What Can We Learn From Students' Test Scores?: "Surface" versus "Deep" Competence

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Abstract
This paper concerns the development of a more effective syllabus for helping Japanese learners improve their oral competence in English. Analyses of the results of two proficiency tests performed on 181 Japanese college students indicated that the greatest difficulty they experienced in comprehension tasks derived from lexical unfamiliarity and that "de-contextualized communication" was far more difficult for them to acquire than "everyday conversational fluency." The findings of this study indicate that: (a) college students should learn how to negotiate in clarifying unknown vocabulary and (b) their college program should make clear which competence to emphasize, either surface or deep communication.

1. Introduction

It has often been said that Japanese college English programs are not effective in helping EFL learners to improve their communicative competence in English, particularly in the areas of listening and speaking. Among the main factors considered to be responsible for this ineffectiveness are large class sizes, an emphasis on translation, and a lack of motivation among students. With the recent globalization of communication, however, the situation has changed at least in one area: an increasing number of colleges and universities in Japan have started to place more focus on the practice of oral communication. One significant issue then concerns how it is possible to develop a more effective syllabus to help the students become communicative in the target language.

In the present paper we explore this issue by describing our research which found that a carefully designed program could help Japanese university students improve their "surface" communication proficiency, and a further step-by-step and time-consuming syllabus should be implemented to help them become competent in "deep" or de-contextualized communication. The organization of this paper is as follows. In section 2 we will outline the research project which we have been working on over the past two years and whose results we will analyze in the following sections. In section 3 we will present the results of our "proficiency-improvement" analysis of the participants' test scores pertaining to their oral comprehension tasks, and in section 4 we will focus on their listening problems by analyzing students' errors as well as disturbance factors found in the comprehension tests, i.e., a "disturbance-and-error" analysis.

2. Experiment

2.1. Method

The data upon which this discussion is based came from 181 1st-year students studying at a four-year university in Shizuoka, Japan. They took two proficiency tests during the 2003 academic year, one at the beginning of the year in April 2003 to place them in proficiency-based English classes, and another at the completion of the 1st-year program in February 2004 to evaluate their

progress in the target language.

The two tests contained the same question items; that is, the same test was given to the same 181 subjects twice during one academic year. The test consisted of two components, a listening task, which included 30 questions, and a reading task, which included 20 questions. The test was approximately one hour in length, and for the listening questions, the pre-recorded tape was played only once on the test.[1]

In the listening task questions, after the students heard a TOEFL-type short conversation between two speakers, they were asked to choose an answer from four possibilities in response to a question given on the tape. It is important to note that the four possible answers were written on their question sheet, whereas the question was played for them only once. In the reading task questions, the students were given three short passages, each of which was followed by several questions. For each question, they were instructed to choose the best answer from four possibilities based on their comprehension of the passage.

2.2. Learning Environments

The following is some general information with respect to English education provided for the subjects during their first college year. The 181 students were placed in basic, low-intermediate, and high-intermediate English classes according to their scores on the placement test performed before the first semester began in early April, 2003.

There were between 20 and 25 students per class, and two 90-minute formal lessons per week were provided for them: One lesson, which focused on listening, was taught by a Japanese instructor, whereas the other lesson, which emphasized speaking, was taught by a native speaker English instructor. Note that there was no formal reading class available for the participants in their first college year.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected from 181 subjects in the two test sessions, the interval between them being 10 months. As mentioned above, the same test battery of the same 50 question items was given to the participants in each test session.[2]

By comparing the data from the first and second test sessions, two analyses were made for the following distinct purposes: One was a “proficiency-improvement” analysis to see whether or not a year of classroom teaching had a positive effect on the students’ communicative proficiency, while the other was a “disturbance-and-error” analysis to determine what their errors could tell us about their comprehension difficulties or about disturbances in the language used in the test..

3. Proficiency-Improvement Analysis

3.1. Results

The following is a summary of the placement test scores obtained from the 181 participants in the

[1] 30 questions used in this experiment were taken randomly from Basic Strategies for TOEFL Test 450 by A. Ebihara, Yohan Publishing Co., 1996, based on Cliff’s TOEFL Preparation Guide (1995), TOEFL Test for Listening 450 by Sanshuu Publishing Co., 1999, and TOEFL Test Reading 190 by Wadden et al., ALC, 2001.

