

*Junior College Students Respond Better to Formative Assessment
Than to Paper Midterms*

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Abstract

Replacing paper midterms with challenging, assessment projects is in line with Robinson and Ross' ideas on measurement: "traditional skills-focused tests of EAP ability relate only weakly to learners' ability to act on such skills in authentic task conditions (1996)."

The Be Our Guest Midterm Assessment Project aimed to confirm that classroom-based, formative assessment leads to more authentic measurement of communicative ability and an increase in student motivation.

A 3-session lesson plan was designed and implemented in a Japanese junior college EFL setting. A group of 30, multi-level students prepared to interact with a visiting Japanese professional in English; assignments required students to listen to a presentation and respond, process relevant information, initiate further communication, reflect and report.

The project structure not only proved helpful in assessing students' grasp of communication strategies, but surveys showed that students were generally more satisfied with their performance than they were after a paper-based test. Pre-activity, many insisted that they 'can't' because they need 'more' English. Post-task many had formed individual learning goals, wanting to use their English 'better'.

Due to its success in improving motivation as well as grades, the project continued with a few methodological adjustments meant to correct one of the limitations, anxiety-based truancy. The newest format included more learner independence as well as technology-assisted input and output segments. The same survey objects were then used to compare the impact of the two versions of the project. Previous positive results turned out to be sustainable and presented a lowered percentage of truancy.

Keywords: Authenticity, collaborative learning, project-based assessment, junior college, confidence.

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Introduction

Junior college graduates at Nihon University's College of International Relations often score low on English finals, due to a lack of self-reflection and corrective behavior, leading to low confidence and motivation (Valies, 2016). In the Business and Management department, a sectional, phased introduction of structural changes to native-taught English courses started as part of a bigger effort to match the required learning outcomes with in-course language instruction and production. These changes consisted of the gradual introduction of task-based and project-based instruction where fluency and L2 language-user confidence were central.

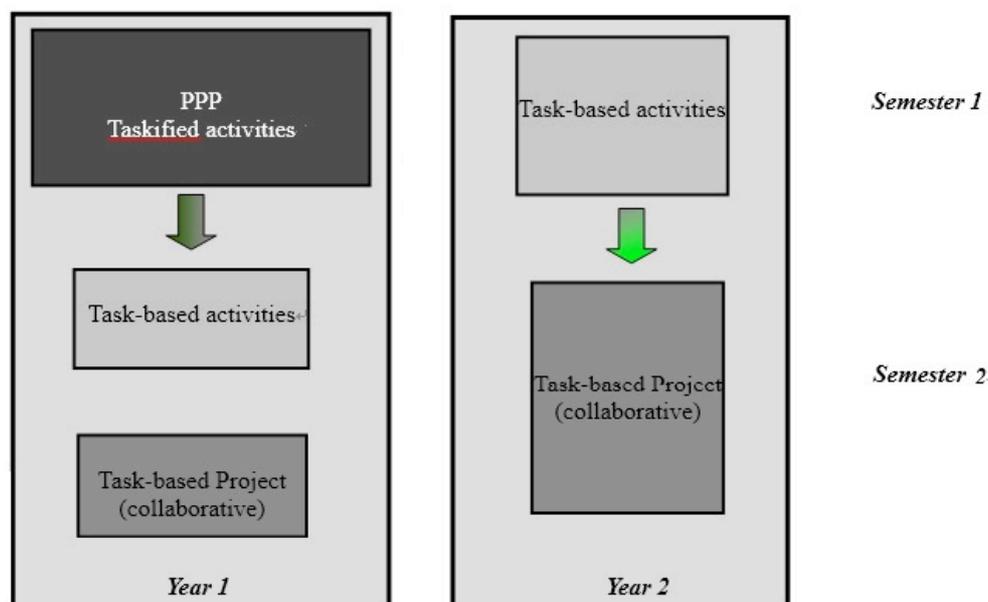


Figure 1: Assessment cycle task-based curriculum implementation now.

Rationale

Replacing paper midterms follow Robinson and Ross' ideas on *authentic measurement*: "traditional skills-focused tests of EAP ability relate only weakly to learners' ability to act on such skills in authentic task conditions (1996)." In my attempts to mitigate this disparity in native-taught EFL classrooms, I have found project-based tasks especially helpful in assessing students' grasp of communication strategies. Such tasks provide them with the chance to show their ability to communicate in authentic, real time situations.

