

## Insights in Language Testing: An Interview with Kenji Ohtomo

by Jeffery Hubbell



Kenji Ohtomo is a professor at Tokiwa University's College of Applied International Studies and a professor emeritus at the University of Tsukuba. A founding member and honorary president of the Japan Language Testing Association, Prof. Ohtomo is also on the board of directors for the Japan Association for Research on Testing and the editorial advisory board of *Language Testing*. After graduating from Tohoku Gakuin University in 1956, he taught junior high school English for half a decade, then worked for the English Language Education Council (ELEC). After studying at Georgetown University, he taught at Kanagawa University

and then conducted research at the University of California at Los Angeles as a visiting scholar. In 1983 he became a professor at the University of Tsukuba and in 1996 joined the faculty of Tokiwa University. This interview was conducted by email in November 2003.

***I first learned of your work through a paper you wrote for the 1978 edition of The Teaching of English in Japan. How did you first become interested in language testing?***

When I started teaching English at a junior high school in 1956, the Michigan Method, which was also known as the Oral Approach or Audio Lingual Method was getting popular. That method was introduced by an organization called "ELEC" in Japan. ELEC stands for the English Language Education Council, Inc. It was established by distinguished scholars in the field of English education and major business leaders in Japan's financial world to improve the English ability of the Japanese at that time. I was invited to be a researcher at ELEC in 1962.

Shigeharu Matsumoto, the grandfather of ELEC, Edwin O. Reischauer, the American ambassador to Japan, and John D. Rockefeller 3rd were very interested in the development of English teaching in Japan and supplied us with a great deal of financial and moral support. The particular method ELEC was interested in at the time was the Oral Approach, developed by Dr. Charles C. Fries of the University of Michigan. This approach was based on behaviorism rather than cognitive-code learning theory.

I was involved in this approach and tried to foster its use throughout Japan. Some questions occurred, however. We had adopted this approach believing it was the best. My question was, "How can we know whether it is actually the best approach?" It was this question that led me into the world of language testing. I thought we had to measure the language ability of students being taught by this new approach. If we could verify that the proficiency of students taught with this approach was greater than that of those who learned through other approaches, the benefit of the approach would be recognized. At that time Professor Robert Lado, who was perhaps one of the best scholars in the field of language testing, moved to Georgetown University. I therefore decided to study language testing at Georgetown University under his guidance in 1965-66.

***When you look at the history of language testing in Japan, can you think of any studies which seem like significant landmarks?***

For a long time, the practice of language testing in Japan could be characterized by what Bernard Spolsky has called the "pre-scientific period" in language testing history. At that stage, any person who was capable of using English well was considered qualified as a language testing specialist. Gradually, however, we became aware that persons who can speak or write well are not necessarily good at language testing. There are four events that I believe have contributed to that awareness in Japan.

The first was a series of five lectures given by John B. Carroll at a seminar sponsored by the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JACET)

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on November 6-8, in 1969. The lectures addressed issues on EFL testing, criteria for evaluating language instruction, psychological aspects of English instruction, practical problems of examination construction, and the role of testing in university admissions. The contents were published by Taishukan in 1972.

I'd like to think that the second landmark was a book I wrote on Item Response Theory in 1996. This is the first book about the application of Item Response Theory to language testing in Japan. Item Response Theory had already been introduced into the field of psychometrics, but only dealt with the use of IRT in general, not about its application to language testing.

The third breakthrough came at the International Meeting of the Psychometric Society in July 2001 in Osaka. More than 300 participants from 19 countries gathered to discuss recent developments in the theory and application of psychometrics. The proceedings, edited by Haruo Yanai et. al., was published by Springer-Verlag in 2003. It includes papers on methods in psychometrics such as Structural Equation Modeling and IRT.

The most recent addition to the field in Japan was the Kenkyusha Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, published this year under Ikuo Koike's editorial guidance. Despite its English title, it's actually a concise encyclopedia in Japanese containing 1535 entries covering 13 different fields in applied linguistics. I edited Section XII, which was devoted to research and measurement. This contained entries on almost every aspect of research methodology and language testing, including Research Design, Classical Test Theory, and Item Response Theory. A team of leading scholars in the field of language testing in Japan contributed to these articles.

***You were one of the joint-chairs for the 21st Language Testing Research Colloquium (LTRC '99) in Japan. How did Japan become a conference venue?***

The idea of holding LTRC '99 in Japan came up in 1996. Some of the participants from Japan to LTRC '96 in Finland proposed that a LTRC colloquium be held in Japan, and I was asked to join Randy Thrasher in heading the project. At that time, although there were many associations in the field of foreign language teaching in Japan, none dealt specifically with language testing. So as a result the Japan Language Testing Association (JLTA) was inaugurated.

The 1999 Language Testing Research Colloquium was planned by the International Language Testing Association (ILTA) and the Japan Language Testing Association (JLTA). The Executive Board of the ILTA at that time consisted of Elana Schohamy, Alan Davies, Caroline Clapham, and Tim McNamara. The joint-chairs of the LTRC 99 Organizing Committee were Professors Randy Thrasher and myself. Together with other execs of the newly formed JLTA; Yuji Nakamura, Youichi Nakamura, and you - Jeff - as a Member-at-Large, we worked very hard to prepare for the colloquium. There were 198 participants from 13 different countries. This was the most exciting international language testing conference Japan had ever had, and it did a great deal to promote JLTA's work in the field of language testing here.

***Do you feel teacher training programs in Japan today are providing teachers with a sufficient basic knowledge of testing principles?***

I am afraid not. The main reason must be the insufficient number of professors who can conduct useful and meaningful training in language testing at universities. As I mentioned before, the pre-scientific period in the field of language testing in Japan lasted so long, and there were very few professors who could teach language testing. Lado's *Language Testing* was first published in 1961 and again in 1964. I went to Georgetown University in 1965 in order to see what was happening in language testing in the US. However, there were no other noteworthy language testing publications except Lado's.

Of course, testing theory has been developing rapidly in the fields of education and psychology with refinements in Classical Test Theory, Generalizability Theory, and Item Response Theory. Regrettably, in the field of language testing, few teachers here are aware of these developments. So there has been a big gap between the two worlds: the testing of language and testing in education or psychology.

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However, after the LTRC '99 in Japan, a new movement in language testing has been gaining momentum, and most people have begun to recognize how important

good practice in testing, measurement, and assessment is for improving the quality of language teaching. However, we need more professors who are qualified to teach language testing at university levels. Unless we have enough specialists in our universities, we cannot increase the number of teachers who are up-to-date on testing theory and practice. Organizations such as JALT or JLTA should lead the way in promoting the growth of sound testing components in teacher training curricula. It is questionable whether the person conducting teacher training programs in Japan are the most qualified ones. Very often the recruitment of teacher trainers is decided through an "old boy network" that underrates language testing ability or knowledge.

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