The Immediate Method: Immediate results?

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Proponents of the Immediate Method suggest that meta-communication tools can break down student unwillingness to answer the teacher's questions in typical Japanese school contexts. This paper will examine the veracity of these claims by documenting the implementation of the Immediate Method in junior high school oral communication classes. At first some of the challenges facing the language teacher in the Japanese context will be defined, followed by a brief summary of the Immediate Method's key principles, and an outline of the action research undertaken to examine the effectiveness of the Immediate Method. Preliminary conclusions will also be offered.

イミディエート・アプローチの提唱者たちは、典型的な日本の学校において、教師の質問に答える際みられる生徒のやる気のなさは「メタコミュニケーション」の手法で打破できるとしている。この研究論文は、イミディエート・アプローチを中学校のオーラル・コミュニケーション・クラスにおいて実践した際の記録に基づいて、これらの主張の正確性について検証するものである。まず最初に、日本での授業という文脈において語学教師が直面するいくつかの課題を明確にし、続けてイミディエート・アプローチの基本原理の概略について述べる。そしてイミディエート・アプローチの効果を検証する実施研究の概要について述べる。仮定される結論についても述べたい。イミディエート・アプローチの提唱者たちは、典型的な日本の学校において、教師の質問に答える際みられる生徒のやる気のなさは「メタコミュニケーション」の手法で打破できるとしている。この研究論文は、イミディエート・アプローチを中学校のオーラル・コミュニケーション・クラスにおいて実践した際の記録に基づいて、これらの主張の正確性について検証するものである。まず最初に、日本での授業という文脈において語学教師が直面するいくつかの課題を明確にし、続けてイミディエート・アプローチの基本原理の概略について述べる。そしてイミディエート・アプローチの効果を検証する実施研究の概要について述べる。仮定される結論についても述べたい。

The Immediate Method (IM) is essentially a classroom management system especially adapted for the Japanese teaching context. At its core, it consists of three main stages: first, the students are presented with target phrases (often question forms or sentence frames, for example "How do you come here?" / "I come here by ~") with the teacher supplementing each phrase with vocabulary items that fit into the frame slots. The students then copy down these new words and their Japanese equivalents. The second stage is for the learners to prepare themselves for an oral test by practicing the target phrases on each other in pairs. The last stage is for the students to undertake the oral test, whereby the teacher draws

away students in turn and *immediately* tests them on the target phrases. The tests take place away from the attention of the rest of the class, which at that time should be still in preparation for their turn, or perhaps doing some written exercises related to the lesson theme. Other than the frequent occurrence of oral tests, the other remarkable features of the IM are the introduction and regular reinforcement of "metacommunication" phrases, and the use of a progress sheet that follows each test. Details of both of these aspects of the IM follow below.

Context of this study

I teach oral communication classes to third year junior high school students at Kansai Ohkura, a private co-educational school that is located in Ibaraki city in the north of Osaka prefecture. Over the years, I have come across many challenges in conducting satisfying lessons with meaningful communicative outcomes, so it was with great interest that I attended the Immediate Method workshop at the 2004 JALT conference in Nara (for details see Azra et al. 2005). The IM itself originated in French classes at the University of Osaka to deal with specific challenges found there, especially large classes with low student motivation, and has since been adopted by teachers of German and Japanese at the university level. More recently, IM has been developed for teaching English at the beginner level, with the textbook *Immediate Conversations 1* (Brown et al. 2004a) specifically designed to be used in junior high school classes. From April 2005 Kansai Ohkura has been using the textbook for its third year junior high school classes, and this paper looks at the current results from an ongoing action research project examining the effectiveness of the IM in five of those classes.

Classroom challenges

The Immediate Method was developed in response to challenges typically facing teachers in the Japanese classroom context. So, before evaluating the method, it is worth spending a little time looking at what those challenges are, from the specific (particular to the teaching context at Kansai Ohkura), to the general (found in many Japanese classrooms). (See Table 3, challenges column).

