Some Grammatical Features
of Junior High School Students' Oral Interactions

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Various expanded notions of "communicative competence" brought by Canale and Swain (1980a, 1980b), Canale (1983), and Swain (1984) subsequently contributed to the Course of Study in Japan. A practical activity called the "Interactive English Forum" has been carried out for developing junior high school students' "communicative competence" along the lines of the Course of Study. The conversation data of the three participant groups   the two levels of the student groups in the Interactive English Forum and the native speaker group for comparison   are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively in terms of the grammatical competence among the four areas of communicative competence. In this study, the total number of words spoken by the participants in five minutes, the size of vocabulary – the number of non-textbook words – and sentence structures are investigated.

1.0   Introduction

English Language Education in Japan has placed great emphasis on grammar for a long time. It was not until the last half of the 1980s when the Japanese government began to take action on English education with regards to the internationalization of Japan. It was initiated by the theoretical and practical transition of second language acquisition (SLA) in foreign countries and by the globalization throughout the world. Within the scope of the new Course of Study in 1988, boards of education and schools started to work on a new English teaching style to enable students to acquire "communicative competence," which was first advanced by Hymes (1972 and 1974) and later by Canale and Swain (1980a and 1980b). Following the key concept of the Course of Study, "practical" communicative competence has been emphasized since the recent 1998 revision: Nagasawa (2003). Having placed too much stress on grammar for a long time, the English education system in Japan is now on the way to being reformed.

One attempt to reach this goal is being carried out by a cooperative effort between a board of education and the schools in its jurisdiction that are working together for the purpose of developing students' communicative competence. It is called the "Interactive English Forum", which has been conducted since 1999 by the Ibaraki Prefectural Board of Education. The "Speech Contest," held annually up until 1998, was discontinued since memorizing and reciting a speech is only one-way communication. In its place, this pioneering approach aiming at the students' oral interactions was put into practice.

Among the vast research on communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980a,

1980b), Canale (1983), and Swain (1984) brought various expanded notions of communicative competence, which subsequently contributed to the Course of Study in Japan. In the view of Canale and Swain, communicative competence minimally involves four areas of knowledge and skills: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. As stated by Canale, grammatical competence "remains concerned with mastery of the language code (verbal or non-verbal) itself. Thus included here are features and rules of the language such as vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation, pronunciation, spelling and linguistic semantics": Canale (1983: 7).

2.0 Purpose of the study

Through observations at the Interactive English Forums, from the County and City Forums (lower level) to the Prefecture Forum (highest level), it becomes obvious that there is a clear distinction among the participants at the different Forums. Junior high school students cannot be required to speak English perfectly, as they are just beginners; nevertheless, the participants in the upper level Forum are more proficient than those in the lower levels. The purpose of the study is to determine the kinds of abilities that make these students proficient in English in view of grammatical competence.

3.0 Method

3.1 Participants

The English Interactive Forum, which has been conducted since 1998 by Ibaraki prefecture, is held every summer with second and third grade students representing each school. Two second grade students and two third grade students from each of the 234 schools in the prefecture participate in the first level of the Forum held by city or by county, called the "County and City Forum." About 40% (180 students) of those participants proceed to the second level of the Forum that involves five districts, called the "District Forum." The students taking part in the District Forum are given the name "middle level students (MLS)" in this paper. Twenty percent of the MLS (36 students) are selected to participate in the final level for the prefecture called the "Prefecture Forum." These participants are given the name "higher level students (HLS)" in this paper.

All the third grade students have studied English for nearly two and a half years by the time of the Forum, which is held just before and during summer vacation. Students who have studied abroad more than 6 months cannot participate in the Forum. They are not asked whether or not they studied English at private English schools, like cram schools, when they were in elementary school.

The students participating in the Forum are divided into groups consisting of three members, or four in rare cases, which are determined by random selection. A few minutes prior to

the conversation, they are given a topic that they will have five minutes to discuss before a panel of judges.   Prior to the free conversation in the group, each student is given 30 seconds to introduce him/herself to avoid taking too much time introducing themselves in the conversation.   Only three topics – "family", "friends", and "school" - are used at the County and City Forums, as well as at the first round of District Forums; hence, students are able to practice, to some extent, what to talk about in advance.   Nonetheless, students are required maintain interaction with others at the Forum, so if a student changes the topic suddenly, the judges are to deduct some points.   Topics for the second round at the District Forums and all rounds of the Prefecture Forum are chosen from the words in their junior high school English textbooks, such as "useful," "holiday," and so forth, requiring students to carry out a more realistic conversation than lower level students are able to do.

