
An interview with JD Brown

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James Dean (“JD”) Brown specializes in second language testing, curriculum design, research methods, and connected speech at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. He has appeared a number of times at the annual JALT conference, at JALT SIG conferences, at JALT Chapter meetings, and has been writing articles for Shiken for nearly 20 years. Thus, he has had a long connection with JALT and the Testing and Evaluation SIG. This year he is collecting his writings for Shiken and putting them into a book. The Testing and Evaluation SIG is happy to announce that SIG members will receive a free copy of this book. We also encourage everyone to attend this year’s JALT conference, where JD Brown will be giving a keynote address. This interview with JD Brown takes a look at his writings for Shiken, testing and English teaching in Japan, and his upcoming JALT presentation.

You have been writing Stats Corner for almost 20 years. How have reader interests changed over the years? Has any advice changed over this time? What will be in your new book based on Statistics Corner?

Readers have had seemingly random interests over the years, so it is difficult to say if anything has changed. In language testing generally, there is now much less focus on score reliability. Score reliability depends on how a certain group of students interacts with a specific set of test items. Thus, test items that are ‘reliable’ for one administration may not be for another administration. Instead of looking at score reliability, there is much more concern nowadays with the validity of score use, especially since Sam Messick’s seminal work on the issue. This is one of the biggest changes that has come about over recent decades.

The new book collects together most of the Shiken Stats Corner columns (41 of the original 43 appear in the book). It organizes them into two main parts: one on language testing and the other on language research. The three sections of the language testing part cover (a) strategies for test design and use, (b) item analysis techniques, and (c) reliability issues, while the three sections of the language research part discuss (d) planning research studies, (e) interpreting research, and (f) analyzing research results. The book will also include a table of contents and index, as well as one preface in English and one in Japanese, and an introductory chapter. I’m hoping that the resulting book will prove useful for any language tester or researcher. It is interesting to note that many of the articles from Statistics Corner have been widely cited by other authors inside and outside of the language testing and research fields, probably because they are accessible online and because the presentation of the concepts is straightforward and relatively easy to grasp.

Do you have any advice for those people who are interested in learning about statistics?

Learning statistics from the beginning is like learning anything new. Hence, it is important to find explanations of statistics that are easy to understand. The Statistics Corner in Shiken is one place to find such simple and straightforward presentations of statistics. More to the point, it is important to understand the basic concepts first as this helps researchers select the proper statistics for the situation in which they are working. Learning formulas is probably less important because modern statistical software packages take care of the mathematical calculations. However, understanding the statistical concepts, knowing which assumptions underlie each form of analysis, and knowing which statistics to use for which purpose

are all important. Otherwise, any statistical studies that result will probably have little meaning or even be misleading. Again, the new book should serve as one good resource for learning these sorts of things.

What trends do you see for testing or English in Japan?

I have criticized the university entrance exams in Japan for a number of years. But here I would like to be more positive because there have been many positive changes, especially with the “recommendation” system. This system has opened up admissions decisions to more kinds of information. Since multiple sources of information are much more likely than single sources of information (like single exam scores) to lead to reliable and valid decisions, the recommendation system, if handled properly, could be a very positive trend. That said, it is still up to the admissions officers involved to use the information in appropriate ways, which does not happen automatically. Nonetheless, having multiple sources of information to base decisions on is moving in the right direction.

It also seems to me that Japanese students who are returning from long stays abroad are being treated better in recent years. In many cases, these students have separate entrance exams and differing admissions requirements. I think, or at least hope, that educators and policy makers in Japan are beginning to realize that returnees have a lot to offer, even if they do not fit the traditional Japanese mold. The new admissions processes can help to insure that they are not frozen out of good Japanese universities.

University entrance exams have also improved with the inclusion of listening sections at a number of universities. Listening subtests provide additional information about the ability of the students to actually *use* the language, which is obviously quite different from the information provided by the traditional *yakudoku* tests that primarily measure the students’ knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and of course, their test-taking abilities. Importantly, the EIKEN tests are assessing all four skills (reading, listening, speaking, and writing), which provides even broader and better measurement of the students’ abilities to use English. It would be nice if the university entrance examinations would also assess speaking and writing, and thereby provide more comprehensive assessment of the students’ English abilities rather than just focusing on their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and reading, and in some cases listening.

There are also some encouraging trends in Japan with regard to immersion learning of English. What I mean is that, every year, there seem to be more institutions where students are studying their content courses with English as the medium of instruction. English immersion K-12 schools for Japanese students and *gaijin* alike also seem to be more common. In ideal settings, students can learn in both English and Japanese. A few universities and one college that I know of also offer regular content courses in English. There are also co-teaching models in which a Japanese instructor lectures in English, while another instructor provides EFL support. I’m necessarily being vague here (even though I am thinking of specific places where I have visited and observed instruction) because I don’t want to put any particular institution on the spot while these nascent trends are developing.

What will your keynote presentation be about at JALT this year? Can you give us a preview?

The presentation that I am planning for the JALT conference will examine the connection between testing and learning. More specifically, I will focus on how assessment can enhance learning. Taking a cognitive approach, the very definition of learning involves developing and increasing links in the brain through a process called myelination. My JALT presentation will consider how classroom activities and assessment can contribute to developing and strengthening those connections. Assessment should be part of the learning process, and not something added on to see what students have learned. Indeed, the very definition of assessment ought to be something like “classroom activities that provide systematic feedback.” What I’m saying is that students need feedback from assessment to help focus and correct the

language practice that can then effectively strengthen the connections in their brains—the connections that are the physical manifestations of learning. I will not only consider the importance of such feedback, but also ways to improve feedback so that it better contributes to the learning processes. Or something like that. I haven't actually written my speech for next November yet, but I'm thinking it will be along the lines that I just outlined.

Thank you for the interview and all the advice you have given to Shiken readers over the years! We look forward to seeing you at JALT this year.

Thank you for visiting Hawai'i. It has been a pleasure talking with you. See you in at the JALT Conference in Nagoya.