
INTERVIEW TESTS FOR CONVERSATION CLASSES

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After studying English vocabulary, grammar, and reading for an average of six years before college, how many of our Japanese university freshmen and sophomores in our low-intermediate conversation classes could actually hold a conversation? Very few. Our task as native-speakers was to teach English as an interactive communication medium. How should we test progress?

“Test the abilities whose development you want to encourage.” (Hughes, 1989, p.44) Simple, right? For conversation classes focused on interaction skills, written evaluations only wouldn’t suffice, we needed proper tools.

During midterms and finals, we met with over thirty pairs of students for a twenty-minute multi-tasked oral “interview test”. Was providing students the opportunity to try out the conversation skills practiced in their 90-minute weekly classes important enough to merit the outside-class time and energy on our parts? Would we learn anything more about their conversation skills than by only giving them a written test? After reviewing our notes, watching video clips and reading student evaluations, the answer to both questions is an unqualified “yes”.

Conversation Class Goals

Japanese students in general are more comfortable with a conversation dynamic referred to by Mayer (1994, p.13) as the “Queen Bee” syndrome: one speaker dominates a conversation, basically entertaining others. When asked, questions set up the speaker’s next point. The resulting conversations appear to be a series of mini-speeches. Teaching conversation classes to students not socially encouraged to use the interactive give-and-take nature of English can be challenging.

Textbooks, with often “perfect” conversations in which speakers fluently and flawlessly interact, often reinforce Japanese speakers’ “We’re Shy” or “Gold Medal” syndromes; when asked to publicly produce their own obviously flawed conversations, embarrassment and reticence follow (Mayer, p.12). While textbook conversations provide examples of patterns and expressions that, if memorized, may help low-level students start conversations with more confidence (Huang, 1987, p.294), they are of little use when searching for the right word or response to add during everyday conversation.

Given this combination of circumstances, our particular teaching objectives and methods may well differ from those of teachers in other ESL situations, or where students are more inherently willing to speak.

In a study of children learning to use English, Ernst (1994, p.316) concluded that

students use more communication strategies when they have control of a topic and especially when a topic is of interest to them.

In our classes, through games, textbook exercises, and small group and pair activities, students generated their own questions, learned to ask follow-up questions, and gave their own opinions to further conversa-

tions. We emphasize that in any language, speakers do not always produce perfect exchanges. We teach time fillers for those needing a moment to think, and restatement techniques to help students cope with a lack of vocabulary. In this kind of class environment, students relax, their affective filters lower, communication becomes less stressful, less intimidating, and possibly they add some new strategies to their conversational bag of tricks.

The Formats We Used and Why

		Interview Format	
		<i>Midterm</i>	<i>Final</i>
2T	Warm-up	2T	Warm-up
2S		2S	
(5')	How many classes do you have today?	(3')	How are your classes going?
2S	Two conversations	2S	Two conversations
(8')		(10')	
	You are at a party. Talk with a friend about what you usually do on the weekends or in your free time.		Talk to your partner about a boring weekend activity.
	A new person comes to your club. Introduce yourself and find out about the new person.		Ask your partner about some cheap Christmas present ideas.
T-S	Question from the teacher to each student	T-S (S)	Question from the teacher with some follow-up by the partner
(3')		(7')	

What city in Japan is
the most important?

Why?

What is your home-
town like?

How much money does
a college student
need each month to
live on his or her
own?

How often do you play
pachinko on the
weekend?

2T
each S
(4')
Teacher Conversation
with comment/ques-
tion from each student
(same question types
as above section)

At midterms, we hoped to challenge students, letting them know their strengths and areas for improvement. For the finals, we commented on strengths only, hoping to leave them with a feeling of success for their next English course or speaking opportunity.

How Students Prepared

For both interviews, students had study sheets with the interview format, general topics to be covered, and many sample questions prepared by teachers and classmates thus alleviating fears of the unknown which might hinder their desire and ability to talk comfortably. Students were given time in class one day to practice sample conversations with different partners.

Getting Started

The interviews were held in one office, four of us seated around a table. One teacher was the facilitator, the other took notes.

Interviews started with a 3-5 minute warm-up period. We hoped for a

relaxing transition into the English-speaking environment inside the office. In the few cases when students weren't acquainted, we tried chatting about other classes or activities to help them see themselves as members of the same group, especially important given the role group membership plays in Japanese culture and the effects unequal status could have on conversation (Mayer, p.15).

Letting Them Talk

The bulk of each test consisted of the two student conversations. We hoped this section and the choice of topics would create a positive, or beneficial, backwash with earlier student conversation activities (Weir, 1990; Hughes, 1989).

