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## Links

# Perspectives

# The Role of Formative Assessment in Global Human Resource Development

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Over the last few years, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been advocating the development of *guroubaru-jinzai* [global human resources]. These global human resources are to be top global performers who are intellectually savvy and internationally minded young men and women able to communicate across cultural divides and promote Japanese interests on the world stage. The success or failure of this policy will in no small part be determined by how well the various components of the educational system are aligned towards the goal. In particular, the ways in which assessment is conceptualized and practiced is vitally important. The continuation of a testing and examination system that consistently rewards memorization and repetition of learned facts will stifle the independence, creativity, and collaboration skills that MEXT hopes to develop. Rather, the development of these skills is best facilitated through formative assessment processes, which have until now been lacking within secondary and higher education in Japan. Instead there has been an inordinate focus on summative assessment and high stakes testing within the education system. In this paper I argue for the importance of formative assessment in shaping learners into the top global performers desired by MEXT and suggest some steps to be taken towards a contextually-based formative assessment practice.

　ここ数年文部科学省はグローバル人材の育成を推奨している。グローバル人材とは異文化コミュニケーション能力と国際理解を備え、日本の国益を視野に世界で活躍できる知的エリートと言える。この政策が成功するには、教育制度を構成する様々な要素の良

好な連携が不可欠である。中でも教育評価の適切な概念化と実行は特に重要である。丸暗記や機械的な学習を奨励する試験制度は、自立、創造力および協調力など文部科学省が人材に求める能力の育成を妨害していると思われる。学生がこの能力を習得するためには、形成的評価が有効であるが、従来日本の高校や大学ではあまり行われてこなかった。実際には、総括的評価と一発試験ばかりが重要視されてきたと言ってよいだろう。本稿では、グローバル人材育成における形成的評価の重要性を論じ、教育環境に合わせた実践方法を提案する。

The importance of English education for Japan's national interest has been officially acknowledged for many years now and only seems to increase with time. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in a recent policy document stated,

> グローバル化の進展の中で、国際共通語である英語力の向上は日本の将来にとって極めて重要である。 (Guroubaruka no shinten no naka de, kokusai kyoutsuugo de aru eigoryoku no koujou wa nihon no shourai ni totte kiwamete juuyou de aru.) [*With the progress of globalization, English has become a common language internationally and so improvement of English ability is vitally important for Japan's future*.] (MEXT, 2014)

As part of the recognition of the forces of globalization and the role of English within it, MEXT has advocated the development of *guroubaru-jinzai* [global human resources]. These are Japanese men and women equipped to succeed on the world stage by way of three general characteristics. Firstly, they have excellent language and communication skills. Secondly, they have a disposition that is proactive, ambitious, flexible, and responsible. Thirdly, they have a deep understanding of foreign cultures while maintaining a steadfast Japanese identity (MEXT, 2011).

The way in which classroom assessment is conceptualized and practiced will have a great impact in either helping or hindering the development of these *guroubaru-jinzai*. This is because of the pivotal role that assessment plays in the education system. "Every model of the teaching-learning process requires that teachers base their decisions—instructional, grading, and reporting—on some knowledge of student attainment of and progress towards desired learning outcomes" (Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004, p. 361). It has been observed that much of assessment practice the world over is grounded in behaviourism, even though learning theory itself has moved on. According to James (2012),

> The dominance of psychometric models [of assessment] must, in large measure, be attributable to the fact that parents, em-

ployers, policy makers, the media and the general public do
not really understand what goes on in classrooms. Therefore
they are wedded to proxy measures of learning and achieve-
ment that have doubtful validity. (p. 203)

Presently, little is known about how individual teachers working in the
Japanese context conceive of and practice assessment and what effect this
is having on student learning. It does seem, though, that in general teachers
in Japan are less concerned with formative assessment practices, or assess-
ment *for* learning, and instead prefer practices that promote student meta-
cognition, or assessment *as* learning (Gonzales & Aliponga, 2012). This is
despite the fact that there is a rich literature from Japan advocating essential
components of formative assessment such as learning-oriented assessment
tasks, development of evaluative expertise, and student engagement with
feedback. In particular, portfolio creation as a learning-oriented assessment
task has been used successfully to aid reflection (Howrey & Tanner, 2009),
increase student engagement (Howrey, 2011), and boost motivation (Apple
& Shimo, 2004). The development of evaluative expertise has received some
attention through studies in self- and peer assessment. Matsuno (2009)
found that although students did not assess themselves objectively, they
were much more reliable in assessing their peers. Peer assessment has thus
been recommended as one means of awarding grades, as peer scores cor-
relate highly with instructor scores even when there has been no training
in peer assessment (Saito, 2008). The value of peer assessment in the Japa-
nese context has also been affirmed by a number of other studies (Asaba &
Marlowe, 2011; Sato, 2013; Taferner, 2008; Wakabayashi, 2008).

