

Final AR Report – 2012

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March 2013

Title: Communication Strategies and Peer Conversations
Class: 1st Year Junior High School – 23 students (all boys)
Subject: English Communication Skills (one 50-minute lesson per week)

Problems:

- a) Many students seem to treat communicative speaking activities as drills, paying little attention to the information that is being expressed by their interlocutor. This is possibly because they are more accustomed to lessons in which “speaking” means reading aloud or memorizing sentences and then repeating them, without having to attend to much of the meaning of what they say or hear. This may lead to learners who have little appreciation for the communicative purpose of language study.
- b) Students may feel that they do not have enough language forms or skills to be able to express information that is of much interest to their classmates.
- c) Speaking with partners who appear to have little interest in what they are hearing may have a negative effect on learners, especially with regards to their motivation. If they do not feel that they are communicating anything, they may have little desire to make much effort.

Goals:

1. To promote communicative interaction among students through the use of Conversation Strategies (CSs);
2. To increase students’ motivation by helping them become aware that it is possible to achieve true communication without high levels of accuracy through the use of CSs;
3. To give students recursive practice of information-exchange tasks based on personalized topics and supported by written work;
4. To implement a respected Communication Skills syllabus with clear aims and structure, featuring on-going assessment and end-of-term exams (Conversation Tests) that aim to demonstrate students’ progress in developing their communicative competence.

What I did:

- a. I provided input of the target language by giving demonstrations, through listening activities, using my own preferences as examples. Students answered written questions about their own preferences before sharing the information with classmates in speaking activities.

- b. I introduced Conversation Strategies (*starting and ending a conversation, key word shadowing, rejoinders for showing interest, fillers, follow-up questions*), which were practiced throughout the school year. Each CS was first practiced with activities that specifically focused on its use before being integrated into topic-based timed conversations.
- c. Students practiced *bad shadowing*. This was done by having students purposely shadow the wrong word when listening to their partner; in other words; they would intentionally mis-speak when using *key-word shadowing*. This was an activity designed to help them attend to the meaning of what their partners say, to review the vocabulary they have learned, and to make their conversations more engaging and fun.
- d. At the end of each term, Students took Conversation Tests that closely followed the classroom peer conversations and that were scored mainly based on the use of the target CSs.
- e. I administered three student surveys: one at the end of the first term (July 2012), one at the beginning of the second term (September 2012), and one at the end of the second term (December 2012). However, I was not satisfied with the first survey as it did not contain many items that were useful for obtaining data relevant to my research. I therefore did not include the results from that first survey. The September 2012 questionnaire asked students about their perceived awareness and use of CSs at the beginning of the school year and at the time of the survey. The December 2012 questionnaire was similar but it asked students to compare the time of the survey with beginning of the second term. This was done to see how students evaluated their progress in terms of acquiring the CSs. The surveys also sought to collect information on students' feelings about the various CSs and their attitudes towards learning English in general. Due to a cancelled lesson, I was unfortunately unable to administer a questionnaire at the end of the third semester.

What I Learned:

1. In both the September 2012 survey and the December 2012 survey, students overall felt that they had improved their awareness and use of every CS (see Table 1 and Table 2). It should also be pointed out that no students felt a negative change in any of the CSs over the two surveys.
2. Figure 1 shows that students perceived a greater improvement in their use and awareness of the CSs in the September survey than they did in the December survey. This suggests that they felt they had improved more soon after being introduced to, or beginning concentrated practice of, the CSs. In addition, 17 students (77%) commented on the December survey that they would like to learn new CSs (see Q.B7), further supporting this claim. However, Figure 2 shows that students' perceived use and awareness of the CSs in December was stronger overall than in September for all but one (Follow-up questions), suggesting that the continued practice had a positive effect.

