

## **Speaking Assessments by Japanese English Teachers Pre and Post Implementation of CEFR in the Midst of a Global Pandemic**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Amid a global pandemic, while schools in many parts of the world were closed to adhere to quarantine orders, schools in Japan resumed face-to-face classes after only a month of closure with strict adherence to COVID-19 guidelines and standard operating procedures (SOP). This study examined how speaking assessments were administered face-to-face for Grade 5 and 6 elementary school students prior to and after introducing the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and amid a global pandemic between April to October 2020. The paper also reports the challenges and strategies employed in carrying out the speaking assessments following the CEFR while adhering to the SOP. The study employed a qualitative research method that utilised semi-structured interviews to elicit information from four teachers who taught in eight schools within Niigata City, Japan. Findings suggest that prior to the implementation of CEFR, not all teachers carried out speaking assessments. However, the implementation of CEFR emphasised the need to teach speaking and carry out speaking assessments. The CEFR also served as guidance for the teachers in preparing the assessment scoring rubrics. The results also showed that the speaking assessments were implemented individually instead of in groups before the pandemic and the presence of the masks, which increased the student's anxiety and affected their performance. However, the teachers employed various strategies to overcome the challenges by modifying the assessment tasks and utilising web conferencing technology.

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*Keywords:* CEFR, English as a foreign language, Japan, pandemic, speaking assessment

## INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 saw a complete shift in how teaching and learning were viewed, particularly in classrooms where the face-to-face mode of delivery was either the only or preferred method of instruction. The COVID-19 pandemic induced a drastic shift in learning systems as schools, colleges and institutions of higher learning adjusted their mode of delivery. They tried to implement and adapt to entire online teaching. While schools worldwide were forced to close and shift all face-to-face classes to the virtual realm (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020; Gross & Opalka, 2020; Zhang, 2020), schools in Japan faced a slightly different predicament. All schools in Japan were only closed for one month (from March to April 2020) and after that were ordered to reopen. COVID-19 guidelines were implemented in all schools nationwide to ensure the safety of students and teachers. It included wearing masks at all times and avoiding the 3C's—close contact, closed places and crowded places. These regulations were in line with the guidelines issued by the WHO (2019). Therefore, in April 2020, teachers and school administrators resumed face-to-face classes and continued administering assessments while adhering to WHO's guidelines.

To add to the whirlwind of uncertainties, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan decided to follow through with an English Education Reform plan that was announced in late 2019. This new plan which took effect at the start of the new school year in April

2020, included a curriculum designed based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which is often used as the point of reference for language policy and language education across the globe (Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Little, 2007). In addition, this plan was to make English a formal graded subject for elementary school students in Grade 5 and 6 (age 11 to 12 years old) nationwide and ensure standardised assessments across the board. Prior to the 2019 plan, English was taught in classrooms as a foreign subject but was not formally graded for Grade 5 and 6 students (Carreira, 2006).

In April 2020, the new directive based on CEFR standards required English to be taught for 70 hours, which is approximately two hours per week of 'English as a formally assessed subject' for years 5 and 6 (Nemoto, 2018). The plan comprised new methodologies of delivering and assessing English lessons for elementary Grade 5 and 6 students based on CEFR. The directive from the Board of Education is for teachers to achieve a higher tier of A1 by the end of the school year (March 2021). A1 is the basic user level and refers to the ability "to understand and use familiar everyday expressions and fundamental phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. At this level, students should be able to introduce themselves and others, ask and answer questions about personal details such as where they live, people they know and things they have. Students should also be able to interact in a simple way, provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help (Council of Europe, 2020).

While this new directive by the ministry was a commendable effort, its implementation in the middle of a global pandemic posed a problem on how the new curriculum and assessment would be executed, as the conventional classroom setting had now changed. Although CEFR provided a framework for assessing language (listening, speaking, reading and writing), many schools in Japan were left with no concrete outline on assessing speaking tests, particularly amid a global pandemic. While textbooks and manuals were provided, the teachers interviewed for this research felt that there were no proper directives on effectively conducting speaking assessments for their students based on CEFR while simultaneously ensuring they abide by the new COVID-19 guidelines. Therefore, because previous assessment methods could not be administered due to new COVID guidelines, teachers were compelled to develop innovative speaking assessment strategies to ensure students were assessed based on CEFR standards.