Only third grade students' conversation data was used for this study.   Among those students, twelve MLS were extracted from a District Forum, four of which were male and eight were female.   Among thirty-six HLS from the Prefecture Forum, twelve students were extracted: five of them male and seven female.

The data of twelve native speakers (NS) are used for comparison with the students' data, because English textbooks in Japan are written based on the native-speakers' norms as a target language.   Comparing the data between the NNS and NS will give a large amount of information regarding this situation.   The vocation of the NS is to speak English to help students who are studying English as a second language (ESL) accomplish their learning goals.   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, seven were male and five were female.   They were required to carry out conversations under the same circumstances as the students, that is, the same topics and the same length of time, as naturally as they could.

3.2   Transcription

The conversations were videotaped and the sound was recorded on music discs (MDs) in the Forum halls for the students and in a meeting room for the NS.   For all the interactions, not only was the sound transcribed, but also the non-verbal expressions, such as body language.   The transcription convention mainly follows Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998).

3.3   Categories of Data Analysis

The participants' conversation data are analyzed quantitatively as well as qualitatively from the grammatical point of view.   All references to number of items spoken or uttered by the participants refer to those in the respective five-minute conversations, unless otherwise noted.

In terms of grammatical competence, the following three categories are investigated:
1)   Total number of words spoken in five minutes

The number of words spoken by each participant in the conversation is recorded. This number will be used to calculate proportions for all other categories.

2) Number of non-textbook words

According to Hendricks et al. (1980), vocabulary showed the highest correlation with English proficiency; therefore, the size of vocabulary is investigated. Here, the number of words that are not in the students' English textbooks is counted to see how many non-textbook words the students could use. The reason for this is that Japanese students normally learn English words only from their textbooks. The English textbooks used by the students in this study are *Sunshine English Course 1, 2, 3* (Kairyudo, 1998) authorized by the Ministry of Education. All of the non-textbook words are counted, including Japanese-English (i.e. English words that have been incorporated into common Japanese usage); however, proper nouns are excluded.

3) Sentence structure

Canale (1983) referred to sentence formation as a category of grammatical competence. To investigate the types of sentences the participants employ, the following forms are counted:

a) Sentential fragments

- Reactive tokens composed of backchannels or one-word utterances (e.g. "Mmm." "Ah." "Yes."). They are counted only when the participants complete reactive tokens with falling intonation. When they are followed by other words, they are counted as other types of sentence formations. (e.g. "Mmm (hesitation)…I like hamburger" is regarded as a sentence).

- Noun phrases, adjective phrases, and adverbs (e.g. "Ah, very cute boy." "Very delicious." "As old as you?")

- Prepositional phrases (e.g. "In America?")

b) Sentences

- Simple sentences (e.g. "I like skiing very much.")

- Compound sentences (e.g. "So, I tried to talk to everyone, but my English was poor.")

- Complex sentences (e.g. "So, when I'm free, I help her.")
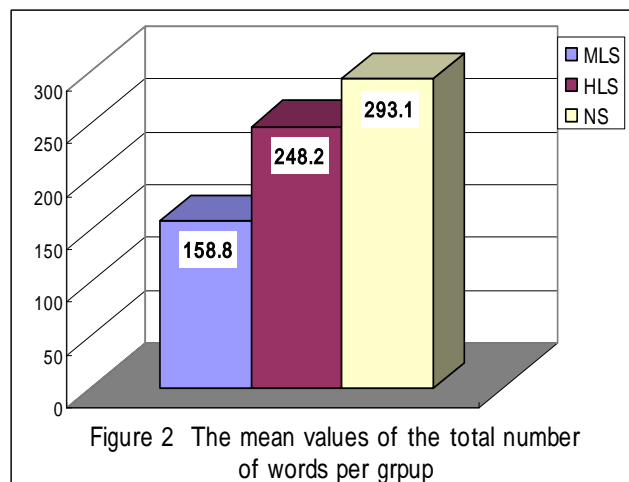
4.0   Results and Discussion

In this section, the participants' grammatical competence is analyzed by means of investigating:

1) The total number of words used by the participants

2) The number of non-textbook words

3) The sentence structures from one-word utterance to complex sentences.

Table 1 shows the data used for analyzing grammatical competence. To calculate the averages for each group, the figures of the twelve participants are summed and then divided by twelve. (The same measure is taken hereafter.)

