Characteristics of Interactional Management Functions in Group Oral by Japanese Learners of English

Junko Negishi
Waseda University

This study attempted to investigate the characteristics of interaction dynamics in a group oral interaction carried out by Japanese learners of English. The relationship between the participants' language development and interactional management functions (IMFs) was also explored. Oral performance tests in a paired or a small group have recently been introduced because the assessment of L2 learners' authentic conversational competence is considered important in the current era of globalization. Qualitative analysis showed that some characteristics, namely, modifying or developing the topic and negotiation of meaning, displayed an association with the development of the participants' language ability. More proficient speakers' dialogues of this study showed a more complex, co-constructed, and collaborative nature, with more interactions and negotiation of meaning.

Key Words: oral performance, group discussion, interaction

1 Introduction

The concept of "interactional competence" was first advocated by Kramsch in 1986, when communicative language teaching was being promoted. This method of teaching favoured classroom interactions in pairs or groups, unlike traditional language proficiency tests, which put emphasis on lexical and grammatical forms but paid little attention to the dynamic process of communication. In this sense, language proficiency tests in Japan have not changed since the term was first coined two and a half decades ago. Kramsch claims that interaction is important because "successful interaction presupposes not only a shared knowledge of the world, the reference to a common external context of communication, but also the construction of a shared internal context or 'sphere of inter-subjectivity' that is built through the collaborative effort of the interactional partners" (p. 367). Collaborative interaction allows negotiation of meaning between/among the interlocutors, which subsequently prompts second language (L2) acquisition.

    He & Young (1998) and Young (2000) take up the notion of

interactional competence as a core concept of the Interactional Competence Theory, which defines speaking ability as authentic normal conversation in the target language. Various definitions of interactional competence can be found in the literature: Jacoby & Ochs (1995) define it as the way interlocutors co-construct the oral performance through collaborative and supportive interaction, and Ducasse & Brown (2009) define it "in terms of how speakers structure and sequence their speech, and how they apply turn-taking rules" (p. 424).

Apart from the Interactional Competence Theory, the significance of interaction has also been asserted by numerous researchers: McNamara (1996), for example, points out the weakness of communicative competence models, which focus too much on individual performance and he asserts the necessity of interaction between speakers. Furthermore, conversational interaction is believed to be beneficial for L2 learning (Swain, 2001). That is, when L2 learners partake successfully in a collaborative activity, they use language in their "knowledge-building" interaction for the purpose of solving their language problems. Swain terms it "collaborative dialogue" (p.281), in which the speakers construct the interactive performance jointly, not individually.

2 Oral Performance

2.1 Oral interaction in a paired or a small group (group oral)

Although interviews are the most commonly used performance-based oral tests, the format is often criticized as being "pseudo-social and asymmetrical" (van Lier, 1989). Oral tests in a paired or a small group (group oral, hereafter) have recently been introduced to the range of oral performance tests because the assessment of L2 learners' authentic conversational competence is considered important in the current era of globalization. The introduction of paired and group oral tests became possible because of "a product of the increased interpretability of test scores, potential validity of the scores when linked to real-world criteria and positive washback effects" (Bonk & Ockey, 2003, p. 89).

Oral performance tests of the paired or small group types are being administered, for example, in Cambridge First Certificate (paired), Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English (paired) and in the speaking test administered by the Council of Europe for (paired and group oral). There are some local tests that utilize the group oral. In Korea these are run by a university, the Educational Testing Service (ETS; to select scholarship recipients) and a private company; in Hong Kong there is the Hong Kong Use of English test, and in China there are the College English Test–Spoken English Test and the Public English Test Systems. No group oral tests have been administered in Japan to date, excluding an English Forum for junior high schools organized municipally, whose purpose is to encourage and

Characteristics of Interactional Management Functions in Group Oral by Japanese Learners of English

improve students' communicative competence as advocated in the Japanese course of study. In comparison to interviews, the group oral is likely to produce natural and insightful conversation with peers, and it has been proved to be appropriate in certain test situations and in a battery of oral tests (Bonk & Ockey, 2003; Fulcher, 1996; Van Moere, 2006).

Research dealing with the paired format has recently begun but only a few studies dealing with the group oral have been carried out to date. This study attempts to investigate the characteristics of interaction dynamics in the group oral carried out by Japanese learners of English.

2.2 Disadvantages and advantages of the group oral

It has been claimed that the group oral has various defects. The first drawback is that the interaction might be affected by uncontrollable variables from other interlocutors which threat its validity such as gender, age, intimacy, status, introverted/extrovert personalities, willingness to speak, and different levels of proficiency. These variables may have a smaller effect on a single-speaker test format such as a monologue or picture description. The second limitation is a matter of the quality of the interlocutor. An interlocutor in a small group is an examinee; therefore, the interlocutor cannot be trained and is less qualified. The interlocutor may disrupt the other peers in the group (Brooks 2009; Van Moere, 2006). Thirdly, compared with an interview, an assessment of a group oral generally demonstrates lower inter-rater agreement, which is also a threat to validity (Van Moere, 2006). Fourth, rater severity and inconsistency threaten the validity of the test format as well as other performance-based assessments (Bonk & Ockey, 2003). These disadvantages might have been the reason why the test format of group oral interactions was used rarely.