Over one year, there have been numerous articles, blog posts and YouTube videos on how teachers worldwide have adopted and adapted to conduct effective online assessments for students. However, literature on face-to-face assessments in schools during the global pandemic is scarce, simply because educational institutions from kindergarten to colleges and universities converted their conventional mode of delivery to online lessons during the pandemic. Hence, a study on how teachers who continued to conduct face-to-face assessments and developed alternative

assessments strategies is vital. Furthermore, it presents a crucial understanding of how speaking tests were administered successfully despite COVID-19 SOP restrictions and how such strategies can be continued within the new normal post-pandemic.

This paper, therefore, aims to examine how Japanese English teachers administered speaking assessments for Grade 5 and 6 elementary school students in eight schools within the Niigata Prefecture, Japan prior to, and after the implementation of CEFR amid a global pandemic. The paper further discusses the challenges teachers faced in conducting speaking assessments and their strategies to overcome the challenges of conducting speaking tests while following the CEFR framework and adhering to COVID-19 guidelines.

### **Objectives**

This paper aims to address the following objectives;

1. to discover how Japanese English teachers administered speaking assessments before the CEFR framework was introduced.
2. to discover how Japanese English teachers administered speaking assessments after the CEFR framework was introduced during the pandemic.
3. to identify the challenges faced by Japanese English teachers in assessing speaking during the pandemic and the strategies they developed to overcome the challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Common European Framework of Reference

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages comprises learning, teaching and assessment. It is often referred to as the globalisation of language education policy (Behforouz, 2020; Byram & Parmenter, 2012). It was developed by the Council of Europe and first published in 2001. It promotes transparency and coherence in language education. The framework can be applied to the teaching and learning of any language. Thus, it is no surprise that it is an exclusive neutral reference in all educational sectors. According to Little (2006), CEFR has been translated into 37 languages, including Japanese. In some countries, the CEFR has helped “to develop both strategic language policy documents and practical teaching materials. In others, it is becoming the most reliable reference for curriculum planning” (Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007, p. 7). CEFR is a descriptive scheme that is particularly useful in analysing the second language (L2) learners’ needs, specifying their learning goals, guiding the development of learning materials and activities, and providing orientation for assessing L2 learning outcomes (Little, 2006). CEFR includes six reference levels, and they are A1 (*Beginner*), A2 (*Elementary*), B1 (*Intermediate*), B2 (*Upper Intermediate*), C1 (*Advanced*) and C2 (*Proficiency*). Within these levels, A1 and A2 are regarded as basic users, B1 and B2 are independent users, while C1 and C2 are referred to as proficient users.

### English Education in Japan

Japan is one of the countries with limited opportunities to practise speaking English in a real-life context due to the lack of people who use the language daily. Besides social circles, independent studying and extra English classes at an *eikaiwa* (英会話 or English conversation school), students are presented with little opportunity to acquire the language outside the classroom (Nemoto, 2018). Moreover, there is no need to use English to communicate when the native language of Japanese is used daily (Tsuboya-Newell, 2017).

English is regarded as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Japan, while Japanese is the first language (L1) and the main medium of instruction for all subjects in schools. However, literature has shown that there has always been little exposure for Japanese students to engage with the English language outside the classroom (Mahoney & Inoi, 2015; Negishi et al., 2013; Nemoto, 2018). As a solution, in 2002, Japan introduced English activities as a part of the government’s integrated studies initiative for elementary school students (Nemoto, 2018) to have more practice with the language. Then in 2011, a new subject called Foreign Language Activities was introduced in primary schools across Japan to encourage more engagement with the English language (Negishi et al., 2013).

However, research has shown that the efforts did not yield very promising results, as Japanese students are still not competent in the language. It poses an issue especially when Japan aims to have a bigger global

presence and ensure the Japanese people can communicate more effectively in English (Nemoto, 2018). In a study on the challenges in increasing the teaching hours of English in Japanese schools, Nemoto (2018) noted that there was an inconsistency with how lessons were delivered across the nation since English activities were introduced in 2002. He revealed that different teachers adopted different instruction and content delivery methods, tweaking lesson plans and developing rubrics for assessments.