Table 1 The Data for Grammatical Competence

			Total number of words spoken in five minutes	Number of non-textbook words	Number of reactive tokens	Number of noun phrases, adjective phrases and phrases	Number of prepositional phrases	Number of simple sentences	Number of compound sentences	Number of complex sentences
Middle level students (MLS)	A	1	196	10	14	6	1	31	0	0
		2	152	3	16	6	2	20	1	0
		3	117	0	13	1	1	21	0	0
	B	4	125	3	7	1	0	23	0	0
		5	217	8	13	7	0	25	1	0
		6	203	4	19	5	1	18	1	5
	C	7	121	2	11	0	1	11	1	0
		8	201	9	27	2	0	20	0	2
		9	106	9	6	3	0	19	0	0
	D	10	89	0	10	3	0	10	0	1
		11	248	4	17	8	0	33	0	0
		12	131	4	23	6	0	18	0	2
Higher level students (HLS)	A	13	312	5	34	11	0	22	3	5
		14	177	1	47	1	1	13	1	3
		15	317	5	39	1	1	30	3	7
	B	16	203	2	27	3	0	29	0	1
		17	255	0	37	9	0	28	0	2
		18	253	4	23	19	2	26	2	2
	C	19	87	2	25	2	0	9	1	1
		20	285	17	30	7	0	26	1	6
		21	355	13	37	10	1	25	3	6
	D	22	322	7	27	7	1	28	1	6
		23	152	7	44	10	1	11	0	2
		24	260	8	39	5	0	27	1	5
Native speakers (NS)	A	25	326	30	11	5	0	15	1	12
		26	64	7	6	3	0	9	0	0
		27	419	34	8	4	0	29	0	18
	B	28	219	10	9	7	1	16	2	3
		29	190	17	4	6	0	11	1	4
		30	431	18	16	6	0	20	2	10
	C	31	457	32	29	0	0	28	5	15
		32	311	17	40	6	0	23	1	8
		33	166	11	20	2	2	10	0	5
	D	34	499	38	21	6	1	21	1	14
		35	225	22	28	2	0	17	0	6
		36	210	13	15	4	0	12	0	7

AVERAGE

	Total number of words spoken in five minutes	Number of non-textbook words	Number of reactive tokens	Number of noun phrases, adjective phrases and phrases	Number of prepositional phrases	Number of simple sentences	Number of compound sentences	Number of complex sentences
MLS	158.8	4.7	14.7	4.0	0.5	20.8	0.3	0.8
HLS	248.2	5.9	34.1	7.1	0.6	22.8	1.3	3.8
NS	293.1	20.8	17.3	4.3	0.3	17.6	1.1	8.5

Figure 1 The mean values of the total number of words per subgroup

	MLS-A	MLS-B	MLS-C	MLS-D		HLS-A	HLS-B	HLS-C	HLS-D		NS-A	NS-B	NS-C	NS-D
	155	182	143	156		269	237	242	245		270	280	311	311

Figure 2 The mean values of the total number of words per grpup
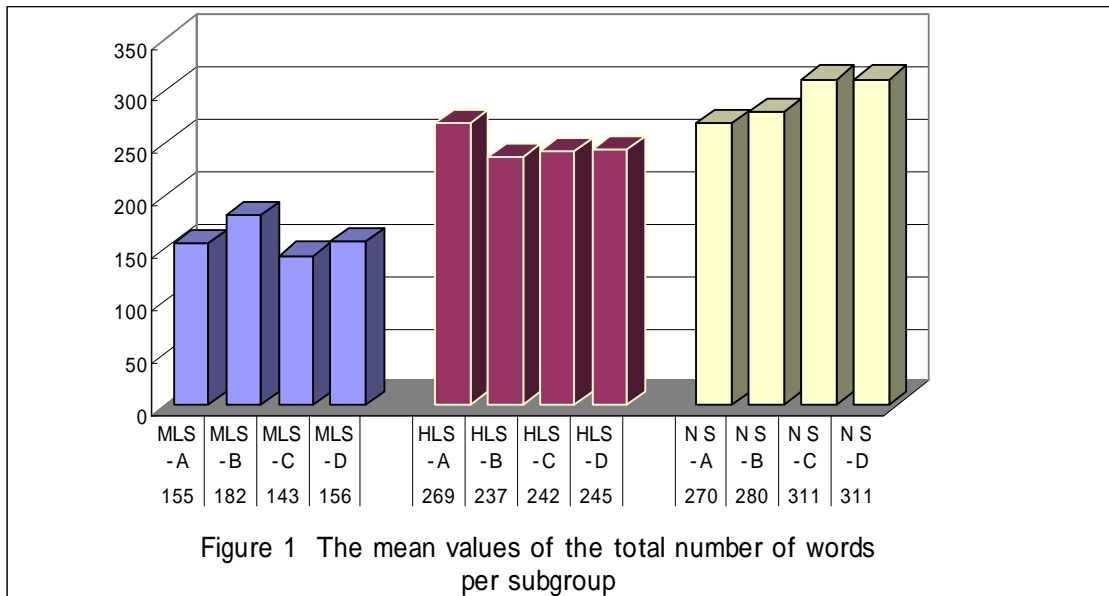
4.1   Total Number of Words