The ways in which students engage with feedback is essential to the
practice of formative assessment, as the whole endeavor revolves around
using the results of assessment tasks to move students to the next stages of
learning. Reugg (2015) found that students in a Japanese EFL class engaged
more with teacher feedback than peer feedback, although peer feedback
led to more successful revision attempts. Concerning methods of giving
feedback, there seems to be little difference between form-focused and
content-focused feedback in improving writing accuracy (Peloghitis, 2011)
and little difference in learning effects between models and recasts in oral
feedback (Sakai, 2004).

The aforementioned studies are a small sample of research that has looked
into alternative methods of practicing assessment and using feedback from
that assessment to further learning without relying on summative tests.
However, summative testing still remains dominant in Japan, as it does in

all Confucian-heritage cultures (Carless, 2011). The excessive influence of testing in Japanese schooling has led to its educational system being labeled as "examination oriented" by Sugimoto (2014) and as an "examocracy" by McVeigh (2006). This describes a situation in which most EFL lessons in formal schooling are not focused on promoting genuine communicative competence and other skills associated with the *guroubaru-jinzai*, but rather on preparing students for university entrance examinations (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009).

This situation persists despite the fact that there is widespread agreement among scholars as to the benefits that derive from formative assessment as against summative assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998). There are also a number of theoretical models of formative assessment that do exist, such as authentic assessment (O'Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996), assessment for learning (Gardner, 2012), teacher-based assessment (Davison & Leung, 2009), and learning-oriented assessment (Carless, 2014). At present, however, these models of formative assessment are not in widespread use. Harlen and Winter (2004) argued that the main inhibiting factors are as follows:

- a reliance on assessment practices that give more attention to grading and assigning learners to "levels" rather than giving feedback about how work could be improved;
- teachers' lack of awareness of pupils' learning needs; and
- the high stakes attached to national test results, which encourage teachers to focus on the content of the tests and practicing test-taking. (p. 393)

In Japan, students are often ranked in respect to their peers, and the high-stakes nature of standardized tests exerts a powerful influence over all stages of education. Entrance exam pressure fuels EFL education in junior high school and high school, and tests such as TOEIC and EIKEN strongly influence English study in much post-secondary education.

The ways in which student learning is assessed are extremely influential on the teaching–learning process. In fact, within Japan itself, it has been observed that policies concerning assessment have had a transformative effect on EFL education throughout the last 150 years (Sasaki, 2008). The importance of assessment has been reflected in MEXT policy documents, as in the following example:

英語力の評価及び入学者選抜における英語力の測定については、
４技能の総合的なコミュニケーション能力が適切に評価されるよう促
す。(Eigoryoku no hyouka oyobi nyuugakusha senbatsu ni oke-
ru eigoryoku no sokutei ni tsuite wa, 4 ginou no sougoutekina
komyunikeishon nouryoku ga tekisetsu ni hyouka sareru you
unagasu.) [*Regarding the measurement of English ability for the
purposes of English assessment and admission to school, we as-
sert that all four skills for comprehensive communication ability
be assessed appropriately*.] (MEXT, 2014, p. 10)

But just what does it mean to assess English "appropriately"? Certainly, when students perceive an assessment method to be inappropriate, it encourages a surface approach to learning in which there is little deep thought and little cognitive gain (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005). However, the qualities that make an assessment event appropriate in the eyes of Japanese students and their teachers need to be clarified. The present paper is aimed at contributing to a professional discourse concerning appropriate assessment as it is conceptualized and practiced in Japanese EFL. First, assessment will be defined and the relationship between summative and formative assessment will be explored. Second, the sociocultural factors that work to hinder formative assessment practice will be described. Finally, some suggestions will be made as a way forward to a contextually based formative assessment practice.

## The Summative and Formative Functions of Assessment

Brown, Hudson, Norris, and Bonk (2002) defined assessment as "the process of gathering information in consistent ways via tests (and related sources), making interpretations based on that information, and then applying those interpretations to reach decisions or initiate particular actions within the language classroom or program" (p. 13). The implication of this definition is that assessment processes should ideally feed back into classroom instruction, so it is better for teachers to have a certain amount of freedom and authority in planning and implementing procedures for assessment. In this way assessment is best conceptualized as an approach (which allows for greater teacher autonomy in implementation), rather than a method (prescriptive techniques used irrespective of context). Abrams (2014) wrote,

Best practices research distinguishes between methods and
approaches and asserts that educators must have the flexibility

> to adapt their pedagogical approaches . . . as necessary in order to best meet their learners' needs, just as those approaches must reflect the philosophical beliefs and values of the educator. (p. 1)

When making policy for language assessment in the Japanese context, encouraging an approach will yield better results than imposing a method.

