

The Effects of Intensive Communication Activities To Improve Novice Learners' Oral Interaction Skills

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Abstract

One of the goals for most EFL learners, particularly for novice learners, is to become fluent or to acquire oral skills; therefore, language teachers should encourage students to be successful in learning to speak in classrooms. A group activity would be pedagogically meaningful for language teachers to work toward facilitating students' development of English speaking ability. One of the practices of an oral interaction has been carried out with a group of three novice learners of English who participated in intensive communication activities.

The study was carried out to see if the intensive communication activities worked effectively to improve the novice learners' oral interaction skills. There were two types of participants: junior high school students who were instructed how to carry out oral interactions with two other students, and vocational college students who did not receive special treatment or training for oral interactions. That is to say, the substantial difference between the junior high school students and the vocational college students were whether they were intensively taught to interact with other students in English. Their English level was approximately the same according to the most standardized English test in Japan.

The conversations were videotaped, transcribed and then analyzed. With regard to grammatical features, there were several characteristics that discriminated the novice learners, such as the total number of words spoken in five minutes and the use of phrases, simple sentences, and compound/complex sentences. In terms of discourse features, this type of instruction did not seem to affect the participants' oral interaction skills so far as the quantitative analysis was concerned. The statistical analysis revealed a difference among the participants on the total number of words spoken in five minutes and the number of simple sentences.

1. Introduction

In the domain of teaching English, the methods of communicative language teaching have become the basic mainstay since 1970s. There is a vast array of studies and practices of 'communicative' language teaching. Davies (1978) mentioned that a communicative approach should focus on oral skills before written ones. As one of the goals for most EFL learners, particularly for novice learners, is to become fluent or to acquire oral skills, language teachers should encourage students to be successful in learning to speak in classrooms. To do so, teachers need to give students communication tasks with the aim of facilitating oral interactions with each other rather than to give lectures to them. The lessons should be learner-centered so that they will have sufficient opportunities to practice speaking.

One of the procedures to accelerate students' oral interaction skills is group work and Fulcher (1996) states that group or pair work are by and large well received by learners. According to Long's "Interaction Hypothesis" (1981, 1983a and 1983b), the interactional nature of conversation facilitates language development. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) proposed that when ESL learners

share common goals and interests, they communicate with one another better. Long and Porter suggested in 1985 that paired and small group activities increase the amount of meaningful and interesting interactions and greatly multiply the number of opportunities to speak English. Oshita (1996) also put forward the claim that group work enables students to diversify communication patterns, activate psychologically, facilitate solving the problems, evoke the interlocutor's sympathy, and become conscious of conveying the meanings. A group activity would be pedagogically meaningful for language teachers to work toward facilitating students' development of English speaking ability. Luoma points out the advantage of group discussion as follows: "In classroom assessment, ... group discussions, or individual presentations followed by group discussion, can be quite practical, and they serve the purpose of practicing speaking and generating learner talk quite well." (2004: 39) Although such group activities are not used in formal tests of speaking due to the difficulties of managing the sizes of groups and the mixture of ability levels (Reves, 1991), Cambridge First Certificate employs interactive communication such as a three-way discussion (UCLES, 2001).

Speaking is meaningful interaction between people (Luoma, 2004). As for EFL learners, Hughes (2002) mentions that an awareness of effects of the interactive, spontaneous and personally oriented nature of speech can be of great benefit to learners, both in terms of fluency and appropriateness, and also for the improvement of global listening skills. Hughes also lists three basic aspects of spontaneous speech which language learners need to be made aware of, and which language teachers may find it helpful to reflect on:

- 1) speaking is fundamentally an interactive task;
- 2) speaking happens under real-time processing constraints;
- 3) speaking is more fundamentally linked to the individual who produces it than the written form is.

Hughes (2002:135)

One of the practices of an oral interaction activity has been carried out with groups of three junior high school students with the aim of improving their communicative English ability. One prefecture board of education has compelled all of its junior high schools, 234, to put communication activities into practice in their classrooms. Its final goal, the Interactive English Forum, is to let students express themselves in English after practicing oral interactions in each school. The participants of the Interactive English Forums are representatives of the second and third grade junior high school students from each junior high school. There are several Forums from the 1) City and County level, 2) District level, and the final, 3) Prefecture Forum. From the data of the third grade students, Negishi (2003 and 2004) found some characteristics between the so-called 'higher level students', the participants who proceeded to the final Forum, and the 'middle

level students' who were not able to take part in the final but performed at the District Forum.