As I discussed in a previously published article featuring the Be Our Guest lesson cycle, bolstering intrinsic motivation to keep students working towards English fluency is just as important as authenticity. By allowing students to interact in the target language with Japanese professionals, authenticity remains central. Guest speakers function as examples of students' *future L2 self* in the work force. As L2 end-users they can provide insights that will help students feel confident about attaining their learning goals. For example, while sharing their experiences, they could stress how perfect command of a language is not necessary for communication and highlight how mastering a new language did not change their heritage (2016).

When considering future professional L2 learning goals, one tends to focus on the 18-40 age bracket active in the work force. It may be useful to look a little further and consider whether the learning goals and interests change in an older age bracket. An exploratory survey on learning styles, learning goals and motivation was held among older learners who choose to continue their English studies in their free time. The sample was taken from four levels studying at VOIS NPO Shizuoka and Mishima. The total number of respondents was 12 out of 25. The most represented age group was between 30-60. The object was an online survey created in google forms. This means that respondents had to use technology to submit their replies. The result though anecdotal indicate a common thread. The reason learners choose to continue to study is to achieve previously unreached learning goals during their secondary and tertiary education. Since they are experienced workers, self-sustained motivation and the ability to work independently to complete tasks can be assumed. They are beyond the L2 future image and they still would have rather had been trained to self-motivate and study independently at an earlier stage in their lives. Listed learning goals included L2-user confidence, listening, reaction speed and the ability to talk about Japanese culture in English (see appendix 1). This could lead one to believe that fostering confidence in the ability to use the language should start early and should be given its due place in the curriculum.

Keeping in mind the need to foster learner confidence, provide real time opportunities to use the language and authenticity, project-based assessment was implemented on a trial basis. The purpose of this study was to confirm whether a practitioner-generated, classroom-based, project-based assessment tool could more accurately measure the communicative ability of junior college students and increase their confidence levels. In the following sections I will discuss approach, results, course corrections, conclusions and limitations respectively.

Approach

The study was conducted over two years (2015-2017) and participants were first-year and second-year junior college students of the smaller Business and Management department. The courses selected for this study were two core courses, namely English II, IV. Both focused on the practice of listening and speaking, as well as reading and writing skills. Though communicatively-oriented, input and expected output was academic English. For the 2015-2016 schoolyear participating students came to 35. The participating students' level of English ranged between TOEIC level 200-350. The assessment project was slated for 3 sessions, 90 minutes each. Project goals were to assess student ability to apply listening, speaking and writing strategies studied over half a semester. Learning outcomes were explained to the students at the start of the first session and specified in a grading grid. (see appendix 2)

Learning outcomes included:

- understanding the main points of a presentation given in real time
- asking the speaker questions and clarifying where needed
- processing the gathered information through team work
- forming an opinion and supporting it with examples from the presentation
- reflection on use of L2 in future professional life

To confirm the efficacy of the project as an assessment tool, the teacher had students fill out a pre- and post-task confidence survey (Valies, 2016), a pre-and post-test confidence survey (see Appendix 3) and compared semester 1 midterm test results with semester 2 project grades. Resources used included paper-based student handouts, a 15-minute Power Point presentation by a guest speaker. Objects used for evaluation purposes included teacher observation sheets, confidence self-assessment forms, pre- and post-talk surveys, grade lists from assessment project and midterm tests.

Procedure

The 3-sessions followed the same preparation procedure for both first and second year students as they all attended the same presentation with the same guest speaker.