The definition of assessment can be further broken down into two broad categories: summative and formative. Although there is no agreed-upon definition of these terms, it may be broadly stated that summative assessment is concerned with summarizing the amount of learning that has been achieved up to a certain point. It seeks to rank or certify students in a process that could be called "assessment *of* learning." Formative assessment, on the other hand, could be described as "assessment *for* learning," in that it is primarily concerned with promoting effective learning by using the results to modify the teaching and learning activities that are taking place. For the purpose of this paper, formative assessment is conceptualized in line with Wiliam (2004), who stated, "formative assessment refers not to an assessment, nor even to the purpose of an assessment, but the function that it actually serves" (p. 3). The fact is that there is no inherent quality of a test that makes it either formative or summative. Rather, these two labels refer to the ways in which test results are used (i.e., to grade students on their level of achievement or to direct the focus of further study).

Although both functions of assessment have their place, an over-emphasis on the summative function of tests will be to the detriment of learner development. Any Japanese EFL program that focuses heavily on summative tests risks sabotaging its own efforts at improving students' educational attainment. Boud (2000) wrote,

> Ironically, summative assessment drives out learning at the same time it seeks to measure it. It does this by taking responsibility for judgments about learning away from the only person who can learn (the student) and placing it unilaterally in the hands of others. It gives the message that assessment is not an act of the learner, but an act performed on the learner. (p. 156)

Boud (2000) argued that although summative assessment is useful and desirable, there needs to be a significant shift of balance towards the

formative function to empower students to be competent assessors of their own performance and consequently effective lifelong learners.

The heart of formative assessment, as stated by Black and Wiliam (2009), is grounded in five key strategies:

1. clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success;
2. engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding;
3. providing feedback that moves learners forward;
4. activating students as instructional resources for one another; and
5. activating students as the owners of their own learning. (p. 8)

Somewhat propitiously, research in the Japanese EFL context has suggested that each of these five integrated strategies can be used to good effect. The first strategy has been increasingly implemented in English learning via "can-do" statements. In particular, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors (O'Dwyer, 2011) and its Japanese variation, the CEFR-J (Tono, 2013) have been used as a broad roadmap to direct learning paths and make the often hidden goals for success more visible. The second strategy, that of eliciting evidence of understanding through learning tasks, has been most widely recognized through the method of communicative language teaching and its most popular offshoot, task-based language teaching (Sybing, 2011). The meaning-focused nature of tasks arguably provides better evidence of students' deeper understanding of language as it is actually used. The third strategy, that of feedback, has been the focus of much research activity, mainly centered on oral corrective feedback (Mori, 2002; Sakai, 2004) and written feedback (Peloghitis, 2011). The activation of students as instructional resources for one another has been done successfully in Japan through collaborative learning (Kato, Bolstad, & Watari, 2015), cooperative group work (Hirose & Kobayashi, 1991), and peer assessment (Asaba & Marlowe, 2011; Okuda & Otsu, 2010). The final strategy has likewise been advocated in Japanese EFL, mainly in the guise of promoting learner autonomy (Irie & Stewart, 2012) and self-regulated learning (Sullivan, 2014).

It is important to note that tests that have heretofore been used for summative purposes can be subsumed into a formative assessment framework. In other words, according to this conceptualization, summative tests can be used for formative purposes. There is no need for a radical departure from all high-stakes testing as it is currently conducted in Japan,

but rather for a strategy that appropriates summative tests and uses them to promote productive student learning processes. This has been called "the formative use of summative tests," or FUST (Carless, 2011). In countries like Japan that have an entrenched system of high-stakes EFL testing, FUST provides a workable compromise between institutional interests that require certification and ranking and pedagogical interests that seek to promote greater learning achievement. Brown (2000) suggested one way in which this might be achieved: by using university entrance examinations in Japan to promote learning.

The positive aspect of summative testing has also been addressed by Taras (2005), who argued that for any assessment to be used for formative purposes, it must be grounded upon a summative judgment that has preceded it. If appropriate feedback is to be given to the learner to help aid further learning, that feedback must be based upon a summative assessment of that student's achievement. And so, "by recognizing that summative assessment is central and necessary to all assessment, it should stop the demonization of assessment for validation and certification, and instead see it as a stepping stone to learning" (Taras, 2005, p. 476).