Although the group oral has received little attention, it has a variety of advantages. First, the group oral is resource economical (Bonk & Ockey, 2003). In particular, the format enables educational institutions to test many students at a single time in comparison to an interview test that has a higher demand on an interviewer. Second, raters can concentrate on their assessment; they need not participate in the interaction with the examinees asking the appropriate questions. Third, group orals or paired interactions promote more communicative, speaking-focused teaching and learning, which may reflect classroom situations and induce the washback effect, because collaborating during speaking activities helps develop the learners' oral proficiency. Linking an oral communication task and a classroom activity may suit educational contexts (Davis, 2009). Fourth, oral interaction enables speakers to show more varied interaction patterns and language functions within a richer discourse, which leads to authenticity (ffrench, 2003; He & Dai, 2006; Kormos, 1999; Lazaraton, 2002; Skehan, 2001; Taylor, 2000, 2001). In this regard, speakers have more opportunities to show their oral ability or interactional competence as they employ more interactional and

conversational management functions (Fulcher, 1996; Galaczi, 2004; Taylor, 2001). The more authentic the test task becomes, the more valid the score interpretation (Ockey, 2009). Oral interaction, therefore, may lead to more complex, co-constructed, and collaborative dialogues, with more interactions and negotiation of meaning. Fifth, oral interaction evens out the asymmetrical power relationship observed in the interview test format (Egyud & Glover, 2001; Iwashita, 1996; Lazaraton, 2002; Skehan, 2001; Taylor, 2001; van Lier, 1989; Young & Milanovic, 1992). Finally, Fulcher (1996) reports that subjects perceive the group oral as more valid than an interview because discourse during the group oral is felt to be more natural.

2.3 Research in group oral

Compared to research in interview tests, studies in the group oral have been very limited. Folland & Robertson (1976) are the researchers who first advocated "the group oral" as one performance test format. The group oral has been reported to threaten the reliability of test scores; however, further research should be carried out because the research is insufficient in this area, compared to the research in interviews and paired oral performance tests. Van Moere (2006) states that "the potential advantages to group assessments, and the fact that candidates themselves give positive reactions to this test format, suggest that further research is warranted into group oral tests" (p. 436).

Ockey (2009) investigated interlocutor effects in groups of three, studying whether scores assigned to assertive and non-assertive speakers were affected by interlocutors' levels of assertiveness. The group members took two kinds of tests: a group oral test and an individual speaking test via telephone. Statistical analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which assertive or non-assertive speakers' scores were affected by the degree of assertiveness of the interlocutors. The assertive speakers received higher scores when grouped with the two non-assertive interlocutors and lower scores when grouped with the two assertive interlocutors.

He & Dai (2006) investigated 60 groups of Chinese learners of English in the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) administered by the National College English Testing Committee. The CET-SET was a face-to-face small group test carried out mainly by three group members. He & Dai explored the candidates' discourse by means of the interactional language functions (ILFs). Doubts were aroused regarding this test format, because the candidates tended to speak to examiners rather than to their peers. As a result, low interactional language functions were observed in Challenging, Supporting, Modifying, Persuading, Developing, and Negotiating Meaning. It is likely that the candidates put too much emphasis on the speaking test and, consequently, were not aware of the indispensability of meaningful interactions. For example, some candidates referred to their interlocutors in the third person, and some mentally prepared their opinions without listening to their peers. Such behaviours resulted in less interaction during discussions. It seems, however, that raters could have informed them

Characteristics of Interactional Management Functions in Group Oral by Japanese Learners of English

in advance that the assessment would also apply to interaction and collaboration, and dominating the conversation would not necessarily lead to high scores.

In the group oral, research has shown that topic, or prompt, is not a significant factor when more than one prompt is employed (Van Moere, 2006). What most affects a test-taker's performance or how raters perceive an individual test-taker are "the characteristics of interlocutors and interaction dynamics within the group" (Van Moere, 2006, p. 411).

The analysis of text and discourse has focused on content and on the cognitive and strategic features (Swain, 2001), that is, fluency, accuracy, complexity, turn-taking, etc. On the other hand, some researchers have been attracted to sociocultural theory in the realm of L2 learning (Swain) and testing. The theory of interactional, co-constructed learning has been influenced by Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and his proponents. The use of qualitative analysis has been increasing, and more researchers are utilizing qualitative methods to complement their quantitative analyses for pursuing validation verification. Among the researchers, Galaczi (2004, 2008) and Storch (2002) applied the methods of conversation analysis (CA) in order to explore L2 learners' discourse in a paired test. Brooks (2009) reports that qualitative analysis within sociocultural theory revealed that encouraging elaboration, finishing sentences, referring to a partner's ideas, and paraphrasing were more frequently observed in a paired test, which indicated a more complex, co-constructed, and collaborative nature of dialogue, with more interactions and negotiation of meaning.

3 The Study

3.1 Aim of the study

In this study, interactional competence, specifically, characteristics of interaction dynamics in the group oral in terms of interactional management functions, carried out by Japanese learners of English, were investigated by means of qualitative analysis. The relationship between the participants' language development and interactional management functions was also explored.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Participants

The participants in the study were 135 students from seven schools from among three kinds of educational institutions, that is, two junior high schools, two senior high schools, and three universities in and around Tokyo, Japan.

Junko Negishi

They were divided into a total of 45 groups, each containing three students. The groups comprised of fifteen junior high school student groups, fifteen senior high school student groups, and fifteen university student groups. In order to ensure the appropriate balance of students from the various types of schools, about half of the participants were recruited from public schools, while the others from private schools. The university students belonged to a wide-range of faculties, none of them being English majors. From the questionnaire distributed at the time of the group oral, we knew that no students had received education abroad with English as the medium of instruction.