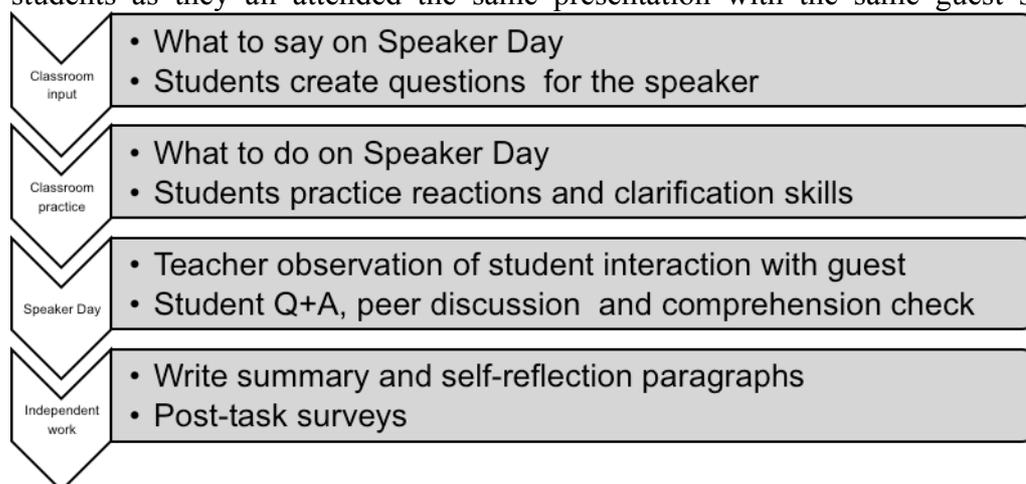


Figure 2: Flow chart project procedure.

As you can gather from the flow chart above, students can go back and look up functions acquired in class and select the most applicable ones to help them complete their tasks. This creative option is absent when taking tests. The fact that a variety of valid responses are accepted often lessens any performance anxiety.

Results

In-class observations and post-task surveys show that:

- students use more skills to complete *real-time* tasks than when they simply reproduce language
- student confidence increased after completing the project (see figure 3)
- student grades are higher after completion of a project than after a taking a test. 1st graders at +20% ; C to B. 2nd graders at +8%; D to C. (see figure 4)
- students prefer a final project over a final test

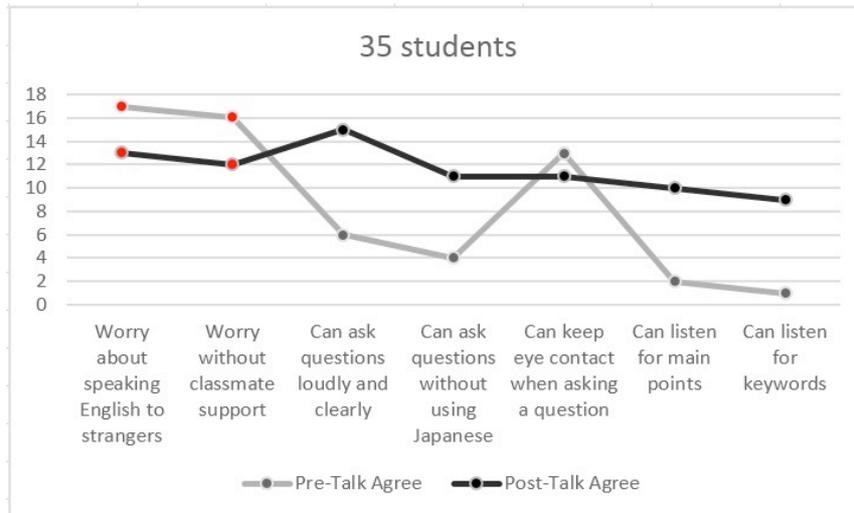


Figure 3: Pre-talk and post-talk confidence all students.

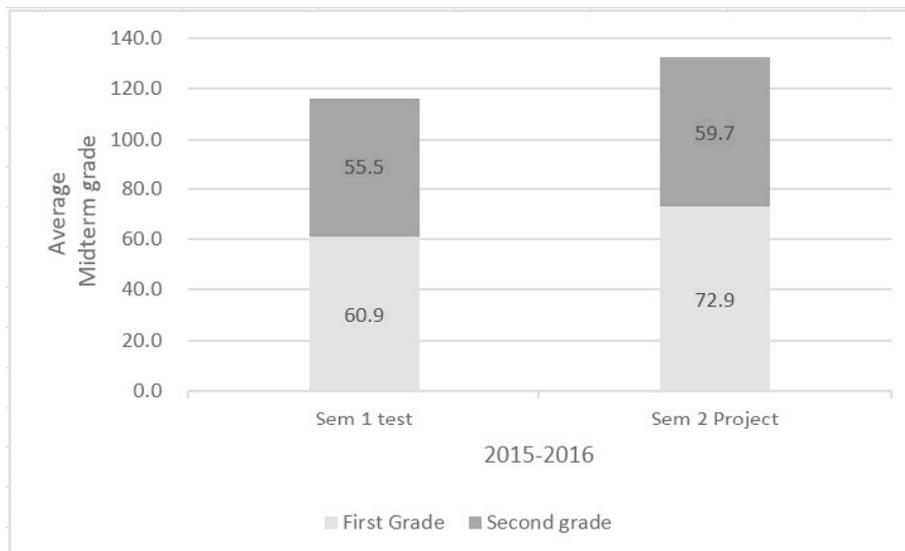


Figure 4: Comparison of midterm test and midterm project grades 2015-2016.

