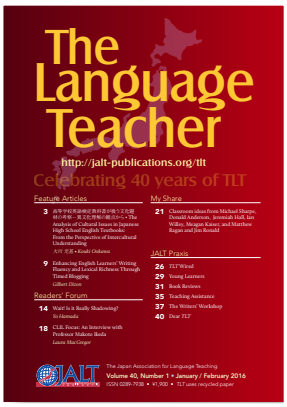
# The Language Teacher

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## Torrin Shimono & James Nobis

TLT *Interviews brings you direct insights from leaders in the field of language learning, teaching, and education—and you are invited to be an interviewer! If you have a pertinent issue you would like to explore and have access to an expert or specialist, please make a submission of 2,000 words or less.*

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*Our featured interview is with James Dean ("J. D.") Brown, Professor of the graduate faculty of the Department of ESL at the University of Hawai'i in Manoa. Dr. Brown specializes in the areas of language testing, curriculum design, program evaluation, and research methods. He has taught all over the world—in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. He has served on the editorial boards of prestigious journals such as* TESOL Quarterly, JALT Journal, *and* Language Testing, *to name a few. He has also written and edited many books and articles. Recent ones include* Mixed Methods Research for TESOL *(2014),* Cambridge Guide to Research in Language Teaching and Learning *(2015),* Introducing Needs Analysis and English for Specific Purposes *(2016), and* Statistics Corner: Questions and Answers about Language Testing Statistics *(2009).*

*Dr. Brown was interviewed by J. Lake and Trevor Holster, both of whom are experienced university teachers on the editorial board of* Shiken, *the language assessment publication of the JALT Testing and Evaluation (TEVAL) SIG. J. Lake is currently the Program Chair of the TEVAL SIG and the Fukuoka chapter of JALT. His research interests include language learning motivation, language assessment, and positive psychology. Trevor Holster is the Publications Chair of the JALT TEVAL SIG. He is interested in researching the integration of classroom assessment with instruction, performance-based testing, peer-assessment, and placement testing. So without further ado, to the interview!*

# An Interview with J. D. Brown

J. Lake
*Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University*
Trevor Holster
*Fukuoka University*

**J. Lake and Trevor Holster:** *Thank you for taking the time to talk to us about classroom language assessment and your JALT2016 plenary talk. Your talk was relatively short given what you know about classroom language assessment. Would you care to add a couple of points that you had to leave out?*

**J. D. Brown:** For those who were not at the plenary, let me summarize my talk. I focused on three questions: (a) What happens in the brain when students learn? Answer: The myelination process which means they need *lots of practice* and *tailored feedback*; (b) Where in the brain is language stored? Answer: New research indicates that vocabulary is stored in semantic groupings all around the outside of the brain; and (c) When should language learning start? Answer: Research indicates large differences between child, adolescent, and adult learning. I also argued that integrating language teaching, classroom activities, and assessment practices requires matching learning and assessment to how humans communicate, matching age, learning, assessment, and the brain, and perhaps using rubrics/checklists to do so. I concluded that classroom assessment practices should at least involve *extensive practice and appropriate feedback* and should be *semantically organized* and *age appropriate*.

To answer your question directly, classroom assessment issues that I could not cover include at least: (a) The important differences between standardized testing and classroom assessment; (b) guidelines for writing good classroom assessment items; (c) examples of useful and legitimate classroom assessments; (d) questions that teachers should ask themselves to improve their teaching and assessment; (e) the importance of using rubrics in classroom assessment; and (f) the steps that teachers should include in using classroom assessment.

*Many teachers are suspicious of testing and evaluation. The most extreme view is that any process of evaluation is harmful. How would you respond to that view?*

I think that, most often, the hostility that arises is toward the sorts of high-stakes, standardized, multiple-choice testing that only results in a score (like the entrance exams in Japan, TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC, etc.). As an ESL and EFL teacher, I, too was hostile to such testing because of the effect it had on my students. For example, when teaching communicatively using tasks and pair work, my students would argue against my methods by saying things like, "This won't be on the TOEFL." That kind of thing would raise the hackles on any teacher.

But, as I stressed in my JALT talk, classroom assessment is very different from standardized testing. Classroom assessment should be about creating *carefully tailored feedback* that is directly related to and will foster student learning. From my perspective, any teacher who is against the idea of using feedback to foster student learning simply doesn't understand how learning works.

*Obviously, classroom testing has been around for a long time, but there seems to be a renewed interest in this topic in recent years? Any thoughts about why that is?*

I think that some teachers are reacting to the current pervasive overemphasis on standardized testing. From my point of view, the best way to counter the negative effects of standardized testing is to do effective classroom assessment that provides useful feedback and increases learning. However, we also need to push back against the study-for-the-test mentality. I have long chanted to my students, "If you learn English, your TOEFL score will go up. If you learn TOEFL, only your TOEFL score goes up. Studying for TOEFL is a terrible way to learn English. Why not learn English? Then, you will have a good TOEFL score *and* the ability to use English."

Other causes of the renewed interest in classroom assessment probably include our greater understanding of the differences between standardized and classroom assessment, our realization that most of the assessment that goes on in students' lives actually takes place in classrooms, and our understanding that assessment feedback can and should be used to increase and foster learning.