[2] Most of the participants did not notice that they took the same test battery twice.

first and second test sessions in the 2003 academic year.[3]

Table 1: Proficiency Test Scores of the First and Second Semesters

Type of Test	Semester	Max.	Mean	SD	T value	Sig.	Pearson's *r*	Sig.
Listening	First	30	16.99	3.78	2.55	*	.52	***
	Second		17.68	3.68				
Reading	First	20	9.82	2.65	3.13	***	.35	**
	Second		10.59	3.12				
Total	First	50	26.81	5.18	3.98	***	.57	***
	Second		28.27	5.48				

Note: n=181 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

To measure the effects of formal learning on participants' comprehension skills, a *t*-test was used to compare the mean scores of the first and second semesters in listening, reading, and total (listening and reading). Mean scores, standard deviations (SD), *t* value, and Pearson's correlations for the listening, reading, and total are found in Table 1. As can be seen, the students' proficiency scores in listening, reading and total at the end of the second semester were significantly higher than those at the beginning of the first semester. Note also that according to the degree of standard deviation, the students showed similarly varied behavior in each test session in listening; on the contrary, in reading they showed much more varied and heterogeneous behavior in the second semester than in the first semester. The results of Pearson's correlations between the proficiency test scores of the first and second sessions showed that there were a significantly high relation in listening [n=181, r=.52, p<.001], a high relation in reading [n=181, r=.35, p<.01], and a significantly high relation in total [n=181, r=.57, p<.001].

Table 2 summarizes the frequency distribution of the students in each task according to their score difference from the first semester to the second semester.

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Students by Score Difference (df)

Score		-9～-5	-4～-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5～6	7～9
Listening	n	14	17	23	11	13	22	26	19	14	13	9
	%	7.73	9.39	12.71	6.08	7.18	12.15	14.36	10.5	7.73	7.18	4.97
Reading	n	6	24	18	15	24	26	19	15	9	12	13
	%	3.31	13.26	9.94	8.29	13.26	14.36	10.5	8.29	4.97	6.62	7.18

As can be seen, more than one half of the students, i.e., 94 out of 181 (51.93%), showed an increase of from 1 to 4 points out of 30 in the listening task, whereas 69 (38.12%) showed a similar gain in the reading task. Notice further that in the reading component 24 students (13.26%) remained

[3] 187 students participated in the experiment; however, 6 foreign students have been excluded from the present study because they did not receive EFL education in the Japanese school system.

unchanged score-wise; on the contrary, 13 students (7.18%) remained so in the listening component.

3.2. Discussion

A glance at the two test results in Table 1 reveals that the students' overall scores showed small improvements both in listening and reading; in listening the mean score rose from 16.99 to 17.68, and in reading the mean score increased from 9.82 to 10.59.[4] Recall, however, that listening comprehension was emphasized in formal instruction, but not reading comprehension. This suggests that their listening activities had a small but positive effect on their reading proficiency.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that more students improved their listening skill than their reading skill and that 13.26% of the students showed no improvement at all in reading, as shown in Table 2. These results per se imply that some aspect of EFL comprehension cannot be improved to a serious degree if it is not taught in the classroom. This is consistent with the difference seen in Pearson's correlations between the first and second test scores regarding listening and reading.

To sum up thus far, the findings of this analysis have demonstrated, first, that the class size being small, classroom teaching can help college students improve their comprehension skills in EFL, and, second, that a large improvement in comprehension should not be expected if it is not being taught.

4. Disturbance-and-Error Analysis

4.1. Results and Discussion

To investigate what made Japanese college students commit errors in comprehension, all student answers were first coded as being either an error or a correct choice. Then, their errors were tabulated in percentages on each question item for the purpose of a "disturbance-and-error analysis." Our attention here was placed on the errors made by 181 participants in the listening task alone.[5] Recall that 181 college students took the same listening test twice, at an interval of 10 months, during the 2003 academic year, that the test battery consisted of 30 questions, and that they were asked to choose one answer from the four furnished in writing on the answer sheet.