One of the greatest challenges seems to be one of time–in particular finding enough time for each individual student to have a chance to communicate in English in a satisfying and meaningful way. Large classes typically found in Japanese schools limit the opportunities that any one student may have to speak in class, especially when interacting with the teacher. Averaging 20 students per class, the class sizes at Kansai Ohkura are not as big as some that the IM has been designed for, but they are large enough to make meaningful conversation practice difficult. Moreover, time is limited in another sense: oral communication classes at Kansai Ohkura are scheduled just once a week, and coupled with other scheduling policies, on average there are only 25 45-minute classes in a school year. That equates to less than one hour of teacher attention per student in a year. Not only does this affect the possible range and depth that a course can realistically cover, but also learner retention and motivation.

Another typical feature of the oral communication class at Kansai Ohkura is the lack of a clear purpose: the curriculum is defined by the textbook, and when I first started, I was expected cover the units one by one, regardless of students' interests or handling of the material. There were to be no tests, grades or homework and in no way did student performance affect the rest of their school lives. In this environment, how is one to measure progress? What constitutes learner achievement?

The lack of clear goals also meant it was difficult to feel a sense of accomplishment, affecting student and teacher motivation. An unmotivated class can become a disruptive class, with the teacher wasting precious time on discipline rather than pedagogy. This problem of disruption may also occur when there is a disparity in skill levels, with students who find tasks too easy and who find them too difficult becoming disengaged, or in the words of Csikszentmihalyi (1985), lacking *emergent* motivation.

Perhaps even more demotivating is the reticence of the students to participate, which has been linked to the education system of Japan. For example Williams (1994, p10) points out that:

> Traditionally the technique employed in most classrooms is of a lecture style, where the teacher remains standing behind a desk at the front of the class and the students receive information as the teacher lectures. Little input is ever solicited from the students, and it is instilled that a classroom is a place where one listens and learns but does not speak.

In contrast to this, in my classroom students suddenly come across a teacher asking them to not only speak up, but to speak up in English, and to each other! They are required to voice opinions and answer questions that do not have a clear right or wrong answer. It is no understatement to call this a classroom culture shock.

Anderson (1993, p102) found one thing that troubled Western language teachers in Japan was that students rarely volunteer answers:

> Most Japanese will only talk if specifically called upon, and only then if there is a clear-cut answer. But even if the answer is obvious, it may be preceded by a pause so long that the instructor is tempted to supply the answer first. This type of pause—or even a true silence—does not necessarily signify an unwillingness to comply, but may simply indicate that the student is too nervous to respond, or too uncertain of the answer to risk public embarrassment.

It is also commonly acknowledged that Japanese students tend to be very shy when speaking in front of the whole class. Doyon (2000) offers an in-depth look at the topic of shyness in Japanese classrooms, where he refers to the work of the anthropologist Takie Sugiyama Lebra. Lebra (1976) identified three interactional domains in Japanese society: ritual, anomic and intimate. The traditional classroom culture in Japan is typically a *ritual interactional domain* replete with formalities, conventional rules, and highly *guarded* behavior. On the other hand a person in the *anomic interactional domain* feels both considerable social distance, and a lack of concern for the opinion of others, sensing no

need for formalities and no desire for intimacy–which may perfectly describe some of the more disruptive students who are not fully invested or integrated into the collective sense of purpose of the oral communication class.

In order to overcome shyness in the classroom, Doyon recommends *moving toward the intimate interactional domain, a domain where* more open communication and displays of spontaneity are likely to prevail. For Doyon, this means, among other things: creating intimacy between students by eliciting personal information; removing the "teacher's mask" by becoming more friendly with the students; and moving away from the evaluation paradigm (Doyon 2000, p.10).

The Immediate Method

It may be a lot to expect one method to deal with all the challenges outlined above, but proponents of the Immediate Method make some very strong claims for its success in the Japanese context:

> It makes conversation teachers' lives much easier because: no more discrepancy between the teacher's efforts and the observed results; students are sure to start speaking in class and make progress; every student participates and makes progress, not just the two front rows; teachers spend less energy during class time. (Brown et al. 2004)

Proponents point out that the success of the method rests on three key elements (Brown et al. 2004b, p11):

> 1) Students systematically use "meta-communication" expressions—tools which aid in keeping the conversation going, even when they encounter unknown vocabulary;
>
> 2) Students are frequently interviewed in small groups or individually, and receive a score based on their oral performance;
>
> 3) Their scores are kept on a progress sheet, which they are responsible for.

