Enhancing Student Feedback for Eiken Interviews Through a Criterion-Referenced Framework

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This paper reports on the development of a criterion-referenced framework (CRF) designed to provide feedback to Japanese students preparing for the Eiken second-stage speaking test. Drawing from the works of Griffin (2018) and Hattie and Timperley (2007), it documents the first stage of an action research project aimed at prototyping a CRF to provide clear feedback to students. The CRF is proposed to provide advice to students constructing narratives from image sequences. The tool integrates the Eiken Foundation of Japan's (2008) can-do list and the Japanese Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, and Technology's (2018) *High School Foreign Language Goals for the English Communication Curriculum*, outlining essential skills for each proficiency level. This approach aims to develop an effective alternative to extemporaneous speaking test preparation. The CRF illustrates a method for providing formative, structured feedback for Eiken speaking test preparation. This research has implications for ESL/EFL educators advising students preparing for speaking tests.

本論は、英検二次試験のスピーキングテストを受験する日本人学生にフィードバックを提供するために設計された基準参照フレームワーク（CRF）の開発について報告するものである。Griffin（2018）ならびにHattie と Timperley（2007）の先行研究を基に、アクションリサーチ手法により、学生に明確なフィードバックを提供することを目的としたCRFのプロトタイピングの第一段階を記録している。また、CRFは一連のイラストからナラティブを構築する学生に対して助言を提供するための提案である。このツールは、日本英語検定協会のcan-doリスト(日本英語検定協会, 2008)と高等学校学習指導要領「外国語科の目標」（文部科学省, 2018）を統合し、各習熟度レベルに必要なスキルを概説している。このアプローチは、即興の英検二次試験準備に代わる効果的な方法を開発することを目的としている。CRFは、英検二次試験の準備のための形成的で構造化されたフィードバックを提供する方法を示している。本研究は、ESL/EFLの教育者がスピーキングテストの準備を行う学生にアドバイスする際に示唆を与えるものである。

The importance of the Eiken test has grown significantly since 2018, when a panel from the Ministry of Education officially recognized Eiken as one of the approved private English tests for university admissions. However, a scarcity of detailed information regarding the interview scoring system, the pass rates, and questions with high failure rates—along with an emphasis on traditional approaches to teaching and learning—make preparation for the Eiken a continuing challenge. This point is pertinent in Japanese high schools, where "...clear learning outcomes and assessment criteria are new aspects of pedagogy for many Japanese teachers and students" (Yamamoto, 2016, p. 106).

In recent years, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has set ambitious student Eiken proficiency targets, aiming for 50% of all 3rd-year middle school and high school students to achieve Grade 3 and Grade Pre-2, respectively. Although the Eiken is not officially part of the national curriculum, it is backed by MEXT and supported by local education boards and schools (Tatsukawa, 2018, p. 90). Despite incremental improvements since 2011, data from MEXT indicate that these targets have remained unmet for over a decade (Nippon Communications Foundation, 2023).

Thus, one challenge facing English education in Japanese high schools is to improve students' Eiken scores, particularly their ability to pass the speaking

interview section. While criticisms of standardized speaking tests such as the Eiken abound (e.g., Borg, 2023; Wood, 2019), research supports the view that the capacity to speak English remains a significant barrier for Japanese students (Humphries et al., 2015; Masutani, 2021). Consequently, the interview component of the Eiken test emerges as a critical hurdle to overall test success. Approximately 92% of applicants who applied for external entrance examinations in 2021 used Eiken results to supplement the Common Test for University Admissions (Nichibei Eigo Gakuin, 2023). However, pass rate data for Eiken have been withheld from the public since 2015, and the Eiken interview's scoring system, aside from the minimum passing score, remains largely opaque. This lack of transparency hinders effective student preparation.

In response to the significant anxiety and difficulty that Japanese students experience with speaking English, various strategies have emerged. For instance, Takeno and Matsuura (2018) suggest analyzing model responses to compile lists of useful verbs and vocabulary, while others have collected interview questions from past tests to produce a reference guide to coach students on answering them (Whitley, 2017). Similarly, educational resources frequently adopt a scattergun approach, aiming to expose test-takers to a large volume of sample questions and model answers. However, more emphasis must be placed on aligning test preparation with fostering the capabilities that the test ostensibly aims to measure, rather than focusing exclusively on scores.