Even though a large number of students complained that the preparation and independent work were time-consuming, many were happy with their accomplishments. Combining all four skills in a real-life situation turns out to be enough of a challenge for students unused to a task-based format. Surprisingly, some students came to the memorable realization that English was a tool they had to learn to use more effectively. Pre-activity they insisted that they needed *more* English, but post-task they wanted to learn to *use it better* (K.Valies, 2016).

Limitations

- The sample of 35 consisted of higher proficiency level students taking native taught, mandatory English courses.
- Though truancy on Speaker Day was an automatic fail, there were still no-shows. Reasons included performance anxiety and time commitment.
- Class composition changes between semesters affect team work, peer support and motivation.

Attempted corrections

Due to the positive results obtained, increased confidence and higher grades, the project was continued the following school year (2016-2017). In the hope of further improvements, the project approach and procedure were adjusted to address the limitations uncovered the previous year. Truancy on speaker day and lack of team participation are central. In trying to reduce performance anxiety and time commitment, the decision was made to extend the number of classroom sessions to a total of four. Reasons for this include supplying students with more monitored preparation time to ask questions and have peer discussion.

Additionally, first year students were assigned a different end-task than the more experienced second-year students. First year students from the new English II core courses (now oral fluency focused) will no longer write reports but are instead required to do in-class presentations to prove their comprehension. These were then both peer and teacher evaluated. The second-years were assigned a transformative, creative project which required them to actively obtain information through a group interview with the guest speaker. Their focus became exploring who the presenter was professionally as well as who their classmates were. They achieve this they created bio poems and a compilation of informative and concise video biographies.

Approach

The continuation of the study was conducted over the 2016-2017 academic year. Participants were first-year and second-year junior college students of the smaller Business and Management department. The courses selected for this study were two core courses, namely English II, IV. The revised English II course focused on the practice of listening and speaking, while English IV was limited to reading and writing skills. For 2016-2017, the participants numbered 17. Their level of English proficiency remained between TOEIC level 200-350. The assessment project was slated for 4 sessions, 90 minutes each. Project goals were to assess student ability to apply listening, speaking and writing strategies studied over half a semester. Learning outcomes were explained to the students at the start of the first session and specified in a grading grid. (see appendix 2)

Learning outcomes for the first-year students were unchanged. Second-year students worked towards:

- creating questions that would get them the information they needed to create a bio poem and video biography
- asking the speaker questions and clarifying where needed
- collecting information through team work and pairing it down to a concise yet informative poem
- speaking and recording oneself and reflecting upon one's performance

The two survey objects from last year were used as is and again semester 1 midterm test results with semester 2 project grades were compared. Resources used included a 15-minute Power Point presentation by a guest speaker, iPads, two separate, teacher-monitored *Padlet* class pages, smartphones, video editing software, open source imagery and music.

Procedure

The structure of the four sessions remained unchanged for the first-year students. The most significant addition to the content was the peer-led reflection on future jobs and the English needs involved. The second-year students followed the pattern shown in the flowchart below (see figure 5). On Speaker Day they interviewed the speaker in a more intimate setting (see appendix 4).