3.2.2 Data collection procedure

The data on the group oral were collected from each educational institution through the following process: (1) A questionnaire was distributed with questions on the participants' backgrounds; (2) The students were randomly allocated into groups of three; (3) Each group drew a card on which one of the six interaction topics - School, Family, Friends, Hobbies, English, and Culture (the last being only for university students) - was written down, and they were asked to speak on the topic; (4) Five minutes were allotted to each member of the group to plan his/her speech without speaking to the other members of the group; (5) Each member of the group introduced themselves for about half a minute as a warm-up activity; (6) Finally, the three students interacted orally as a group for five minutes on the selected topic. They were encouraged to have a natural and casual conversation while sitting and looking at each other. The interaction was videotaped after acquiring the permission of the participants.

3.2.3 Data transcription procedures

The sound and movie files were separated using DVD Decrypter Ver. 3.5.4.0 (free software); subsequently, wav. files were created by means of DVD2V Ver. 1.86 (free software). All conversation saved as wav. files was transcribed with the aid of Transcriber Ver. 1.5.1. Along with transcribing, the DVDs compensated for the deficiency of the information.

Some transcript notations should be noted here. A full stop (.) and a question mark (?) do not always denote the end of the sentence. The former indicates falling intonation, and the latter demonstrates rising intonation. Capital letters denote emphasis except the beginning of a sentence. Two brackets ([ ) for two interlocutors indicate overlapping utterances. Equal signs (=) at the end of one utterance and the beginning of the following utterance demonstrate a latch, meaning no interval between adjacent utterances. Capital letters denote emphasis except when appearing at the beginning of sentence. Letters in italics are Japanese words or sounds (for

transcript notations, see Appendix).

3.2.4 Data analysis

For the purpose of analyzing the interactional management functions of the participants' discourse, the following coding scheme was developed, based on that of He & Dai (2006) and Brooks (2009). Since the participants' speaking ability was much lower than that of the subjects of He & Dai and Brooks, all of whom were at least upper intermediate, the list below was modified to comply with the novice to intermediate participants of this study.
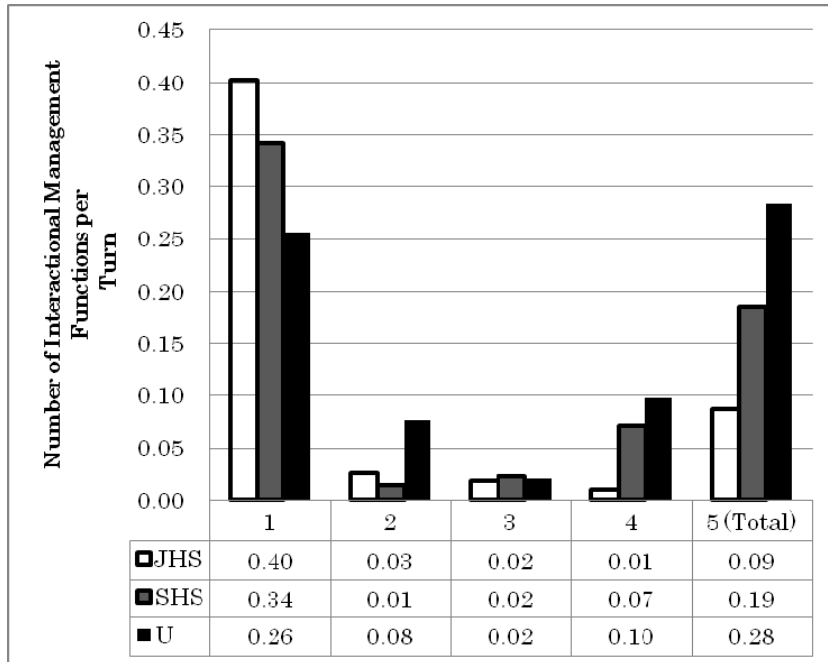
1. Asking for information or opinion
   - Ask for information or opinion
   - Prompt elaboration by another speaker
2. Agreeing or supporting
   - Express agreement with what another speaker has said
   - Support opinions or assertions made by another speaker
3. Disagreeing, challenging, or persuading
   - Express disagreement with what another speaker has said
   - Challenge opinions or assertions made by another speaker
   - Attempt to persuade another speaker to accept one's view
4. Modifying or developing
   - Modify arguments or opinions in response to another speaker
   - Express ideas building on what another speaker has said
   - Referring to or incorporating another speaker's ideas or words
5. Negotiation of meaning
   - 5.1 Asking for clarification or confirmation
       - Ask for explanations that may not have been understood
       - Express incomprehension
       - Paraphrase what another speaker has said
   - 5.2 Giving clarification
       - Give clarification as required by another speaker or correct another speaker's misunderstanding of one's own message
   - 5.3 Checking for comprehension
       - Check the listener's understanding of the message to find out whether the speaker is understood by others
   - 5.4 Asking for help
   - 5.5 Responding to help
   - 5.6 Correcting or suggesting words
   - 5.7 Uptaking correction or suggestion

In order to analyze participants' interaction in a group of three, it may be worthwhile to develop this type of coding scheme; however, it should be noted that this list has limitations, because interaction has diverse functions and cannot be measured by a single means. In addition, the participants' utterances sometimes involve multiple interactional management functions. Despite of these limitations, I believe this study provides some insightful information about the group oral, in terms of sociocultural, interactional dynamics.

