

# Communicative Competence and Focus on Form

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Focus on form (FonF) is the integration of grammar instruction with activities that have a communicative purpose (Long, 1991). Ellis (2006) and Long concluded that FonF leads to faster learning. Moreover, learners need to practice communication to develop communicative competence (Savignon, 1997). However, there is little longitudinal research in classrooms on FonF's effects (Ellis, 2006). This paper summarizes a yearlong study implementing an approach to FonF that Lee and VanPatten (2003) proposed, based on information exchange tasks supported by structured-input and output activities. The study, conducted in a 1st-year Japanese junior high school class, showed that the approach was effective at developing both grammatical competence and overall communicative competence. Additionally, the approach contributed to a high level of student motivation to study. The study has implications for the effective implementation of FonF in Japanese junior high schools.

フォーカス・オン・フォーム・インストラクション (FonF) は、文法指導と、コミュニケーションを目的とした活動とを統合させたものである (Long, 1991)。 Ellis (2006) と Long は、FonFによってより速く学ぶことができると結論づけている。また、学習者はコミュニケーション能力を高めるために実際にコミュニケーションをとる必要がある (Savignon, 1997)。しかしながら、FonFの効果についての長期的な実践の調査はほとんどない。本論文は、structured input及びoutput活動に支えられた情報交換タスクを基本とした、LeeとVanPatten (2006) が提唱するFonFをめざした取り組みの1年間にわたる研究をまとめたものである。この研究は、日本の中学校1年生のクラスで行われ、結果としてFonFが文法能力とコミュニケーション能力の両方を伸ばすのに効果があるということがわかった。加えて、このアプローチによって生徒の英語学習に対する意欲も高まった。本研究は、日本の中学校におけるFonFの効果的な実践にとって意味がある。

**T**HE JAPANESE Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) emphasizes the importance of communication using the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (MEXT, 2009). MEXT also lists specific grammar points and functions that students should learn to develop their communicative ability. How can teachers best help their students develop communicative competence within these guidelines?

Savignon (1997) said that communication practice is necessary for learners to develop communicative competence. On the other hand, Ellis (2006) pointed out that *form-focused instruction* (FFI) is needed for developing grammatical competence. Long (1991) and Ellis proposed that both can be accomplished most effectively with *focus on form* (FonF). Defined by Long, FonF is the integration of FFI with what Ellis (2001) termed *meaning-focused instruction* (MFI), instruction in which the learner uses the language.



This paper summarizes a yearlong empirical study on FonF in a 1st-year Japanese junior high school (JHS) English class, which I conducted (Rector, 2012). In the literature review I describe an approach to FonF proposed by Lee and VanPatten (2003) integrating *information-exchange tasks* for MFI with *structured input and output tasks* for FFI. In subsequent sections I summarize my implementation of the approach and data collection. Then, based on data from language samples, communication tests, and student surveys, I show that integrating structured input and output and conversation strategy practice with information-exchange tasks were effective at developing students' communicative competence and led to accurate production of target forms. Moreover, the effectiveness of the approach contributed to students' strong motivation and enjoyment of English. I conclude with the suggestion that Japanese JHS teachers replace the traditional FFI in their classes with structured input and output and provide at least 1 hour a week of MFI based on information exchange tasks.

## Literature Review

Ellis (2001) defined two broad areas of second language instruction: MFI in which the learner uses the language, and FFI in which the learner studies the language as an object. Savignon (1997) maintained that communicative competence requires the simultaneous, integrated use of grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences (p. 225). She contended that this requires MFI. However, Long (1991), Ellis (2006), and Lee and VanPatten (2003) contended that FFI is also important.