Figure 1 shows the mean values of the total number of words spoken in the five-minute conversations for each of the twelve subgroups.   Table 1 has the total number of words spoken by each participant.   The total number of words spoken differs from person to person, which is possibly a reflection of the participants' personalities.   The number of words spoken per person ranges from 64 words to 499 words.   Nevertheless, the average number of words for each level demonstrates a definite distinction among the three groups.   In this study, the MLS use 158.8 words, the HLS use 248.2 words, and the NS use 293.1 words.   Figure 2 shows that the number of words spoken on average by the NS is nearly twice as many as that of the MLS.
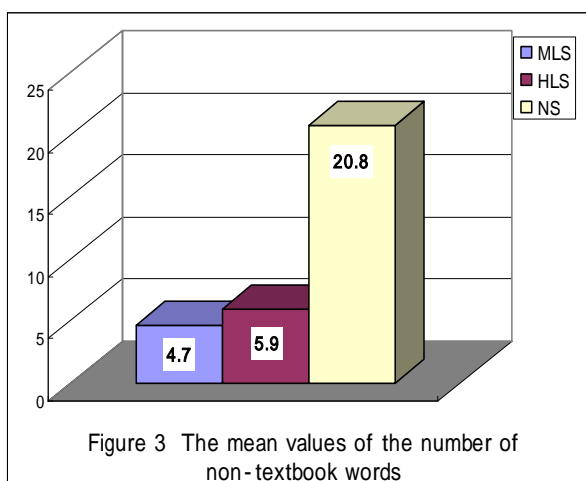
4.2   Number of Non-textbook Words

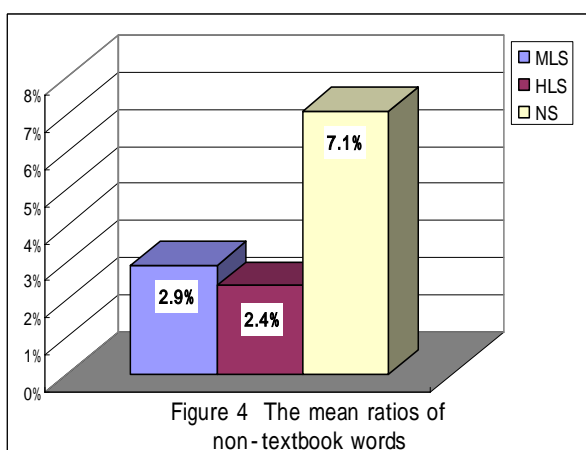Figure 3 The mean values of the number of non-textbook words

Figure 4 The mean ratios of non-textbook words

Figures 3 and 4 show the number of non-textbook words and the ratio of non-textbook words respectively. As the Figures illustrate, the NS's use of non-textbook words is much higher in number and proportion than the students illustrating that the more proficient the speaker is, the higher the use of difficult non-textbook words. Examining the numbers of non-textbook words closely, the HLS use a few more words than the MLS, 5.9 words versus 4.7 words respectively. However, the ratios of the two groups show an opposite phenomenon: the HLS use fewer non-textbook words per total words (2.4%) than the MLS (2.9%). The purpose of calculating the ratio of non-textbook words per total number of words spoken is that the total number of words is different per group; therefore, the ratio shows the percentage of non-textbook words per total words.

Neither of these results, the number of non-textbook words and the ratio of non-textbook words, show a significant difference between the MLS and the HLS indicating that the number of non-textbook words used in the conversations does not discriminate between the levels of students. It is possible that this result is due to the fact that the students study from the same size of vocabulary at school.

Qualitative analysis

As is shown above, the students use relatively the same number of non-textbook words, both being a small percent of the total number of words; furthermore, the non-textbook words consist primarily of "Japanese-English" words that have been incorporated into common Japanese usage, such as *boxing, delicious, or litchee.* Additionally, the students repeatedly use the same non-textbook word in the interactions. As a result, most of the words that the students employ are textbook words.

