developing evaluative expertise, and student engagement with feedback. The aim of the present study is to apply this theoretical model of learning-oriented assessment as a conceptual lens to examine existing research from the Japanese context. By doing so, it is hoped that a firm contextual grounding could be established that would support and guide the practice of learning-oriented assessment in EFL education in Japan.

　近年、様々な文化的文脈の中で、評価がいかに学習を促進するかに注目が集まってきている。しかし総括的評価と一発試験が重要視されている日本では、評価をめぐる学術的論議は極めて少ない。世界で普及しつつある形成的評価の理論モデルの1つに、学習重視の評価learning-oriented assessment (LOA) がある。LOA は、儒教の伝統文化圏では香港での導入が試みられているが、日本での適合性については未だ検証されていない。LOAの実践には3つの重要な要素がある。すなわち、学習重視の評価タスク、評価能力の向上、そしてフィードバックに対する学生の関心である。本論の目的は、既存研究を日本の状況から検証するための統合的手法としてLOAの理論モデルを適用することである。それによって、日本の評価方法の背景が明確になり、日本のEFL教育におけるLOAの応用が推進される。

Assessment occurs at all stages of the education process. From entrance exams and placement tests at the beginning of a course, to progress tests and short quizzes, through to final summative tests at the end of a course, assessment pervades the learning cycle. If a teacher wishes to exert an influence over what students will aim to achieve, how much time they will spend on studying and particular items they will focus on, then perhaps there is no better way than tailoring assessment tasks to meet those ends. Indeed, there is much evidence that improving assessment practices can have a dramatic effect on the amount of learning that will take place (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Pereira, Flores, & Niklasson, 2015). The ramifications of assessment practices are also wide ranging. Apart from determining whether a student passes a unit, assessment also affects diverse areas such as self-efficacy, motivation, career opportunities and at the wider level, social cohesion, and university ranking.

While we know that assessment is important, we also know that the cultural context is also important. Assessment does not take place in a vacuum, but is deeply embedded within the cultural setting in which it occurs. The wider political, social, and ideological environments exert a powerful influence on the way assessment is conceptualized and practiced (Teasdale & Leung, 2000). While there have been various studies into discrete assessment practices in Japan (such as peer-assessment, alternative assessments, provision of feedback, and so on), there is very little in the literature concerning an over-arching theoretical framework which unites these practices into a cohesive whole.

Such a framework could be provided by a model known as learning-oriented assessment (LOA). As a strand of formative assessment, LOA has been tried and tested in the Hong Kong context for implementation in Confucian heritage cultures (Carless, 2011). However, its suitability for Japan has not yet been explored. Sullivan (2014) notes, "It is unclear how widely the concept of learning-oriented assessment is known and understood [in Japan], and whether it would be readily accepted by teachers so accustomed to working within a normative assessment framework" (p. 455). This paper aims to fill the gap in the literature by drawing on the theoretical construct of learning-oriented assessment as a conceptual lens to examine existing research from the Japanese context. It seeks to answer the question, to what extent does the research literature from Japan lend support to a conceptual model of learning-oriented assessment? The central premise is that formative assessment is beneficial for learning. Therefore, if a firm contextual grounding for LOA in Japan could be established, its implementation in policy and practice would likely lead to better learning outcomes in Japanese EFL education.

ARTICLES

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The Japanese Cultural Context

Japan has been classified as a Confucian heritage culture, or CHC (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Many other East Asian nations have been identified as falling into this category, such as Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea. Carless (2011) has argued that the worldview of CHCs manifests itself in assessment practice in a number of ways. For example, there is a tolerance of hardship when preparing for high-stakes tests. Learners are praised for enduring the psychological and physical pressures associated with being a student preparing for examinations (known as *jukensei* in Japan). The examination system is based almost exclusively on competition. There is a conviction that competition leads to hard work, which brings out the best in people, and so society prospers. To be successful in examinations, memorization is the key. The Han Chinese regarded memorization of Confucian classics as the way to develop virtues and ethics that would be worked out in behaviors and social interactions. Modern students in Japan devote inordinate amounts of time to memorizing vocabulary lists and set phrases. Repetition and memorization as pillars of education lead to uniformity, order, and conformity.