Long (1991) defined two general design types of FFI, FonF and *focus on formS*. FonF is a design in which FFI is integrated with MFI. Focus on formS refers to designs in which FFI is separate from MFI. Ellis (2001) expanded this to include two types of FonF, planned and incidental. In planned FonF the teacher anticipates the need for FFI and plans intensive study of a form

to support MFI. In incidental FonF the teacher deals with issues extensively as they come up in MFI. Within these three types of FFI, there are a wide variety of techniques that might be used. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these techniques in detail; however, interested readers can find useful discussion of these techniques in Ellis (2001) and Williams (2005).

## Information-Exchange Task

Lee and VanPatten (2003) advocated an approach to planned FonF organized around MFI activities they called *information-exchange tasks*. These are activities in which learners complete a task, such as writing a composition, using information they obtained in open-ended communication. Doing something with the information is important to ensure learners attend to meaning in their conversations. This increases the likelihood that they will improve their accuracy. Lee and VanPatten proposed preparing students for information-exchange tasks with pretasks focused on specific competencies. For FFI they recommend tasks called structured input and output.

## Structured Input

Structured input helps learners acquire grammar by drawing their attention to the target form while they process the meaning in comprehensible input. It is based on two ideas. First, learners acquire language when they attend to form to understand the meaning of communication (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). The second is the hypothesis that learners may not acquire form from comprehensible input if they do not need to attend to the form to understand the meaning (VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993). For example, learners generally process content words before they process verb endings, so if a past tense sentence has the word *yesterday*, they will not attend to the verb form. Structured input might deal with this by having students respond to temporal

information in items that convey that information only with the verb form.

### Structured Output

In order for learners to develop fluency and accuracy with a particular form, they need to practice *access* (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). Access, defined by Terrell (1986, 1991), is the process by which people use their acquired language to express their intended meaning and string form and structure together in appropriate ways. Structured output activities require students to express their thoughts using a particular form. A critical feature is that another person responds to the learners' output in some way. This increases the likelihood that learners will attend to the meaning of what they say (Lee & VanPatten, 2003).

### Research Issues

From their reviews of the research, Long (1991) and Ellis (2006) concluded that learners learn more quickly with FonF than with focus on formS or MFI alone. Also, Lee and VanPatten (2003) cited a number of studies showing the effectiveness of structured input and output on development of grammatical competence. Therefore, Lee and VanPatten's approach to FonF is an appropriate framework for developing communicative competence in Japanese JHSs. However, little research has been done on its implementation or effect on learning outcomes.

Two exceptions are Sato, Iwai, Kato, and Kushiro (2008) and Sato, Fukumoto, Ishitobi, and Morioka (2012). Both papers reviewed action research conducted by teachers in Japanese secondary schools. Sato et al. (2008) showed that structured input and output may lead to higher test scores in Japanese high school grammar courses. Sato et al. (2012) looked at FonF instruction in JHSs. In one case study in this paper, Morioka

replaced much of the grammar instruction in her 3rd-year JHS class with information-exchange tasks and structured input and output. Based on student surveys, she concluded that the structured input and output enabled students to use the target language in the information-exchange tasks. However, Morioka's study did not confirm the accuracy of the students' production with language samples or look at their communicative competence overall. In the present study I attempt to fill this gap.

### Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How can FonF based on information-exchange tasks and structured input and output be implemented to develop communicative competence in Japanese public JHS students?
2. What effect does this have on students' development of English skills?
3. What effect does this have on students' motivation to persevere in class?

### Method

#### Teaching Context

I conducted the study at a JHS where I worked as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) and collected data from one of nine classes with 34 students each. I chose this class for the study because the class had a positive attitude and did not have behavior problems that might interfere with or complicate the study. Each class had 3 hours each week with a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) and 1 hour with me. The JTE followed the textbook and created some of her own communicative output activities for practicing grammar.