Negishi (2003) conducted research to find out the communicatively crucial items among the students in order to bring the communication level of EFL learners closer to that of native speakers. To evaluate the students' communicative competence, four categories were chosen for analysis: grammar, vocabulary, fluency and strategy. The study revealed some characteristics of the junior high school students' oral interactions. The participants were: 1) the participants of the District Forum only, named junior high school middle level students, were abbreviated to the 'JHSs middle' and 2) the participants of the final, Prefecture Forum, named junior high school higher level students, were abbreviated to the 'JHSs higher.' The items that discriminated between the students were the total number of words, the rate of speech, the length of pauses, and the number of sentences. However, they did not show enough significance probability level to distinguish the JHSs middle and the JHSs higher statistically. Although the study demonstrated some features, it also raised a question: Why was there no significant difference between the two levels of the students? There must be other items that were not chosen in the study, with which one can intuit a clear distinction between the two when one listens to the video tapes and reads the transcriptions.

Negishi (2004) carried out the next analysis to solve the above problem and to determine the items that increased the students proficiency in English, since the participants in the upper level Forum were more proficient than those in the lower levels. Among the varied areas of research, the notion of communicative competence by Canale and Swain (1980a and 1980b) was employed because of the fact that the Course of Study of Japan appeared to be guided by their theory (Nagasawa, 2003).

The results revealed the difference between the groups as follows:

- 1) Phenomena that the less proficient speakers employed the least or that the more proficient speakers employed the most: a) total number of words spoken in five minutes, b) number of words spoken on each subordinate topic, c) number of words following the main topic
- 2) Phenomena that the less proficient speakers employed the most or that the most proficient speakers employed the least: a) turn-takings, b) body language expressions, c) hesitations
- 3) Phenomena that the higher level students employed the most: a) shorter segments, b) reactive tokens

2. Purpose of the Study

Based on the studies above (Negishi 2003 and 2004), this study was carried out to see if the intensive communication activities for participating the Interactive English Forum worked effectively to improve the novice learners' communication skills. Due to the fact that the junior high school students instructed with intensive communication activities seemed to speak fluently, the spoken data from vocational college students, who had not received such treatment, were analyzed together with the spoken data from the junior high school students. Their overall English level was

more or less equivalent according to the most popular standardized test in Japan, the STEP test.

Research questions were set as follows:

- 1) Do the intensive communication activities work to improve novice learners' oral interaction skills?
- 2) If they do, what items are affected by the intensive communication activities?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

There were four types of participants, the vocational college students and the junior high school students, both of whom were divided into approximately two groups by their English level: the STEP (The Society for Testing English Proficiency Inc.) test 3rd level and pre-2nd level. Although the vocational college students were strictly graded by the STEP test when they entered the college, the junior high school students were not actually grouped by the STEP test.

Public junior high schools in Japan use the same textbooks designated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in order to maintain educational standards. Because of the supervision, we can indicate that the top 15 to 25 percent junior high school students have the STEP 3rd grade certificate and some of them have the pre-2nd grade certificate. For these reasons, it can be assumed that the students who performed at the final level Forum are at the pre-2nd grade level. Likewise, those who took part in the district level Forum are at the 3rd grade level. This indicates that the overall levels of English between the junior high school students and the vocational college students were nearly the same as far as the STEP test was concerned. The STEP test is a very common examination in Japan, particularly for students, which measures learners' English ability in terms of vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening, and speaking via an interview test. According to an announcement from the STEP, more than 2.5 million people take the tests every year. It is said that the 3rd grade certificate is close to 100-220 of TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) and pre-2nd is 220-470. Since the vocational college students have studied English at least four years longer than the junior high school students, the junior high school students could be regarded as high-achieving speakers of English; on the other hand, the vocational college students could be inferred as the opposite.

