

A Study of English communicative competence of Japanese junior high school students as beginners of English

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1. Introduction

English teaching in Japan has placed emphasis on its grammar for a long time. However, due to the globalization of the world and its use of English as a lingua franca, the teaching style is shifting from reading and writing to listening and speaking. Since the last curriculum guidelines in 1989, the Japanese government has emphasized improving students' communicative competence in their study of English. Junior high schools are trying to have communicative-based lessons since they are beginners in English, and also because they have listening tests for high school entrance exams.

Ibaraki prefecture, which has 243 junior high schools, discontinued the speech contest in 1998 as it is strictly memorization of English and doesn't evaluate the ability of the students to converse in English. In its place, the prefecture started the 'Interactive English Forum' to improve the students' interactive communication ability. In this Forum, the students perform five-minute oral interactions in groups of three. Students enjoy participating in this form of competition more than the speech contest. Since the Forum began, the students' overall English ability seems to have improved because of their work with Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs).

The purpose of this study is 1) to learn the crucial elements of communication that must be supplied to student to bring the communication level of L2 learners closer to that of the native speakers. An additional purpose is 2) to learn if there is a difference between the subjective, holistic results of the Forum, based on the criteria found in the Appendix, and the objective, numerically analyzed evaluation conducted through this research. Furthermore, the data will be examined 3) to discover effective methods to improve the students' communicative competence.

2. Theoretical background

Since 1965 when Chomsky put forward his claim of competence and performance in linguistic knowledge, Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980) and

Canal (1983) cultivated the theory of communicative competence. This wave has changed the curriculum guidelines of Japan in 1989 to regard communication as important. However, schools have been bewildered as to how to cope with this innovative idea: which is more important to teach, accuracy or fluency, or what part of communication should be taught selectively through the good utilization of AETs.

This Forum is a good opportunity for investigating junior high school students' speaking ability, because they speak rather in a vernacular style, not in a careful style, a necessary factor to study interlanguage (Labov, 1970). The other strong point of the Forum is that it has merits of group work, which enable the students to diversify on communication patterns, activate psychologically, facilitate solving the problems, evoke the interlocutors' sympathy and become conscious of conveying the meanings (Oshita, 1996).

On choosing the categories for this investigation, reference was made to the hesitation phenomena (filled pauses (fillers), repetitions, corrections) and temporal variants (speech rate, articulation rate, length of pause, and length of run) (Wiese, 1984). The 'Interactive English Forum' judging criteria seems to have referred to the criteria that Yomeyama cited (1994). The results drawn from these two sets of criteria will be compared in this paper.

Diversified claims have been made regarding the levels of communication. Young (1995) remarked that one of the differences between intermediate learners and advanced learners comes from the numbers of t-units per minute, whereas Chamber (1997) stated that becoming fluent is not about speaking faster, but about pausing less. Adams (1980) found that factors showing speaking ability are accent, comprehension, fluency, grammar and vocabulary; however, he claimed that accent is not a crucial factor for differing levels. The analysis of the participants in this study will seek to determine which of these claims is accurate in regards to the levels of communication ability.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Two second grade students and two third grade students from every junior high school in Ibaraki prefecture participate in city or county level Forums just before summer vacation. The second grade students have studied English for at least one and a half years, and the third grade students have studied it for two and a half years by the time of the Forum. Students who have studied abroad more than 6 months cannot participate in the Forum. Only the data of third grade students is used

in this paper.

According to the result of the first Forum, 180 students were selected as participants in five district Forums. Thirty-six students participated in each district level Forum. In this paper, twelve "middle level students" were extracted from this district level Forum. Four of the twelve students selected for this study were male.

From the district level Forum, 36 students were selected to participate in the prefectural Forum. The twelve "higher level students" were extracted from this Forum. Five of the twelve students selected for this study were male.

The data of twelve native speakers, who are all ESL (English for Second Language) teachers, were also used as controlled groups. Nine of them are teaching English to junior high school students in Ibaraki prefecture and three of them are teaching English to adults at an English school in Toronto, Canada. Out of twelve people selected for this study, four were male.

The students participating in the Forum were divided into groups consisting of three members, which were determined by random selection. A few minutes prior to discussion, they were given a topic that they had five minutes to discuss.

3.2. Procedure

The students participating in the Forum were divided into groups consisting of three members, which were determined by random selection. A few minutes prior to discussion, they were given a topic that they had five minutes to discuss.