## Teaching Procedure

Each term, I developed a lesson plan and administered a communication test based on an information-exchange task. For these tasks, each student wrote a short composition about a classmate, using information obtained in a timed conversation. For preparation, the students practiced the information-exchange tasks as many as six times with different partners after doing a variety of tasks to develop specific proficiencies including:

- structured-input drills developed from Total Physical Response (TPR) (see Appendix A for an example);
- structured-input and output tasks developed from common communication games such as guessing games and bingo;
- various MFI activities, such as writing compositions and interviewing classmates; and
- recursive short conversations focused on practicing conversation strategies, such as introductions, the use of *how about you*, and closing conversations.

A typical class session started with recursive short conversations. In this activity the students practiced a conversation strategy four or more times with different partners, often recycling grammar from previous class sessions. The class spent the remaining time with either structured input followed by structured output or an MFI activity.

## Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data from three sources. First, I transcribed and did error analysis on language samples to get a picture of how, and to what extent, students developed their grammatical competence. The samples consisted of recordings of four students' class activities and recordings of the communication tests and

writing samples from the entire class. The second source was the students' scores on the communication tests, which demonstrated their progress in developing conversation strategies, listening, and writing skills. The third source was two student surveys in Japanese, which I administered in December 2011 and March 2012 to confirm that the students' performance represented improvement and see how my lessons affected motivation. In December, I asked students to compare their impressions of their present abilities with those of the previous April. In March, students did the same for new questions and then answered the original survey, giving their impressions for March. Students also gave reasons for their feelings about English.

## Results

### Student Production and Errors

The language sample data show that students produced target forms of structured input and output drills very accurately in the first communication test (see Table 1). Students produced one of these forms, the collocation of *do* rather than *play* with various activities, in the third communication test 10 months after the treatment, though less accurately. Error rates for subject-verb agreement in third-person statements, targeted in the second term, showed a similar pattern. For comparison, subject-verb agreement for *who*-fronted questions was not the target of structured input and the error rate for it was 100% (see Table 2).

**Table 1. Error Rates for Targets of Structured Input Produced on the First Communication Test ( $n = 34$ )**

Target form	Errors	Accurate production	Error rate
Yes-or-no questions	3	288	1%
Yes responses	1	171	1%
No responses	1	99	1%
Positive statements: regular verbs	1	377	0%
Negative statements: regular verbs	2	64	3%
Collocation with <i>do</i>	8	36	18%

**Table 2 Error Rates For Selected Forms on the Communication Tests ( $n = 31$ )**

Form	Communication Test	Errors	Correct	Error rate
Collocation of <i>do</i> with activity nouns	Term one	6	36	14%
	Term two	3	0	100%
	Term three	12	30	29%
Noun forms with the verbs <i>like</i> and <i>play</i>	Term one	143	18	89%
	Term two	40	16	71%
	Term three	70	37	65%
Third person singular subject-verb agreement	Term two	34	187	15%
	Term three	53	74	42%
Subject-verb agreement in who-fronted questions	Term three	50	0	100%

Some evidence suggests that recycling target forms enhances the effect and durability of structured input and output. In the second term on 15 September, students completed structured-input and output activities aimed at helping them use appropriate noun forms, plural or noncount, as objects of *like* and *read*. Recordings of the four volunteers revealed that immediately following this treatment, some students produced plural nouns in a short conversation activity. However, when this activity was repeated after a 2-week hiatus, some of the same students did not produce plural forms. This was followed by a 1-month hiatus in which the students did not have my lessons. After this hiatus, these students did not produce plurals at all in the communication test (see Table 3). In contrast, in the first and third terms there were no breaks. The students had opportunities to recycle target language in MFI activities every week. Additionally, in the first term, I found a variety of errors in writing and speaking samples over the course of the term that students did not make on the communication test (see Table 4).