Adjacent research in this field predominantly addresses the complexities of assessing speaking ability, ensuring consistency in assessor judgments, establishing the validity of test construction, and developing pedagogical approaches to enhancing generalized communication skills. However, instructors remain largely ill equipped to provide students with effective feedback (Kriewaldt & Turnidge, 2013). One possible way forward is through the work of Patrick Griffin (2018), whose comprehensive guide *Assessment for Teaching* is instrumental to understanding the theory and practice of establishing a criterion-referenced framework (CRF). Hattie and Timperley (2007) then provide authoritative commentary regarding how such tools enhance the feedback process.

It was with the principles of those particular works in mind that the feedback mechanism described here for Question 2 of the Eiken interview was developed. This question requires interview participants at Grade 3 and above to produce an ex-tended response to an image or sequence of images. Performing well on this question is crucial, as it carries significant weight in the interview. However, in the absence of specific, publicly available criteria, EFL teachers in Japan are usually left with no other option but to adopt extemporaneous approaches to interview preparation.

This paper is part of an ongoing action research project aimed at developing a comprehensive CRF for English-as-a-second-or-foreign-language (ESL/EFL) teachers to advise students and deliver feedback about their preparedness for the Eiken second-stage speaking test (Eiken interview). It details the steps taken to create a prototype CRF (currently in piloting). The prototype is a step toward addressing two research questions: 1) whether a more structured method exists to offer students feedback and advice to enhance their performance in the Eiken interview and, more broadly, 2) how teachers can ensure that their test preparation feedback is effective.

Literature Review

Why Not Traditional Rubrics?

Traditional rubrics—whether holistic, analytical, descriptive, single-point, or checklist—generally take one of four common approaches, which Brown (2018) refers to as "all-or-nothing," "target-level," "matter-of-degrees," and "multiple-features" (p. 10). Although each has its merit, a general reliance on counts, scores, and scales often proves to be punitive rather than developmental. In short, rubrics tend to focus on *quantifying* performance rather than *qualitatively* reflecting on a student's progress, and this approach can lead to assessments that are more about penalizing errors than fostering growth.

Furthermore, the use of negative and ambiguous expressions in such rubrics can demotivate learners by providing feedback that is neither constructive nor actionable. This tendency is especially problematic in language learning, where continuous engagement and positive reinforcement are crucial. It is for this reason that the current research digresses from such established methods to advocate for the progressive rules for developmental rubric writing established by Griffin and Francis (2018b).

In short, while traditional rubrics may be useful for *scoring* purposes (i.e., helping evaluators determine a test-taker's score), they fall short when the goal is to provide students with advice on how to improve their performance. As a result, they are not well suited for instructors aiming to help students prepare effectively for tests.

Why Criterion-Referenced Frameworks?

In contrast to traditional rubrics, Patrick Griffin's criterion-referenced framework (CRF) measures student performance against specific, well-defined capabilities, so as to reduce the propensity for rater biases such as norm-referenced comparisons, leniency/severity, central tendency, and halo effects, which occur when criteria are ambiguous. The CRF is particularly suitable for performance-based, formative assessment in ESL/EFL classrooms as it focuses on individual achievement and skill mastery on a developmental continuum. It stands out for its emphasis on assessing proficiency and its position as a student-centered educational approach.

Griffin (2018) argues that the prevailing "deficit model" (p. xv) in traditional rubrics often frames assessment as a tool for identifying what students lack, tasking teachers with fixing these gaps without providing adequate scaffolding. This approach can be particularly counterproductive in ESL/EFL contexts, where it might penalize rather than support learners. Griffin challenges this model by advocating for a developmental approach, which shifts the focus from deficiencies to readiness for learning. By contrast, a traditional rubric, with its binary proposition, is unsuitable for providing feedback on test performance as it fails to offer students the detailed information needed to formulate better responses.

Teachers can use the descriptive, indicative behaviors in a CRF to identify specific points for improvement, set goals based on students' current abilities and potential for growth, and recommend strategies for improvement. In this way, the process encourages teachers to make clinical judgements and "...[consider] and [interpret] the learner's response to gauge the effect of the intervention on learning" (Clarke et al., 2020, p. 388).

This approach is crucial in language learning, where clear, actionable feedback is essential for progress. Griffin's framework aligns capabilities with learning objectives, ensuring that assessments are transparent. This developmental methodology thus transforms assessment instruments into tools that can facilitate dialog between teacher and student.

Methodology

Narrowing the focus on the problem through a process outlined by Wallace (1998), the action research project reported on here focuses on the author's previous experience working in a Japanese high school, where a perceived lack of interview preparation support was noted. These observations led to a consideration of potential tools that could be provided to assist teachers and students to bridge the "...gaps between what is actually happening in our teaching situation and what we would ideally like to see happening..." (Burns, 2009, p. 2).