4 Results and discussion

Figure 1 shows the number of interactional management functions per turn used by each of the three educational institutions. The reason why the total number of interactional management functions was divided by the number of turns is that each function occurs turn by turn. The total number of turns was 427, 351, and 429 for the junior high school, senior high school, and university respectively. Characteristics of each interactional management function are explained below, with some examples.

Figure 1. Number of interactional management functions per turn used by three educational institutions

	1	2	3	4	5 (Total)
□JHS	0.40	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.09
■SHS	0.34	0.01	0.02	0.07	0.19
■U	0.26	0.08	0.02	0.10	0.28

4.1 Asking for information or opinion

The junior high school groups employed *Asking for information or opinion* (No. 1) more than the senior high school and university groups. It was used the most out of the five interactional management functions for both the junior high and the senior high school groups, though not for the university groups. This phenomenon may indicate that less proficient speakers rely on questions; namely, they use more other-nominated turns rather than self-nominated turns.

Characteristics of Interactional Management Functions in Group Oral by Japanese Learners of English

Excerpt 1 (junior high school: group 5)

2	→R:	Do you have a sister?
3	→M:	Yes, I do. *Toh*, do you have a dog?
4	R:	Yes, I do.
5	→R:	Do you have a cat?
6	M:	Yes, I do.
7	L:	Mmm...*toh*…
8	→M:	Do you have a dog.
9	L:	Yes, I do. *Toh*.
10	R:	How old does dog.
11	M:	No, I don't.

Specifically for the junior high students, this function is essential to their conversation. As can be seen in Excerpt 1, they repeatedly use "Do you have …?" questions (indicated by → and underlines), which is the easiest way to recycle a question that another interlocutor has already used. In Turn 10, meanwhile, when *R* asks *M* how old *M*'s dog is, which cannot be answered with "Yes/No," *M* cannot answer the question appropriately; instead, *M* says, "No, I don't." Without recycling the identical questions, the junior high school students have difficulty in staying with the topic. They seem to concentrate on filling time, but at the same time they try to be friendly, showing interest in other interlocutors.

Excerpt 2 (university: group 44)

31	L:	Are any of you trying to get the teacher's license? or any kind of license?
32	R:	No…
33	M:	No. How about you.
34	L:	Uh, teacher's license.
35	R:	Really.
36	M:	Do you want to be teacher?
37	L:	Uhm, I wan, I actually don't really want to be a teacher but just, I just want a license.
38	→M:	Uh: it's to get a relief. [Uh: relief. Yeah, yeah.
39	→R:	[(laughter) Guarantee…
40	L:	Yeah, yeah, so how about you.

Excerpt 2, an example of a university group's interaction, shows a similar numbers of questions to Excerpt 1, but each of the questions asks for further information to develop their interactions. More collaborative, more proficient speakers are likely to contribute to the interaction by self-nominated turns. For example, in Turn 38, responding to *L*'s utterance "I just want a license", *M* provides a reason: getting a license is "to get a relief." *R* also adds her opinion, "Guarantee…" (indicated by → and underlines).

Junko Negishi

4.2 Agreeing or supporting

Even though the total number of *Agreeing or supporting* (No. 2*)* was much lower than the number of *Asking for information or opinion* (No. 1*)*, it is notable that the university groups made use of this function three times as often as the junior high school groups and eight times as often as the senior high school groups. The reason for this phenomenon may be that the university groups knew various expressions for agreeing or supporting the interlocutors' utterances.

Excerpt 3 (junior high school: group 10)
    31   *R:*   But maths homework is very fun.
    32   →*L:* Me, too.
    33   →*M:* Me, too.

       In Excerpt 3, junior high school participants *L* and *M* agree with *R*'s opinion by saying "Me, too." (indicated by →). They should have said, "Yes, it is.", "I think so, too.", or "I agree with you." They might have known these expressions but found them difficult to use when responding. As a result, they use "Me, too." as an alternative. This expression is commonly utilized by junior high school students. Expressions for demonstrating their agreement are limited to "Me, too." for novice learners.

Excerpt 4 (university: group 42)
    24   *R:*   I, I strong, uh, I strongly thought Japanese should learn
                   about Japan more.
    25   →*L:* Yes, we should try…
    26   →*M:* I think so, too.

       In contrast to the junior high participants, the university students support ("Yes, we should try…") in Turn 25 or agree ("I think so, too.") in Turn 26 with the appropriate expressions, as shown in Excerpt 4 (indicated by →). However, it is noteworthy that even the university students frequently use "Me, too." for agreeing.

4.3 Disagreeing, challenging, or persuading

The third interactional management function was least common of the five functions in all of the educational institutions. There was little or no difference in the totals for the junior high, the senior high and the university: 8, 8, and 9, respectively. Compared with *Agreeing or supporting* (No. 2), *Disagreeing, challenging or persuading* (No. 3) demands more elaboration, because the speakers need to explain why they disagree, challenge, or persuade. In addition, Japanese people tend to avoid disagreeing with one's opinion; this might be why few instances of the function were found.

Excerpt 5 (junior high school: group 13)

56	*L:*	I like sleeping.
57	*M:*	Sleeping?
58	*L:*	Yeah.
59	→*M:*	Oh, that's BA:D. That sounds bad. No, no, no. No, you have to study.
60	→*L:*	No, I don't sleeping.

In Excerpt 5, *M* starts criticizing *L* in Turn 59 (indicated by →) after confirming that *L* likes sleeping. To do so, *M* needs to elaborate how *L*'s behaviour should be condemned and what *L* should do. Once accused, *L* adds a contradictory argument, "No, I don't sleeping [*sic*]." (indicated by →) in Turn 60.