As a result, it created various learning experiences in the classroom and inconsistent assessments that did not accurately measure learning outcomes. To address this discrepancy, in 2011, Grade 5 and 6 students underwent 35 hours of English classes per year (approximately one hour per week) with lesson plan guidelines provided for teachers to ensure some consistency in the teaching of the language (Mahoney & Inoi, 2015). In addition, it allowed all students to receive an equal number of contact hours with the language across the country. Teachers were also given a clearer idea of how to conduct the lessons from the guidelines given. However, because English was not a formal subject within the curriculum, there was still no standardised testing and grading of the students, despite the increased hours and guided lessons (Mahoney & Inoi, 2015). In addition, Mahoney and Inoi (2015) noted that some teachers had trouble assessing learning outcomes in the classroom as there were reports of teachers conducting their tests. However, because the students were

not formally graded, these tests were again not standardised.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research employed a qualitative case study research design using semi-structured interviews for data collection. The qualitative approach was most suited as it allowed the researcher to gather detailed information on how assessments were carried out prior to and after the implementation of CEFR.

The following were the main questions asked during the interview;

1. How did you conduct speaking tests prior to the implementation of CEFR?
2. How were speaking tests conducted after the implementation of CEFR?
3. How did the COVID-19 guidelines affect the way speaking tests are done?
4. What were the challenges you faced in conducting face-to-face speaking assessments while adhering to COVID-19 guidelines?
5. What strategies did you employ or develop to overcome the challenges you faced?

### Context of the Study

It must be noted here that the implementation of CEFR and the introduction of formal testing were all part of the government's plans to reform the English education system in Japan even before the pandemic hit. However, instead of putting the plans on hold, the Japanese government decided

to proceed and directed all schools to ensure CEFR standards were met as schools resumed face-to-face teaching after a one-month closure. Therefore, the introduction of CEFR coincided with a period when the entire world was affected by a global pandemic. Hence, when discussions in this paper refer to testing after the implementation of CEFR, it also refers to a period where testing was conducted within a classroom with COVID-19 SOPs in place.

The introduction of CEFR provides a more comprehensive approach to how language is learnt and taught, as the equal focus is placed on four skills of English. Figure 1 shows the expected improvements in English language proficiency for all school levels. For Elementary students, the new CEFR standard requires students to master between 600 to 700 new words during their elementary grade, which lasts for four years. It is a challenging feat

particularly when students were not required to remember new words or be tested on them in the past.

### Participants

From April 2018, to improve the way English lessons are conducted, the Niigata City Board of Education hired teachers who have an additional licence for teaching English only [*gaikoku-go senka kyō* or 外国語専科教] (Niigata City, 2020). These teachers are referred to as “MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) teachers”. It was done to ensure that teachers conducted English lessons with a specific qualification for the subject. From April 2020 to March 2021, there were 24 MEXT teachers in Niigata (Niigata City, 2020).

Data were collected from four Japanese English language teachers in Niigata City, Japan. All four teachers have a bachelor’s