This Confucian orientation to education has had a residual impact on CHC societies. Han and Yang (2001) note four areas in which this has occurred. First, education is primarily conceived as being utilitarian in nature. In other words, it is the means toward entering a good university, getting a good job, and so on. Second, examinations play a key role in education, so that examination success is valued more highly than actual learning or genuine growth in knowledge. Third, book knowledge is prioritized at the expense of practical skill. Fourth, summative assessment is emphasized at the expense of formative assessment, which is neglected. This neglect has resulted in a vital need for the adoption of formative assessment processes to counter-balance an education system dominated by grading and competition. Yet while the development of formative assessment in CHCs may be an "urgent priority" (Carless, 2011, p. 4), it is also extremely difficult. Attempts to introduce Assessment for Learning (AfL) into the Hong Kong educational system have largely remained unfruitful (Berry, 2011), and efforts made by South Korea to break out of its bondage to a high-stakes exam based education system have also been wrought with difficulty (Kwon, Lee, & Shin, 2015).

The Learning-Oriented Assessment Model

In an attempt to counter the negative consequences of an examination-oriented culture, Carless (2014) has proposed a model of learning-oriented assessment (LOA). Carless defined LOA as "assessment where a primary focus is on the potential to develop productive student learning processes" (2014, para. 4). The model is based on three interlocking principles that capture the core elements of an approach to assessment that prioritizes student learning (Figure 1).
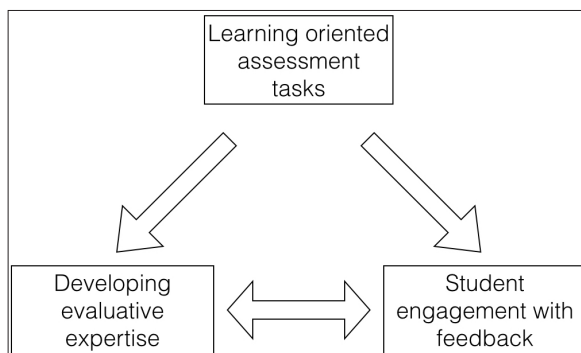

Figure 1. Model of learning-oriented assessment, as proposed by Carless, 2014.

The first principle, and occupying a central place in this model, is *learning- oriented assessment tasks*. These are tasks which lead students into deeper engagement with the area of study through problems which are closely related to the real world, and thus are seen as being authentic. The second principle, *developing evaluative expertise*, and the third principle, *student engagement with feedback*, are interconnected and support the first principle. Learners develop evaluative expertise through engaging with quality criteria as they evaluate and reflect upon their own work and that of others. Engagement with feedback concerns the way in which students receive feedback messages from the teacher or from peers, and how they use this feedback to help them progress to a higher level of learning achievement.

Learning-Oriented Assessment Tasks

The first principle of LOA encourages an approach to creating assessment tasks that are engaging, relevant, and authentic. While Carless frames his discussion of learning-oriented assessment tasks around the notion of ways of thinking and practicing (McCune & Hounsell, 2005), within the context of EFL education, task-based language teaching (TBLT) would perhaps be a better way of looking at the same principle from a different angle. TBLT

theory also states that learning tasks need to be engaging, relevant, and authentic (Ellis, 2003). The focus here is on the pragmatic use of the target language, and not a mere display of knowledge. In this way, there is a clear conceptual link between TBLT and LOA.

Although Sato (2010) has argued that TBLT is not suited to the Japanese context, this argument makes no allowances for a contextual application of the TBLT approach in a manner suited to Japan (Sybing, 2011). As an approach that is able to be adapted according to local needs, TBLT has shown great promise for increasing engagement with the language and boosting the motivation of Japanese learners (Willis & Willis, 2009).

Portfolio creation is a powerful example of a learning-oriented assessment task. A portfolio is a collection of work that has been selected by the student as demonstrating achievement in the language. It therefore involves collection, selection, and reflection (Howrey & Tanner, 2009). Accordingly, portfolios can function as the bridge that links the two LOA principles of learning-oriented assessment tasks and developing evaluative expertise. Portfolios have been widely practiced and researched in a number of university EFL settings in Japan, and have been found to increase engagement (Howrey, 2011), aid in self-reflection (Bonn, 2011) and boost motivation (Apple & Shimo, 2004). Portfolio creation as an assessment task thus encourages the growth of evaluative expertise, the second principle of LOA.

Developing Evaluative Expertise

The second principle of LOA concerns the ability of learners to critically evaluate their own work (self-assessment) and that of others (peer-assessment). Through a process of engaging with performance criteria and critically analyzing their own work, learners are said to better understand the purposes of the curriculum and develop skills that will promote more effective study habits. However, while the research into self-assessment suggests that the practice has benefits for learners in the affective dimension, the benefits in the cognitive dimension are less clear.

Matsuno (2009) used Multifaceted Rasch measurement to compare how learners rated themselves and their peers when compared with a teacher rater. Overall, analysis of the results showed that students evaluated themselves more harshly than they did their peers. Matsuno (2009) writes, "In the present study, some students also did not assess their own writing objectively; few students

awarded themselves a high grade even though they may have thought that their essays were good" (p. 88). Accordingly, although self-assessment may have value in terms of encouraging metacognitive skills, Matsuno's study cannot be used to recommend self-assessment for formal grading.