Midterm conversations took the form of role plays, asking students to chat about hobbies, hometown, school life, summer, weekend, or free-time activities in given settings: at a party, during a club activity, at school. In several instances, roles were indicated on the randomly chosen topic cards. To get pairs on task quickly, the teacher indicated who started. Once begun, students talked until exhausting the topic without interruption.

In the final interview, topic cards were less specific. Rather than telling students the location of a conversation and the status of the partners (club members, students, tourists), the cards only directed students to discuss various topics: part-time jobs, career plans, personal finances, cheap present ideas, and boring activities. As Decker (1995) points out, the complexity of the task needs to stay relative to the level of the students (p.21). This increased challenge seemed fair: students had been in class for almost a year, spoke more English and were more familiar

with having conversations.

The Teacher Hurdle

The final task gave students a chance to interact with teachers. During both interviews, following the paired conversations, students were asked a randomly drawn question. Midterm questions were written by the teachers, based on topics from the text chapters; the final questions came from the students themselves. Since students used textbook questions as samples, the difficulty level of the questions was consistent for both interviews.

During midterm interviews, to gauge comprehension and offer a real challenge, students listened to a brief conversation between the teachers and were asked to respond with a question or comment. We chose topics from the same sets students had used in the preceding section, hoping that familiarity would aid understanding. We spoke naturally, with shortened answers, overlaps, basically unsimplified vocabulary, and at native speed. This task proved overly challenging for some students, leading us to modify this section and create the most significant difference between midterm and finals testing.

For the final interview, we also wanted the students to take away a sense of responsibility for continuing to improve their English. Consequently, we eliminated the teacher-centered conversation at the end of the final interview and made the third “Question from the Teacher” section more conversational. Beyond merely answering a question, they now needed to ask a follow-up question or comment about their partner’s answer. One or both teachers then joined in, offering comments or

questions to open up the discussion. The process was repeated with the second student, bringing the interview to a close at the twenty-minute mark.

Evaluating The Students

Assigning scores was perhaps the most difficult part of the entire process. When classes began, we had made the oral test worth half of the student's midterm and final grades, while basing the other 50% of those grades on more traditional written examinations primarily covering vocabulary, listening and grammar. We needed a numerical grade to

Midterm Terms	Final Terms
<p>CO-OP (cooperation)</p>	
<p>How well did the student work with his/her partner? Did the student maintain eye contact, ask questions or make suggestions to "save" partner?</p>	<p>Brevity Did the student give enough information without dominating the conversation or causing a long silence?</p>
<p>A.C. (aural comprehension)</p>	
<p>Did the student seem to understand what was said?</p>	<p>Relevance Was the student on topic? Did the student pay attention to what his/her partner said and respond appropriately?</p>
<p>FLU (fluency)</p>	
<p>How smoothly did the student get his/her ideas across? Did the student give details, using appropriate vocabulary with understandable pronunciation?</p>	<p>Clarity Was the student comprehensible? Did grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation cause misunderstanding?</p>
<p>ACC (accuracy)</p>	
<p>Could the student use the basic grammar patterns and vocabulary covered in class?</p>	

submit at year's end. During interviews, we classified students as strong or weak. To make the note-taker's job manageable, we devised record sheets combining score boxes focusing on the necessary skills for each task with space for subjective notes. The note-taker (not the students' teacher) became responsible for assigning scores, cross-checking later.

After the midterm interviews, we simplified both the grading and the record sheet. Wanting more accuracy, we separately rated then averaged scores. It worked best for the note-taker to rate during the interview and the mediator immediately following, referring to the note-taker's notes with the scores on the right covered. The point spread was reduced from 1-5 to 1-3 because we found ourselves debating differences between a 2.5 and a 3. We thought with a three-point scale, students would be strong, average or weak; it wasn't so simple. Skills for the student conversation section were regrouped and renamed to reflect our increasing interest in student interaction. See samples below.

Student I.D.	Name:	
	Date:	Time:
MIDTERM INTERVIEW		
WARM-UP: Thurs.-accounting Fri.-Intl. Management		
ROLE PLAYS/CONVERSATIONS		
1. weekends/party Hi, _____. weekends I'm busy not free time. What position do you play? My Sun. is broadcasting 7-5.	5	4
	3	2
	1	
	CO-OP	FLU
	A. C.	ACC
	(×2)	

2. h.s. - What do you spend time?

Do you play club soccer? (laughing) J. traditional I joined...not to..I belonged to volunteer group- Shonan Beach clean-up. Many, many people is enjoyed.