Although the practice of assessment needs to be contextually grounded, debates about formative and summative assessment must not be limited to within the boundaries of the educational institution in which it takes place. Rather, as sociocultural theory attests,

> Activities within schools and practices associated with them are part of the broader cultural systems of relations, and social structure in which they have meaning. Summative, and increasingly formative, assessment practices are shaped by broader social and educational policies and structures. (Elwood & Murphy, 2015, p. 184)

As learning institutions seek to comply with MEXT objectives in developing *guroubaru-jinzai*, a well-articulated strategy of formative assessment is indispensible. However, to implement such a strategy a number of hindrances relating to student beliefs and teacher roles within the classroom will need to be negotiated.

## Hindrances to Formative Assessment Practice: Student Beliefs and Teacher Role Conflict

Major potential obstacles to the development of formative assessment practice are the divergent beliefs that are sometimes held within the classroom. It seems that students can hold quite different beliefs about assessment from those held by their teachers. Brown (2009), in an exploratory study into teacher and student beliefs about effective language teaching, found that there were significant discrepancies between the beliefs of the two groups. Generally, the teachers believed more strongly in the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) than did their students. Brown noted, "Unfortunately, in many cases, the participating teachers' perceptions of this ideal communicative classroom did not parallel their students' perceptions" (Brown, 2009, p. 54). As formative assessment finds natural expression through the practice of CLT, divergent teacher–student beliefs will need to be negotiated. For example, it has been noted in Japan that many learners appreciate form-focused instruction and explicit correction (Sato, Fukumoto, Ishitobu, & Morioka, 2012), which some teachers may be unwilling to give. Identifying and clarifying differences in assessment belief would help nurture a classroom ecology more conducive to language learning.

Of course, this ecology is best sustained when the learner is motivated to learn and the teacher is motivated to teach. However, this does not happen as often as we would like. Perrenoud (cited in Black and Wilian, 1998) wrote,

> A number of pupils do not aspire to learn as much as possible, but are content to "get by," to get through the period, the day or the year without any major disaster, having made time for other activities other than school work . . . Every teacher who wants to practice formative assessment must reconstruct the teaching contracts so as to counteract the habits acquired by his pupils. (p. 21)

This tendency towards apathy is arguably the case for many EFL students in higher education in Japan (McVeigh, 2001), where English is a compulsory subject required across most disciplines and a proverbial bitter pill that must be swallowed.

It is vital that student beliefs about assessment be addressed, as this is potentially one of the greatest hindrances to formative assessment in Japanese EFL. Even though teachers are invested with authority and responsibility to ensure that conditions are ripe for learning, it is really the learner who has

ultimate sway over the learning process. Concerning assessment for learning (AFL), Davison and Leung (2009) noted that "the learner's role is crucial because it is the learner who does the learning. This point seems obvious, even trite, but it is central to the AFL philosophy and, if treated seriously, clearly highlights where formative assessment can go wrong" (p. 399). The old adage, *You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink,* is especially applicable to those classrooms where EFL is a required subject and student motivation is low. The teacher may spend a great deal of time and effort in creating assessment tasks that are interesting and designed to promote effective learning habits, but if the student does not want to learn, then no learning will take place. Therefore one of the teacher's primary tasks is to foster within students those beliefs that are conducive to active participation in learning and assessment processes.

This is no easy feat, and it is made all the more difficult because of the need to balance teacher roles that are often in conflict during regular classroom interaction. Two main roles of EFL teachers have been identified as that of rater (or assessor), which requires teachers to identify levels of language achievement, and that of facilitator, in which the teacher continually appraises students through the ebb and flow of classroom discourse (Rea-Dickins, 2006). The facilitator role has a focus on academic improvement, and the assessor role is concerned with external accountability (Ewell, 1991). These roles sometimes conflict, as teachers are often "at the confluence of different assessment cultures and faced with significant dilemmas in their assessment practices: sometimes torn between their role as facilitator and monitor of language development and that of assessor and judge of language performance as achievement" (Rea-Dickins, 2004, p. 253). Their role as language-learning facilitator requires teachers to be responsive to individual needs and sensitive to personalities; their role as assessor requires them to be impartial and somewhat removed from personal circumstances. The result of such internal conflict is that there is often a substantial gap between teachers' beliefs and their actual practice (Saad, Sardarah, & Ambarwati, 2013). A dialogic negotiation and renegotiation of teacher and student roles within the EFL classroom will pave the way for an assessment practice that effectively assesses language achievement and also meets the needs of individual learners.