On the face of it, the IM follows the presentation-practice-production approach. At the beginning of each unit key phrases are presented–usually with the aid of visual charts. These phrases come from lesson topics that revolve around everyday things that are said to allow students to speak immediately, and be interested in what they and their partner have to say. For example "Do you have any brothers or sisters?", "What's your favorite subject?" and "What do you usually do on weekends?".

The practice stage is next. Here students are encouraged to rehearse the key phrases orally (or with written exercises) in preparation for later testing. Ideally the students practice question and answer routines in pairs, without much supervision as the teacher may be occupied carrying out testing.

Testing consists of an oral interview with 2-3 students and the teacher in a corner of the classroom, away from the attention of other class members (and subsequently a more *intimate* domain). The tests are regular (at least once every other class), and they provide opportunity and time for every student to interact with the teacher. They can be thought of as the motor that drives the method, in contrast to Doyon's (2000) advice to move away from an evaluation paradigm.

Each student is given a progress sheet at the start of the year, on which test scores are recorded after the interview has been completed. This is supposed to offer instant feedback on their performance and, according to the authors of this method, the progress sheet has its own pedagogical value (Brown et al. 2004b, p15). By giving the students responsibility not to loose the progress sheet (and encouraging them to personalize it with photographs, etc.) it is supposed to have a psychological effect: the students understand that they themselves are responsible for their learning and accomplishments As a result, lost sheets are expected to be rare and the students should be sufficiently motivated to not only perform well in the tests, but practice well in pairs prior to the tests. This is important as a teacher occupied in testing small groups away from the centre of the class is not in a position to control a large part of the class for a large amount of the time.

The other key element mentioned above is the use of meta-communication phrases (MCPs) which are presented early and recycled frequently to enable smooth communication (Brown et al. 2004b, p12). For example the question recommended to be taught first is "What's -- in English". This allows students to use the vocabulary needed to answer questions, as well as encourage curiosity and spontaneity. Also the response "I don't know" is a key phrase found in the first unit of *Immediate Conversations I*, which should give the students an acceptable way to say something when they do not know what the answer is, preferable to the silent response that seems to prevail in many classrooms (Brown et al. 2004a, p11).

Table 1. Typical MCPs from *Immediate Conversations I*

T: What's *tsukareta* in English? S: Pardon? T: What's *tsukareta* in English? S: I don't know.	T: How do you say *tsukareta* in English? S: I don't understand the question. T: What's *tsukareta* in English? S: It's "tired".	S: What's *tsukareta* in English? T: It's "tired" S: How do you spell it? T: T, I, R, E, D.
Example MCPs:	What's --- in English? Pardon? I don't know I don't understand How do you spell it?	

Other MCPs that may be introduced early on are identified in Table 1. All of these are idealised examples that may occur during the presentation stage of, for example, Unit 4 of *Immediate Conversations 1* (which deals with the key phrase "How are you today / How about you?"). Typically during the presentation stage, as a class the students translate vocabulary items in vocabulary boxes, usually with the teacher fronting the activity. At this stage, and crucially during oral interviews, the IM relies upon the teacher recycling and encouraging the use of MCPs as much as possible.

Action research

In order to investigate the effectiveness of the IM in my context, I started some action research, which at the time of writing is still in progress. To date there have been three components to the research: the research diary, lesson recordings and a mark-off sheet for MCPs occurring in class.

In the diary, I note lesson plans before the start of each class, and write brief observations after each class–usually in the 15-20 minutes between classes. In another section I keep a journal of thoughts after periods of reflection, and when inspired by background reading.

It soon became apparent that class recordings would be necessary, and these started after the third class. The lessons have been recorded on a small digital recorder which the students quickly grew to ignore. After each day of teaching I would listen to the classes again and review the notes I had made. The recordings also helped me check the accuracy of my MCP sheet.

The MCP sheet was born out of the realisation that in practice there were two types of MCP – spontaneous and prompted, and also 5 classes. (See Table 2).