In this regard, the vocational college 3rd level students were called 'VCSs 3rd', and the pre-2nd level students 'VCSs pre-2nd', due to their STEP test score. The junior high school participants who took part in the Prefecture Forum were called 'JHSs higher' and in the District level 'JHSs middle' in this study.

As mentioned above, in terms of the STEP test, English level of the VCSs Pre-2nd and the JHSs higher were relatively close, and the VCSs 3rd and the JHSs middle were close as well. Nevertheless, the substantial difference between the VCSs and the JHSs was whether they were intensively taught to interact with other students in English. The JHSs were instructed how to carry

out oral interactions with two other students. They participated in intensive communication activities several days a week for two to three months by their Japanese teacher of English (JTE) and/or assistant language teacher (ALT), a native speaker. On the other hand, the VCSs received ordinary lessons according to their self-report, that is to say, lecture-oriented lessons and few communication activities.

None of the students, both of the vocational college students and the junior high school students, have ever lived or received education abroad. The length of studying English by the JHSs was two and a half years and that of the VCSs was approximately seven years.

Each group had twelve participants. Out of twelve members in each group, the VCSs 3rd had 11 females, the VCSs pre-2nd 8, the JHSs higher 7, and the JHSs middle 8.

3.2 Spoken Data

The oral interactions of the junior high school participants were videotaped at the Interactive English Forums, which were held in halls, and transcribed. Those of the vocational college students were videotaped in a similar fashion at the college and transcribed, as well. Each participant in a group introduced themselves for about thirty seconds before the conversation began to avoid wasting time for self-introduction in the conversation. The interaction was precisely five minutes on a topic which was given several minutes prior to the conversation, such as school, friends, family, culture, dream and so forth.

3.3 Data Analysis

Based on the result of Negishi (2003 and 2004), only grammatical features and discourse features were investigated in this study since the Interactive English Forum could not elicit a sufficient number of sociolinguistic and strategic expressions. In terms of grammatical features, the items analyzed were as follows:

- 1) total number of ¹words spoken in five minute interactions
- 2) sentence structure
 - a) sentential fragments (²reactive tokens and phrases)
 - b) sentences (simple sentences, compound sentences, and complex sentences)

Discourse features were analyzed by the following items:

- 1) turn-takings (self-selections and nominations)
- 2) reactive tokens (number of backchannels, number of body languages expressions, and other types of reactive tokens)
- 3) coherence (number of words spoken per subordinate topic and number of words following the main topic)

¹ A 'word' here includes fillers and reactive tokens such as 'Oh!' and 'Mmm...'

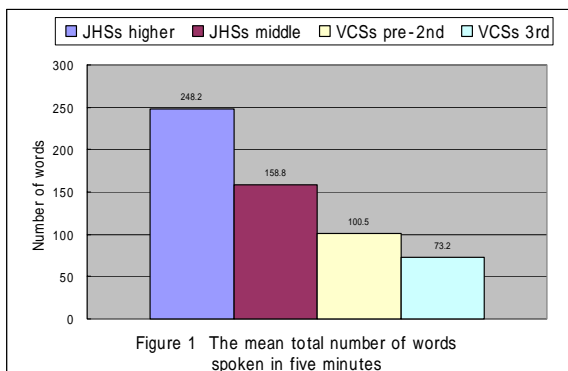
² See 4.1.2. for 'reactive tokens.'

4. Results and Discussion

The conversations were videotaped, transcribed and then analyzed quantitatively based on the categories described in 3.3. The results were as follows:

4.1. Grammatical Features

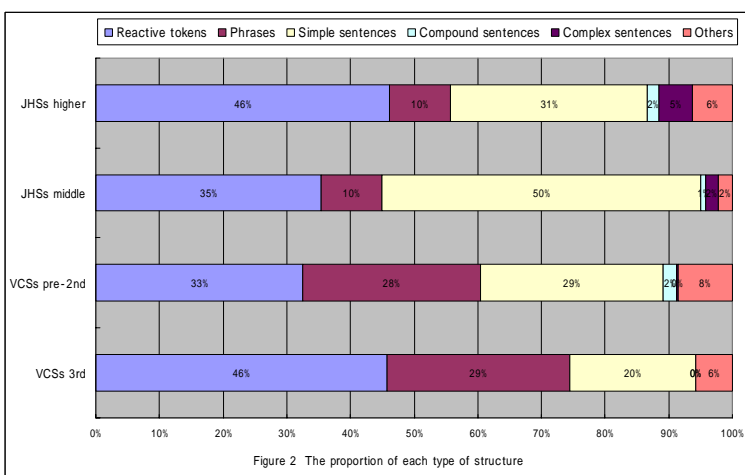
4.1.1. Total number of words and sentences/sentential fragments spoken in five minutes



In this study, a ‘word’ includes fillers and reactive tokens. The number of words each student spoke in five minutes was counted, which could be regarded as one of the indicators of their fluency. The mean total number of words was calculated per group, showing that the JHSs higher seemed to be the most fluent among the four groups, followed by the JHSs middle, the VCSs pre-2nd, to the

VCSs 3rd, who seemed to be the least fluent. As Figure 1 shows, the result clearly displays that the JHSs higher used the largest number of words, 248.2, followed by the JHSs middle, 158.8, the VCSs pre-2nd, 100.5, and the VCSs 3rd the least, 73.2. This indicates that the intensively instructed JHSs were more fluent than the non-instructed VCSs, which means the instructed JHSs spoke more enthusiastically with less pauses.

4.1.2. Sentence Structure



To investigate the sentence structures the students used, sentences were divided into two types sentential fragments and sentences.

Sentential fragments

As for sentential fragments, two kinds of fragments were counted, a) reactive tokens and b) phrases. Reactive tokens were divided into two groups: backchannels and other types of reactive tokens. Backchannels are one-word utterances, such as “Yeah,” “Oh,” or “Mmm...,” including laughter, but not including

“Mmm...” for hesitation. Other types of reactive tokens are reactive expressions like “Great!,” repetitions of statements by another speaker, and short statements, such as “That’s wonderful.” (Clancy et al. :1996) Phrases are also regarded as sentential fragments, such as noun phrases, adjective phrases, adverbs, prepositional phrases other than reactive tokens. Figure 2 shows the proportion of the structures which each group used. The reason for employing the proportion here, not the numbers, is that the mean number of words each group used greatly differ, from 73 to 248, so the numbers simply cannot accurately show the difference between the four groups.

In terms of sentential fragments consisting of reactive tokens and phrases, the intensively instructed students, JHSs, employed less than the VCSs: the JHSs higher 56% (46% reactive tokens and 10% phrases) and the JHSs middle 45% (35% and 10% respectively) versus the VCSs pre-2nd 61% (33% and 28% respectively) and the VCSs 3rd 74% (45% and 29% respectively). This means that the JHSs’ use of sentential fragments was about half of the total number of words; while, the VCSs’ use of them was just more than three-fifths for the pre-2nd, and nearly three-fourths for the 3rd. Specifically, it is obvious that the VCSs used more phrases than the JHSs: the JHSs’ 10% versus the VCSs’ 28.5%.

Sentences

Sentences were divided into three groups, a) simple sentences, b) complex sentences, and 3) compound sentences. As for simple sentences, comparing the JHSs and VCSs, the former used 40.5% (higher’s 31% and middle’s 50%) and the latter 24.5% (pre-2nd’s 29% and 3rd’s 20%). This indicates that the instructed students could use more sentences compared to the non-instructed students who employed more sentential fragments. With regard to complex and compound sentences, although only a few were used over all, there was a clear difference between the intensively instructed students and the other students. That is, the JHSs higher, who were regarded as the most fluent, employed 7% of complex/compound sentences while the VCSs 3rd, who were regarded as the least fluent, uttered no complex/compound sentences at all. This suggests that the more the students practiced, the more simple sentences and complex/compound sentences they could use in their casual oral interactions. The result of Negishi (2004) revealed that the native speakers used 36% simple sentences, 19% complex/compound sentences. This comparison also suggests that the VCSs were at the earlier stage of learning and the JHSs had advanced to the next level.