Excerpt 6 (university: group 32)

51	*R:*	I heard golf, golf is too expensive for [us.
52	*L:*	[Uh, I think so, too.
53	→*M:*	Yes, it's very expensive <u>but, erm, it's worth, er, playing.</u>

In Excerpt 6, taken from a university group, the participants are talking about *M*'s hobby, golf. *R* and *L* assert that golf is a sport that costs a lot of money. *M* agrees at first, then *challenges* to persuade the other two by saying, "…but, erm, it's worth, er, playing." (indicated by → and an underline).

It is likely that *Disagreeing, challenging, or persuading* (No. 3) demands a higher language or communicating ability than *Asking for information or opinion* (No. 1) and *Agreeing or supporting* (No. 2). The participants who successfully participated in *Disagreeing, challenging, or persuading* (No. 3) were likely to be more proficient speakers. In this respect, the junior high school speakers in Excerpt 5 managed the interaction well.

4.4 Modifying or developing

The fourth interactional management function, *Modifying or developing*, demonstrates clear developmental characteristics, though the number is limited; as depicted in Figure 1, the total number per turn is 0.01 for the junior high school, 0.07 for the senior high school, and 0.10 for the university. In order to modify or develop the prior interlocutor's utterance, the speakers are first required to understand the utterance and then to add their own opinion or information, which also calls for elaboration. For this reason, it seems to be very difficult for the novice learners to modify or develop the topic.

Junko Negishi

Excerpt 7 (junior high school: group 13)

18   *M:*   Why do you join, ah, why did you join, mmm, *judo* club?
19   →*R:*   Ah, *judo* is great Japanese sports.
20   *M:*   Oh, how about you, T****** <<*L*'s name>>.
21   →*L:*   Uh, I, I think it is very interesting.
22   *M:*   So, <<Japanese words>>.
23   *R:*   Really?
24   *L:*   Oh, yes.
25   *R:*   OK.
26   *R:*   How about you.
27   →*M:*   Mmm I think it is one of the most famous sport in Japan. And it's very fun.

In Excerpt 7, *M* prompts a talk about their mutual hobby, *judo*. First, *R*, in Turn 19, answers *M*'s question: "Ah, *judo* is great Japanese sports [*sic*]." Next, *L*, in Turn 21, comments: "Uh, I, I think it is very interesting." Last, *M*, who started the topic, develops the topic in Turn 27 by saying, "Mmm, I think it is one of the most famous sport [*sic*] in Japan. And it's very fun." (indicated by →). This is a rare but good example of a junior high school student group.

Excerpt 8 (senior high school: group 18)

6   *R:*   What do you do with your friends. Do you play with your friends?
7   *M:*   I play baseball with, with my friends.
8   →*R:*   I, I talk with my friend about a lot of things, eh, example, for example? Oh, ah, *toh*, about music, about our teachers and our hobbies. Eh, what do you talk about with your friends.
9   *L:*   I talk, I talk subjects with my friends and, and, and, I talk friends.
10   *R:*   How about you.
11   *M:*   Ah, I talk, I talk about social with my friends? That's all.

Excerpt 8 gives an example of a senior high school group. First, responding to *R*'s question in Turn 6, *M* gives a typical answer: "I play baseball with, with my friends." Next, in Turn 8, *R* develops the topic, giving some examples of what he talks about with his friends and teachers (indicated by →). Compared with *R*, it seems to be harder for *L* and *M* to develop the topic; those two students' utterances are much shorter and convey less information (Turn 7, 9, 11).

Characteristics of Interactional Management Functions in Group Oral by Japanese Learners of English

Excerpt 9 (university: group 41)

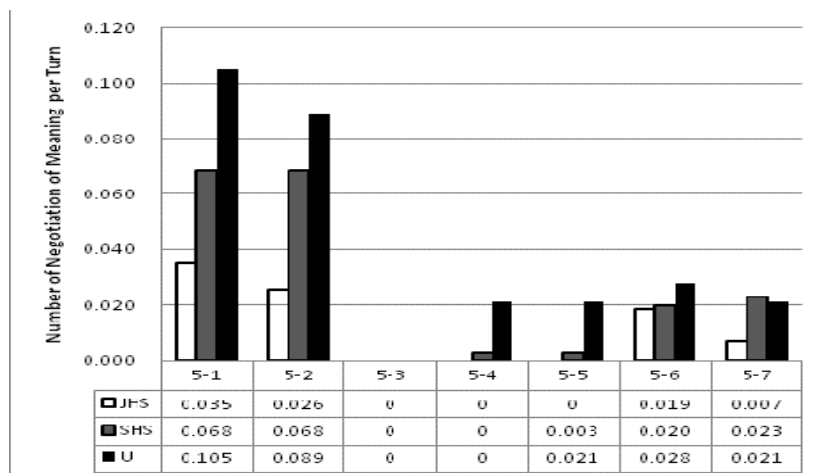|		
15	*L:*	(laughter) But there are some different points.
16	*R:*	Mmm, for example, seniority system?
17	*L:*	Yeah, seni-, seniority system.
18	→*L:*	I think Korea, Korean people show more respect to seniors than Japanese. For example, they use the term of respect to parents [always.
19	*R:*	[Mmm mmm.
20	*L:*	That's surprise to me.
21	*R:*	AH:: How about you.
22	→*M:*	Uh, I was surprised, uh, when I hear it is natural in Korea, uh, to, uh, make rooms for seniors in, on, on the train? Uh, while in Japan it is not natural because, mmm, uh, we Japanese are so shy? So, mmm, we sometimes hesitate to make rooms for seniors.
23	*R:*	Mmm, yeah, eh, sometimes some, some seniors get angry when we, when we if "please take look the seat that…"
24	*M:*	H::I, ah, yeah they say "I'm, I'm young [not seniors." (laughter)
25	*R:*	[yeah "I'm still young." (laughter)