The 5 classes of MCP are:

Class A – Correct meta-communication phrase

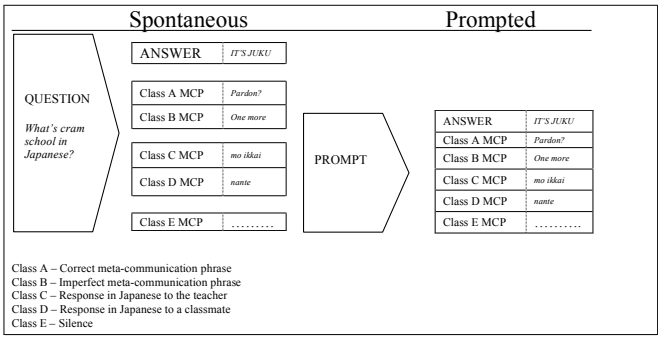
Class B – Imperfect meta-communication phrase in English

Class C – Response in Japanese to the teacher

Class D – Response in Japanese to a classmate

Class E – Silence

Table 2. Spontaneous and prompted MCPs



Class E, D and C MCPs are often followed by a prompt from teacher or classmate to produce an appropriate MCP in English or an answer. I found class B is sometimes followed by a prompt (such as a correction) or ignored, whilst class A MCPs allow the dialogue to flow.

For example, if the question "What's cram school in Japanese?" is asked and the student did not hear properly, a class A response might be "pardon", class B "One more" (which might be corrected or might be ignored) class C *eh* or *nani* to the teacher, class D seeking collaboration in Japanese from another student to help negotiate the meaning of the question, and class E a silent response.

To keep track of how often these MCPs occur, I keep a mark-off sheet with the five main MCPs (table 1), and record each time I hear one. At the end of the day when I listen to the class recordings I also check the MCP sheets. Whilst I am satisfied with the accuracy of the data, due to the arbitrary nature of its collection, it would be wise to treat the

figures with some care. However I feel it is safe to use them to indicate the relative frequency of each MCP.

Findings

First I would like to consider one extract from a classroom recording, taken from an oral interview with three students being tested on the key phrase "How do you spell --?" It seems to have gone very smoothly. There is little hesitation and there are few silent responses, almost no Japanese and good evidence for an intimate interactional domain (plenty of laughs, and spontaneity in line 43 when the student recalls Humpty Dumpty).There are also many MCPs used. There are 6 occurrences of "I don't know", 5 of class A or B forms of "How do you spell --?", 2 of "What's – in English?" and one "Pardon?" All of the "I don't know" MCPs are spontaneous, while "What's – in English?" MCPs are all prompted by the teacher's question "Can you ask me" in line 20, and "Can you ask me a question" in line 48.

What is more interesting is that the first three occurrences of "How do you spell --?" are all prompted, at first by a direct question in line 9. Then in lines 31 and 32 they take a bit more time to be prompted (lines 23-30). The first pause (line 23) encourages the "Pardon" response and it is only after the "Okay?" and another awkward pause that the students seem to realize they are expected to ask the follow-up question "How do you spell--?" But after this pattern has been set, the final utterances of that MCP (lines 51 and 52) occur spontaneously.

This extract is not representative of most recordings most of the time. The students involved were the most motivated, and many of the MCPs had recently been target phrases in previous lessons, but it offers a glimpse of what may be achieved using the IM. Whether students can maintain MCP use remains an important research question, and to find the answer we can look to another extract taken some 3 months later.

Extract 2 takes place at the presentation stage where the teacher is presenting vocabulary. In line 1 the teacher is asking for the English equivalent of "*haha ni okutte morau"*, and this causes a lot of conversation amongst the class in Japanese. As Marchand (2005) notes, Japanese responses (class C or D MCPs) are generally preferred to silences, and this is especially true when students look to each other for help and collaborate to answer questions.