For the sake of our frequency distribution analysis, the 30 listening questions were first divided into three ranges according to the degree of difficulty measured by the mean correctness rate among the participants on each test session: namely, the "low difficulty" range consisted of questions in which more than 75% of the group of 181 students got the answer correct; the "medium difficulty" range contained questions in which 75% to 55% of the student group chose the correct answer; and the "high difficulty" range consisted of questions in which less than 55% of the student group chose the correct answer.[6]

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[4] One may mention that these results might mean more than they first suggest, given the general assumption that many Japanese university students did not study as hard as they used to in high school. However, investigating whether this was indeed the case was not our concern.

[5] Due to space limitation, an analysis of the participants' results in the reading section will not be included here. An additional paper will be furnished at a later date.

[6] These three ranges were determined based on the students' mean correctness rate on the 30 questions in each test session (52.7% in the first semester and 59.1% in the second semester).

The results showed that in the first semester there were six question items which were of low difficulty, whereas there were sixteen question items which were of high difficulty; on the contrary, in the second semester there were 10 low difficulty questions items and twelve high difficulty questions. That is, as a consequence of one-year ESL formal instruction, four questions changed from "medium difficulty" to "low difficulty," and other four questions changed from "high difficulty" to "medium difficulty" for the students to comprehend. However, the questions whose difficulty levels remained unchanged were four each in the low- and medium-difficulty ranges, while they were twelve in the high difficulty range.[7] Note in passing that there was no question item that the students found more difficult in the second semester than in the first semester.

4.1.1. Questions of Low and Medium Difficulty

Let us now look at some typical examples of short conversations from the test battery. First, (1) and (2) are examples of low difficulty questions, those which posed almost no difficulty to the students in both test sessions.[8]

(1) Woman: Neil, why were you late for class this morning?
Man: I overslept and missed the train.

Question: Why was Neil late?
(A) He got up later than usual.
(B) He had to stop by at his grandmother's place.
(C) His alarm clock didn't ring.
(D) The train was late.

(2) Man: I have a sore throat.
Woman: Did you see a doctor?

Question: What does the man mean?
(A) He ate too much orange jelly.
(B) He doesn't like to see a doctor.
(C) He likes sour fruit.
(D) His throat hurts.

During the academic year, the mean correctness rate rose from 87.3% to 92.9% for (1) and from 84.0% to 90.1% for (2), respectively. This suggests that these conversations were very easy to most college students to comprehend.

Second, (3) and (4) include typical question examples which were of medium difficulty in both sessions.

(3) Man: Are you coming with me to the concert tonight?
Woman: No, Daddy. I promised to baby-sit for the Miller's baby while they go to the concert.

Question: What will the woman do tonight?
(A) She'll visit her neighbor.
(B) She'll go to the concert.
(C) She'll watch Mr. And Mrs. Miller's children.
(D) She'll go out with her father.

(4) Woman: How was your class today, Prof. Hill?
Man: It was awful. Only five out of 36 showed up. I was about to cancel the class.

[7] We will return to these 12 high difficulty questions in subsection 4.2.
[8] In these examples and those below the underlined answer is the correct one for the given question.

Question: How did Prof. Hill like his class?
(A) He enjoyed teaching.
(B) He was disappointed with the class.
(C) He canceled the class.
(D) He scolded five students.

The mean correctness rate in (3) was 59.7% in the first semester and 68.0% in the second semester, a 8.3% increase, and in (4) it was 59.7% in the first and 61.9% in the second semester, only a 2.2% increase. The results indicated that these were such questions that those students having "average" comprehension proficiency can manage to understand without great difficulty. Incidentally, in the case of (4) a little over 50 students out of 181 chose (C), a wrong answer, in both test sessions.

4.1.2. Difficulties Lowered

This subsection deals with how much the students improved score-wise in listening by considering a change in the degree of difficulty pertaining to each question item from the first to the second semester. There were eight question items in which the mean correctness rate increased in the second semester. To be more precise, the results showed that the difficulty rating of four question items went from medium to low and that of four other question items went from high to medium. The mean increase in the correctness rate of these questions was 11.95%. It is also important to note that there was no question item that the level of their difficulty decreased from high to low difficulty.