## Towards a Contextually-Based Formative Assessment Practice

Encouraging teachers to engage more actively in formative assessment will not in itself be enough to make a significant contribution to the development of *guroubaru-jinzai*. The way in which Japanese students conceptualize assessment and their beliefs about assessment must also be shaped and molded in ways that are conducive to productive learning. Individual students will interpret and make meaning of assessment practices according to their own belief structures. Learners may lack the cognitive insight to understand the intentions of assessment even when these are explicitly stated (Rea-Dickins, 2006); or they may find it expedient to consciously work against the teacher's stated goals in order to pursue their own ends (Spence-Brown, 2001). In this way, students construct a personal version of the hidden curriculum based upon their previous experiences with assessment and the assumptions to which they give rise (Sambell & McDowell, 1998). Students who have been brought up in a heavily testing-oriented culture will have developed certain predispositions towards assessment that will influence the way they approach any kind of activity in which they will be evaluated. The aims of formative assessment need to be clearly explained to students unfamiliar with it if they are to become active participants in the teaching–learning process.

Traditional methods of assessment used throughout the past decades have left a deep imprint on educational culture. Any attempt to impose a system of assessment practices or techniques on top of existing beliefs and values, as one may apply a patch to an old garment, is bound to be an exercise in futility. Rather, the effort to move existing assessment practice towards a more learning-oriented approach will necessarily entail a shift in core understanding about teacher and learner roles. This is because, as Pedder and James (2012) noted,

> [The alteration of assessment practice] involves transformations in classroom processes, and this entails change not only in what teachers and students do but also in how they relate. It involves behavior imbued with deeper understanding and values. These understandings and values are informed by norms associated with particular conceptions of appropriate roles for teachers and for students. (p. 37)

Traditionally, and perhaps even now in Japan, teachers have been seen as the provider of knowledge, with students expected to soak up that knowledge in order to mechanically recite it on the final exam. However, approaches to assessment that are focused on promoting learning "accompany a necessary

shift in learning relationships, with students becoming part of effective learning communities, involved in co-construction of knowledge, rather than passive recipients of teachers' knowledge" (Sambell, McDowell, & Montgomery, 2013, p. 8).

Thus, in an ideal situation, how would teachers and students view their respective roles? Black and Wiliam (2009) argued,

> The teacher is responsible for designing and implementing an effective learning environment, and the learner is responsible for the learning within that environment. Furthermore, since the responsibility for learning rests with both the teacher and the learner, it is incumbent on each to do all they can to mitigate the impact of any failures of the other. (p. 7)

According to this view, when learning fails to occur, blame cannot be laid squarely at the feet of either the teacher or the learner. Both have to work together to achieve the educational goals that have been set.

Once the foundation has been laid, strategies for encouraging productive assessment practice put in place, and teachers and students understand their roles in the teaching-learning process, a framework for formative assessment will be a practical help in EFL curriculum design. The following six questions can support educators in their efforts to implement assessment procedures that will encourage productive learning. These questions are based on Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery (2013), who consolidated much of the research into assessment for learning and university education.

1.  Does the assessment develop students' abilities to evaluate their own progress and direct their own learning?
2.  Is the assessment rich in informal feedback (such as peer evaluation and group work)?
3.  Is the assessment rich in formal feedback (such as teacher comments and corrections)?
4.  Does the assessment offer extensive confidence-building opportunities and practice?
5.  Is there an appropriate balance of summative and formative assessment?
6.  Is there an emphasis on authentic and complex assessment tasks?

The extent to which each of these questions can be answered positively is the extent to which the assessment can be considered efficacious in promoting learning.

## Conclusion

The Japanese government is to be lauded for its efforts to promote globally minded and internationally focused young men and women who can communicate across cultures. The development of English language skills and the assessment of those skills play a major part in this. If assessment of English is to be done "appropriately" (MEXT, 2014), then greater emphasis must be placed on formative procedures. At present, the summative function is the primary focus of much assessment practice in Japanese EFL. High-stakes tests that exert enormous influence over the future prospects of young people overshadow formative assessment procedures that aim to promote genuine learning. This imbalance needs to be redressed. The principles and strategies of formative assessment aim to create just the kind of person MEXT desires. These are people who are able to critically analyze their own work and that of peers, who are confident and competent in practical English use, and who are autonomous and self-regulating as they continue along a trajectory of life-long learning. It is hoped that all levels of the educational system will recognize the value of encouraging an approach to assessment that prioritizes its formative functions and consequently work to implement formative assessment practices in their places of learning.

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