All the interactions were videotaped and transcribed. The four middle level groups (12 students total) and the four higher level groups (12 students total) were extracted from the interactions, and their transcripts were compared with those of 12 native speakers (four groups) who performed the same kind of discussion as the Japanese students.

3.3. Categories of data analysis

To evaluate the students' communicative competence, four categories were selected; grammar, vocabulary, fluency and strategy.

To evaluate the students' grammatical knowledge, the number of grammatical mistakes were counted. To measure their active vocabulary, the number of words studied from their school textbooks as well as the number of words not found in their textbooks were counted. The students' fluency was evaluated by examining the rate of speech, the number of words per sentence, the length and the number of pauses that were longer than half a second, the number of sentences, and

the number of repetitions and self-corrections. The number of fillers and the number of evasions, rephrases, and loan-words were counted to evaluate their strategy.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Mean values of each group

Table 1 compares the mean values of each category for all three groups. The last three lines of Table 1 indicate the relative proportion of each category when the middle level students' values are set to 1.00. The original data is in the Appendix.

In most cases, there is only a small variation in the values between the middle and higher level students, whereas the variation between the students and the native speakers is large.

Table1 Mean values of each group

category \ group	GRAMMAR	VOCABULARY		FLUENCY						STRATEGY		
	number of mistakes/100 words	number of words	number of non-textbook words	rate of speech (words/sec)	number of words/sentence	number of pauses	length of pauses (sec)	number of sentences	number of repetitions	number of self-corrections	number of fillers	number of evasions, rephrases, loan-words
Middle	5.41	157	3.40	1.60	4.40	16.30	14.20	36.30	2.80	2.00	18.40	1.20
Higher	5.07	209	3.70	2.10	4.40	13.40	9.80	49.00	2.90	1.40	18.90	0.90
Native	0.12	242	15.10	2.70	7.80	14.30	11.80	31.10	1.30	0.80	10.80	0.10
Middle = 1	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Higher	0.94	1.33	1.04	1.32	1.00	0.83	0.69	1.35	1.06	0.71	1.03	0.79
Native	0.02	1.54	4.42	1.67	1.80	0.88	0.84	0.86	0.49	0.38	0.59	0.07