One such example is given in (5) below.

(5) Man: I hear Jane isn't teaching here this term.
Woman: That's right. She was fired.

Question: What does the woman say about Jane?
(A) She's tired of teaching.
(B) She was dismissed from her job.
(C) She's changing jobs.
(D) The school is too hot.

The mean correctness rate of this question increased to 59.2% in the second semester from 39.2% in the first semester, an increase of 19.9%. A closer examination of the results indicated that on the first test 69 students out of 181 chose (A) wrongly, whereas in the second semester 36 of those 69 students managed to choose (B) correctly. As such, it seems to be the case that approximately 20% of the student group could distinguish *tired* from *fired* or/and they became familiar with the meaning of *dismissed*.

Another example in (6) exhibited a 14.4% increase in correctness rate from 43.7% to 58.1% on the test.

(6) Woman: Paul, would you check my mailbox when I'm gone?
Man: Sure, no problem. When are you leaving?

Question: What does the woman want Paul to do?
(A) Feed her cats.
(B) Mail a check for her.
(C) Drop her a line.
(D) Pick up her mail.

The students' errors seemed to suggest that 117 students were unable to distinguish *check* in *check*

my mailbox and *check* in *mail a check for her*, but in one year of learning 12 of those students could overcome this problem in the listening task.

4.2. Disturbance Factors and Errors

Recall that there were 12 question items in the range of high difficulty range, and their difficulty remained unchanged throughout the 2003 academic year. By considering the students' errors in these 12 questions, we will identify what caused them to make a wrong choice, i.e., disturbance factors. The results of the two tests showed the following disturbance factors: (i) confusing pronunciation, (ii) unfamiliar vocabulary, and (iii) discourse ambiguity.

4.2.1. Confusing Pronunciation

Let us first look at an example of a pronunciation problem in (7).

(7) Woman: Would you please spell your name for me, sir?
Man: Sure. W-I-double-T-N-E-R.

Question: How does the man say he spells his last name?
(A) Wiwtner.
(B) Wittner.
(C) Wittmer.
(D) Iitner.

(7) was a question to which 122 students (67.4%) chose (A) on the first test and 117 students (64.64%), on the second test; 36 (19.9%) answered correctly on the first test, while 58 (32.0%) did so on the second test. The difficulty seems to stem from the students' unfamiliarity with the way of saying *tt* as in *double t* in the target language, a disturbance factor.

(8) is another example of confusing pronunciation.

(8) Man: William looked very tired this morning.
Woman: He drove George's car from Georgia to NY without stopping to sleep.

Question: What does the woman mean?
(A) William slept all the way from Georgia to New York.
(B) George didn't sleep at all on the trip.
(C) William was half asleep at the time that he was driving.
(D) William didn't sleep at all on the trip.

In this case the disturbance factor was *George* in *George's car*, which induced 50 (B) errors on the first test and 56 (B) errors on the second. Only 75 students (41.4%) chose (D) correctly. Note in passing that 36 students failed to understand *without stopping to sleep*, choosing (A) incorrectly.

4.2.2. Unfamiliar Vocabulary

Let us now consider examples of unfamiliar vocabulary. (9) was one such example.

(9) Man: Why are you wearing that cream all over your arms?
Woman: I ate wild berries at the picnic last week and I broke out in a rash.

Question: What does the woman say happened to her?
(A) She got scratched in the wild berry bushes.
(B) She got cut at the wild picnic celebration.
(C) She was allergic to the fruit that she had eaten.
(D) She was trying to get a suntan at the picnic.

This question was quite difficult for most students to comprehend on the listening test because

wearing that cream and *broke out in a rash* on the tape, and *scratched* and *allergic to* on the answer sheet were unfamiliar words or expressions, hence all are disturbance factors. As such, out of 181 students, 67 chose (A), 38, (B), and 57, (D), totaling 162 (89.5%), whereas only 17 (9.4%) correctly chose (C). These results indicate that when they encountered a vocabulary problem, the students had a tendency to rely on words or expressions whose meanings they were certain of, such as *wild berries* and *picnic* in this case. It seems that such a tendency led to an error in comprehension.