In line 5 the teacher's attention is drawn away to a couple students (S10 and S11) who do not seem to be paying attention, but when asked directly also start to wonder about the correct answer. The students who were originally asked the question (S6 and S7) offer a response, with an "I don't know" in line 8 and a good attempt at the answer in line 9. The teacher gives the correct translation in lines 10 and 12, but there is a negotiated exchange confirming the appropriateness of the word "lift" in lines 15-23. Here the students who had been drawn into the question in line 5 finally resolve their uncertainty when S10 asks the question "How do you spell lift", a perfect spontaneous use of that particular MCP

These are just a couple extracts from the classroom recordings, and more can be found in Marchand (ibid.) who sees a tendency over time for ever-increasing spontaneity. This can be confirmed by analyzing the results of the MCP mark-off sheets.

Extract 1. Oral interview

01	T:	I see. That's good (..) And Umm:: (…) >Do you know< What's (.) err::: (...) *megane* in English
02	S1:	(1.0) It's (..) glasses in English
03	T:	Glasses. How do you spell glasses
04	S1:	(..) I don't know
05	T:	Okay
06	{laughing}	
07	T:	How do you spell glasses
08	S2	I don't know
09	T:	(..) Okay. Do you want to ask me?
10	S3:	(.) How:: do you (.) spell (..) glasses
11	T:	Er (.) It's G, L, A. (..) S, S, (.) E, S
12	{writing}	
13	T:	L
14	S1:	S, E {laughing}
15	T:	L, A, S, S, E, S. (..) Okay. **Um**m:: How do you say:: (.) *tenjou* in English
16	S2:	It's (…) I don't know {laughing}
17	T:	Okay. How do you say *tenjou* [in English
18	S1:	[I don't know
19	S3:	(..) I don't know
20	T:	Okay(.) Can you ask me
21	S3:	How (..) What? (.) What s:z *tenjo* in English
22	T:	In English (..) Umm:: It's **cei**ling
23	(2.0)	
24	S3:	Pardon?
25	T:	Ceiling
26	S3:	Cei::ling
27	T:	Yes
28	{laughing}	
29	T:	Okay?
30	(1.0)	
31	S1:	[How do you spell]
32	S3:	[How do you spell it
33	T:	Ahh: (..) It's C, E, I, L
34	Ss:	°C, E, I, L°
35	T:	I, N, G
36	Ss:	°I, N, G°
37	T:	That's right. Good. Ceiling
38	S1:	(xxxxxx)
39	T:	Okay. err:: (.) How do you say *kabe* in English
40	S2:	(.) I don't know
41	S3:	It's wall
42	T:	wall
43	S2:	Ah::: (..) Humpty Dumpty!
44	T:	Humpty Dumpty, that's right!
45	{laughing}	
46	T:	Um:: okay, how do you spell wall?
47	S2:	Wall, okay W, A, L, L
48	T:	That's right. Good. Okay that's good. Can you umm ask me a question
49	S1:	(2.0) What's *yuka* in English
50	T:	er it's floor
51	S2:	How do you [spell
52	S1:	[How do you spell it
53	T:	Ah: F, L, O, O, R

Extract 2. Presentation stage

01	T:	What is (.) *haha ni okutte morau* (.) in: (.) English.
02	Ss:	[*(x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x x)*]
03	S6:	[*(xxx) haha ni okutte morau (xxxxxx)*]
04	T:	in English. (..) *haha ni okutte morau..*
05		(..) >girls, girls< are you listening? (.) *haha ni okutte morau.*
06	S10:	*(xxx) °eigo de, haha ni* [*okutte morau° (xxxx)*]
07	S11:	[*(xxxxxx)*)]
08	S7:	I [don't know]
09	S6:	[drive with my Mother.
10	T:	Close. (..) Not (.) n-not perfect, but okay. (..) It's (.) get a lift, (..)
11	S10:	get a lift
12	T:	with my Mum.
13	S10:	(..) with::u
14	T:	get a lift, (...)
15	S11:	lifto?
16	T:	(.) with my Mum.
17	S12:	lifto (..) left?
18	T:	lift.
19	S12:	lift?
20	T:	get a lift (.) with my Mum.
21	S10:	how do you spell lift?
22	T:	L, I, F, T.
23	S10:	°L, I, F, T°
24	S12:	° get a lift (..) with (.) my Mum°

Figure 1 compares the number of spontaneous and prompted MCPs as they occurred over the period from June 10th to September 30th. As can be seen, there is a slight improvement in the ratio between prompted and unprompted MCPs, especially in the last weeks of September. The exception to this trend is the large number of prompted MCPs on September 2nd, which could be explained by the return to school after a lengthy summer break.