3. In the September 2012 survey, the conversation starter “Hi, how are you?” showed the least change (see Table 1), possibly because many students had been introduced to it before entering junior high school and were therefore already familiar with it. In fact, only one student said that he did not know it at the beginning of the school year. However, its use did increase substantially by the beginning of the second term, which may indicate the effect of repeated practice on an already known CS. This perceived improvement continued throughout the second term. Interestingly, although the conversation ender “Nice talking to you.” was not as well known as the aforementioned starter, they both reached similar figures by the end of the second term (see Table 2). This suggests that it is possible to “make up the ground” if enough repeated practice is done.
4. *Key-word shadowing* showed strong and steady improvement throughout, from only 13% of students claiming to use it often at the beginning of the school year (see Table 1) to 68% saying so by the end of the second term (see Table 2). This may be a result of the heavy emphasis I put on this CS both in classroom activities and in the conversation tests. In addition, over a quarter of the students commented that *key-word shadowing* was the most useful CS for their conversations (see Q.B2).
5. *Rejoinders for showing interest* showed strong improvement in the first term, but less change in the second (see Figure 1). This is possibly because it was new for many of the students at the beginning of the school year but not very challenging for them to acquire. As it is a formulaic CS, once students memorize the phrases, they have little difficulty applying it to their conversations.
6. The CS that was least known at the beginning of the school year was *fillers* (see Table 1). Moreover, they were only introduced at the beginning of the second term so students had less time to practice them. The December 2012 survey showed that a comparatively large number of students were not using them very much by the end of the second term, and some of their comments supported this. However, the most common reason given for their lack of use was that students felt they did not need to use them because they already knew exactly what they wanted to say (see Q.A4 and Q.B4). This is an example of the classroom practice of a CS becoming unnatural.
7. Twenty of the respondents (91%) said that their speaking skills improved during the second term, suggesting that the activities have been effective (see Q.B1). Only 7 (32%) specifically identified CSs as the cause for this improvement, while others mentioned having more vocabulary, grammar, and being able to speak more naturally.
8. The CS that showed the strongest change in use in the September survey was *follow-up questions* (see Table 1). Again, these were not introduced until the beginning of the second term, even though over half the class claimed to be aware of them earlier, despite not actually using them. By the end of the third term, students were generally using them well. However, it should be

noted that most students were not using them in full sentences and so they became more like a formulaic CS than an L2-based CS. 23% of students said that *follow-up questions* was the most useful CS they had learned (see Q.B2); while I am surprised that this figure was not higher, it may have been because many students were not sure if they were using it correctly.

9. *Bad shadowing* was only introduced towards the end of the second term (see Table 2). It is therefore not surprising that so few students were aware of it at the beginning of the term. In fact, it is not strictly speaking a CS; it is more of an activity that promotes careful listening during a conversation. In the survey, I made the mistake of presenting it as a CS, so students unsurprisingly were critical of it in terms of its use as a way to promote communication. Several comments pointed out that it might make your speaking partner annoyed (see Q.B3). While this is true, *bad shadowing* is not intended to be used outside of the classroom. This is another example in which the unnaturalness of certain classroom activities, despite being communicative, clashes with what students would experience in authentic, real-life interactions. From my informal observations, I noted that students generally enjoyed using *bad shadowing* – it forced them to listen, provided them with a challenge, and gave them the opportunity to add some playfulness to their peer conversations. Moreover, *bad shadowing* could be used as an introduction to the authentic CS of asking for verification by repeating a key word with rising intonation.
10. The conversation test results (see Table 3) show that “*Hi, how are you?*” and “*Nice talking to you.*” remained strong in their use throughout the school year. *Key-word shadowing* actually decreased significantly in the December test, but this was perhaps because they were also using *bad shadowing* which meant they were unlikely to follow up with *key-word shadowing*. This CS was strongest in the final test, suggesting that students had become comfortable with its use. The results show that *rejoinders for showing interest* were also used very well by the students in February, reflecting perhaps that some level of acquisition had taken place. *Fillers*, however, decreased in use by the final conversation test; this reflects several students’ comments about not remembering to use them when they had their answers ready to produce (see Q.B4) and is perhaps a result of better memorization of their replies in preparation for the test.

Future Issues:

I would like to:

- introduce CSs for explaining things, including non-verbal CSs, such as gestures.
- better scaffold the output of the weaker students in the class.
- connect topics with grammar items that students are studying in their other English classes.