With regard to grammatical features, there were several characteristics that discriminated not only between the VCSs and JHSs but among the four levels of students, such as the total number of words spoken in five minutes and the use of phrases, simple sentences, and compound/complex sentences. In short, the intensively instructed JHSs spoke more fluently, using more words, and were able to employ more sentences than fragments. On the other hand, the VCSs tended to show their disfluency with less words and incomplete utterances consisting of phrases and reactive tokens.

4.2. Discourse Features

4.2.1 Turn-takings

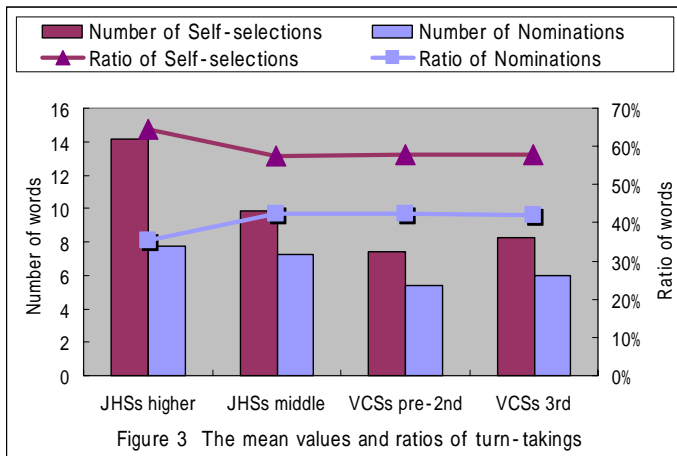


Figure 3 The mean values and ratios of turn-takings

People take turns when they are selected or nominated by the current speaker or, if no one is selected, they may speak of their own accord (self-selection). If neither of these conditions occur, the person who is currently speaking may continue: see Sacks et al. (1974). The method by which the participants take turns was analyzed in terms of nomination and self-selection in

this study. All the students changed the floor more often by self-selections, which demonstrates that they tried to speak enthusiastically, regardless of whether they could speak fluently. The bar graph of Figure 3 shows the number of self-selections and nominations and the line graph shows their ratio. Compared to the number of self-selections, the number of nominations does not show a significant difference.

Although the number of turn-takings differed, the mean ratio of self-selections was almost the same, 57.3%, 57.8%, 58.0%, among the groups, except the JHSs higher, who had a ratio of 64.5%. This phenomenon seemed to be caused by the JHSs' enthusiasm to carry out the conversation which led frequent turn-takings. However, it cannot be said that fluency or the intensive instruction had an influence on turn-takings.

4.2.2. Reactive tokens

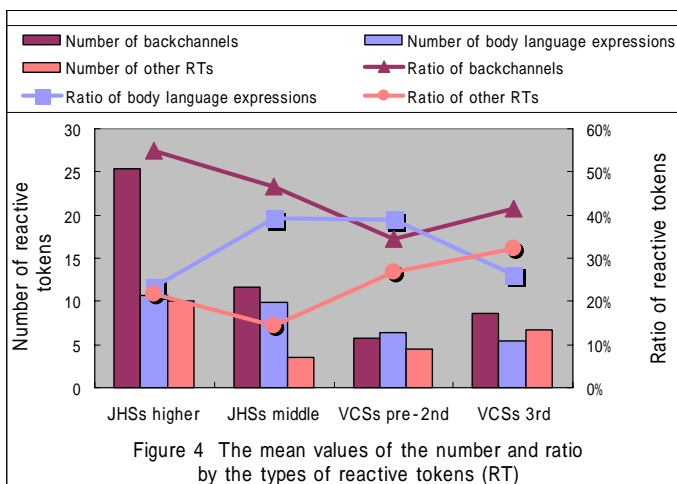


Figure 4 The mean values of the number and ratio by the types of reactive tokens (RT)

Figure 4 shows the mean values of the number and ratios by the types of reactive tokens. Although there seemed to be some differences in the participants use of reactive tokens, typical characteristics were not observed among the groups. It can be said, however, the JHSs tended to use more backchannels than the VCSs in terms of both numbers and ratios.