Excerpt 9 shows how more proficient students develop their topic over turns (indicated by →). Just before Turn 15, *L* talked about the commonality between Japan and Korea in regard to Confucianism. *L* begins to add an opinion about the dissimilarities between the two countries in Turn 15. *R* successfully draws out *L*'s opinion about the seniority system in Korea in Turn 17 and 18. After *L* completes her contribution, *R* successfully elicits *M*'s experience in Turn 22. *R* finally talks about her experience in Turn 23. By taking turns, they productively develop their topics.

4.5 Negotiation of meaning

As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of *Negotiation of meaning* per turn increases with the level of education: 0.09 for junior high schools, 0.19 for senior high schools, and 0.28 for the universities. Figure 2 shows the number of each sub-categorized *Negotiation of meaning* per turn for each educational institution. Only the negotiations that increase/decrease at a proportionate rate are described in detail below.

Figure 2. Number of negotiation of meaning per turn used by three educational institutions

	5-1	5-2	5-3	5-4	5-5	5-6	5-7
JHS	0.035	0.026	0	0	0	0.019	0.007
SHS	0.068	0.068	0	0	0.003	0.020	0.023
U	0.105	0.089	0	0	0.021	0.028	0.021

4.5.1 and 4.5.2 Asking for clarification or confirmation and giving clarification

The number of instances of *Asking for clarification or confirmation* (No. 5.1) and *Giving clarification* (No. 5.2) is likely to have a strong relationship with the participants' L2 development, as indicated in Figure 2.

Excerpt 10 (junior high school: group 10)
    25   *R:*   Yes. (laughter) *Eh:to*. Do you have to the many homework?
    26   *L:*   I think my homework is little.
    27 →*R:*   Little.
    28   *L:*   Eh?
    29 →*R:*   Little.
    30 →*L:*   <u>Don't much</u>.
    31   *R:*   I think that many homework. very, very.

The linguistic means that the novice learners use for *Asking for clarification or confirmation* is very simple. In Turn 25 in Excerpt 10, *R*, who initiates the topic, believes the amount of homework is large, and he expects *L* to agree; however, *L* disagrees and says, "I think my homework is little." *R* is not sure whether *L* really thinks this or has made a mistake, so *R* asks for clarification in Turn 27 (indicated by →). *L* seems not to understand what he is asked; therefore, he asks, "Eh?" in Turn 28. Then *R* confirms through repetition

Characteristics of Interactional Management Functions in Group Oral by Japanese Learners of English

(indicated by →). *L*, finally, gives clarification with an incorrect but understandable expression, "Don't much [*sic*]." (indicated by → and an underline). On the final turn, Turn 31, the listeners, including *L*, understand that *R* thinks there is a large amount of homework. Although the students' expressions were simple, they managed to clarify the uncertainty.

Whereas this group could negotiate meaning with simple expressions, most of the junior high groups had difficulties in utilizing *Asking for clarification or confirmation* and *Giving clarification*. By giving up the negotiation, they often stopped interactions and changed topics abruptly.

The senior high school students' examples were no different from those of the junior high students; specifically, their interaction was very simple, and when asking for clarification, they used questions consisting of single or a few words with rising or falling intonation. The biggest difference between the junior high and the senior high groups was that the latter were inclined to ask for clarification without giving up, whereas the former easily gave up or caused breakdowns.

Excerpt 11 (university: group 32)

22	*M:*	How often do you cook.
23	*L:*	Umm, I, I often eh, sweet, especially cake or some tea. I like, I like sweet food. So I'm, I am very fun when I, when I cook sweet.
24	*M:*	So how often do you=
25	→*L:*	=How often?
26	→*M:*	Yes [like.
27	*L:*	[Umm twice a month.
28	*M:*	OH::
29	*L:*	About twice a month.

In Excerpt 11, even the university students exchange very simple questions and answers. In Turn 22, *M* asks *L* how often she cooks. *L* misunderstands *M*'s intention and answers with what she cooks. *M* again asks *L* the same question, and *L* confirms the question by repeating "How often?" with a latch. *M* gives clarification by saying "Yes" (indicated by → and underlines), and at last, in Turn 27, *L* answers *M*'s primary question. Although the conversation is very simple, their interaction goes smoothly compared to the junior high school groups.

More importantly, the total of these functions (5.1 and 5.2) increased from the junior high (0.061 = 0.035 [5.1]+ 0.026[5.2]) to the senior high (0.136 = 0.068 + 0.068) to the university (0.194 = 0.105 + 0.089). This increase may indicate fewer breakdowns, because the more the participants employed these functions, the more they could clarify the interlocutor's utterances.

4.5.3 Checking for comprehension

There were no examples of *Checking for comprehension* among the participants of this study.

4.5.4 and 4.5.5 Asking for help and responding to help

There were no explicit examples of *Asking for help* and *Responding to help* among the junior high groups, and only one example was found among the senior high groups. Even the university groups had only nine instances of both asking and responding.