Collected Data

September 2012 Questionnaire Results

Table 1. Students' own comparison of their awareness and use of the target CSs at the beginning of the school year and at the time of taking the survey (S = 23)

Communication Strategy	1		2		3		4		Average	
	I don't know it		I know it but don't use it		I know it and sometimes use it		I know it and often use it			
	Apr-12	Now: Sep-12	Apr-12	Now: Sep-12	Apr-12	Now: Sep-12	Apr-12	Now: Sep-12	Apr-12	Now: Sept-12
<i>Hi, how are you?</i>	4.3%	0.0%	26.1%	0.0%	39.1%	34.8%	30.4%	65.2%	3.0	3.7
<i>Nice talking to you.</i>	26.1%	0.0%	26.1%	13.0%	34.8%	43.5%	13.0%	43.5%	2.3	3.3
Key-word shadowing	26.1%	0.0%	39.1%	17.4%	21.7%	52.2%	13.0%	30.4%	2.2	3.1
Rejoinders for showing interest	19.6%	0.0%	39.2%	4.4%	23.9%	43.5%	17.4%	52.2%	2.4	3.5
Fillers	34.8%	0.0%	30.4%	34.8%	30.4%	39.1%	4.3%	26.1%	2.0	2.9
Follow-up questions	17.4%	0.0%	21.7%	0.0%	47.8%	34.8%	13.0%	65.2%	2.6	3.7

Selected answers to open-response item questions, translated from Japanese (S=23):

Q.A1. *Compared to the first semester, do you think your speaking skills have improved?*

Yes, a lot. (2)

Yes. (16)

A little bit. (4)

Q.A2. *Did learning CSs help you?*

Yes. (18)

- They are useful for speaking to foreigners or going abroad. (6)
- I sometimes use them in other English classes. (1)

I don't know. (3)

No. (1)

Q.A3. *Are there any CSs that you are able to use this semester that you couldn't before? If so, what helped you to be able to use them?*

Follow-up questions. (6)

- They are often used in English classes. (1)
- I concentrated in the class so I could do it. (1)

Fillers. (6)

- Since I learned these in class, I've started using them a lot. (1)
- I use them when I talk to friends. (1)

Key-word shadowing. (3)

- It makes the other person feel like they are understood. (1)

Rejoinders for showing interest. (2)

- They're easy and fun to use. (1)

No. (2)

Q.A4. *Are there any CSs that you can't use well? If so, why not?*

No. (13)

Key-word shadowing. (2)

- It's difficult. (1)

Fillers. (2)

- I'm not really sure when to use them. (1)
- I didn't have a chance to use them. (1)

"Nice talking to you" – it's difficult to remember. (1)

Q.A5. *Did using CSs during pair work help your timed conversations?*

Yes. (20)

- I think they're useful but I sometimes forget how to use them. (1)
- I used CSs in other classes. (1)
- I improved my speaking. (1)
- They are useful but I didn't use them much. (1)
- I improved my communication skills, pronunciation, and the volume of my voice. (1)

No. (3)

Q.A6. *How do you think you can improve your speaking skills?*

Practice. / Speak a lot. (10)

- Ask other people to listen to you. (1)

Make a strong effort. / Study. (5)

Go abroad. / Speak to more foreigners. (2)

Q.A7. Do you want to continue practicing CSs?

Yes. (22)

- I want to learn more of them. (1)
- I want to go out into the world so I want to keep using them. (1)

No. (1)

December 2012 Questionnaire Results

Table 2. Students' own comparison of their awareness and use of the target CSs at the beginning of the 2nd term and at the time of taking the survey (S = 22)

Communication Strategy	1		2		3		4		Average	
	I don't know it		I know it but don't use it		I know it and sometimes use it		I know it and often use it			
	Sep-12	Now: Dec-12	Sep-12	Now: Dec-12	Sep-12	Now: Dec-12	Sep-12	Now: Dec-12	Sep-12	Now: Dec-12
<i>Hi, how are you?</i>	0.0%	0.0%	18.2%	0.0%	36.4%	22.7%	45.5%	77.3%	3.3	3.8
<i>Nice talking to you.</i>	4.5%	0.0%	22.7%	9.1%	45.5%	13.6%	27.3%	77.3%	3.0	3.7
Key-word shadowing	4.5%	0.0%	22.7%	9.1%	54.5%	22.7%	18.2%	68.2%	2.9	3.6
Bad shadowing	40.9%	0.0%	22.7%	18.2%	27.3%	36.4%	9.1%	45.5%	2.0	3.3
Rejoinders for showing interest	0.0%	0.0%	15.9%	4.5%	63.6%	43.2%	20.5%	52.3%	3.0	3.5
Fillers	22.7%	0.0%	36.4%	27.3%	31.8%	40.9%	9.1%	31.8%	2.3	3.0
Follow-up questions	9.1%	0.0%	13.6%	9.1%	50.0%	31.8%	27.3%	59.1%	3.0	3.5

Selected answers to open-response item questions, translated from Japanese (S=22):

Q.B1. During the second term, have your speaking skills improved? If so, in what ways?