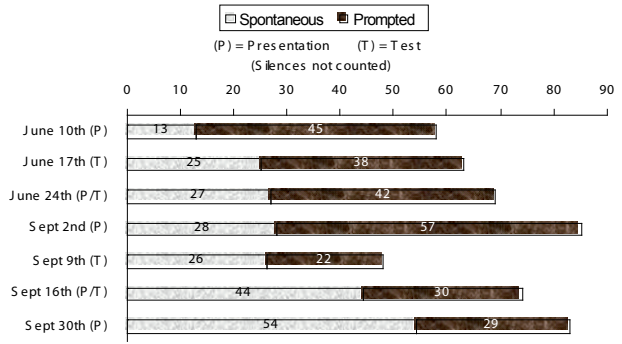


Figure 1. Frequency of spontaneous MCPs and prompted MCPs

Figure 2 shows the spread of spontaneous MCPs per class. Again, in the last two weeks of September there was a shift towards class A MCPs, and figure 3 (see appendix) shows this has in the main come from "I don't know" responses, and to a lesser extent "pardon". At this time in my research diary I noted a ripple affect, where after one student had successfully responded with an "I don't know", many others readily followed suit. This is also evident to some extent in extract 1.

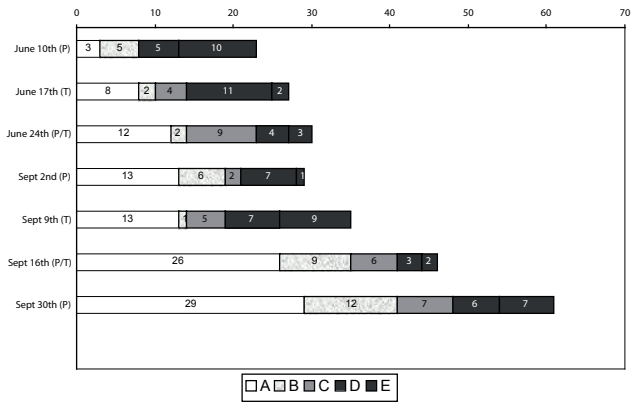


Figure 2. Total spontaneous MCPs by class

As has already been noted, class C and D responses tend to be preferred to class E, with Japanese responses outnumbering silences in every week except June 3rd. As a result, it could be suggested that a classroom where students are using code-switching as a means to achieve communicative ends—especially when it comes to interacting with the teacher—is preferable to one with guarded behavior and long periods of silence. Also as figure 2 shows, the silent responses themselves seem to come and go, and again according to my diary notes, they were especially noteworthy on hot days. If we compare the profiles of class 4 and class 5 with their spontaneous MCP output (figure 4 in the appendix), it may come as no surprise that class 5 had a PE class immediately prior to their oral communication class. They consistently accounted for most silent responses, so it is important to remember that external factors also affect the success of a class.

Conclusion

This is still a research in progress, so this paper can only offer some preliminary conclusions (see the *Results* column of Table 3). Whilst there has naturally been no change to the time constraints as far as scheduling goes, since the implementation of the IM the regular oral interviews of every student have allowed for plenty of teacher-student interaction evenly spread among class members. The progress sheet has been somewhat successful in maintaining interest, and to date only 2 have been lost. However, it is too early to tell whether there has been significant progress across all classes–although use of MCPs, which are increasingly spontaneous and accurate, shows encouraging signs.

Anecdotally, it would appear that this year's classes are better behaved than previous years, and it seems I am spending less time on discipline and more time teaching. However, the IM demands isolating the teacher from the majority of the class while conducting oral interviews which means there are moments when the students may lose focus. This is especially true after they have completed the tests; this is dead time which to date seems to be inadequately filled by supplementary written exercises. As has been noted, there is evidence of significant code-switching during tasks, and while this may be beneficial in the short-term, its long-term effects on retention and acquisition have to be questioned. Also, the teacher-fronted presentation stage, while providing a familiar framework in which students can become more relaxed and spontaneous, may breed a lack of engagement among some students as it is too routine.