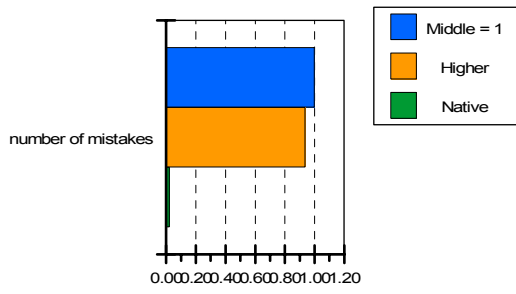


Figure 1-1 The number of mistakes

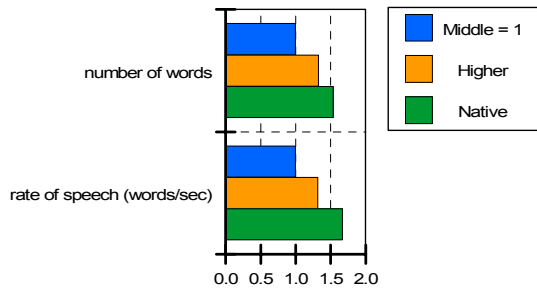


Figure 1-2 The number of words and the rate of speech

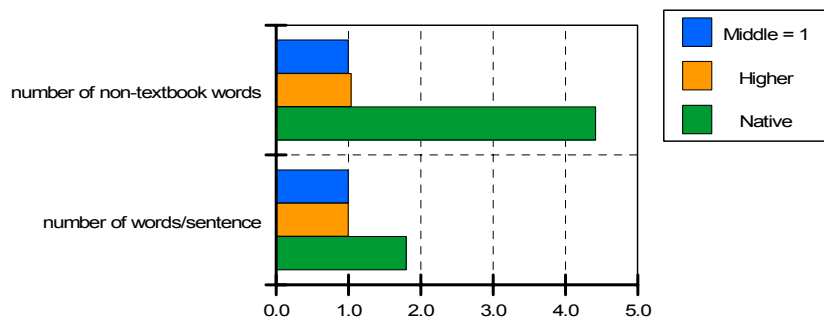


Figure 1-3 The number of non-textbook words and the number of words per sentence

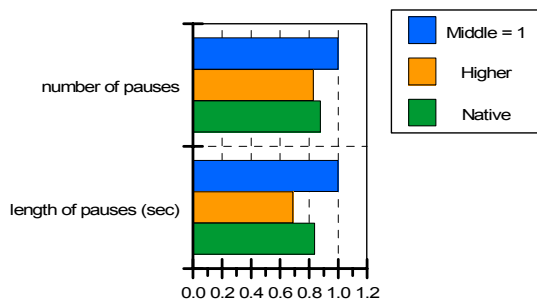


Figure 1-4 The number of pauses and the length of pauses

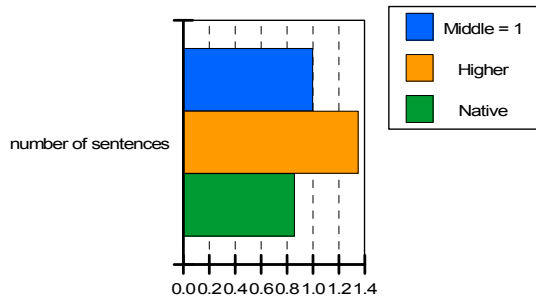


Figure 1-5 The number of sentences

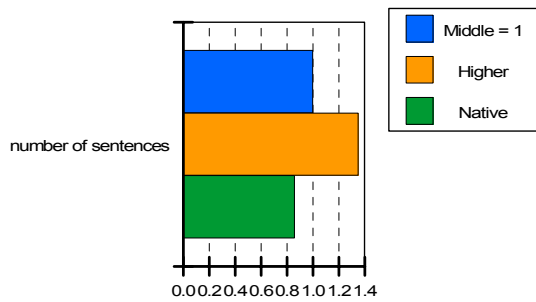


Figure 1-5 The number of sentences

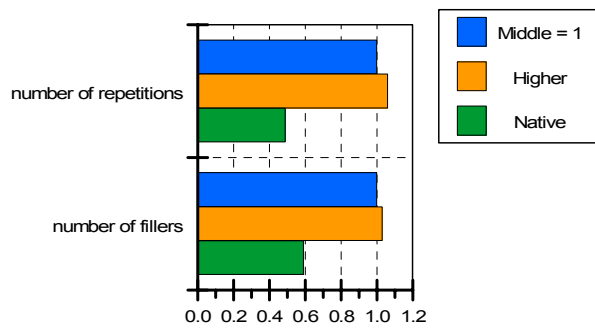


Figure 1-6 The number of repetitions and the number of fillers

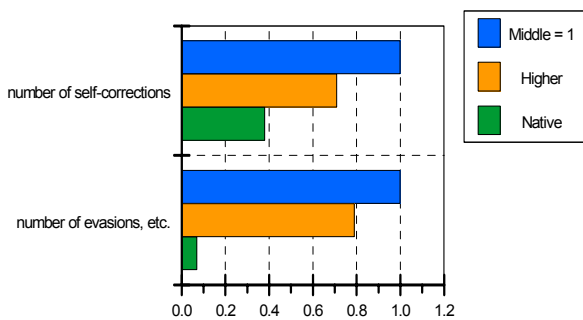


Figure 1-7 The number of self-corrections, evasions, rephrases and loan-words

1) The number of mistakes (Figure 1-1)

It appears that the more fluent the students were, the more grammatical mistakes they made. However, when comparing this to

the number of words used, the possibilities of making mistakes were almost the same that middle level students made mistakes at 5.41 per 100 words while the higher level students made mistakes at 5.07.

2) The number of words and the rate of speech (Figure 1-2)

When looking at the number of words and the rate of speech for each group, Figure 1-2 shows that the proportions for each group in the two categories are relative to their level of English. The higher level students tried to use more words than the middle level students, despite the fact that they had learned the same amount of vocabulary. The comparison of the number of words and the rate of speech between three groups clearly shows the differences in their levels of English.

3) The number of non-textbook words (that is, words above junior high school level) and the number of words per sentence (Figure 1-3)

The small variation in the number of non-textbook words and the number of words per sentence for the middle and higher level students indicated that those were not primary factors in comparing their level of fluency. Both groups of students were inclined to use one-word responses to show their interest in the speaker's story. Fragments and short sentences were also common among the students. It is important to note that the native speakers used more difficult words and made longer sentences than the two student groups. This follows the description of Chamber's (1997) that the utterances and sentence segments processed by L2 learners increase in length as fluency improves.

