

**A QUICK-START GUIDE**

# How to Test Speaking Skills IN JAPAN



Jerry Talandis Jr.

## How to Test Speaking Skills in Japan: A Quick-Start Guide

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Author Jerry Talandis Jr.  
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# INTRODUCTION

*In my professional travels, especially in Japan, I found that most teachers are intimidated by tests and maybe even a little frightened of them. Why is that? I believe that one cause is the fact that no one has ever taken the trouble to clearly explain to most teachers how very useful tests can be to their work.*

-J.D. Brown (1995: 12)

This is a book for Japan-based EFL teachers interested in learning how to conduct effective in-class speaking tests in order to help their students speak English more fluently. It's written for new teachers, fresh off the boat, and also for those experienced instructors who would like a review of basic concepts and some fresh new ideas. The basic premise is that testing should be embraced and utilized as a powerful tool to help our students learn. Testing in Japan has a bad rap in the eyes of many students and teachers, often with good reason. Nevertheless, if we approach assessment from a more integrative perspective, where the tests themselves closely resemble regular language practice activities, we can enlighten ourselves and our students about the effectiveness of the learning and teaching that goes on in our classrooms (Brown, 2013). In other words, *testing should reflect teaching* (Mendelsohn, 1989). This book is my contribution towards making this happen for you in clear and practical ways.

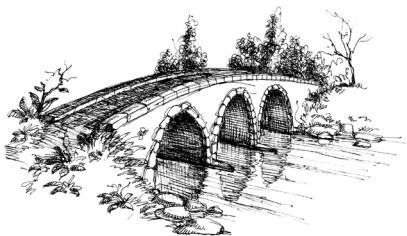
I've been teaching in Japan now for over 20 years, since 1993, and during most of that time I rarely felt confident in my assessment skills, especially in oral communication classes. I was under the mistaken impression that evaluating speaking skills was extremely difficult and time consuming, so I either avoided it altogether or conducted unsatisfactory written exams. When checking out some books on the subject, I was often put off by their dense and technical nature or overwhelmed by the amount of information provided. *Regression? Analysis of variance? 15 different types of validity? Hm... my head hurts. Oh, look—sixty techniques for testing speaking skills! Great! But which one should I choose? My class starts in a few hours...* Complicating matters was the fact that most of these books were written for a global audience, to be used in a variety of teaching contexts in widely differing cultures. *Hm... interesting idea, but will this really work with my Japanese students?* As a result, I rarely felt like the information spoke directly enough to my needs here in Japan, where we face our own particular set of challenges in getting our students to talk. What I really could have used early on was a colleague to sit down and explain to me in words I could understand just why I should bother with speaking tests and how I could administer some specific ideas that were tailored to my teaching situation. So, while I'm no expert on language testing, I am willing to take on this role for you by sharing what I have learned over the years, one teacher to another.

Instead of a comprehensive, authoritative tome that addresses every possible teaching situation, with this book I'm aiming to generate value via a *less is more* approach that gives you, the Japan-based educator<sup>1</sup>, just what you need to get up and running with speaking tests. Based on my experience, I'm convinced that once you understand a few key basic principles, learn how to mark, administer, and

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<sup>1</sup> If you happen to be reading this but are not teaching in Japan, then much of the information in this book should still prove valuable because the core theme of tests as learning tools still applies. Keep your local context in mind and make use of what you can.

evaluate an oral test, and then try out a few simple and proven activities, you will start to see significant improvements in your students' speaking skills. Once you taste a bit of success, my hope that is any lingering intimidation or fear surrounding language testing will be lessened, and you'll be more encouraged and motivated to seek out some of the amazing, higher-level literature and resources in order to develop your own ideas and approaches.



*This book is a bridge between theory and practice*

I therefore see this book as a bridge of sorts, between language testing theory and its actual practice here in Japan. You know that old saying, the one about giving someone a fish vs teaching them how to fish? Well, I want to do both: give you some practical testing activities, marking strategies, and resources you can use today while simultaneously imparting basic background information so you can test your students with self-awareness and conviction for the remainder of your career. Think of this book as your *quick start guide*—that thin, colorful, and easy-to-read pamphlet included with the new electronic gadget you've just bought. You don't need to read the thick manual cover to cover before you can start using it. Let's jump right in and get started. Transformation of your teaching practice awaits!

## HOW IS THIS BOOK ARRANGED?

There are three parts to this book. In **Part 1**, the main focus is on making the case for conducting and evaluating speaking tests by

outlining the benefits and basic principles involved. The job of **Part 2** is to give you a clear idea on how to mark and administer a speaking test. Here you will learn how to define various aspects of conversation in measurable ways, such as fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation. Practical tips for administering oral tests will also be covered. In **Part 3**, three practical and proven speaking test ideas will be offered, each one presented in a detailed step-by-step format optimized for typical teaching situations—large classes with low-level students, regular mid-sized groups, and small classes with higher-level learners. The **Appendices** at the end of the book contain all of the test handouts you'll need as well as a few model marking/feedback rubrics you can use for inspiration on constructing your own. Finally, the **resources** section highlights a few useful places to get information and tools that can help you take your language testing skills to the next level.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the inspiration to begin this project and the encouragement to not give up, I'm deeply indebted to Bruno Vannieu, an award-winning French teacher at Kobe University. Bruno was also instrumental in helping develop the testing ideas put forth in this book and provided invaluable feedback as well. *Merci beaucoup, Bruno!* I'm also grateful to my family for their patience while I struggled to get this project done by the deadline. Next, I'd like to thank my students at the University of Toyama for granting me permission to take their photos during our speaking tests. Thanks to their cooperation, the assessment activity directions in this book are now richly illustrated and much easier to follow. Finally, I want to give a big shout out to Malcolm Swanson for some life-saving last minute help on the design and layout of this book.

How can you efficiently conduct valid and reliable speaking tests within EFL classes in Japan? This practical and accessible book aims to answer this question by offering some proven in-class oral testing techniques that can simultaneously assess communicative competence while helping students build smooth and natural conversation skills.

Written in a friendly, jargon-lite style, this quick-start guide will:

- Make the case for conducting speaking tests with your Japanese students
- Cover essential testing principles and qualities of good tests
- Offer clear guidelines for test administration and marking
- Provide step-by-step instructions for several proven oral test techniques suitable for assessing progress in a variety of teaching contexts

This book is ideal for teachers new to oral communication testing or for those who would like to review the basics and pick up some new ideas. No previous knowledge or experience with speaking tests is required.



Jerry Talandis Jr. has been teaching English in Japan since 1993 and is currently a professor at the University of Toyama. His research interests include pragmatics, language testing, and professional development through classroom-based research. He is also co-author of the EFL textbook *Conversations in Class*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition.

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