Excerpt 12 (university: group 31)
```
3   →R:   And I, I think, I think many time difference of
           Japanese, uh, Japanese culture ah, both of Japanese
           culture and Korean culture. And, mmm, I think Korean
           is, ah, more, mmm, more, mmm… (laughter)
4   →L:   Aggressive?=
5    R:   =Aggressive.
6    L:   [Really?
7    R:   [And… Yes, yes.
8    L:   I see.
```

Excerpt 12 is an example of a university group. In Turn 3, when *R* is talking about Korean and Japanese culture, she struggles to find an appropriate word, and repetitions and hesitations occur: "ah, more, mmm, more, mmm…" To help *R*, *L* suggests a word: "Aggressive?" (indicated by →). Without a pause, *R* uptakes it as if the word is exactly what she wants to say. *L* is not sure that the word is really what *R* means, so she confirms it in Turn 6. Although *R* has already started saying something different, she answers *L*'s confirmation by responding, "…Yes, yes." in Turn 7.

This example could be categorized as *Correcting or suggesting words* (5.6) and *Uptaking correction or suggestion* (5.7); however, in this case, *R*'s struggle was regarded as *Asking for help*.

4.5.6 and 4.5.7 Correcting or suggesting words and uptaking correction or suggestion

With regard to *Correcting or suggesting words*, there was no major difference among the three educational institutions as Figure 2 shows. In terms of *Uptaking correction or suggestion*, the junior high groups rarely used this function, while the senior high school and university groups employed the function more. However, with such a small amount of evidence, it cannot be concluded that these negotiations are associated with the participants' speaking development.

Characteristics of Interactional Management Functions in Group Oral by Japanese Learners of English

Excerpt 13 (junior high school: group 3)

15	*M:*	Do you like English?
16	*R:*	Yes, I do.
17	*M:*	Do you like English?
18	*L:*	I do?
19	*M:*	Do you like colour? Do you like colour?
20	→*R:*	<<corrects M's utterance in Japanese>>
21	→*M:*	What? What favourite colour=
22	→*R:*	=Do you.
23	→*M:*	Do you like.
24	*R:*	I like orange.

There are few examples among the junior high school groups, especially of *Uptaking correction or suggestion* (5.7). Excerpt 13 is one of these instances. While *M* asks questions by means of "Do you…?", she is at a loss for how to ask what colour her interlocutor likes and repeats, "Do you like colour?" in Turn 19. *R* corrects *M*'s utterance, suggesting the use of "What". *M* uptakes the word and starts to ask, "What favourite colour [*sic*]", but the sentence is still not completed. Then *R* suggests "Do you." and *M* again uptakes *R*'s suggestion (indicated by →). Although the question is not complete, *R* answers *M*'s question with "I like orange." in Turn 24. It is likely that *R* dominates *M*, which rarely happens between strangers (classmates, in this case).

Excerpt 14 (senior high school: group 29)

8	*M:*	Mmm, a little, eh G***** <<School name>>, um, I, uh, I study very, I studied very hard from, *eh:toh*, summer time? Now in=
9	→*L:*	=Summer vacation.
10	→*M:*	Summer vacation in, uh, <<Japanese words>>, three, three, three=
11	→*L:*	=Third
12	*M:*	Three=
13	→*R:*	=Third, third grade
14	→*L:*	Third grade in junior high school.
15	→*M:*	Third grade in, in junior high school. Eh: test is, ss-, so so so, how about you, M******* <<R's name>>.

The senior high school group in Excerpt 14 exhibits a good example of *Correcting or suggesting words* and *Uptaking correction or suggestion* (indicated by →). *M* may have been regarded as less proficient, and the other two interlocutors try to help *M*. In Turn 8, *M* is not sure about the words he says, so he pronounces them with a rising tone: "... *eh: toh*, summer time?"

Even though *M* keeps talking, *L* cuts in to correct *M*'s utterance to "Summer vacation" in Turn 9. *M* uptakes the correction and continues to talk but is again stuck on a word; *M* says the word in Japanese and repeats "three" many times in Turn 10. *L* again cuts in and corrects the wrong word, "three", to "third"; however, *M* does not uptake the word this time. Then another interlocutor, *R*, suggests a phrase, "third grade", which is used appropriately in *L*'s phrase, "Third grade in junior high school." *M* finally uptakes the whole phrase and carries on his talk. It seems that *L* is the most dominant, followed by *R* and, lastly, *M*. This relationship among the students may stem from friendship, since they are classmates.

There was no instance of word/phrase correction in the university groups. They exhibited only suggestion and its uptake.

Excerpt 15 (university: group 31)

13	*R:*	Some people come my, mmm, my for ummm, in front of my...
14	→*M:*	<u>Home? [House?</u>
15	*R:*	[Oh no <<Japanese words>>.
16	→*L:*	<u>Somebody come [to...</u>
17	*R:*	[Somebody come.
18	→*L:*	<u>In front of me.</u>
19	*R:*	Yes. I, I, I say, I, I said, umm "No, no, no, uh, is this line, line is this" [You, you, ummm, umm
20	→*L:*	[Ah. <u>you are a...</u>
21	*R:*	Umm, you are, uh umm, "Please wait my back" but, but, he said? "I'm very ummm, I'm"
22	→*M:*	<u>Hurry.=</u>
23	*R:*	=Hurry.=
24	→*M:*	<u>=Hurry.=</u>
25	*R:*	=Hurry. [So "Please, mmm umm" I think Japanese not so..
26	*L:*	[AHH::
27	→*L:*	<u>Rude or..</u>
28	*R:*	Rude and that, that's in, mmm, is, can't, can't, ummm, happen in Japan.