**Table 3. Student Production of Nouns as Objects of *Like* and *Read***

Student	Language sample date and activity			
	5 July Term one test	15 Sept Short con- versations	27 Sept Short con- versations	28 Nov Term two test
Konan	<i>Lego</i>		<i>Legos</i> (4)	<i>animal</i>
Noriko	<i>cat, dog</i>	<i>cats</i>	<i>cat</i>	<i>bird</i>
Yuna	<i>carrot, dog, book, cherry, comics, cat, watermelon</i>	<i>books</i>	<i>books</i>	<i>dog, cat, hamburger</i>

Student	Language sample date and activity			
	5 July Term one test	15 Sept Short con- versations	27 Sept Short con- versations	28 Nov Term two test
Irusa	<i>strawberry, lemon (2), cherry, cookie, orange</i>	<i>strawberries</i>	<i>strawberry</i>	<i>tiger, monkey</i>
Hiroshi	<i>carrot, onion (2), lemon</i>		<i>onion (4)</i>	<i>birds</i>
Kana	<i>cat, strawberry</i>		<i>tomato</i>	<i>dogs (2), hamburger</i>

Note. Numbers in parenthesis indicate the numbers of occurrences.

**Table 4. Errors in Verb Forms in MFI Tasks in the First Term**

Student	14 June	28 June	5 July: Commu- nication test
Koichi	<b>I'm do</b> snow-boarding. <b>I'm don't</b> play golf.		I play baseball I play badminton I play 卓球.
Tomoki	<b>I'm don't</b> like NAME	I don't like study. I don't like basketball.	I don't like 焼肉.

Student	14 June	28 June	5 July: Commu- nication test
Momoka	<b>I'm play</b> SKE <b>I'm play</b> too AKB.	I play soccer. I play swim- ming. I play shogi.	I play badminton. I play volley- ball. I don't play dance.
Nobita	I am from ドラム オウコク I am チョッパー	<b>I NAME</b> (5)	I'm NAME.
Hiroshi		<b>I want like</b> AKB goods. (5) Do you <b>want like</b> AKB goods (5)	I want AKB goods Do you want AKB goods?
Junichiro	In response to <i>do</i> -fronted ques- tions. Yes, <b>I am</b> (2)	In response to <i>do</i> -fronted ques- tions Yes, <b>I am</b> (9) Yes, I do (1)	In response to <i>do</i> -fronted ques- tions Yes, I do. (2) Yes, <b>I am</b> . (1)

Note. Errors are in bold. Numbers in parentheses indicate occurrences.

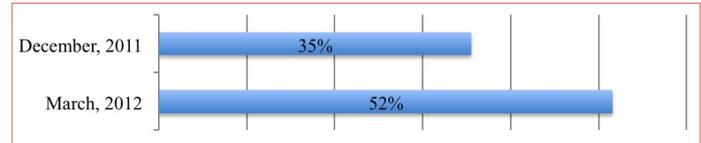
### Test Results

Table 5 shows achievement of goals for the conversation portion and selected goals from the written portion of the third-term communication test. This shows the students used conversation strategies they practiced in the third term. For example, the students used conversation strategies representing a range of competencies: sociolinguistic (openers and closers), discourse

(follow-up questions), and strategic competencies (shadowing) (see Table 5). Moreover, more than half the students also used other strategies that they practiced in the previous terms or picked up from demonstrations, an improvement over term two (see Figure 1). As writing goals changed due to the introduction of complex sentences, comparison to previous terms is complicated. Ninety-four percent of the students wrote complex sentences, which they learned in my lessons in the third term. Most of the students also included 10 points of information in their compositions. This suggests that they were able to understand and remember what they learned from their conversation partners.

