

Summary: Japanese English at the junior high school level

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Unit 1 Japanese English at the Junior High School Level (1): Evaluation of Oral Interaction Skills

The four on-demand lessons describe our data analysis among junior high school students. First, we explain one feature of the current situation of English Language Education in Japan, referring to the Course of Study initiated by the Japanese government and actual methods used by educators in classrooms. A practical activity called the “Interactive English Forum” has been carried out for developing junior high school students’ “communicative competence” in accordance with the Course of Study. In the Interactive English Forum, the students are divided into groups consisting of three members, which are determined by random selection. A few minutes prior to discussion, they are given a topic that they have five minutes to discuss.

The purpose of the four on-demand lessons is to characterize some aspects of Japanese English at the junior high school level, by evaluating the students' oral interaction skills in terms of communicative competence.

This unit first focuses on the importance of speaking, oral interaction skills, and group activities in English Language Education. After describing the relationship between

communicative competence and the Interactive English Forum, the background of the notion of communicative competence is described and defined.

Among the vast research, 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. Theory and some literature of the communicative competence in relation to the present study are described. The importance of comparing the data between the EFL learners and the native speakers is described in this chapter as well, following the ideas of Swain (1984), MacCarthy (1991), and Kachur (1997).

Unit 1-2

This unit introduces two studies, Pilot Study 1: Dysfluency analysis and Pilot Study 2: Conversation Management analysis. The main purpose of Dysfluency Analysis is to determine the crucial items of communicative abilities among the students which must be supplied to them to bring the communication level of second language learners closer to that of native speakers in terms of vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and strategy. Although Dysfluency Analysis demonstrated some features that discriminate

between students and between the students and the NS, it also raised some questions:

Pilot Study 2 is carried out to investigate the difference of the use of Conversation Management Discourse Markers (CMDM) among different groups of English speakers, the Japanese junior high school students, Philippine immigrant who use English as a second language, and native speakers of English in Canada, who are considered to employ CMDM differently. The result shows that Japanese students do not use adequate CMDM including lexical items, but that they use limited paralinguistic items such as a nod or a noise.

Based on the results of Pilot Studies, some research questions are added to investigate the participants' communicative competence:

- 1) To inquire into the causes that discriminate not only between the students and the NS, but also between the MLS and the HLS.
- 2) To inquire into the concrete phenomena explaining the HLS's lowest relative proportions in the number of pauses and the length of pauses; and the highest relative proportion in the number of sentences, the number of repetitions and the number of fillers.
- 3) To inquire some features of gestures and noises.

Unit 3

In this unit the oral interactions of the participants are

analyzed based on the notion of communicative competence. The purpose is to examine the following questions:

- 1) What kind of ability makes the students proficient in English?
- 2) What kind of “communicative competence” does the Course of Study expect to be feasible for junior high school students?
- 3) Are there any specific areas that teachers can instruct students for the purpose of developing their communicative competence?

The conversation data are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively in terms of the four areas of communicative competence.

Unit 2 Grammatical Competence

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 utterances to complex sentences.

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 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.

Unit 3 Sociolinguistic Competence

The participants' sociolinguistic competence is analyzed by investigating how the participants apologize, compliment, request, object, and verbally co-operate with each other according to Cohen (1996).

Few sociolinguistic utterances are observed as the given topic does not require the participants to interact socially. Nonetheless, certain characteristics are found, such as the MLS's apologies for communication breakdowns and the excessive amount of compliments used by the HLS. The qualitative difference that is observed between the MLS and the HLS is that the MLS apologize only with "I'm sorry." Alternatively, the HLS are able to provide the reason for the apology and can also respond to the apology. The characteristics that both levels of students have in common are the tendency to demand directly or use *please* for requests, and the use of mitigation when stating an objection.

Unit 4 Discourse Competence

The participants' discourse competence is investigated by means of analyzing the following.