Yes. (17)

- Using *key-word shadowing*. (3)

- I improved my vocabulary and how to make sentences. (2)
- Remembering all the CSs gives me a wider range of expressions. (1)
- I started using *bad shadowing*. (1)
- Using *fillers*. (1)
- Using *follow-up questions*. (1)
- I can use basic grammar and greetings. (1)
- I can speak to the native English-speaking teacher a little bit. (1)
- I have more new vocabulary. (1)
- I can talk to people naturally. (1)

A little bit. (3)

No. (2)

Q.B2. *Which CS is most useful for your English conversations? Why?*

Key-word shadowing. (6)

- It's good for your brain. (1)
- I can make sure what the other person wants to say. (1)

Follow-up questions. (5)

- I can learn a lot from other people's answers. (2)
- I can communicate with other people. (1)

"Hi, how are you." (4)

Rejoinders for showing interest. (2)

All are important. (1)

Q.B3. *Which CS is least useful for your English conversations? Why?*

Bad shadowing. (6)

- It makes other people annoyed. (3)
- It's not necessary. (2)
- People might think I'm not listening. (1)

Fillers. (4)

- They don't have any meaning. (2)
- They're easy to forget. (1)

None. (7)

Q.B4. *Are there any strategies that you can't use well? If so, why not?*

Fillers. (7)

- I always answer the question immediately. (3)

- I always say it in Japanese. (2)
- I always forget to use them. (1)
- I don't know the right timing to use them. (1)

Bad shadowing. (3)

- If I don't remind myself to use it, I forget. (1)
- I just learned it. (1)

None. (7)

Q.B5. *Has your attitude towards learning English changed this school year? If so, in what ways?*

No change. (13)

It's changed. I'm starting to feel like I can do it so I want to learn more. (7)

Studying English is becoming more interesting. (1)

It's becoming more difficult so I have to be more serious about my studies. (1)

Q.B6. *What do you think is the best way to improve your speaking skills?*

Repeated speaking practice. (8)

Go to foreign countries. / Talk to foreigners. (5)

Good pronunciation. (2)

Q.B7. *Do you want to learn new CSs?*

Yes. (17)

No. (2)

Q.B8. *Do you like learning English? Why or why not?*

Yes (14)

- It's interesting/fun. (7)
- I want to communicate with people all over the world. (5)
- English will be useful in the future. (1)
- I feel motivated. (1)

So-so. (3)

No – it's difficult. (5)

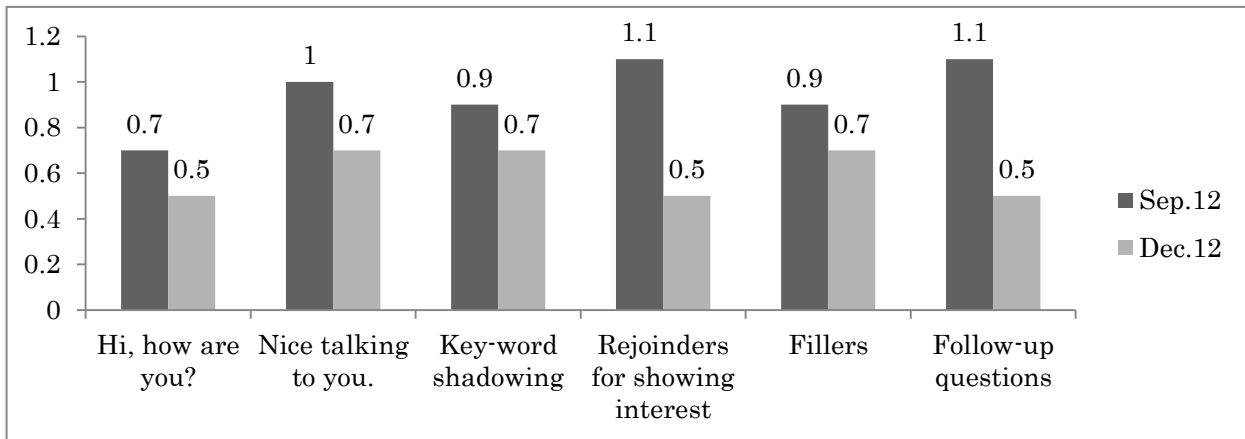


Figure 1. Comparison of point differences between September 2012 and December 2012 questionnaires