*In recent decades, we have seen major changes in theories about language learning. Has this really changed what teachers and students actually do in the classroom, especially concerning assessment and feedback?*

It would be easy to lose hope in the face of how slow change occurs in actual language classrooms. One reason that change is so slow is that some individual teachers resist it. I'm not sure if that is due to laziness or simple inertia, but the fact remains that many teachers resist updating their teaching methods or delude themselves about what they are doing. For example, in doing an evaluation of the English teaching in Tunisia, I was told that *communicative* language teaching was universal in the English classes in the public schools. Indeed, the first class I observed was conducted by a *genki* young teacher, who had just returned from training in the UK, and her class was fantastic—communicative, task-based, learner-centered, and very noisy. Unfortunately, the other nine classes I observed, taught by less *genki*, older, established teachers, were what I call "pseudo-communicative" with teachers saying things like, "We communicate. I ask a question and the class answers—choral response style," and "I have them do pair work by getting students to work on written exercises together."

What I am saying is that after 40 years of observing English teaching around the world, I have found that young, recently trained teachers tend to be up-to-date while some older teachers stay current, and still other old teachers brag about how many years of teaching experience they have. Hopefully, over time, evolution will lead to "major changes in theories about language learning" resulting in real changes in "what teachers and students actually do in the classroom." Sadly, such evolution seems to be glacially slow.

*In several publications, you have suggested incorporating good characteristics of the teacher's values and local values into assessment practices. Could you elaborate on how classroom teachers might do this?*

All teachers have values that they bring to the classroom, but they are also under pressure from the values of others in teaching/learning situations with colleagues, administrators, students, and parents. We all do a subtle dance combining all these values in our professional lives—sometimes by compromising. For example, many *gaijin* teachers in Japan bring to the classroom the Western attitude that students who do not do the work for a course should fail, but then they are told by administrators that they cannot fail even a single student. The *gaijin* teacher is faced with a dilemma. Perhaps with an eye toward keeping her job, she decides to compromise by going along with the administrative policy in grading. Nonetheless, she teaches the students her values and tells them individually that their work and/or behavior was very much below expectations and would in fact fail in the outside world, especially overseas. That sort of compromise requires "incorporating good characteristics of the teacher's values and the local values into assessment practices" if you see what I mean.

*In your new Statistics Corner book, you mention that teachers should report scores as percentages. Doesn't this encourage looking at learning as an accumulation of final products? Although this is fine for many learning points, shouldn't we also be giving feedback on where they are in the process of learning?*

When I talk about presenting scores on classroom tests as percentages, I am usually making the point that these are criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) rather than norm-referenced tests (NRTs). Basically, I am

trying to get teachers to think of their classroom tests as measuring what the students *have learned or can do* related to the objectives or learning outcomes of their courses, or as you put it, "an accumulation of final products." I think that percentages accurately describe the way many teachers and students think about how much students have learned or can do. But, also, the *percentage* scores that indicate how much the students have learned on classroom assessments make a nice contrast with the *percentile* scores that indicate where the students are in the distribution of scores of standardized tests. To illustrate this difference, on the NRT standardized paper-and-pencil TOEFL, we know that a student who scores 600 was at the 84th percentile or did better than 84% of the other test takers and worse than 16%. However, we do not know what percentage of the questions that student answered correctly, nor do we care. Conversely, if a student got 80% correct on a CRT classroom assessment, we do not know by looking at the score where the student is in the distribution of scores for that class, nor do we care because we are focused on the how much that particular student learned or can do (80%).

I consciously used the phrase *learned or can do* in the previous paragraph because learning points are not just about knowledge or what students can pour into their brains, but also about the skills that they develop or what students can do with the language. And so, that brings me to your point. In assessing what students can do with the language, teachers naturally turn to forms of assessment that afford students opportunities to show what they can do. This includes various types of performance or task-based assessments where the scoring and feedback might quite appropriately take the form of a rubric or checklist, and these do not necessarily lead to percentage scores. Moreover, students in a reading course might be asked to do extensive reading, and the best way to give feedback on that might be to keep track over time of the number of pages each student has read per week. Even in intensive reading classes, assessment might focus on reading speed (not a percentage) and comprehension (probably a percentage). So percentages are a good way of thinking about CRT scores as compared to NRT scores, but common sense indicates that percentages are not the only way of keeping track of student learning or giving them feedback.

*You also discussed the neurological differences between children's language acquisition, where neural plasticity allows very rapid incidental language acquisition. Adult learners lack the neural plasticity of children. The term "native speaker" is almost perfectly synonymous with childhood language acquisition. Does this mean that native speaker models of proficiency are inappropriate as the basis for adult level curriculum or assessments?*

Yes, in my opinion, the so-called native speaker (NS) model is inappropriate in many situations. I have suggested elsewhere that only those students planning to immigrate to an English-speaking country or study in a university in such a country may need to aspire to a NS or native-like model. Most EFL students in Japan are not planning to immigrate or study abroad. Indeed, they are much more likely to use English in their home country in the form of English as an international language (EIL) or English as a lingua franca (ELF) and do so while speaking to other non-native speakers of English. In such cases, goals of intelligibility and comprehensibility might serve the students much better than goals of grammatical accuracy and the unattainable NS model. For example, learning EIL for business purposes or ELF for travel purposes would provide the majority of students with a target that might be attainable in the mere 600-800 hours that most Japanese study English in school. What I mean is that successfully reaching the NS (or even native-like) target necessarily takes those few students who do it decades and requires many thousands of hours of study or exposure to English—not the usual 600-800 hours that most students get. Why not give those students who are *not* planning to immigrate or study abroad—that is, the vast majority—a much more attainable and useful target like EIL or ELF? (For more about EIL and ELF, see McKay & Brown, 2015).

*Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions.*

No, thank you! I really enjoyed attending JALT2016 in Nagoya and doing this interview.

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