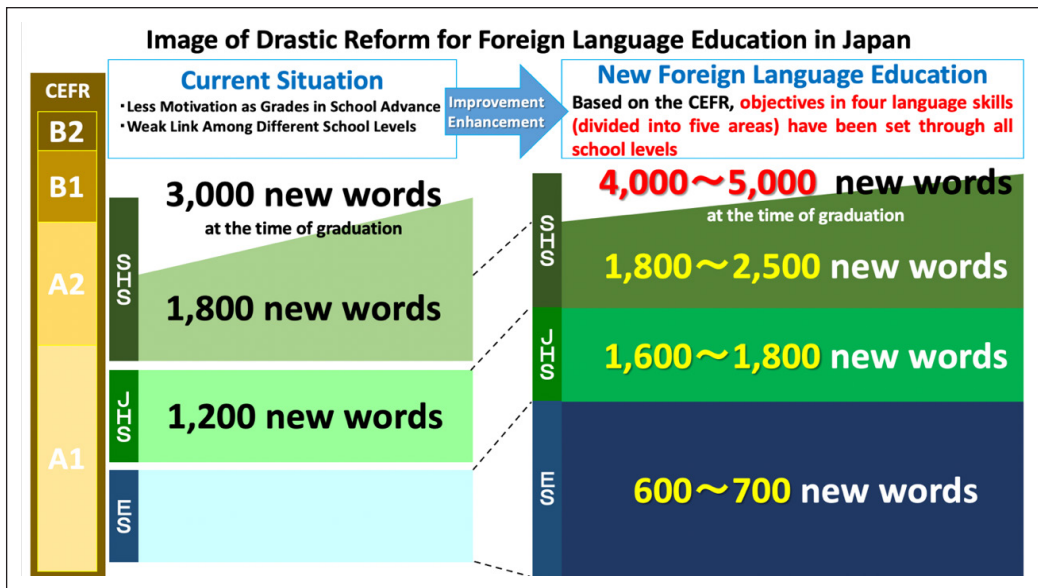


Figure 1. Improvements expected from the reformation of English education in Japan (Niigata City, 2020)

degree, have vast experience teaching English at elementary schools and a teaching licence for elementary schools in Niigata City. Their names have been omitted from this paper to maintain the teachers' privacy, and they have been allocated numeric numbers and referred to as Teacher 1 to Teacher 4. Teachers 1, 2 and 3 are MEXT teachers who work at two or three schools in Niigata City. Teacher 1 has 34 years of teaching experience in elementary schools and two years as a MEXT teacher. Teacher 2 was an elementary school teacher before becoming a MEXT teacher for the first time in April 2020. Teacher 3 has junior high school teaching experience and became a MEXT teacher in April 2019. Teacher 4 has an elementary school teaching licence and has been appointed as the teacher in charge of English at her school. The teachers have conducted speaking tests for over 400 students from April to October 2020 based on the CEFR framework.

### **Instrument**

This research employed semi-structured interviews, and the teachers were asked five open-ended questions to elicit information on how speaking assessments were carried out before the pandemic and how COVID guidelines affected how speaking tests were carried out during the pandemic. These questions were supported by follow up questions that were aimed to gather additional responses where necessary.

The researcher had previously worked with these four teachers, so this qualitative method was the most appropriate.

Furthermore, it presented a comfortable environment and allowed the researcher to have an open conversation with the teachers as they shared their information freely. The interviews with the teachers were conducted individually at their respective schools. The data were then analysed based on emerging themes from the research objectives and expounded in this paper's findings and discussion section.

### **FINDINGS**

This section of the paper will present the findings based on the responses given by the teachers for the questions posed to them. The findings are presented within subheadings based on the objectives of this paper.

#### **Speaking Assessments Prior to the Implementation of CEFR**

Prior to the implementation of CEFR, only two of the four teachers interviewed for this research carried out speaking assessments for their students. Teachers 1 and 3 acknowledged that although speaking was not a priority among the four language skills before the new school year (April 2020), they still tried to conduct speaking tests to gauge their students' competency level. Teacher 1 for example noted that she conducted her speaking tests in groups to help students motivate one another. She focused on collaborative work where students were asked to answer as a class or in small groups. She also used her own rubric to mark students' verbal ability. Although not aware of CEFR at that time,

she noted that a rubric for assessment guided teachers and students as they knew what they were being tested on. *“The rubric was very helpful as it helped me gauge my students’ speaking ability and areas that they needed extra help with”*.

Teacher 3 also had a similar rubric when assessing speaking. He said, *“I designed a 5 point Likert scale to assess their competency level. Most of the students were between 1 and 2”* (1 being very weak and 5 competent). Teacher 3 was always more concerned with students using the language confidently rather than grading them on accuracy. When explaining the importance of understanding the context of the language, he noted that *“there is no point in them memorising the sentences for the test if they don’t know what they mean”*. Therefore, his assessments before the implementation of CEFR was not based on language accuracy but rather on the ability of the student to speak in context. *“I want them to enjoy speaking English and not be afraid of the language”*. For example, he said, *“when I ask the student...how are you today? A simple answer of OK, tells me that they understood my question...and that is more important”*. Teacher 3 also asked students to design their posters or notes and present them to the class. These presentations were mainly done individually, but students had many opportunities to work in groups prior to the presentations. Teacher 3 found this helpful technique for students to speak English using the target grammar or vocabulary depending on the lesson’s topic.