A similar result was obtained in (10), an example containing the word *audit*.

(10) Woman: Dr. Horowitz, could you let me audit your class?
Man: Sure. No problem.

Question: What does the woman want to do?
(A) Attend a class for no credit.
(B) Add a class.
(C) Drop a class.
(D) Just sit in a class to take notes for his friend.

43 students (23.8%) chose (A) correctly on the first test, and 57 students (31.5%) made a correct choice on the second test, i.e. an increase of 7.7 %. More significantly, 88 students (48.6%) chose the wrong answer (B) in the first semester, while 103 students (56.9%) did so in the second semester. These results led us to assume that those students were unable to understand the meanings of *audit* on the question and *for no credit* on the answer sheet, whereas they knew the meaning of *add* in Answer (B). In short, these students failed to understand the meanings of *audit* and did not understand *for no credit*, so they showed a tendency to rely on *add a class*, the meaning of which they could understand.

4.2.3. Discourse Ambiguity

We will finally turn our attention to students' errors attributable to ambiguity of discourse context by considering a short conversation in (11), for example.

(11) Man: Honey, we're out of milk.
Woman: There's another one in the bag.

Question: What does the woman mean?
(A) He has to go out and get some milk.
(B) They can use honey instead of milk.
(C) They don't need milk.
(D) They aren't out of milk.

64 students (35.4%) chose the correct answer (D) on the first test, and 78 students (43.1%) did so on the second test, hence a small increase of 7.7% in the mean correctness rate; on the contrary, 78 students (43.1%) chose the wrong answer (A) on the first test, and 85 students (47%), on the second test.

These results suggest that many students could understand the meaning of *out of milk* in the first utterance, but they failed to understand what *another one in the bag* in the second utterance meant in the discourse. In other words, many students failed to understand the discourse structure or contextual development involved in the conversation. Furthermore, there was no clear contextual cue to help students' comprehension.

(12) provides another example in which many students could not grasp the contextual

cue because it was not obvious, but subtle in the discourse.

(12) Woman: Karen is entering Stetson University this fall.
Man: So she did apply?

Question: What had the man assumed about Karen?
(A) She had not applied to Stetson.
(B) She had not worked very hard.
(C) She was certain to be admitted.
(D) She was not likely to be admitted.

In this conversation, although *entering a university* and *apply* were not difficult, the mean correctness rates were 31.0% on the first and 28.8% on the second test, respectively. To put it differently, approximately 130 students out of 181 failed to choose the correct answer (A). Instead, most of them incorrectly chose either (C) or (D), indicating that it was quite difficult for them to understand what the second utterance implied with the phonetic emphasis on *did* and a rising contour. In addition, the semantic meaning of *assume* in the past perfect form was indeed difficult for most students to understand, hence inducing their errors in this question.

4.3. Surface versus Deep Proficiency

The preceding error analysis has revealed that while eight question items showed an increase in mean correctness rate, twelve question items in the high difficulty range remained unchanged. In this subsection, we would like to investigate what caused this improvement in students' listening comprehension.

We observed that unfamiliar words caused a serious disturbance in listening comprehension. In other words, learning new vocabulary is a significant key to the improvement of comprehension proficiency. In one year of learning, for example, approximately 20% of the students became able to understand that *fire* and *dismiss* were synonyms in (5) and that *check* had two different meanings in (6). On the contrary, difficult vocabulary such as *break out in a rash* in (9) and *audit* in (10) remained unfamiliar to most students in both test sessions. We were thus led to conclude that lexical fluency should be emphasized in communicative teaching.

As mentioned in our earlier discussion, interpersonal conversations such as those in (1) and (2) were quite easy for the students to comprehend; the mean correctness rate rose from around 85% to over 90%. We assume this low difficulty can be attributed to the fact that these topics are quite popular in English textbooks. Let us consider (13) in support of this point.