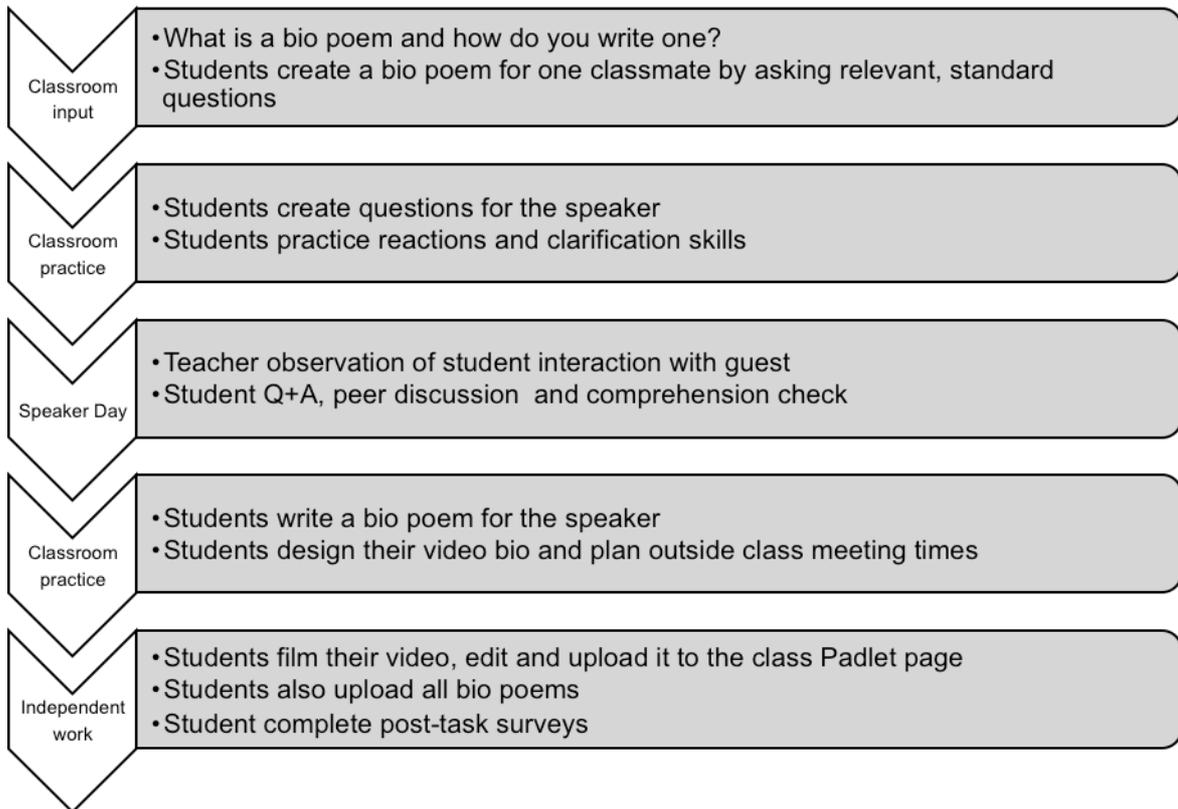


Figure 5: Flow chart project procedure 2nd years 2016-2017.

Results

In-class observations and post-task surveys show that:

- student confidence is sustained after completing the project
- 2nd year grades are higher after the project than after the test. 2nd graders go up by +77%; D to A. 1st graders show a 5% decline; C to D (see figure 6).
- students still prefer a midterm project over a midterm test.
- students indicated four lessons provided enough time to complete the tasks.
- Second-years could independently use functions on their devices including video editing software and the *Padlet* app. First-years needed more support.
- Truancy percentages in the second grade decreased with the changes to the project procedures. Conversely the first grade showed an increase (figure 7).