This is the group that was introduced in *Asking for help* and *Responding to help* (5.4 and 5.5). The example here focuses more on suggestion, compared to Excerpt 12. The speaker *R* is chatty but not fluent, which lets other interlocutors cut into *R*'s talk. Although the first suggestion, in Turn 14, is turned down, *L* immediately suggests an idea to *R* in Turn 16. After the uptake in Turn 17, *M* and *L* keep suggesting words or ideas (indicated by → and underlines), which is likely to guide the conversation. This is an extreme

example; when other university speakers make a suggestion, they give a word
or phrase but do not guide the exchange.

4.6 The ratio of the interactional management functions

Figure 3. Ratio of interactional management functions used by three
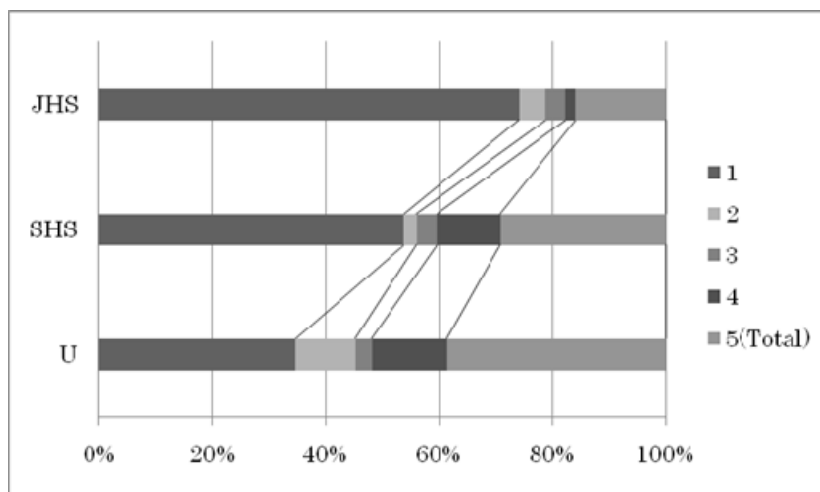educational institutions

      Figure 3 shows the ratio of interactional management functions
used by each educational institution. The junior high school groups employ
Asking for information or opinion the most (No. 1: 74.1%), comprising three
fourths of the functions. In contrast, the university groups use *Negotiation of
meaning* the most (No. 5: 38.6%), followed by *Asking for information or
opinion* (No. 1: 34.8%). This shows a good contrast between the junior high
school and the university, and the senior high falls in the middle. As has
already been mentioned, the senior high school and university groups could
develop or modify the assigned topics but the junior high school groups could
not, as shown by No. 4 in Figure 3.

5 Conclusion

This study explored the various characteristics of the participants' interaction.
Some characteristics displayed an association with the development of the
participants' language ability; *Modifying or developing the topic*
demonstrated some relationship with educational institution. In other words,
the university participants could modify or develop self- or other-initiated
topics better than the high school students, who, in turn, performed better

than the junior high school students. This result is similar to that of Galaczi (2008), in which collaborative interactions that exhibited the "topic extension move" demonstrated expansion and modification/development of the interlocutor's utterance. In addition, less proficient speakers were likely to use *Asking for information or opinion* more, which indicates that they employ other-nominated turns rather than self-nominated turns.

   Negotiation of meaning equally demonstrated this phenomenon. The more proficient the participants, the more they were inclined to use this strategy. Specifically, the university participants tried to negotiate meanings that related to the collaborative interactions, such as *Asking for help* and *Responding to help* or *Correcting or suggesting words* and *Uptaking correction or suggestion*. The overall features demonstrated by the more proficient speakers of this study were similar to the subjects of Brooks' study (2009); namely, their dialogues showed a more complex, co-constructed, and collaborative nature, with more interactions and negotiation of meaning.

   What we need to focus on concerning interaction is that students must know how to interact, how to negotiate meanings, and how to co-construct the conversation between interlocutors. Such interactional competence cannot be improved by interviews, monologues, or picture descriptions, and the focus cannot be on grammar alone. From a pedagogical point of view, various skills and abilities need to be taught in a balanced manner. This type of classroom activity will bring about close relations with the group oral test format.

   The group oral is an effective format for L2 learners, providing more opportunities to interact with peers, irrespective of its threat to construct validity. Brooks argues, "Perhaps rather than being viewed as a threat to construct validity, variability in interaction should be embraced as being more reflective of real world communication" (2009, p. 361). More group oral interaction should be promoted in L2 settings.

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Junko Negishi

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Junko Negishi
Waseda University
2-722-10, Mito, Ibaraki,
311-4151, JAPAN
Phone & Fax: +81 29 252 4866
Email: jnegishi@dream.com

Characteristics of Interactional Management Functions in Group Oral by Japanese Learners of English

Appendix
Transcript Notations

[	Overlapping utterances
=	Latching that indicates no interval between adjacent utterances
.	Falling intonation: e.g., sentence final
?	Rising intonation (does not mean a question)
CAPITAL	Stressed syllable
:	A prolonged stretch
…	Unfinished utterance
Italics	Japanese words
(inaudible)	Inaudible or incomprehensible utterance
(laughter)	Laughter particle
/word/	Severely mispronounced word
<< >>	Author's description