QUESTION FROM TEACHER

city most important?

Tokyo- cultural, political; many kinds of elements, important city

TOPIC FOR Comment/Questions

1st impression, I think mixed, modern

(×2)

CO-OP					
A. C.					
FLU					
ACC					

A. C.					
ACC					

A. C.					
FLU					

Co-operation 16/20
 Listening 28/30
 Fluency 17/25
 Accuracy 15/25
 76/100

Positive comments: Listening strong, keeps trying

Cheerful partner, eye contact

Needs to improve: Grammar, vocabulary- more detail

Name:

Date:

Time:

FINAL INTERVIEW

WARM-UP: Exams

ROLE PLAY #1

Topic: Free time-weekend

go to shopping in Yokohama, I show movie. I want to see *Speed*, but I'm busy. How 'bout you? (context-unclear)

	3	2	1
Brevity			
Relevance			
Clarity			

ROLE PLAY #2

Topic: Part-time jobs

What p.t. job do you have?

Where is this job?

My p.t. job is security guard in Yokohama. I work a factory and parking. 2 yrs. Factory is easy but parking is hard. I'm studying? Standing?

QUESTION FROM THE TEACHER

Which do you like, Sat or Sun p.m.? I like Sun. because Sat. I have to go to p.t. job 8am - 8 pm

	3	2	1
Brevity			
Relevance			
Clarity			

	3	2	1
A. C.			
FLU			

19/24
= 79%

Nonverbal: smiling, laughing, gd. eye contact

Strengths: gd. listening, able to add details

Areas to improve: vocabulary, making connections clear

What About Errors?

Even our strongest low-intermediate students produced conversations filled with enough grammar and vocabulary errors to make some teachers cringe. All teachers wouldn't evaluate these students identically; native-speakers, evaluate differently from nonnative-speakers, new teachers differently from experienced (Schmitt, 1993). However, we fail to really test the skills we want our students to develop if we penalize them for problems with areas not underscored in classes, such as complex grammar and pronunciation accuracy.

We wanted students to converse, to ask questions or make comments about what their partners said with relative ease. We wanted them to wriggle out of difficult situations with coping techniques. Did we totally disregard grammar and vocabulary problems? No, when these problems

caused communication breakdowns, we penalized students, especially during midterm interviews, which focused on topics requiring basic English vocabulary and question-forming skills. By carefully tying our evaluation criteria to our class goals, we were able to accomplish Hughes' directive (1989, p.4), and make some interesting discoveries along the way.

Breakdown and Repair

All the conversations had some breakdowns, generally due to: lack of vocabulary, syntax problems, extremely short or general answers, and long silences. How well they could keep the conversation going despite these problems is what our scoring focused on.

We found similarities between the strategies used by effective native-speaker communicators and the strong communicators among our students. Ellis, Duran, and Kelly (1994, p.147-149) mention two different types of strategies used by native speakers: deep, meaning-based strategies usually based on personal knowledge, using larger contexts and making implications; and surface text-based strategies that relate only to the previous utterance and seem static with little connection to either speakers' experiences or other parts of the conversation. We found this meant the difference between students who could track discussion and expand it spontaneously and those who relied on memorized phrases or questions, unable to follow the flow of conversation.

We found stronger communicators taking the initiative, manipulating topics, engaging their partner, using fewer memorized phrases, elaborating on an idea and taking extended turns using complex sentences, seeking and offering clarification and restating when necessary. Note the

confusion over the memorized phrase “how ’bout you”. ** In the first conversation, the stronger speaker must deduce the reference, and together the partners straighten it out.

<topic: free time on the weekends>

A: What movie do you want to watch lately?

B: Mm. Now I want to see *Speed*, but I’m busy so I don’t see. (glances at camera) I don’t watch.

** A: How ’bout you?

B: Unhhh? (laughs)

A: (Makes eye contact)

B: Weekend?

A: (Staring at prompt card for help)

When you have free time on the weekend, where are you go?

B: mm. I usually stay home

A: Stay home?

B: yes or..

A: sleeping?

(both laugh) (inside joke for the class-most people work all weekend)

B: yes

A: yeah

B: and going shopping mm foods uh mm

A: I live with my parents. So I don’t buy food, buy food. My parents buy my food.

In the second, the stronger speaker realizes more context is necessary to make the “how ’bout you” ** clear, and repairs the conversation.

<topic: part-time jobs>

A: From Feb. to Nov. I worked Baskin Robbins ice cream shop.