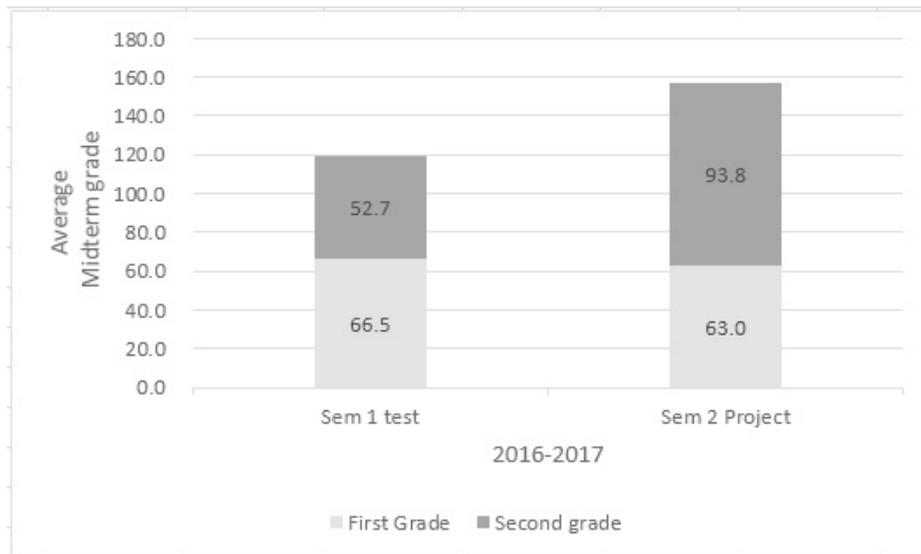


Figure 6: Comparison of midterm test and midterm project grades 2016-2017

Limitations

1. The 2016-2017 participant sample was smaller than the previous year due to smaller class sizes.
2. Course content for both English II and English IV (second semester/project-based assessment) changed affecting team work, peer support and motivation.
3. The first-year students' familiarity with functions on their devices beyond those used daily was overestimated. Many needed extra support either from their teacher or classmates.
4. The first-year group included a few students with social difficulties and trouble adjusting to student life. This most likely accounts for the hike in truancy.

Truancy Speaker Day 2015-2017	Percentages
Grade 1 - 2015-2016	10
Grade 2 - 2015-2016	16
Grade 1 - 2016-2017	17
Grade 2 - 2016-2017	0

Figure 7: Truancy percentages with tests and project assessment.

Conclusion

Replacing midterm tests with project-based assessment remains a viable alternative that provides sustained increases in learner confidence, grade improvements and a more concise understanding of students' ability to creatively use the L2 language to convey meaning (fluency). Though limitations on the study may have caused variable results, closer monitoring and increased independence to organize tasks can be said to have helped students believe in their ability to 'fix' their English. Anxious students felt included by closer peer- and teacher communication lines and more regular feedback moments. The switch from writing summary and opinion paragraphs to presentations reflecting on students' future professional use of L2 led to more meaningful questions and register appropriate questions. In similar fashion, the second-year students delivered a far more personal document when given freedom to use alternative forms of expression. Technological problems were easily solved by adding digital handouts with extra pointers and/or screen captures for easy student access. Students were immediately on board with a non-paper instruction manual and appreciated the mobile access to it.

Implications for further study

Further refinement of the assessment tools is indicated. First graders would benefit from an earlier introduction to the real speaker format on a smaller scale. For example, could listen to one mini presentation by a classmate and perform the similar tasks as those included in the midterm project during one lesson.

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Appendix 1

What are your main language learning goals?

- Improving my listening
- Improving my confidence
- Improving my speaking speed
- Increasing my reaction speed
- Increasing my vocabulary
- Learning to make fewer mistakes
- Learning how to talk about and explain Japanese culture/history in English

Source: Object previously published in *Studies in International Relations*, 37(2).

Appendix 2

GRADING GRID

Asked question clearly	2	4	6	8	10
Class questions included in report	2	4	6	8	10
Used keywords in summary	2	4	6	8	10
60% main points in summary	3	6	9	12	15
Topic sentence at start of paragraph	2	4	6	8	10
Reasons and effects	2	4	6	8	10
Examples from talk	2	4	6	8	10
Concluding sentences	2	4	6	8	10
Paragraph length	2	4	6	8	10
Included Mr. Horiike's task	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix 3

Pre-talk self-assessment: confidence statements	Agree	Agree a little	Don't agree
I worry about speaking English to strangers.	17	16	2
I worry if I don't have classmate support.	16	16	3
I can ask questions loudly and clearly.	6	24	5
I can ask questions without using Japanese.	4	17	13
I can keep eye contact when asking a question.	13	17	5
I can listen for main points.	2	28	4
I can listen for keywords.	1	29	4

Post-talk self-assessment: confidence statements	Agree	Agree a little	Don't agree
1. The speaker understood me.	13	15	3
2. I was able to ask questions loudly and clearly.	12	16	3
3. I was able to ask questions without using Japanese.	15	15	1
4. I was able to explain my question.	11	16	4
5. I was able to ask questions without looking at my paper.	11	12	8
6. I can listen for main points.	10	16	5
7. I can listen for keywords.	9	19	3

Source: JALT MW SIG's Between the Keys, 24.2,12.

Appendix 4

Be Our Guest, Bio poem interview
Second graders 2016-2017.



Be Our Guest, speaker presentation
First graders 2016-2017.