Coherence of topics (the number of subordinate topics, the number of words on each topic and the number of words related to

the given topic)

- 1) Turn-takings (the number of self-selections and nominations)
- 2) Reactive tokens (the number of reactive tokens A, backchannels, and body languages)
- 3) Hesitations (the number of hesitations).

The category that discriminates the three groups the most is the coherency of topics. A comparison of the number of words spoken on the subordinate topics shows an increase of approximately 50% from the MLS to the HLS, and 20% from the HLS to the NS. A prominent difference appears when examining whether or not the speakers are able to carry out the conversation along the lines of the main topic: the HLS use four times and the NS use ten times as many words on the main topic as the MLS do.

With respect to turn-takings, both of self-selections and nominations follow the participants' level of proficiency; that is, the less proficient speakers take more turns and have an increased number of unnatural turn-takings. In terms of reactive tokens, the HLS use many backchannels and reactive tokens A. This seems to be a crucial factor to explain the results of Dysfluency Analysis. In terms of body languages, the less proficient speakers tend to rely upon it to communicate with others. Hesitations also followed the level of proficiency, which means that the less proficient students hesitate the most.

Unit 5 Strategic Competence

The participants' strategic competence is analyzed by means of:

- 1) Paraphrasing (circumlocution)
- 2) Borrowing (literal translation, language switch, and mime)
- 3) Avoidance (topic avoidance and message abandonment)

in the interactions according to Tarone (1983).

The total number of strategic means used by the groups is not as many as expected. However, we can observe some features: the HLS use more language switches and the MLS employ more topic avoidances than other strategies. The NS rarely use communication strategies. In terms of the overall number of strategies, there is no significant difference between the students, whereas the difference between the students and the NS is quite substantial since the NS does not employ strategies. In terms of quality, there is no notable distinction between the MLS and the HLS.

Statistical Analysis

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is conducted to see whether or not the participants as a group have statistically significant differences. The items that show significance probability level under 0.01 are mostly in grammatical competence and discourse competence.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results of quantitative analysis and the ANOVA, and also the results of qualitative analysis, some pedagogical implications are proposed. The examples are to train students to use some strategic means for the purpose of not avoiding the current topic and to teach students to carry out interactions related the given topic to expand and develop the topic. A suggestion for expanding the students' variety of expressions is: a) to assign tasks that require a set of activities related problem solving or task-based instructions rather than pattern practice, or b) to give a task composed of four steps: situation, problem, solution, and result or comment, proposed by Nakano (1998).

Unit 5-4 Conclusion

Through the analysis of the participants' oral communication data, some characteristics are observed.

Firstly, quantitative, objective measures reveal the difference among the groups as follows:

- 1) Phenomena that the less proficient speakers employ the least or that the more proficient speakers employ the most.
 - Total number of words spoken in five minutes
 - Number of words spoken on each subordinate topic
 - Number of words following the given topic
- 2) Phenomena that the less proficient speakers employ the most or that the less proficient speakers employ the least.
 - Turn-takings

- Body languages
 - Hesitations
- 3) Phenomena that the students employ less and the NS employ more.
- Non-textbook words
 - Complex sentences (could be used as an indicator)
- 4) Phenomena that the students employ more and the NS employ less.
- Sociolinguistic competence
 - Strategic competence
- 5) Phenomena that the HLS employ the most (Figure 33 as a model):
- Shorter segments
 - Reactive tokens

Secondly, qualitative analysis also reveals many ideas about the differences between the MLS and the HLS, especially for sociolinguistic and strategic competence, which cannot be measured numerically. The MLS students apologize only with “I’m sorry,” whereas the HLS are able to describe the reason for the apology and other students are able respond to it. The analysis also reveals why the MLS have to avoid topics and how the HLS can carry on the conversations. The difference between the students is not great because the HLS only add a few more words or take sociolinguistic or strategic measures. These offer suggestions on how to teach English in classrooms.