There may be two reasons why the students use very few non-textbook words.   Firstly, they might not have had the chance to learn non-textbook words, since students are always taught along the lines of the textbook at school.   Secondly, the students might not want to use them in the Forum conversations for fear that the other speakers will not comprehend the message or meaning. This would work against the student since "cooperativeness" is part of the judging criteria (See Appendix).

The excerpts below show the uses of non-textbook words by the students (underlined).

Excerpt (1)   (MLS: Group B, lines 102-105)

102 A: ….beach is pretty.   And I like fireworks.

103 B: Fireworks? ((nod))

104 C: Fireworks?   Oh, yes. ((nod))

105 B: I like fireworks very much.

Excerpt (2)   (HLS: Group C, lines 117-122)

117 B: Yeah.   Ahah?   I like the feeling, ((A:nod)) so I like K1 and boxing.

118   ((A:nod))

119 C: Yeah. ((nod)) So boxing is very exciting.

120 B: Yeah, ((nod)) exciting sports... ((A:nod))

121 C: And our new AET likes boxing, too.= (A:nod) Yes, and he likes Tom Cruise

122 B: = Oh, boxing. ((nod))

In Excerpt (1), each of the three MLS use *fireworks* at least once for a total of four times in this section of the conversation.   In Excerpt (2) from one of the HLS groups, Speakers B and C use *boxing* four times demonstrating the repetition of an identical word by different speakers.   As a consequence, the actual use of non-textbook words is much smaller than it may seem in the data.

The native speakers use many non-textbook words as observed in Excerpt (3) (underlined).   In this conversation, the non-textbook words are as follows: (Havana), architecture, disturbing, and generous.   The words that the NS use are very difficult and far beyond the comprehension of the students.   Furthermore, the NS do not use the same words repeatedly, which also shows the difference between the NS and the students.

Excerpt (3) (NS: Group A, lines 79-82)

79 C: In old Havana there is beautiful architecture.   The one thing I found that my son

80   found disturbing was one of the attendants in one of the museums asked if they

81   could take our camera and take our picture. ((A:nod))   We thought that that

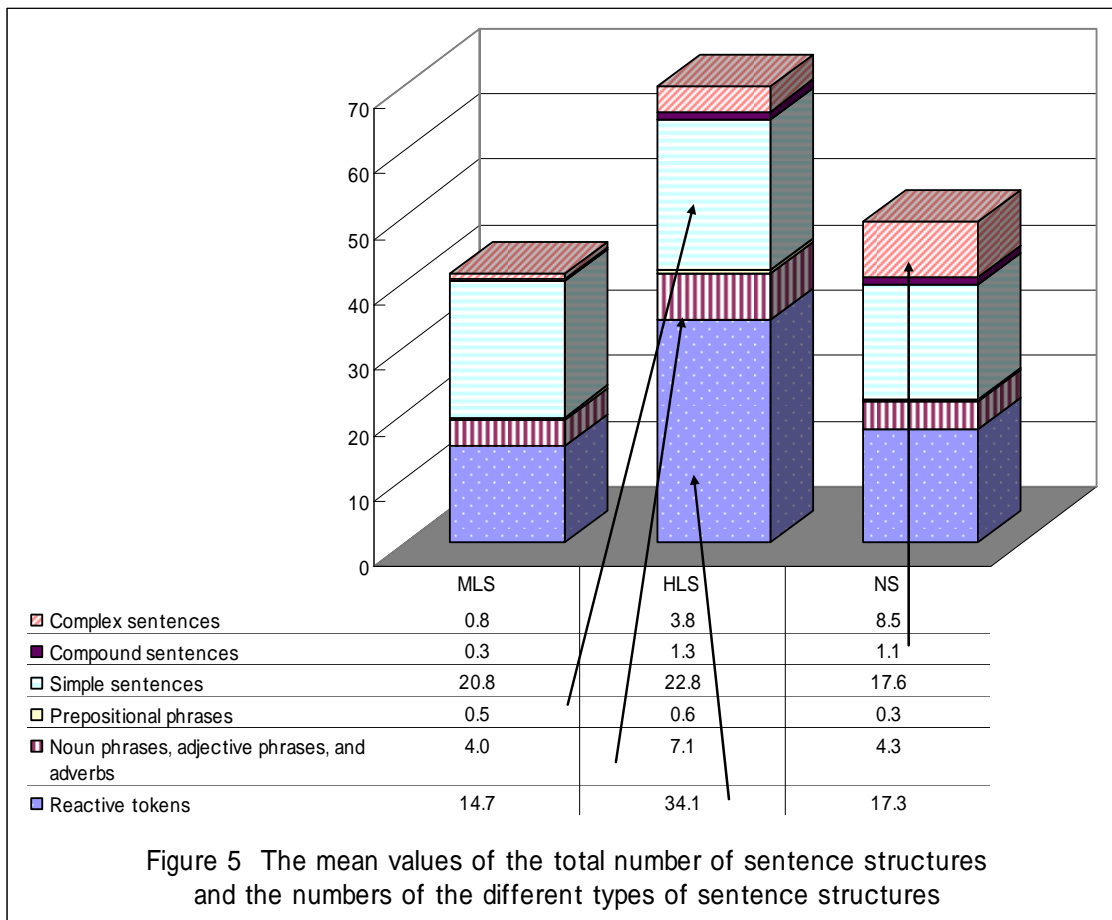82   was very kind and generous.   And then she asked us for money or for candy.