**Table 5. Achievement of Third-Term Conversation Goals and Selected Writing Goals ( $n = 34$ )**

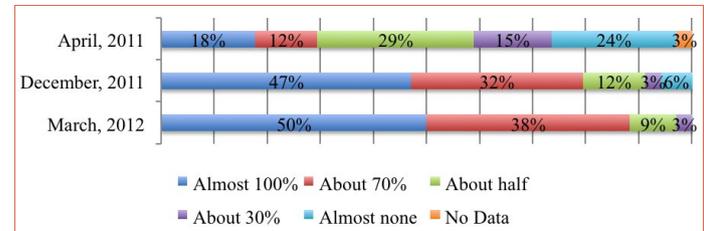
Goal	Percentage of students
Participated for 5 minutes	100%
Used a variety of grammar	85%
Did shadowing	100%
Asked a variety of follow-up questions	100%
Used an opener	100%
Used a closer	91%
Used other conversation strategies	56%
Wrote complex sentences	94%
Wrote at least four sentences	88%
Wrote 10 points of information or more	85%



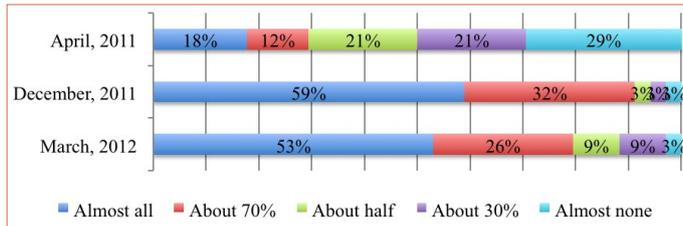
**Figure 1. Communication Tests: Percentage of Students Who Used Other Conversation Strategies ( $n = 31$ )**

### **Students' Impressions of How They Improved**

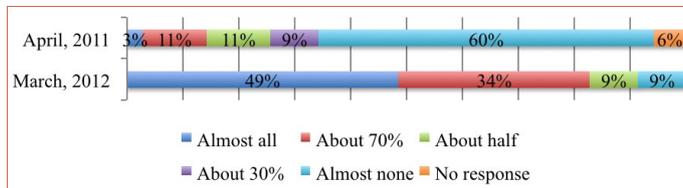
In the student surveys, students confirmed that their ability to participate in open-ended conversation improved (see Figure 2). They also confirmed that their ability to use conversation strategies improved for those strategies they had practiced in the first two terms (see Figure 3) and for those they had practiced in the third term (see Figure 4). Finally, the students reported that their listening comprehension improved (see Figure 5).



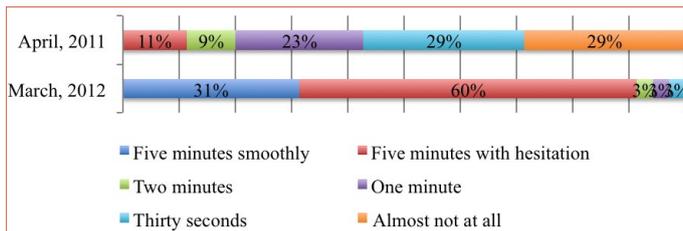
**Figure 2. Student Survey: How Long Could You Talk in Timed Conversations? ( $n = 34$ )**



**Figure 3. Student Survey: Could You Use Conversation Strategies From the First and Second Term? (n = 34)**



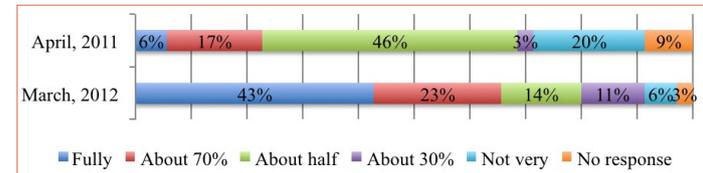
**Figure 4. Student Survey: Could You Use Conversation Strategies From the Third Term? (n = 34)**



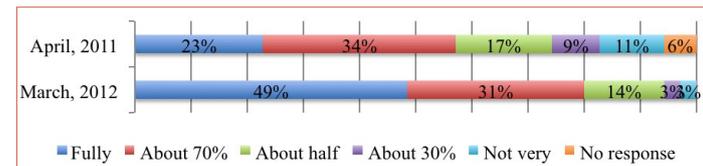
**Figure 5. Student Survey: When Talking in Pairs, How Much Could You Understand? (n = 34)**

## Student Motivation

Concerning their motivation and enjoyment of the class, the students reported an increase in both between April and March (see Figure 6 and Figure 8). Their motivation in and enjoyment of my lessons also increased and was higher than for English in general (see Figure 7 and Figure 9). Two factors stand out as reasons for the students' feelings. First, the most common reason given for positive feelings was success, while that for negative feelings was failure. Second, students found the lessons or specific activities fun (see Table 6).