B: Uh, ice cream shop.

long pause

A: I’m busy and I don’t like that store’s boss. (laughs)

B: (nodding) ah

A: but I now play the store’s friends

B: Where is this store?

- A: MM. Now I live in Hon-Atsugi. The shop is Hon-Atsugi station
* * biru.* How 'bout you? What job do you have?
B: My part-time job is security guard.
* biru=building, in katakana

On the other hand, we found that students who had difficulty with the conversations responded in a limited manner, provided questions and answers with little elaboration; paused a long time; asked for help, sometimes in Japanese; used katakana (foreign spelling) pronunciation of English words; used some memorized rejoinders for lack of syntax; and struggled for vocabulary. These students got ideas from their partners, asked more basic questions, repeated exact words more often, waited for the teacher to rephrase the partner's question or answer, and listened very actively.

Unequal Pairs

There were a few unsuccessful unequal pairs whose conversations fell flat, possibly due to the fact that they were from different classes, or that they fell prey to one of the syndromes Mayer mentions (1994, p,12) such as the Top Dog syndrome or the Queen Bee syndrome. In these cases, the weaker students deferred to the stronger speakers. They stared at the topic cards, spoke in a low voice, read the topics verbatim, and stayed silent for long periods of time. At the same time, the stronger students accommodated by slowing down and speaking in phrases, lowering their voices, asking very basic questions, and trying to reword questions.

Student Evaluation

Of the 70 students we tested, 46 did written evaluations for courses taught by one of the instructors. Students rated all class activities and indicated the best and worst thing about the class.

Very useful	Good	OK	Not interesting	Not useful
5	4	3	2	1
Midterm Interview				
10	15	14	6	1 (absent)
Final Interview				
7	21	12	5	1

Only one student rated the midterm and final conversation tests as not useful.

The Best and the Worst of Conversation Class

Ernst (1994, p.315) concluded that for elementary students to become more comfortable speaking a second language

they need to be in classroom environments where conversation and negotiation are not only encouraged but carefully orchestrated, supported and monitored by the teacher.

Our university students' comments echo this.

<Best thing:>

Very useful	Good	OK	Not interesting	Not useful
5	4	3	2	1
Comment				Interview Rating (M=Midterm, F=Final)
-I like English more.				(M-4, F-4)
-I have no chance to speak English. I have that chance in this class.				(M-3, F-4)
-Can speak with many people in this class.				(M-3, F-3)

<Worst thing:>

-Conversation test is very difficult.	(M-3, F-4)
-Many students in this class didn't speak English so much and clearly.	(M-5, F-5)
-I couldn't speak English so much.	(M-5, F-5)
-I can't communicate perfectly.	(M-4, F-4)

Our Evaluation

On the negative side, the midterm and final interviews for 70 students each took an extra 12 hours of our time spread over several days. A few very unequal pairs were unable to have successful conversations. Video during the final interviews made a few nervous. It is difficult to create an easy-to-use, comprehensive checklist for grading.

On the positive side, however, the chance to motivate students, give individual attention, and focus on the class goals of developing conversational strategies far outweighed the disadvantages. The interviews motivated students to interact and venture beyond the sample text dialogues, using many strategies practiced in class. In addition, this was a rare chance to talk with two native speakers and after interacting with us and understanding us, students felt they had really accomplished something. For our students, as Murphey (1995, p.13) advises, we tried to offer the

stimulation of effective language learning processes that can later be used by learners to help them learn whatever they want.

Through teamwork, we were able to learn specific information about each student's fluency and self-confidence speaking English allowing us to offer useful feedback at midterm time. We could lighten the burden of writing comments and stay more objective, checking our ratings to keep within range or discuss wide differences. And most importantly, especially in the final interview, we focused solely on the interaction aspects, ignoring grammar or vocabulary errors.

What We'd Change

Next time, interview grades will be more holistic for the entire session,

simplifying the record sheets. We would rephrase the categories as shown below.

		Always = A	Sometimes = S	Never = N
		10	7	4
		A	S	N
Warm-Up				
Role play or topic to discuss	Listened actively			
	Gave details			
	Asked for help			
	Used fillers			
	Tried to use only English			
Individual question	Spoke fluently			
	Made eye contact			
	Stayed on topic			
	Included/helped partner			
	Understood the conversation			
Teachers' talking & group discussion				/ 100

For NS and NNS teachers, the more specific rating behaviors would be easier to immediately evaluate. Students leaving the final interview knew for themselves whether they were successful or not.

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- We would like to sincerely thank our conversation class students for their willingness to be videotaped and permission to use their reactions to interview tests.