### **Speaking Assessment After the Implementation of CEFR During the Pandemic**

After CEFR was introduced, all four teachers noted a guide for what to look out for in assessing their students. For example, Teacher 3 noted that *“with CEFR I knew the kind of level the students had to meet... with CEFR I am able to design lessons that will give my students enough practice in A1 level so when they are assessed, they are assessed fairly”* Teacher 2 who had not conducted speaking tests before the implementation of CEFR found it rather tricky to develop assessments that would meet CEFR standards. She did, however, acknowledge that *“CEFR presents teachers with a good framework for assessment”*. When explaining how she conducted her speaking tests, she explained that she struggled a little with developing a rubric that would test the level of all her students in her class as they have varying levels of competency. Therefore, she had to provide enough materials to help them understand the target language before assessing them.

When asked about how students reacted to speaking assessments now being a compulsory graded English language component, all four teachers noted that students were naturally more anxious during the assessment. *“In the past, my students were not particularly concerned with their pronunciation,”* said Teacher 1. However, she noted that when grading became compulsory, students were hesitant to speak, and they would stop and correct themselves. To her, this was a good mechanism, as



*“self-correction is an important element of language acquisition”*. She also noted that regular assessments were an effective way to prepare students for tests. First, however, she explained that *“they need to familiarise themselves with the process”*. This point was also expressed by the other three teachers when asked about students’ reactions to the mandatory testing put in place by the ministry.

### **Challenges Faced and Strategies Developed**

All four teachers noted that although CEFR presented them with a clear guideline to assess speaking, they felt that the COVID-19 SOPs made it very challenging for speaking tests to be carried out effectively. In adherence to the COVID-19 guidelines, there was no physical contact between teacher and student or even between themselves. The lack of physical contact in the classroom posed a challenge as it was difficult for teachers to conduct group assessments. To overcome this, Teacher 3 used Zoom to stimulate a video call environment for the speaking test. It was a new experience for his students. It piqued their interest, and *“they actually enjoyed their assessments because they were eager to see me on a computer screen...and because we conducted the assessment on Zoom, I was able to have group assessments where the students were asked to pose simple questions to their friends and they were graded based on CEFR A1 level of competency”*. It was an effective mode of assessment as the teacher was adhering to COVID-19 guidelines.

Teacher 3 believes that being correct with grammar usage is not necessary. He stressed that *“assessments are of little benefit if the students merely memorise and do not understand the subject matter”*. To stress this point further, he gave an example of an assessment strategy he used on one of his zoom sessions, where he asked his students to say how they all felt about being at home during the one-month lockdown. He highlighted how the *“students were happy to share their experiences and I was grading them on the side but because it seemed like a sharing session, they were freer with the use of the language and were not afraid of how they presented themselves”*.

These thoughts were also shared by Teacher 2. She believes that it is important to provide students with an environment that encourages them to use the language and make mistakes. Therefore, the importance of being able to convey meaning is prioritised in her classrooms. She said, *“I follow the guidelines on CEFR but I have to adjust it to my students’ level and allow them to gradually progress”*. She noted that although the intended level was for the student to reach A1, she presented students with an opportunity to practise the same target language a few times. She noted that with the mask on, it was difficult for students to see her mouth movement. Therefore, she deliberately slowed down her speech and enunciated every word. This method proved effective as it helped train the student’s listening along with their spoken ability. *“When I conducted speaking tests before the implementation of CEFR I would make*

*students watch my lip movement and also made them place their hand in front of their lips so they could feel the difference in air pressure when certain words are pronounced. However, during the pandemic this was a little difficult to execute so I made them sharpen their listening skills”.*

Three out of the four teachers interviewed noted that they found it difficult to accurately link assessments to CEFR as many teachers claimed that students still required much work with their spoken skills before they could be accessed. These teachers, therefore, administered more vocal exercises and varied lessons before they began to test their students. For example, in explaining her challenge in adhering to CEFR standards, Teacher 4 said, *“I cannot test my students when they are not ready”*. She, therefore, noted that her students were given ample practice, and she even conducted mock assessments to prepare her students for the actual speaking test.

Another challenge that all teachers faced was the presence of the mask. All teachers noted that the mask posed a hindrance in identifying what students were saying accurately. For example, Teacher 2 noted that *“it is difficult to understand them under the mask as pronunciation is muffled”*. While Teacher 1 said, *“before the pandemic, it was easier to understand what the students were saying during the speaking assessment as we could see their facial expressions... during the pandemic, the masks partially covered the students’ faces, and this posed a problem for us teachers”*. However, the presence of the mask indirectly compelled

teachers to focus on speaking elements of the assessment, which are more in line with the CEFR descriptors that do not include facial expressions but instead focus on the tone production of the students, such as pronunciation.