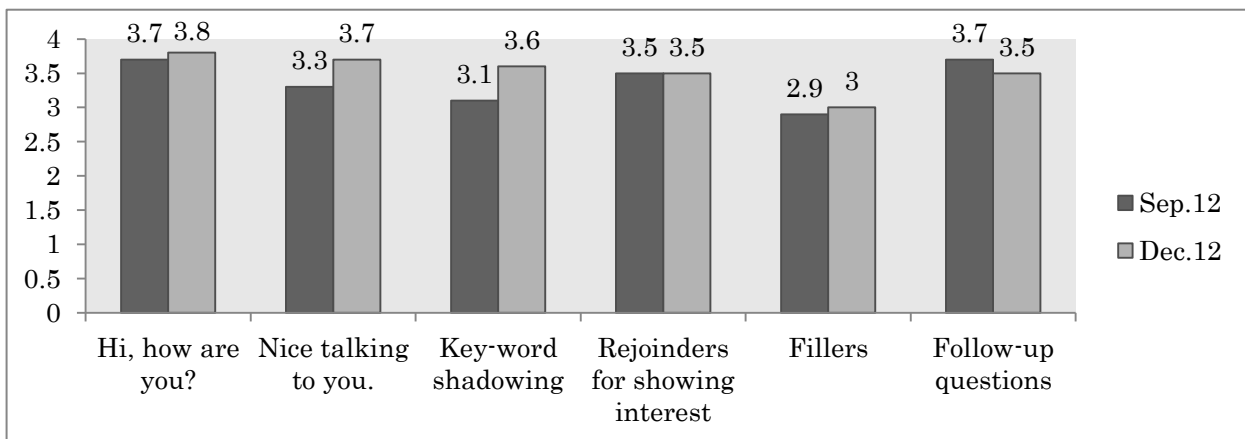


Figure 2. Comparison of points between September 2012 and December 2012 questionnaires

Conversation Test Results

Table 3. Average score (as a percentage) per test criterion for the three Conversation Tests (S=23)

Test criteria	July 2012	December 2012	February 2013
<i>Hi, how are you?</i>	91.5% (1.83/2)	100% (3.00/3)	95.7% (2.87/3)
<i>Nice talking to you.</i>	91.5% (1.83/2)	100% (3.00/3)	100% (3.00/3)
Key-word shadowing	58.7% (3.52/6)	41.8% (2.09/5)	74.0% (3.70/5)
Bad shadowing	n/a	83.4% (4.17/5)	n/a
Rejoinders for showing interest	93.5% (5.61/6)	86.0% (4.30/5)	95.6% (4.78/5)
Fillers	n/a	45.2% (2.26/5)	35.6% (1.78/5)
Follow-up questions	n/a	99.2% (4.96/5)	71.7% (7.17/10)
Volume and eye contact	n/a	98.2% (4.91/5)	80.8% (4.04/5)
Pronunciation	n/a	100% (4.00/4)	95.8% (3.83/4)
TOTAL	80.9% (16.17/20)	81.2% (40.61/50)	80.8% (40.39/50)

Sample Lesson Plan:

“My Winter Holiday” - Recursive Conversation Practice and Short Essays

Goals:

Students will revise previously learned Communication Strategies (CSs) by discussing their recent winter holidays while noting their CS use and writing short essays on the topic.

