

Voices in the Field: An Interview with Leo Yoffe

by Tim Newfields



Leo Yoffe has been teaching English in Japan since 1988. In 1995 he helped establish the Testing and Evaluation SIG of JALT. Coordinating the activities of that group for nearly five years, he also helped edit and print many issues of this newsletter. Soon after the birth of his daughter, he moved to Canada to work for the Foreign Service. This interview was conducted electronically in November 2000.

Could you briefly mention how you became interested in foreign language assessment?

I had been already teaching in Japan five years before my first formal introduction to language testing at the Monterey Institute of International Studies (MIIS) when doing my graduate work. Over that course of time I was involved in program administration, entrance test design, and other types of assessment. As this was such an integral part of my work, I felt woefully unprepared and often at a loss of how to approach these tasks in a systematic and responsible way. The realization that I needed to learn more to live up to my professional responsibilities brought me to a testing seminar taught by Prof. Kathleen Bailey at MIIS. The seminar did not answer all the questions I had, but at least pointed me in the right direction and introduced me to a number of works, notably *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing* by Lyle Bachman, which I found fascinating.

Do you see any ways that foreign language testing in Japan differs significantly from testing practices in other Asian countries or North America?

I cannot comment on testing practices in the rest of Asia. With regard to North American language testing standards, linguistic assessment in Japan has some catching up to do. Most standardized tests in Japan do not make public any validity and reliability data. Most educational institutions do not like to open their testing preparation methods and procedures to outside scrutiny. In other words, there seems to be little accountability in an environment which should demand excessively rigorous standards due to the important role tests of all kinds play in Japanese society. I am also often surprised at the lack of systematic testing training at schools of education, even at graduate level.

In what ways has foreign language testing in Japan changed in recent years?

I think foreign language testing practices have become more transparent and more congruent with the overall objectives of English education in Japan. I am particularly referring to the university entrance examinations - a longtime bone of contention for many Western academics.

Over the last decade the structure of many entrance mechanisms has become more communicative, and this has undoubtedly had a positive washback effect on the instruction at the secondary level.

Do you have any special concerns about recent language testing trends in Japan?

The recent debate about testing practices (see Brown and Yoshida in the popular press) has often degenerated into questions of cultural relativism and the ensuing accusations of imposition of outside values. I do not see this as a productive development and hope that further dialogue can be de-politicized.

On a personal note, could you mention your future plans?

In March 2001 my wife, daughter, and I will be moving back to Canada. Starting in April I will be working at the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs in the economic stream. We feel sorry to leave Japan and all our friends, however, to paraphrase Arnold Schwarzenegger "we will be back". If everything works out according to plan, I should be posted back in Tokyo within the next two years. Thus, we feel this is only a temporary separation.

Any final comments?

JALT, in general, and the Testing and Evaluation SIG in particular, have played a key role in my life in Japan, both personally and professionally. I would like to thank so many people for their hard work in keeping this SIG active and productive. Special thanks go to Cecilia Ikeguchi, Parril Stribling, Elizabeth Hiser, Jeff Hubbell and Tim Newfields. I also want to owe a debt of gratitude to former JALT members Paul Jaquith and Dorothy Pedtke. Paul was singlehandedly responsible for the production of *SHIKEN* in 1996 and 1997. Dorothy was the first treasurer of this SIG.

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