Nevertheless, to overcome the issues caused by the mask, some teachers made their students temporarily remove their face masks and wear a face shield, so their oral region was not blocked. It enabled the teachers to hear the students’ responses clearly and view their non-verbal expressions. Another strategy utilised was to speak slowly to the students. It was to enable the students to understand what the teachers were saying and respond accordingly. This method was in line with CEFR’s A1 level, where the student should interact with the other person provided the person speaks slowly and clearly. It was reiterated by Teacher 2: *“I had to speak extra slowly to make sure students understood me.... I also made sure students enunciated their words underneath the masks”*.

All the teachers interviewed for this paper brought up the issue of anxiety among students during speaking assessments. Two issues caused speaking anxiety. Firstly, in adhering to COVID -19 guidelines, teachers were only allowed to administer speaking tests individually (in smaller classrooms). Teachers 2 and 3 both noted that many of their students were afraid to speak alone as speaking tests in the past, although not graded, were conducted in groups where students were encouraged to converse with one another. They concurred that

students were less motivated because group assessments were no longer permitted for classrooms with small spaces. According to the teachers, this affected the grades of the students. In addition, Teacher 2 pointed out that COVID-19 guidelines limited the type of assessments that could be carried out. The distance between the teacher and student also made it uncomfortable for shy students to speak, which increased their anxiety levels. Moreover, the teacher had to make the students speak louder, which they were uncomfortable with.

To ease anxiety levels among students, Teacher 2 converted her assessment session into a role-play session. Students were placed at a safe distance and were required to ask the teacher simple questions of A1 level while pretending to be a journalist. This exercise *“broke down their anxiety a little as the focus shifted from the speaking test to questioning the teacher...and they loved it”*. In addition, they were not aware that they were being assessed for the session, which made it a lot more relaxed for them. It indirectly presented a less intrusive form of assessment, a new method developed by Teacher 2 to ensure her students were comfortable during the speaking assessment and not fair badly.

In classes that allowed for more than one student for speaking assessments, Teacher 1 found that continuing pair practice at a safe distance helped students prepare better prior to the speaking tests. In addition, it allowed students to gain confidence before being graded. To put students at ease even further, she designed the speaking test in a way

that was similar to how the pair practices were conducted prior to the pandemic. The familiar environment of speaking to their friends helped students develop fluency through repetition and ease their nerves. Given that every learner learns differently, Teacher 4 noted that *“some students were more confident with individual tests and were happy not speaking in front of the entire class”*. The students mainly relied on notes written to help them during the speaking test and were less nervous during the assessment process.

## DISCUSSION

While CEFR provides a clear framework for language teaching and assessment, responses from the teachers showed that on several occasions, the teachers resorted to their methods on how to conduct the speaking tests in line with CEFR standards. However, teachers also fell back on their primary needs and goals for their students within the English classroom. Similar to Nemoto's (2018) findings on the inconsistency of how the lessons are delivered in the classroom, the pandemic has kept the board and teachers from resolving this issue immediately. However, despite these inconsistencies, due to the introduction of the CEFR framework, teachers developed new strategies to ensure speaking tests are carried out effectively based on a globally accepted framework.

The different strategies employed by the teachers were innovative ways to ensure they continued to assess their students' speaking ability based on CEFR's A1

level while at the same time adhering to COVID-19 guidelines and SOPs. Although two out of the four teachers interviewed did not conduct assessments prior to the introduction of CEFR, they did however acknowledge that CEFR provided them with a clear framework. The role of the teacher as the interlocutor in the role-play sessions meant that the student was not placed at a disadvantage. This is because, the student is assessed on a more neutral ground as the teacher was able to adjust the conversation accordingly and this would not affect the student's performance. Ensuring that the assessments were carried out in a fun and safe manner was another strategy that worked to the advantage of the student as it helped calm their nerves before an assessment. The views of Teacher 3 on wanting to keep assessments fun and not stressful validate claims in previous research on reducing examination-oriented learning (Esther, 2012; Leong & Rethinasamy, 2020; Van Lier, 2004; William, 2011) and emphasise the need to focus on the learning experience and provide a more systematic way of assessing, recording and reporting students' learning.