Matsuno's (2009) study has been criticized by Little and Erickson (2015) on the grounds that it is unknown whether the participants were instructed in reflective learning. "It is thus perhaps not surprising that they performed the external task of evaluating their peers' essays more accurately than the subjective task of evaluating their own" (p. 130). This may or may not be the case. Either way, it would be interesting to replicate this study in an EFL program in which critical reflection was purposely promoted.

Matsuno's study did, however, produce strong evidence to suggest that peer-assessment can be used effectively as a means of awarding grades in university classes. While students tend to rate themselves quite strictly, they rated their peers more evenly. They were also internally consistent, and their own level of writing proficiency did not affect their rating patterns (Matsuno, 2009, p. 93). Although Saito (2013) also found a high agreement rate between peer and teacher rating, Mahoney's (2011) study suggested that peer grading differs significantly from teacher grading when evaluative decisions involve context and intelligibility. Overall, these studies give empirical support to teachers who may want to supplement teacher-assessment with peer-assessment, or else use peer-assessment to overcome some of the difficulties associated with teacher-assessment (such as lack of time). The value of peer-assessment in the Japanese context has also been affirmed by a number of other studies (Asaba & Marlowe, 2011; Taferner, 2008; Wakabayashi, 2008).

Student Engagement With Feedback

The third principle of LOA concerns the ways in which students make use of feedback. Receiving feedback from one's peers and the teacher is fairly straightforward, but if the student does not engage with that feedback, it will not lead to any learning gains. Reugg (2015) investigated differences in the uptake of peer and teacher feedback in a Japanese university class. Her longitudinal study suggested that, as might be expected, students paid more attention to teacher feedback than to peer feedback, which led them to make more revision attempts. However, these revision attempts were more often unsuccessful. Peer feedback led to more successful revision attempts, perhaps because the learners

were at a similar language proficiency level, which allowed them to give feedback that the other was developmentally ready to uptake (Reugg, 2015).

One of the main issues in ELT concerns whether or not the feedback is form-focused. Both the literature from studies done in Japan and that from elsewhere seem to suggest that form-focused feedback does not result in any substantial learning gains when compared with feedback that is not form-focused. Peloghitis (2011) investigated feedback methods in a writing course in Japan. Results suggested that students who received feedback only on the content of their writing improved the overall quality of their essays more than students who received feedback on the content plus errors. The ability of students to give reliable and accurate feedback in discussion classes in Japan has been argued by Saito (2013), whose study revealed a high agreement rate between teacher and student rating, as well as a high degree of favorable attitudes towards peer feedback.

However, while learners may receive quality feedback from the teacher or peers, there is no guarantee that they will productively engage with that feedback in order to progress. This is a major concern that has not yet been adequately addressed in the literature. Presently, too little is known about those factors which lead to students ignoring or disregarding feedback and those factors which lead to the productive use of feedback. For the moment, we do know that peer feedback is well-regarded and that content-based feedback has positive results. These two claims provide a general direction toward which educators in Japan may confidently embark.

Conclusion
The Contextual Grounding for Learning-Oriented Assessment Practice

The literature from Japan lends convincing support to a conceptual model of learning-oriented assessment. Learning-oriented assessment tasks, such as those aligned with TBLT theory, of which portfolio creation is a good example, have been shown to increase motivation and boost language acquisition. As students are encouraged to develop evaluative expertise through self- and peer-assessment, they come to understand the criteria for success and plan their learning accordingly. Peer feedback is well-regarded and reliable. It is not yet known how engagement with peer feedback and teacher feedback can best be stimulated, but a focus on content rather than form seems to be one positive direction.

This paper has argued that the current educational climate in Japan is one which is overly focused on summative assessment for the purposes of sorting and ranking, rather than assessment which promotes learning. This culture of testing encourages rote learning and memorization at the expense of deeper learning that is critical and creative. In order to promote productive student learning processes, an alternative paradigm of assessment is needed. It is hoped that this paper has contributed to the establishment of a contextual grounding for LOA and would prove helpful to the development of departmental assessment strategies and learner-focused assessment practices in Japanese higher education.

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Paul Wicking is currently completing doctoral research at Nagoya University and working in the Faculty of Foreign Studies at Meijo University. He has been researching and teaching in universities in Japan for the last 12 years. His research interests include formative assessment, task based language teaching, and global competency education. He can be contacted at <pwicking@hotmail.com>