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4.3. Sentence Structure

Sentence structures are examined with respect to:

1) Sentential fragments

    a) the number of reactive tokens composed of backchannels or one word utterances

    b) the number of noun phrases, adjective phrases, and adverbs

    c) the number of prepositional phrases

2) Sentences

    a) the number of simple sentences

    b) the number of compound sentences

    c) the number of complex sentences

Quantitative analysis

The height of Figure 5 shows the sum total for each group of all the types of sentence structures listed above.   The MLS and the NS have a combined total of 41.1 and 49.0 respectively, whereas the HLS have the highest total at 69.8.   The high total for the HLS is caused by the

	MLS	HLS	NS
Complex sentences	0.8	3.8	8.5
Compound sentences	0.3	1.3	1.1
Simple sentences	20.8	22.8	17.6
Prepositional phrases	0.5	0.6	0.3
Noun phrases, adjective phrases, and adverbs	4.0	7.1	4.3
Reactive tokens	14.7	34.1	17.3

Figure 5 The mean values of the total number of sentence structures
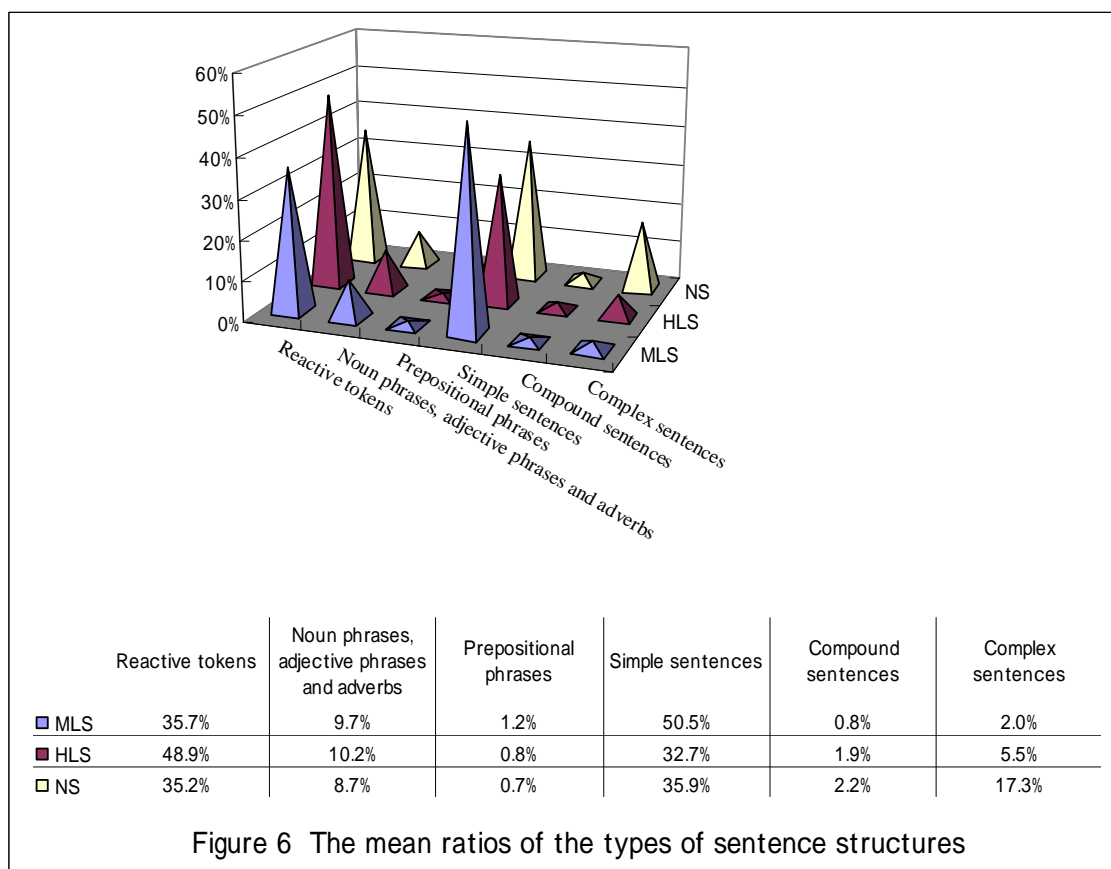and the numbers of the different types of sentence structures