In short, this paper is a report on the prototype development process. Specifically, it describes a preliminary iteration of the cyclical plan-act-observe-reflect action research model based on Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, as cited in Burns, 2009). The research design has been modeled after the instructive paper published by Kashio et al. (2019), who developed a similar rubric using an approach adapted from Brown (2012).

Stage 1: Plan

Griffin et al. (2018) recommend several critical steps for those preparing to develop a CRF. The first step is to identify the construct that the framework will measure. Once the construct is defined, it should be described in terms of observable evidence, known as manifest criteria. This step involves outlining the specific behaviors or responses that indicate the various target proficiencies, after which teachers can "collect evidence of proficiency, interpreting it as representative of a stage of a stage or level... and repeating these actions after a teaching intervention or learning period" (Griffin et al., 2018, p. 46).

Identifying the Construct

To identify the construct for the context outlined above, Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (1980) model of skill acquisition was used as a suitable developmental framework for the prototype CRF. Then curriculum progressions were identified (Griffin et al., 2018, p. 60) to derive domain, strand, capability, indicative behaviors, and quality criteria. In this model, the progression of learning skills is presented through five stages: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. Each stage is characterized by an increasing level of speaking proficiency and a shift from reliance on fixed rules to intuitive responses. The design of the rubric is also informed by the proficiencies identified in the construct map, with the aim of assisting the identification of learners' current skill levels and the provision of nuanced feedback.

Construct Map

The levels of proficiency in the construct map in Table 1 are a cross-reference of the Eiken Foundation of Japan's (2008) can-do list of examination standard descriptions and the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Tech-

nology's *High School Foreign Language Goals for the English Communication Curriculum* (MEXT, 2018; see Appendix A). In accordance with established precedence (see Fujita et al., 2016), the resultant levels of proficiency have been worded to capture the core ideas central to assessing a student's progress, consistent with the standards established by both interdependent stakeholders.

The construct map informs the development of a criterion-referenced framework for assessing student performance in the Eiken interview and allows the developer to target specific skills—in this case those pertinent to Question 2. Although high school students typically take Grade Pre-2 and Grade 2 tests, the range of individual English proficiency varies broadly based on a variety of external factors. To accommodate students operating at advanced levels, this construct map also outlines skills necessary to demonstrate proficiency at Grades Pre-1 and 1. Another reason for this inclusion is that universities in Japan may award points to applicants based on a higher Eiken grade as part of the admission process or may consider externally conducted test results as an alternative to the English component of the entrance examination. As such, high school students in their final year are highly

motivated to pass higher levels of the Eiken test. In Table 1, each level of proficiency requires students to demonstrate a) familiarity with a variety of increasingly complex topics, b) increasing command over a variety of language features, c) an ability to construct stories spontaneously, and d) an ability to present ideas logically to enhance communication.

Rules for Writing Quality Criteria

In constructing the criterion-referenced framework for this project, the methodology was guided by established rules for writing *quality criteria*—a term used to describe criteria that comply with each of the 10 rules presented in Table 2. These rules are crucial for ensuring clarity and consistency and for demonstrating a developmental progression.

The quality criteria were written to distinguish between varying levels of performance. Care was taken to ensure that each criterion contained a single, central idea that was directly observable. The criteria were also written to address just one question in the Eiken interview to ensure that the framework was robust and that it provided targeted feedback to students about specific demonstrated capabilities.

Table 1

Construct Map

	Levels of proficiency	MEXT High School English Communication Curriculum	Jitsuyo Eigo Gino Kentei (Eiken Test)
Outstanding	Students discuss complex social issues reflecting various perspectives employing figurative language. Students can tell spontaneous or unrehearsed stories.	Higher education and beyond	Grade 1
High	Students speak about a variety of topics expressing empathy and self-reflection. They demonstrate sophisticated vocabulary. Students can tell stories with little preparation.		Grade Pre-1
Medium	Students are able to speak about common social issues and reflect on how those issues affect others. They demonstrate variety in vocabulary and sentences. Students tell stories which describe both a scene and the characters when given time to prepare.	English Communication III (H.S. Year 3)	Grade 2
		English Communication II (H.S. Year 2)	
Low	Students are able to speak about everyday topics. They can reproduce basic vocabulary and simple sentences, tell stories in a logical manner and can describe a scene when given time to prepare.	English Communication l (H.S. Year 1)	Grade Pre-2