4) The number of pauses and the length of pauses (Figure 1-4)

These categories had peculiar results. The values for the native speakers are between the values for the middle and higher level students. The higher level students were always enthusiastic to utter some words or phrases, whereas the native speakers sometimes paused to find the words or hesitated before responding. This clearly follows what Chamber noted: lengthy silences may be due to a very limited vocabulary (middle level students), and non-native speakers do not actually pause longer than native speakers (higher level students).

5) The number of sentences (Figure 1-5)

The higher level students spoke more sentences than the middle level students on account of the difference in the rate of speech. On the

contrary, the native speakers uttered the least numbers of sentences among three groups by reason of using significantly more words per sentence.

6) The number of repetitions and the number of fillers (Figure 1-6)

Both of the student groups revealed the same phenomenon in that they used more repetitions and fillers than the native speakers in terms of responding to the speaker. This is a common technique used by Japanese people when having conversations in their native language.

7) The number of self-corrections, evasions, rephrases and loan-words (Figure1-7)

The more fluent the groups were, the lower the number of self-corrections, evasions, rephrases and loan-words used.

4.2. Discriminant analysis

A statistical analysis was conducted to determine whether there was a clear distinction between each group, and, if so, what factors are involved in the distinctions. Since the criterion variable was based on category data and the predictor variable was based on quantity data, discriminant analysis was conducted. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table2 Characteristic value & Significance probability

	Characteristic value	Significance probability
Middle & Higher	2.62	0.056
Higher & Native	7.11	0.001
Middle & Native	8.48	< 0.001

Table3 Explanatory variables**Standardized canonical discriminant function coefficient**

	Middle & Higher		Higher & Native		Middle & Native	
number of mistakes	-0.055		-0.698		-0.411	
number of words	-2.915	2	0.718	4	-0.549	5
number of non-textbook words	-0.269		0.195		0.889	2
rate of speech (words/sec)	1.466	3	0.596		0.787	4
number of words/sentence	1.219	4	-0.167		0.977	1
number of pauses	-0.683	5	-2.541	2	0.855	3
length of pauses (sec)	1.161		2.935	1	0.242	
number of sentences	3.434	1	-0.101		0.105	
number of repetitions	-0.096		-0.340		-0.450	
number of self-corrections	0.375		0.667	5	-0.510	
number of fillers	-0.158		-0.222		-0.017	
number of evasions, rephrases, loan-words	-0.365		-0.802	3	-0.071	

1) Characteristic value

The larger the characteristic value was, the more discrimination there is. The small variation between the two levels of students compared with the large variation between the students and the native speakers indicated that there was less discrimination between the two levels of the students.

2) Significance probability

The significance probability between the middle and the higher group was $p=0.056$, which indicated that there was not a significant probability between them. There are three possibilities to explain this result: a) The communicative competence was comparable among all the participants. b) The categories used in this numeric analysis were inadequate to measure the students' communicative competence. c) The criteria employed at the Forum was inadequate. It is necessary to determine the cause of these results.

The significance probability between the native speaker and both of the student groups was under 1% ($p=0.001, < 0.001$), which indicated that there was a definite distinction between the native speakers and both of the student groups.

4) Explanatory variable (Standardized canonical discriminant function

coefficient)

The findings of the explanatory variables can be found in Table 3. The standardized canonical discriminant function coefficient shows the instances when the absolute value of explanatory variable contributes to the discrimination between the groups. Despite the fact that there was no significant probability between the middle and the higher level students, the primary factor to discriminate between them in a certain sense was the difference in number of sentences. The second and the third factors were the number of words and the rate of speech.

The factors that discriminate between the higher level students and the native speakers were the length of pauses and the number of pauses. As Deschamps (1980) pointed out, this suggests the importance of pauses for L2 learners.

The factors that discriminate the middle level students and the native speakers were the number of words per sentence, the number of non-textbook words, and the number of pauses.

6 Conclusion

Although there seemed to be many factors to discriminate the participants on further examination, the explanatory variables indicated that the length and the number of pauses, and the number of words per sentence played an important role for L2 learners. Students used shorter segments in their sentences as Chamber cited.

It is important to note that students must be taught to produce longer segments; that is to say, teachers should try to teach them sentence level expressions, not short phrases.

The analysis employed in this paper reveals a clear discrimination between the students and the native speakers; however, it did not work well for the discrimination of adjacent groups, that is, the middle and higher level students. Further investigation is necessary to determine whether objective, numerical analysis is effective in assessing speaking performance.