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abundant use of phrases alone or one-word utterances compared to the NS and MLS.

In comparing the number of the different types of sentence structures per group, the HLS employ the highest number of reactive tokens, 34.1, whereas the NS and the MLS use almost the same number of reactive tokens: 17.3 for the NS and 14.7 for the MLS. These are approximately half the number of the HLS. As stated above, the high number of reactive tokens composed of backchannels or one-word utterances for the HLS resulted in the highest total number of sentence structures. The HLS also have the highest number in simple sentences at 22.8 with the MLS at 20.8 and the NS at 17.6.

The number of the sentence structures that the each group employ vary across the types of structures; however, the use of complex sentences demonstrates the progression in proficiency of the speakers. The group that employs the greatest number of complex sentences is the NS at 8.5, then the HLS at 3.8, which is less than half of the NS. The lowest number of complex sentences is from the MLS at 0.8, which is only one-tenth of the NS.

Figure 6 shows the ratios of the types of sentence structures. To consider the kinds of sentence structures the different groups employ, the average ratio for each type of sentence is calculated. It shows the percentage of sentence structures for each group per total number of

	Reactive tokens	Noun phrases, adjective phrases and adverbs	Prepositional phrases	Simple sentences	Compound sentences	Complex sentences
MLS	35.7%	9.7%	1.2%	50.5%	0.8%	2.0%
HLS	48.9%	10.2%	0.8%	32.7%	1.9%	5.5%
NS	35.2%	8.7%	0.7%	35.9%	2.2%	17.3%

Figure 6 The mean ratios of the types of sentence structures

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sentence structures.   For example, the 14.7 reactive tokens used by the MLS is divided by the number of all the structures used by the MLS, 41.1, resulting in a proportion of 35.7% for reactive tokens for the MLS.   The same measure is taken to obtain the ratios in the remainder of the main study.

With respect to the MLS, the sentence structure employed the most per five minutes is simple sentences, which is more than half of all the types combined.   Secondly, the MLS employ reactive tokens at a proportion of 35.7%.   For the HLS, on the other hand, reactive tokens total nearly half of all types combined with simple sentences being the next most often used structure at a proportion of 32.7%.   The most proficient speakers, the NS, have three main proportions of sentence structures: simple sentences at 35.9%, reactive tokens at 35.2%, and complex sentences at 17.3%.

Taking the difficulty of employing complex sentences into consideration, a claim can be made that quantity of complex sentences could be an indicator for judging speakers' grammatical competence.

Qualitative analysis

There seems to be no specific characteristics for each type of the sentence structures among the groups; hence, only some instances are cited in Excerpt (4) (see underlines).

Excerpt (4)
- Reactive tokens; MLS: Group A, lines 11-17
11 C: What is it?
12 B: Ah.. Track and field club?
13 C: Yeah. ((nod))
14 B: Uh... running.
15 A: Oh. ((nod))
16 C: Ah! ((nod))
17 B: Yes.
- Noun phrases, adjective phrases, and adverbs; MLS: Group C, line 41, MLS; Group D, line 48
41 C: Very delicious.

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48 B: Ah, boy.   Ah, very cute boy.
- Prepositional phrases; HLS: Group A, lines 34-36
34 A: Umm, Tokyo Disneyland?
35 B: No, no, no. ((shake head)) [In America.
36   [In America.
- Simple sentences; HLS: Group B, line 124

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124 A: <u>I didn't speak Jap... English so much</u>.