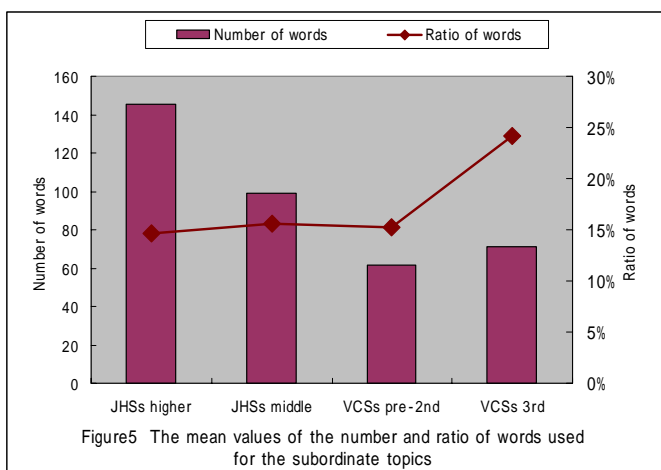
Both the number and ratio of backchannels used by the JHSs were around fifty percent, which might show the influence of their mother tongue. The reason the VCSs used less backchannels in spite of the same mother tongue could be due to their disfluency that put them under more pressure to find the words to express themselves. As the JHSs were instructed to communicate with other students, they were more relaxed and showed their enthusiasm to interact, which led to the transfer of their mother tongue, in the form of backchannels. This phenomenon was clearly observed on their video.

The number of body language expressions the JHSs employed was larger than that of the VCSs; however, the ratio did not show any differences.

As for other types of reactive tokens, the VCSs tended to use more than the JHSs in respect to their ratio. Although there were differences in the numbers and ratios of each type of reactive tokens, there seemed to be no definite items that displayed the influence of the intensive communication activities.

4.2.3 Coherence

To investigate whether the students followed the topic given a few minutes prior to the conversation, the number of words cohering to the topic was counted. The number of words was counted per group, not individually, since the interaction was carried out as a group.



While the students tried to follow the given or main topic, they did change the topic to some minor topics, which are called subordinate topics here. Figure 5 shows the mean values of the number and ratio of words used for subordinate topics. The number of subordinate topics was counted per group. For example, the topic given to one of the VCSs pre-2nd group was “family” and the group started their conversation about speaker C’s family and shifted to speaker C’s dog. The subordinate topic moved to speaker B’s hometown followed by speaker A’s hometown. In this case, the number of subordinate topics of this group was counted as four.

The mean values of the number of words on subordinate topic was 145.3 for the JHSs higher, the largest number, followed by 98.8 for the JHSs middle, 70.8 for the VCSs 3rd, and 61.3 for the VCSs pre-2nd, who had the lowest number. Nevertheless, the ratio, the number of words on subordinate topic divided by the number of total words spoken by the group, displayed the opposite

phenomenon: the JHSs higher 32.3%, the JHSs middle 13.4%, the VCSs pre-2nd 28.6% and the VCSs 3rd 69.7% (The mean ratios of all the JHSs was 20.1% and 26.3% for the VCSs). This demonstrated that the VCSs tended to follow the subordinate topic, which could be inferred to reflect

their experience or maturity, not their fluency.

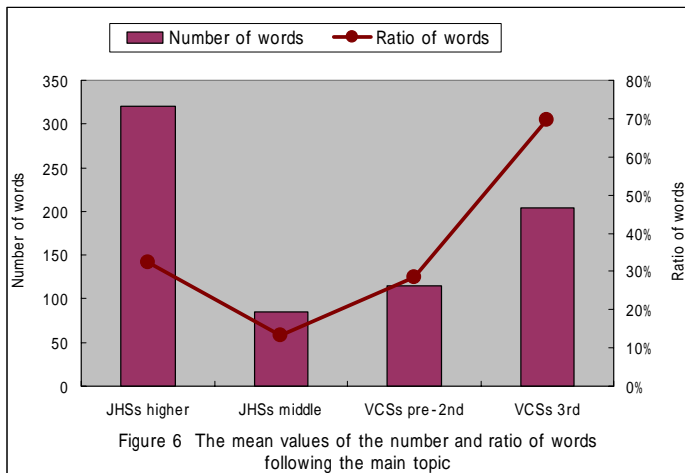


Figure 6 The mean values of the number and ratio of words following the main topic