Finally, the IM does seem to have made an impact on classroom culture–there are indicators of increased

spontaneity in the classes and less guarded behavior on behalf of the students. It is hoped these are signs of the class moving towards the intimate interactional domain, and it remains to be seen whether the increasing use of MCPs can provide a bridge toward more meaningful communicative outcomes.

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Table 3. Summary

	Some challenges in an oral communication class	The IM response	The IM result?
Time	large class sizes / limited class time / lack of practice opportunities and T-S interaction / problems of continuity and retention	guarantee interaction with every student / each stage reinforces core phrases (MCPs)	many of the constraints remain / less time wasting / considerable T-S interaction
Results	no clearly defined course purpose / teaching "the textbook" not the "class" / no tests or grading	progress sheet to measure achievement / students given personal responsibility	2 progress sheets lost / good response to the oral tests / too early to comment on progress
Motivation	various motivation levels / various skill levels / disruptive behaviour / teacher motivation	every-day life lesson topics allow students to talk about themselves / progress sheet gives goal-orientated motivation	some students still disruptive during testing stage / frequent code-switching during tasks / occasional lack of engagement during presentation stage
Classroom culture	classroom experience / culture shock / the silent response / shy students / Lehbra's interactional domains	MCPs to overcome typical blocking situations and the silent response	more spontaneity in the class / increasing use of a limited number of MCPs