- Compound sentences; HLS: Group A, line 25

25 A: So, <u>I tried to talk to everyone, but my English was poor</u>.

- Complex sentences; MLS: Group B, line 21

21 C: So <u>when I am free, I help her</u>.

4.4   Statistical Analysis

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is conducted to see whether or not the participants as a group have statistically significant differences.   The one-way ANOVA is carried out for each item with the proportion data obtained by each figure being divided by the total number of words spoken in five minutes.   Table 2 illustrates the results.   Items that yield significant differences below 0.01%, marked with [**], between the MLS and the HLS, as well as between the students and the NS are explained here.   The number of sentences discriminate the MLS and HLS at the significance
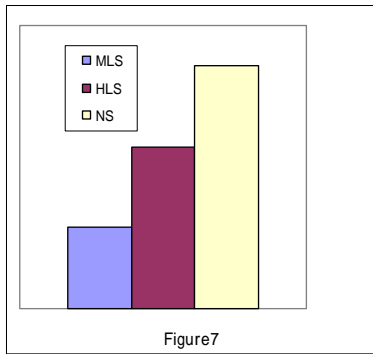
Table 2 The Results of Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

		ANOVA		significance	TEST (5%)		
		F	p		MLS-HLS	MLS-NS	HLS-NS
Grammatical competence	Number of non-textbook words	22.039	9.60E-07	**		**	**
	Reactive tokens	8.389	1.00E-03	**	*		**
	Nouns and adverbs	1.248	0.301				
	Sentence structures / Phrases	0.524	0.597				
	Sentences	15.749	1.73E-05	**	**	**	*
	Compound sentences	2.020	0.149				
	Complex sentences	16.087	1.46E-05	**	*	**	**

probability level 0.01.   The MLS use more sentences than the HLS.   On the other hand, the HLS employ shorter segments, such as reactive tokens composed of phrases alone or one-word utterances. There are two items discriminating the two groups of students from the NS: the number of non-textbook words and complex sentences.

5.0   Summary

Respecting the total number of words, there is a clear difference among the three groups. The students mostly use their textbook words, which is very different from the NS who use more difficult words.   With respect to sentence structures, an unexpected phenomenon is observed: the HLS employ shorter segments, such as reactive tokens composed of backchannels or one-word

Figure7

Figure 8

Figure 9

utterances, more often than the other types of sentence structures. The NS use a greater number of complex sentences than the students, which can be regarded as an index discriminating the students and the NS. The results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) show clear differences by significance probability level under 0.01 on the number of non-textbook words, the number of reactive tokens, sentences and complex sentences.

Through the analysis of the participants' oral communication data, some characteristics are observed. To evaluate the communicative competence without having any bias, quantitative, objective measures were carried out, such as counting the number of items, calculating proportions and conducting statistical analysis. The results reveal the difference among the groups as follows:

1) Phenomenon that the less proficient speakers employ the least or that the more proficient speakers employ the most (Figure 7 as a model):

- Total number of words spoken in five minutes

2) Phenomena that the students employ less and the NS employ more (Figure 8 as a model):
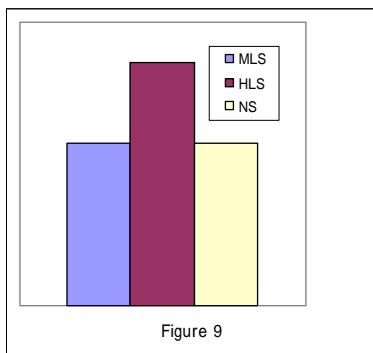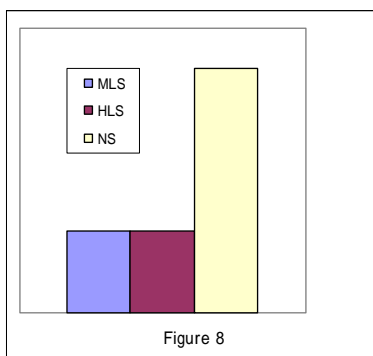
- Non-textbook words

- Complex sentences

(could be used as an indicator)

2) Phenomena that the HLS employ the most (Figure 9 as a model):

- Shorter segments

- Reactive tokens

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Appendix

Interactive English Forum Judging Sheet

Junior H. S. Grade (   )   JUDGE : (   )
Tournament No. (   )

Student No. Judging Criteria				
Intelligibility of Expressions (10 points)				
eg. the degree to which you can get your meaning across to your listener				
Cooperativeness / Friendliness (10 points)				
e.g.1 provided 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 (eg. did not monopolize conversation)				
e.g.4 appeared to enjoy interaction				
e.g.5 was not afraid of making small mistakes				
Appropriateness of Expressions (10 points)				
e.g.1 used appropriate vocabulary and expressions				
e.g.2 spoke fluently				
e.g.3 used only English				