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Appendix

Interactive English Forum : Content, Judging Criteria, Marks, and Viewpoints for Judging

What to do

Each person in a group of 3 has to talk freely for 30 seconds along a keyword for the group, which will be shown just before they start to talk, then launch into free conversation with other members for 8 minutes.

Judging Criteria

Each group is given marks for the communicative performance according to the following judging criteria.

- 1) intelligibility of expressions 10 points
- 2) cooperativeness/ friendliness 10 points
- 3) appropriateness of expressions 10 points

Viewpoints for Judging

1) e.g.1 the degree to which you can get your meaning across to your listener

e.g.2 was not afraid of making small mistakes.

2) e.g.1 provided proper topics / adapted well to the flow of conversation/ rescued conversation from a lull

e.g.2 asked pertinent questions/ made pertinent comments

e.g.3 interacted with others in a balanced way (e.g. did not monopolize conversation)

e.g.4 appeared to enjoy interaction

3) e.g.1 used appropriate vocabulary and expressions

e.g.2 spoke fluently

e.g.3 did not use any Japanese word

Conversation Data

	GRAMMAR	VOCABULARY			FLUENCY							STRATEGY		
		number of mistakes	number of words	number of non-textbook words	rate of speech (words/sec)	number of words/sentence	number of pauses	length of pauses (sec)	number of sentences	number of repetitions	number of self-corrections	number of fillers	number of evasions, rephrases, loan-words	
Middle level students	GROUP1	1	4	194	9	1.78	4.22	14	8	46	6	2	12	2
		2	10	150	4	1.33	3.85	26	22	39	6	3	23	3
		3	4	116	0	1.9	4.14	9	5	28	2	2	9	0
	GROUP2	4	5	122	4	1.82	4.21	11	9	29	1	0	4	1
		5	8	212	3	1.68	5.44	26	21	39	3	3	35	1
		6	4	199	4	1.97	4.33	8	6	46	1	1	15	1
	GROUP3	7	8	121	1	1.34	5.5	20	16	22	2	3	21	0
		8	13	203	4	1.89	4.61	13	10	44	2	4	39	2
		9	13	106	3	1.08	4.24	16	31	25	1	1	3	1
	GROUP4	10	7	89	2	1.48	4.05	14	11	22	3	1	12	0
		11	15	246	4	1.8	4.73	21	15	52	5	3	28	2
		12	11	130	3	1.27	3.02	17	16	43	1	1	20	1
Higher level students	GROUP1	13	9	274	4	1.93	4.89	2	1	56	2	5	31	2
		14	8	167	1	2.35	5.39	4	4	31	0	0	14	1
		15	11	277	3	2.59	4.95	6	5	56	5	0	12	2
	GROUP2	16	10	174	1	2.07	4.24	14	10	41	1	1	14	1
		17	14	219	0	2.07	4.38	15	9	50	3	2	28	1
		18	10	217	2	1.89	3.5	12	8	62	4	0	17	0
	GROUP3	19	2	76	1	2.11	5.07	8	6	15	0	0	8	0
		20	7	249	10	2.39	5.19	16	10	48	6	0	9	0
		21	9	311	8	2.07	4.64	29	19	67	2	3	30	1
	GROUP4	22	22	217	4	1.87	3.34	22	17	65	6	2	25	0
		23	14	178	6	2.09	3.49	17	13	51	1	4	18	2
		24	11	151	4	2.01	3.28	16	16	46	5	0	21	1
Native speakers	GROUP1	25	0	314	37	3.08	7.3	10	6	43	3	1	19	0
		26	0	57	7	3.8	3.17	7	8	18	0	0	5	1
		27	3	393	47	2.6	6.78	4	4	58	1	0	6	0
	GROUP2	28	1	245	11	2.78	8.45	16	13	29	0	1	21	0
		29	1	395	15	2.8	15.8	4	3	25	0	2	17	0
		30	1	179	7	2.89	5.42	24	21	33	1	1	8	0
	GROUP3	31	2	186	5	2.48	4.89	17	13	38	1	0	14	0
		32	3	378	22	2.57	11.45	25	18	33	8	3	15	0
		33	0	163	8	3.02	7.41	14	11	22	0	0	8	0
	GROUP4	34	0	99	6	1.74	4.5	11	10	22	0	0	3	0
		35	4	243	11	2.17	9.72	20	19	25	2	1	10	0
		36	0	249	5	2.37	9.22	20	16	27	0	0	4	0