The mean number of words spoken on the main topic per group was also calculated, as shown in Figure 6. The JHSs higher followed the main topic the most, 320.3, followed by the VCSs 3rd, 204.0, the VCSs pre-2nd, 114.8, and the JHSs middle, 85.0, the least. The ratio, the number of words on the main topic divided by the

number of total words spoken by the group, illustrates that VCSs 3rd followed the topic the most, 92.9%, followed by the JHSs higher, 73.4%, the VCSs pre-2nd, 38.1% and the JHS middle the least 17.8%. From these results, it cannot be said that the instruction had an influence on whether the students followed the main topic.

With regard to coherence, the data was collected per group, not individually; consequently, the statistical analysis was not carried out because of the small number of groups.

In terms of discourse features, the intensive instruction did not seem to affect the participants' oral interaction skills so far as the quantitative analysis was concerned.

4.3 Statistical analysis

The one-way layout analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to find out whether there was a difference between the mean values of the four groups: the JHSs higher, the JHSs middle, the VCSs pre-2nd, and the VCSs 3rd. The results are on Table 1: the items that showed significance with an alpha level of .01 were the total number of words, the total number of sentences, the number of reactive tokens, the number of phrases, the number of simple sentences, the number of compound sentences, the number of complex sentences, the number of self-selected turn-takings, the number of backchannels, and the number of other types of reactive tokens. The multiple comparison by the Tukey's HSD test with an alpha level of .05 is on Table 2: there was no item that clearly discriminated the four levels of students. Seven items distinguished between the two groups of JHSs while no items did for the two VCS groups. The only items that indicated the discrimination between either of the JHS groups and either of the VCS groups were the number of words spoken in five minutes and the number of simple sentences, which showed <.01.

The statistical analysis only revealed the difference among the participants on the number of simple sentences.

Table 1 The result of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) df(3,44)

items	F values	p values
Total number of words spoken in five minutes	23.7	**
Total number of sentences	40	**
Number of reactive tokens	36.2	**
Number of noun phrases, adjective phrases, adverbs, and prepositional phrases	3.1	*
Number of simple sentences	26.4	**
Number of compound sentences	7.8	**
Number of complex sentences	21.4	**
Number of turn-takings (self-selections)	5.4	**
Number of turn-takings (nominations)	2.2	
Number of reactive tokens (backchannels)	27.2	**
Number of reactive tokens (body language)	1.8	
Number of other types of reactive tokens	5.3	**

Table 2 The result of the multiple comparison (Tukey's HSD test)

	Between JHSs higher and JHSs middle	Between JHSs higher and VCSs pre-2nd	Between JHSs higher and VCSs 3rd	Between JHSs middle and VCSs pre-2nd	Between JHSs middle and VCSs 3rd	Between VCSs pre-2nd and VCSs 3rd
Total number of words spoken in five minutes	**	**	**	**	**	
Total number of sentences	**			**	**	
Number of reactive tokens	**			**	**	
Number of noun phrases, adjective phrases, adverbs, and prepositional phrases		*				
Number of simple sentences		**	**	**	**	
Number of compound sentences	**			**		
Number of complex sentences	**			**	**	
Number of turn-takings (self-selections)				*	**	
Number of turn-takings (nominations)						
Number of reactive tokens (backchannels)	**			**	**	
Number of reactive tokens (body language)						
Other types of reactive tokens	**				*	

5 Conclusion

The instructed JHSs were more fluent than the VCSs insofar as the number of words, the use of more simple sentences, and the use of complex/compound sentences were concerned. In this context, the VCSs who had not been given much speaking training showed disfluency including an elevated use of sentential fragments. It can be inferred that to speak fluently, this type of intensive instruction works well according to the results of grammatical features.

Nonetheless, the VCSs were more coherent on the main and subordinate topics. This evidence tells us that it is difficult to make students coherent through practicing. Experience and maturity might be a factor. Other than coherence, discourse features did not display significant difference between the students who had participated in the intensive communication activities and those who did not.

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