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Appendix

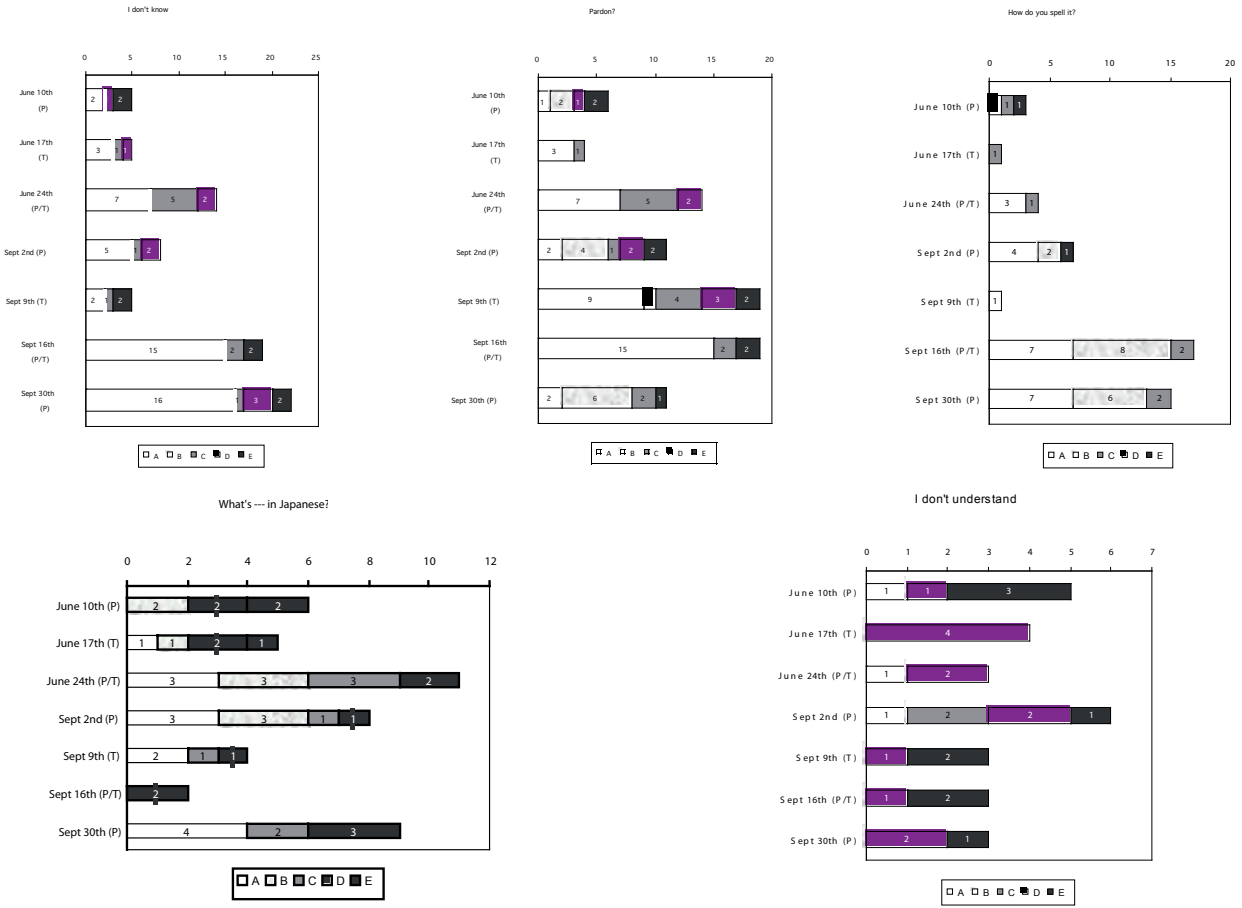

Figure 4. Frequency of individual MCPs

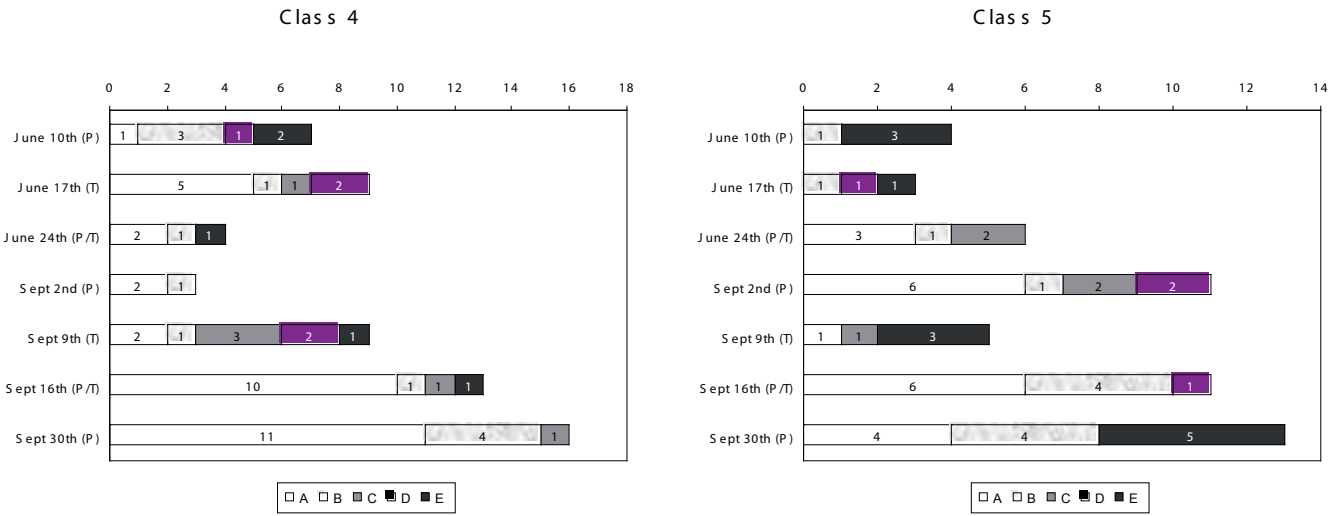

Figure 5. MCP frequency in two classes

Notation conventions (adapted from Jefferson 1984)

(xxx)	incomprehensible	(..)	pause
{ }	commentary, e.g. {laughing}	(…)	pause up to 1 second
Wha-	aborted utterance	(1.0)	timed pause
:	elongated sound, e.g. fo::r	=	fast connection, latching
°oh°	low volume	[ ]	overlapping talk
cram	emphasized or stressed	. (period)	falling intonation
>yup<	high tempo	, (comma)	continuing intonation
<I don't know>	low tempo	?	rising intonation
(.)	micropause	*shiranai*	code-switching, i.e. Japanese