(13) Woman: Would you like to have a piece of cherry pie?
Man: No thanks. I'm on a diet.

Question: What does the man mean?
(A) He wants to lose weight.
(B) He doesn't like sweets.
(C) He's suffering from diabetes.
(D) He has already had one.

The mean correctness rate rose from 82.4% to 90.1% in (13), indicating that most students could understand that *being on a diet* was compatible with *losing weight*. Again, "weight control" conversations are so popular in textbooks that most students have a chance to practice them in school. The data thus suggest that everyday or interpersonal communication poses almost no difficulty to

Japanese learners of English.

In contrast, we have seen in our earlier examples that discourse ambiguity causes serious disturbances in students' comprehension. In (11), for example, as the discourse development was not clear, 103 students (57%) failed to choose the correct answer even though the test questions did not seem to have difficult words. A similar result can be obtained in (14).

(14) Woman: How was the turnout at the meeting last night?
Man: Fewer people came than I had expected.

Question: What does the man say about attendance at the meeting?
(A) Too many people came to the meeting.
(B) There were not enough people at the meeting to inspect the documents.
(C) The man had expected more people to come to the meeting.
(D) There were not enough seats for all the people.

The mean correctness rates in this case were 43.7% in the first test and 52.5% in the second test, respectively. Because the discourse development was complex and did not provide a clear contextual cue for the question at hand, 47 students chose (A), 16, (B), and 20, (D), totaling 83 (45.9%) in the second test, hence a large disturbance. It should be noted that the correctness rates of other ambiguous questions also remained unchanged in the range of high difficulty in both test sessions.

With respect to the difference between interpersonal communication and contextually ambiguous communication, Cummins (1984, 1986) distinguishes between basic interpersonal communication and cognitive/academic communication: Basic interpersonal communication is defined as "context-embedded" interaction in which the participants can negotiate meaning and receive linguistic, paralinguistic, and situational supports, while cognitive/academic communication is defined as "context-reduced" interaction in which they rely primarily on linguistic cues to meaning without paralinguistic and situational help (Cummins 1984: 136-139).[9] By adopting this distinction, we can assume that (1), (2), and (13) are examples of basic interpersonal communication, while (11) and (13) are those of context-reduced communication. The results of this study can be reinterpreted as follows: Unlike students' in interpersonal communication proficiency increased in the 2003 academic year, their listening proficiency in context-reduced communication did not improve much in the 2003 academic year even though listening was emphasized in the classroom. These results are consistent with what Cummins (1984: 133) found in his research on immigrant children's development of English proficiency, i.e., it takes considerably longer (between 5 and 7 years) for children to achieve context-reduced/academic communicative competence than to acquire conversational fluency.

5. Conclusion

To conclude this discussion, we would like to discuss some implications of our research for the development of a more effective syllabus for Japanese college students learning English in Japan.

It has been demonstrated that lexical fluency is an important key to the improvement of

[9] See Sakoda (2002) for a brief introduction of Cummins' accounts of language proficiency and bilingualism written in Japanese.

students' oral comprehension. In this regard, we have to keep in mind that students must have a chance to clarify unfamiliar words or expressions in face-to-face communication. What is significant here is that students should be helped to understand how to negotiate meaning in English communication; they should acquire strategic expressions such as "I don't understand the meaning of (word or expression)," "What is (word or expression)?," "What do you mean?," and "Can you repeat what you said?" Beginning students may be encouraged to negotiate meaning by simply repeating a word with a rising intonation when they do not comprehend it. According to de la Fuente (2002), such negotiation can facilitate lexical acquisition because it allows learners to learn new vocabulary beyond their present level of competence, which is required for acquisition. [10]

This discussion has assumed that there are two types of communicative competence, interpersonal fluency and academic competence. We have come to know that in order for a syllabus to be effective we need determine which competence to emphasize in the classroom. Planning a productive syllabus should then be based on the careful examination of students' needs and goals in learning English. It is our hope that college EFL programs will increasingly be designed to help Japanese students acquire decontextualized or academic communicative competence.

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[10] This is on a par with Krashen's (1985) notion of "comprehensive input."