**Figure 6. Student Survey: How Motivated Were You to Study English? (n = 34)**



**Figure 7. Student Survey: How Motivated Were You in Mr. Rector's Lessons? (n = 34)**

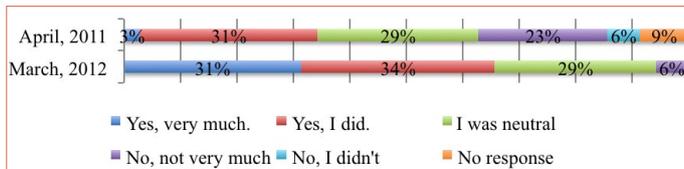


Figure 8. Student Survey: Did You Like English? (n = 34)

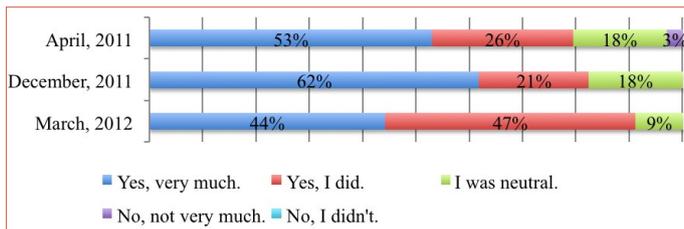


Figure 9. Student Survey: Did You Like Mr. Rector's Lessons? (n = 34)

Table 6. Reasons for Students' Opinions or Changes of Opinion About English (n = 34)

Positive Responses	Percentage of students
I succeeded in or improved my English.	56%
English or Mr. Rector's lessons were fun.	50%
The games were motivating or fun.	21%
I enjoyed speaking in English.	15%
English was challenging.	15%
English is useful.	12%
I had a chance to study with a foreign teacher.	9%

Mr. Rector created a positive atmosphere in the class.	9%
Other reasons	15%
Negative Responses	
I could not understand the class or I failed the test.	15%
English was difficult.	12%
Other reasons	15%

### Discussion

Concerning how the lessons affected learning outcomes, there are two main findings. First, integrating the structured input and output with the information exchange task seems to have helped develop durable grammatical competence. Students did best when targeted forms were recycled repeatedly and continued to accurately produce target structures as many as 10 months after structured input. Production of forms that were not recycled or targeted by structured input was less accurate.

The second finding is that Lee and VanPatten's (2003) approach to supporting information-exchange tasks with pretasks targeting specific competencies appears to have helped students develop communicative competence overall. Test data and student surveys show that practicing conversation strategies may have enabled students to use the targeted strategies in the information-exchange tasks. Also, these data show that students developed their listening and writing ability. They could understand their classmates well enough to write compositions with 10 or more points of information using complex sentences.

Concerning the effect on motivation, based on the student survey, it appears that the students' success in my lessons and their enjoyment of the activities contributed to high motivation

to learn English. It is possible that the positive feelings were the result of the students liking me, but few students reported this. The dominant reasons given were that the students were successful and that they enjoyed the lessons.

Finally, concerning how to implement the approach, in addition to the need for integration and recycling discussed above, the findings suggest two points. First, there is the need for continuity. Integrating and recycling proficiencies require that lessons be conducted without long gaps. Second, the importance of success for student motivation suggests that maintaining students' awareness of their progress with measures such as self-evaluation and communication tests may be valuable.