Table 2
Rules for Writing Quality Criteria

Rule 1:	Enable an inference to be made about developmental learning—there should be no counts of things right and wrong or pseudo-counts (e.g., some, many, etc.).
Rule 2:	Avoid language that is ambiguous or contains comparative terms (e.g., appropriate, suitable, adequate) to define quality of performance.
Rule 3:	Discriminate between performances of increasing quality without procedural steps in a sequence of operations.
Rule 4:	Describe performances such that each successive description implies a progressively higher level of performance quality.
Rule 5:	Contain one central idea that can be recognized.
Rule 6:	Be directly observable (do, say, make, write) and avoid negatives.
Rule 7:	Reflect typical behaviours that cover a diverse range of quality, including a stretch for the most proficient.
Rule 8:	Self-weight based on capacity to separate by performance quality, i.e., no weightings are to be used.
Rule 9:	Have four or fewer criteria for any indicator (to support consistency of judgements).
Rule 10:	Be transparent so persons assessed can verify their assessment—no jargon.

Note. Adapted from Rules for Writing Quality Criteria, by Assessment Research Centre, 2015 (https://reliablerubrics.com/2015/02/09/rules-for-writing-quality-criteria/). Copyright 2015 by Assessment Research Center.

Stage 2: Act (Prototype)

In this stage of the action research, a pairwise comparison process was employed, as described by Griffin and Francis (2018a, pp. 170–173) and best illustrated by Lawless (2022) in a recorded demonstration. The process begins by evaluating the quality criteria (developed in planning) for each capability regarding their relative complexity. Teachers typically work in pairs within professional learning teams (PLTs) to consider two items at a time and ascertain which is more advanced.

This decision-making method can help in simplifying complex distinctions by breaking them down into a series of simpler choices. However, it becomes increasingly complex and less practical as the number of indicative behaviors grows. For this reason, Griffin and Francis (2018b) suggests that CRFs should be limited to six indicative behaviors, with no more than four quality criteria each.

For this specific project, the process was undertaken during the author's postgraduate studies at the University of Melbourne, and peer input was gathered through an online PLT established as part of a clinical teaching course. Over the course of a semester, an iterative approach to development with modifications based on peer feedback was undertaken. The details of these revisions were documented and later presented at a conference by Saito (2023), highlighting the method's application in an educational setting.

The result of application of the process delineated in the plan and action stages above is the Eiken Interview (Picture Description Task) Criterion-Referenced Framework (Appendix B).

Stage 3: Observe (Test)

To evaluate the effectiveness of the CRF prototype, a trial was conducted with a small group of 2nd-year students ($N = 5$) at a private high school in Tokyo, all of whom gave their informed consent after the school granted authorization to gather a small sample of anonymized responses. For the purpose of illustrating the analysis, a single response representing common errors and typical elements of the stimulus that students commonly chose to describe appears in Appendix C.

As the students articulated their responses to Eiken interview Question 2, the interviewer annotated the CRF by circling the corresponding criteria. Following the interview, the students were provided with a copy of the annotated CRF, accompanied by a verbal, bilingual (Japanese/English) explanation of each demonstrated capability in relation to the relevant question. Detailed feedback was later sent to the students via email. A sample of this feedback for Student A is provided (Appendix D) and has been color coded to show adherence to the task level, process level, and self-regulation level aspects of the *feed-up*, *feedback*, and *feedforward* as delineated in Hattie and Timperley (2007).

In Appendix D, feed-up focuses on clarifying learning objectives of the Eiken interview and emphasizing criteria for success, thereby enhancing student engagement with the task. Feedback is mainly achieved through the marked-up CRF. However, specific examples are recorded to illustrate which aspects of a response correspond with the criteria in each rubric

(denoted numerically). Finally, feedforward, which offers guidance on future actions, recommends an appropriate interview level based on these insights and addresses the query "Where to next?"

Stage 4: Reflect

In the reflection stage of the action research cycle, the focus is on evaluating and learning from the experiences and challenges encountered during the initial cycle of implementation. In this instance, the reflection cycle unearthed the following limitations of the prototype CRF.

One significant challenge was the students' limited comprehension of the CRF, primarily due to the language barrier, as it was written in English. During the assessment of students at Eiken Pre-2 and 2 levels, it was anecdotally observed that all students struggled with higher order verbs such as "speculates," "distinguishes," and "makes inferences," as well as metalanguage concepts such as reported speech, personal pronouns, and present participles. To address this issue, the CRF was revised to include language samples. However, no student in the small group could confidently comprehend all the quality criteria. In recognition of this shortcoming, a translated version of the CRF was developed.