Lesson Procedure:

- 1) Teacher elicits two target questions from the students (*How was your winter holiday?* and *What did you do?*), which are boarded along with the teacher’s answers. Teacher also elicits some follow-up questions, e.g. *Where? What? Who?*
- 2) Teacher gives a copy of Handout 1: Answer Table (see below) to all students. Teacher has two volunteer students stand at the front of the class, with two large versions of Handout 1 on the blackboard, and have a demonstration conversation. During the conversation, the teacher is counting the number of CSs used by the students on a large version Handout 2: CS Checklist (see below), also on the blackboard so all the students can see. After the conversation, the two students fill in the information on the large copies of Handout 1.
- 3) Students are put in pairs. They are told to turn their copies of Handout 1 face down and to put their pencils down during their conversations. During conversations, students are being scored by their classmates using Handout 2.
- 4) Students change partners twice so that they have three different conversations in total.
- 5) Teacher puts a large version of Handout 3: Short Essay Blank (see below) on the board and, using the answers written on the board from the first activity, writes a short essay about his winter holiday.
- 6) Teacher gives copies of Handout 3 to all students, who then write essays about their own winter holidays. Teacher collects the finished essays.

Handout 1:

Answer Table

Name	How was your winter holiday?	What did you do?	<i>Where? Who? What?</i>
1.			
2.			
3.			

Handout 2:

CS Checklist

Communication Strategy	How many?
<p>Showing interest:</p> <p><i>Oh, I see. Me too. Great! Wow!</i></p>	
<p>Fillers:</p> <p><i>Um... Let's see... Well...</i></p>	
<p>Bad Shadowing</p> <p><i>A: I like baseball.</i></p> <p><i>B: Basketball?</i></p>	
<p>Good shadowing</p> <p><i>A: I like baseball.</i></p> <p><i>B: Baseball!</i></p>	
<p>Follow-up questions:</p> <p><i>What? Where? Who? Where?</i></p>	
<p>TOTAL</p>	

Questionnaire about Conversation Strategies - December 2012

会話方法についてのアンケート

For each strategy, please circle one of the following responses:
 それぞれの方法に対して当てはまる番号に丸をつけなさい。

1 - I don't know it. 知らない。

2 - I know it but have never used it. 知っている、でも使ったことがない。

3 - I know it and sometimes use it. 知っているし、時々使う。

4 - I know it and often use it. 知っているし、よく使う。

Conversation Strategy 会話方法		2012 年 9 月				現在			
1	<i>Hi, how are you?</i>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
2	<i>Nice talking to you.</i>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
3	Shadowing. A: <i>I like baseball.</i> B: <i>Oh, baseball!</i>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
4	Bad Shadowing A: <i>I like baseball.</i> B: <i>Soccer?</i>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
5	<i>Oh, I see. / Great!</i>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
6	<i>Me too.</i>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
7	<i>Um. / Well. / Let's see.</i>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
8	<i>What? / Where? / When? / Who?</i>	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4

1. 二学期の初めと比べてスピーキングの力は伸びたと思いますか。もし上達したと感じたら、それは具体的にどこですか？

2. 一番役立つと思える会話方法は何ですか。またそれはどうしてですか。

3. 一番役に立たない会話方法は何ですか。またそれはどうしてですか。

4. なかなか使えない会話方法は何ですか。また、どうしてですか。

5. この学年開始時から比べて英語に対する気持ちは変わりましたか。もし変わったのならどのように変わりましたか。

6. スピーキングの力を上達させるのに一番良い方法は何だと思いますか。

7. もっと他の会話方法も学びたいですか。

8. 英語の勉強は好きですか。そしてそれはなぜですか。

Conversation Test Rubric

Start the conversation <i>A: Hi, how are you?</i> <i>B: Fine, thanks. And you?</i> <i>A: Fine, thanks.</i>	No 0		Yes 3		
Ask 5 questions <i>Job? Where? What? For example? Why?</i> 1 point = one word answer 2 point = one sentence answer	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2
Use Good Shadowing / Question Shadowing <i>A: I like burdock.</i> <i>B: Burdock! / Burdock? What is that?</i>	1	1	1	1	1
Use Showing Interest <i>Oh, I see.</i> <i>Oh, great.</i> <i>Oh, me too.</i>	1	1	1	1	1
Use Fillers <i>Um...</i> <i>Well...</i> <i>Let's see...</i>	1	1	1	1	1
Answer 5 questions 1 point = one word answer 2 point = one sentence answer	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2	1 2
End the conversation <i>A: Nice talking to you.</i> <i>B: Bye.</i>	No 0		Yes 3		
Delivery volume eye contact	No 0	OK 1	Good 3	Great 5	
Pronunciation (発音)	<i>katakana</i> English 0		natural English 4		