## Conclusion

This research corroborates Sato et al.'s (2012) finding that structured input and output enable learners to use targeted forms in MFI activities. It also supports Lee and VanPatten's (2003) expectation that the information exchange tasks will improve accuracy and that FonF develops overall communicative competence. It does not show that structured input and output are more effective than other techniques for FFI. However, Sato et al.'s (2008) finding that structured input and output may lead to higher test scores compared to traditional grammar instruction, combined with this study's result that recycling language in MFI may enhance the effects of FFI, should give teachers confidence that replacing traditional grammar instruction with this approach will enhance their students' chances of success. Longitudinal studies comparing outcomes on high stakes tests between students taught with FonF and traditional teaching are needed to increase this confidence.

Realistically, it is unlikely that teachers will abandon the focus-on-formS approach to FFI as long as MEXT maintains a list of target forms, and entrance exams test them. Therefore, I

suggest a mixed approach in which teachers replace all traditional FFI with structured-input and output tasks. They should combine this with at least 1 hour each week of MFI, which, ideally, should be based on information-exchange tasks. With careful coordination between the two strands, this would effectively be FonF. This would likely improve students' entrance exam scores, communicative competence, and motivation to study.

## Bio Data

**Michael Rector** has been teaching English in Japan for 10 years including 5 years in public junior high schools. He completed an MA TESOL course at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies in September 2012. He is currently teaching at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies.

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## Appendix A

### Example Lesson Plan: TPR-Based Structured Input With Structured Output

Target: Second person singular yes-or-no questions, collocations of *do* and *play*

Materials:

- Response cards: “Yes, I do” and “No, I don’t” cards, one pair per participant (see Figure A1)
- Worksheet: 1年(1st Year) Unit 3 Communication Drills

### Summary

In the structured input activity, students learn a meaning-based physical response to two contrasting forms, second-person

statements and second-person yes-or-no questions. The teacher then says questions and statements at random requiring the students to attend to the form to know which response to give. In the output task, the students practice using the question form to ask classmates if they do some activities. This requires them to attend to the collocations for the activities’ nouns.

### Procedure

#### TPR-Based Structured Input

- Distribute the response cards to the students (see figure A1).
- Teach the students to respond to second-person statements by acting out the meaning. Use various activities that collocate with *do* and *play*. For example, “You play soccer,” and “You do judo,” would be appropriate. The activities you use don’t need to be on the worksheet and you don’t need to use all the activities on the worksheet.
- Teach the students to respond to second-person questions about the activities by holding up their response cards.
- Mix statements with questions so that students have to listen to the form to know which response to give.

Yes, I do.	No, I don't.
Yes, I do.	No, I don't.
Yes, I do.	No, I don't.
Yes, I do.	No, I don't.

Figure A1. Student Response Cards

**Structured Output Activity**

- Check to see if the students have noticed the difference between *play* and *do*.
- Explain that *play* collocates with games and sports that have an object, such as a ball, that is moved by various players.
- Have the students complete the sentences on the worksheet (see Figure A2) and circle *yes* or *no* to indicate whether they do the activity. Check their answers.
- Demonstrate how to take turns asking questions with a partner to fill out the worksheet. Use the dialog below.
- Let the students do the activity with three different partners.

**Dialog**

A: Hi (B's name)

B: Hi (A's name)

A: Do you (do cycling)?

B: Yes, I do. / No, I don't.

Do you (do cycling)?

A: Yes, I do. / No, I don't.

B: Do you (play baseball)?

A: ...

1年 Unit 3 Communication Drills

		You			
	I _____ cycling.	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
	I _____ baseball.	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
	I _____ kendo.	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
	I _____ soccer.	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
	I _____ judo.	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
	I _____ skating.	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
	I _____ the guitar.	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No
	I _____ shogi.	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No	Yes No

Name \_\_\_\_\_ class \_\_\_\_\_ no. \_\_\_\_\_

Figure A2. Play/Do Worksheet

## Appendix B

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