With the case of the masks, while the apparatus might have hindered speech quality, it does not limit all the functions of communication entirely. The mask addresses extra-linguistic strategies that educators can use to their advantage in the classroom. It further emphasises the importance of non-verbal communication features in the language, often overlooked by students learning English, let alone speaking. It

is an area that has received significant attention, particularly in scholarly work discussing second language learners and the importance of non-verbal communication (Carreira, 2006; Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Van Lier, 2004). Therefore, despite the COVID-19 guidelines, teachers could still conduct these speaking tests even with the mask hindering the view of the organ we use to communicate. Having their students pay more attention to other aspects of the spoken language like sound production rather than lip movement was a good way to bring more awareness to the spoken aspect of English and to the different phonetic sounds that may not be evident in the student's mother tongue. In addition, the continuous repetition of such words indirectly provided more opportunities to improve language acquisition and build confidence in speaking. This method by the teachers was also in line with CEFR's A1 level, where the student develops a repertoire of words at a basic level.

Using technology to conduct assessments was a fitting example of how speaking tests can be carried out while adhering to COVID-19 guidelines. Using Zoom as a medium was a good way to test students from a safe distance. At the same time, it helped keep anxiety levels low as students felt comfortable behind the computer screen and were more comfortable speaking. Such innovative assessments are needed, particularly for elementary school students whose very thought of assessments can be quite daunting. This assessment strategy can also be employed

for future speaking assessments. It is the way forward for many institutions of learning where assessments at the initial stages of schooling could be conducted with the aid of technology before moving on with face-to-face assessments. In the years to come, it is anticipated that online learning will continue to be developed as the education technology industry is thriving during the pandemic. Creating more opportunities to connect students online for communication is ideal for making speaking tests more fruitful.

## CONCLUSION

Although the data in this study is limited to 4 teachers, it does provide a basic understanding of how speaking tests were conducted prior to, and after the Ministry of Education, Culture Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan introduced CEFR. More importantly, the findings are relevant to teachers today as the new strategies can be developed into viable means of assessments when social distancing has become the new norm.

In a global pandemic when the entire world scrambled to adhere to guidelines on social distancing and quarantine orders, Japan was one of the very few countries that decided to continue face to face mode of educational instruction. Although COVID numbers were on the rise, the government only decided to close schools for one month and, resume the face-to-face mode of instruction after that. This move by the government was particularly challenging for teachers since they were faced with two

major concerns. On the one hand, they were now required to formally grade students on their speaking ability based on the CEFR. Nevertheless, on the other hand, they had to administer these tests while adhering to strict COVID-19 SOPs as the pandemic coincided with the government's directives.

This paper has reported findings from four teachers on how speaking tests were conducted for Grade 5 and 6 elementary school students in eight schools within Niigata City. Hence it is premature to make any firm conclusions. However, the findings present important preliminary data on how speaking assessments can be carried out within the new normal even as literature in this area is still very scarce. The findings also present clear evidence that the introduction of CEFR into the elementary 5 and 6 English curricula has offered teachers a better roadmap to manoeuvre through lesson planning and assessments which is vital to monitor students' learning process continuously. It is proposed that future research could look at a larger scale involving a bigger sample of teachers from different prefectures in Japan. In addition, considering the increment in sample size, future studies could use findings from the present study and include an extra instrument of questionnaire and use a survey method to gather information from a larger sample of teachers and students that would elicit more data. With the introduction of speaking tests based on CEFR, we can see that testing provides a more solid ground on how to measure students' learning outcomes despite the use of several methods to achieve

the same goal. The findings show that this English education reform can streamline how the four language skills in English especially speaking, are taught and tested in Japanese elementary classrooms to ensure more consistency in how learning outcomes are assessed.

There are numerous other variables within the four walls of a classroom that dictate how the assessment session can unfold. For example, students' motivation for that day, the presence of face masks and social distancing that hampers auditory functions are some of the issues that can hinder the execution of a successful assessment. Therefore, based on the interviews with the teachers, while CEFR provides a clear framework for assessing the English language, teachers must always be prepared for the worst-case scenario and learn to adapt, modify and restructure assessments accordingly, and in the case of 2020, it was the global pandemic that has altered the course of education for many years to come.

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