Another reflection centered on the need for providing bilingual feedback. When providing bilingual, verbal feedback, a structured approach would enhance the feedback process. A translated feedback matrix, inspired by Brooks et al. (2019), is planned for use with the next iteration of this project to ensure that the feedback is accessible and actionable.

Additionally, it was observed that students were unfamiliar with criteria and rubrics, which required foundational instruction on how to read and interpret them. When queried, all students responded that they had not ever encountered a rubric in their English classes during the entirety of their formative schooling. Each participant needed to be taught how to interpret a rubric, including understanding levels of progressive complexity in tasks and descriptions of competencies across two axes in the table. This instruction was provided on an individual basis, which proved to be time-consuming. In future iterations of the study, it would be more efficient to explain rubrics as a group activity.

Discussion
Implications for Educators and Policy Makers

For regular classroom teachers who have not received training from the Eiken Foundation of Japan to interview test candidates, the standards by which a student's response is judged can be difficult to discern.

Coupled with the knowledge that "…about one-quarter (24%) of Japanese teachers reported that they do not feel prepared to teach the content, pedagogy and practical components of the subjects they teach" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2018, p. 55) and that "…numerous studies have also discussed the difficulties for [Japanese Teachers of English] of implementing methodologies that have a communicative focus while fulfilling examination preparation needs" (Thompson & Woodman, 2019, p. 49), it becomes clear that a significant disconnect exists between the objectives of the Eiken interview and the practical abilities of teachers to effectively prepare students for it. Therefore, tools such as the prototype CRF presented in this paper for formative assessment may foster a positive backwash effect, ensuring greater cohesion between the test and the curriculum. In addition, educators should be trained in the development of their own CRFs, thereby enabling them to provide feedback to meet their students' specific needs.

Educational Impact

The strength of this research lies in its demonstration of how a CRF, as opposed to a traditional rubric, can be used to provide feedback to students preparing for various standardized speaking tests and tasks. For example, the speaking components of the TOEIC and GTEC tests include similar image description tasks. This versatility extends to all productive skills, providing formative feedback tailored to specific learning objectives. Grounding that feedback in criterion-referenced frameworks can also promote more consistent evaluations compared to traditional rubrics. Arguably a CRF, centered around specific learning objectives, provides an objective method to assess performance-based tasks.

Challenges and Limitations

The CRF developed in this research, while robust in its current form, must be viewed as a living document, subject to ongoing review and refinement. Continued research, building on the insights from this paper, will extend the current project by replacing the existing action research methodology with the more efficacious collaborative action research approach. Embracing such a collaborative focus in action research is significantly beneficial since, as Burns (1999) explains, "[c]ollaborative action is potentially more empowering than action research conducted individually as it offers a strong framework for whole-school change" (p. 13).

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Another challenge is the need for continuous adaptation and revision of tools in response to the evolving standards set by both test providers and MEXT. A recent announcement by the Eiken Foundation of Japan (2023), introducing a new level or standard between the current Grade Pre-2 and Grade 2, exemplifies this need for flexibiility. The change affects the structure of the Eiken test and has significant implications for the CRF developed in this research. Namely, the can-do list, initially developed in 2008, serves as a foundational element of the CRF and so must be revisited to reflect the subsequent changes to the test structure.

These changes will necessitate additional quality criteria and the addition of another level in the progression. The process of continual adaptation is crucial to maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of the CRF, ensuring that it aligns with the latest standards and accurately guides students in their preparation for the Eiken interview.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper presented an illustrative model for creating a comprehensive criterion-referenced framework aimed at supporting students' efforts to improve specific speaking skills. The research process has led to an innovative approach that exemplifies the clinical model of teaching (Clarke et al., 2020; Kriewaldt & Turnidge, 2013). Furthermore, this model can be adapted as a tool for use in ESL/EFL classrooms. Its significance is underscored by its practicality as an instrument for enhancing feedback in performance-based tasks. By advocating for the use of criterion-referenced frameworks, this paper seeks to inspire educators to adopt a more structured, objective, and meaningful approach to student feedback.

Finally, and perhaps more modestly, the future development of this project will aim to refine the current CRF prototype on the basis of input from teachers and students, with the intention of producing a valuable tool for educators charged with preparing students for the Eiken interview.

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Appendices

The appendices for this article can be found in the online version at https://jalt-publications.org/tlt.

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