

## Final Report

### Conversation Strategies and Peer Interaction: Building Blocks for an OC Proficiency Goal

- Level:** Senior High School – 1<sup>st</sup> Grade
- Subject:** Oral Communication I
- Class size:** 20
- Time:** 30 minutes
- Textbook:** *Hello there! Oral Communication I*

#### Problems:

- a) During conversations, many students rely exclusively on memorized sentences and are not able to produce original utterances on the spot. This produces interactions with little turn-taking and questionable levels of communication.
- b) Many students believe that true oral communication is beyond their abilities as they see it necessary to always perform with high levels of accuracy.
- c) The Oral Communication class is often viewed, especially at the institutional level, as being subordinate, or secondary in importance, to other English courses. This often influences the students' perspective, leading them to believe that speaking and listening activities are less important for their overall proficiency than focused grammar study.

#### Goals:

- a) To give students repeated practice of information-exchange tasks based on familiar and personalized topics with a focus on new content emerging from the conversations themselves;
- b) To help students become aware that it is possible to achieve true communication without high levels of accuracy through the use of Conversation Strategies (CSs) that improve fluency and interaction;
- c) To implement a respected OC syllabus with clear aims and structure, featuring on-going assessment and half-term exams (Conversation Tests) that aim to demonstrate students' progress in developing their communicative competence.

#### What I did:

1. At the beginning of each half-semester, I introduced a topic ("My Perfect Meal", "A Place I Like", "My Dream for the Future") to the students by presenting my own personalization of it. Students then personalized it themselves by answering written questions and using these answers as the basis for conversations with classmates.
2. I continued to introduce Conversation Strategies ("Fillers", "Follow-up Questions", "Fixing Communication Problems") as well as recycling previously learnt ones ("Showing

Interest”, “Shadowing”). Each CS was first practiced with activities that specifically focused on its use before being integrated into topic-based timed conversations.

3. Students wrote topic-based Fun Essays, which included draft writing and peer-editing.
4. Students took Conversation Tests, following a similar format to the timed conversations and scored according to a known rubric.
5. Students counted the number of different CSs they used in their conversations and targets were set for CS use.
6. I administered a student survey after the final lesson. This was a 20-item anonymous questionnaire in both English and Japanese. It included the option for students to write additional comments. The sample was three 1st-year classes (121 students) all following the same OC syllabus. There was a total of 102 respondents, of which 88 included written comments.

### What I Learned:

[Although the items on the questionnaire I administered in February 2012 were mostly different to those on the questionnaire from June 2011, there was some overlap; in these cases, I made comparisons between the two.]

1. Although the percentage of students who said that they wanted to be able to speak English barely changed between June 2011 and February 2012, there was a shift to a higher percentage who strongly agreed with this statement: from 70% to 94% (see Figure 1). This increase may reflect a stronger awareness of the benefits, enjoyment, and possibility of speaking English. This was also supported by some of the students’ comments: about 28 wrote that they would like to further practice their English conversation skills, including 8 who specifically wanted to continue the OC class in the next school year.
2. 92% of students said that they had improved their conversation ability in the OC class by February 2012; this compares to 75% in June 2011, which is perhaps obvious considering the extra 7 months of studying (see Figure 2). However, such a number still indicates that, overall, students found the activities beneficial for their conversation skills. Over 30 students also wrote about some aspect of their English ability that had improved since the beginning of the course. Reasons they gave for this included: having the opportunity to speak a lot in class, learning and using the CSs, listening to only English from the teachers, listening to a native-speaker’s pronunciation, and using new vocabulary in the conversations.
3. Figures 3, 4, and 5 show the students’ feelings of how well they could use the three target CSs of *Showing Interest*, *Shadowing*, and *Fillers*. All were similar, with over 85% of respondents saying they could use each of them. A similar item about *Showing Interest* and *Shadowing* also appeared on the June 2011 questionnaire, and there was a 10% increase from that early survey to the more recent one, probably reflecting the many opportunities students had for conversation practice between the two. The highest percentage of students who strongly agreed that they could use the CS was for *Shadowing* (40%), possibly as it is not very cognitively challenging.
4. *Follow-up Questions* was the CS about which students were least confident of their ability, with over 30% saying that they could not use them (see Figure 6). This is predictable as it

was the last CS to be introduced and the most difficult to use, linguistically and for other reasons. Students' comments included:

"When I think about what questions I should ask, I can't listen to my partners, but if I'm listening, I can't think about questions. I feel a bit bad when I ask a question because I have to interrupt my partner."

"It was difficult to use Follow-up Questions without stopping the conversation. In order to not stop the conversation and to have a deeper conversation, I thought I had to guess what my partner was going to say next."

5. Figure 7 shows how useful students felt practicing the CSs was in June 2011; Figures 8, 9, 10, and 11 show their feelings about the individual target CSs. The most obvious difference is that a majority strongly agreed with the statement in the later survey, indicating a small but significant change in students' attitude. Again, this is likely due to the continuing conversation practice with integrated CS use that students did, and hopefully the positive effect that it had. Supporting this view is the fact that over 85% of respondents said that they wanted to continue practicing the target CSs and/or to learn more CSs (see Figures 13 and 14). *Follow-up Questions* were considered, in general, the most useful CS by students - unsurprising, given how integral they are to most interactions.
6. The percentage of students who agreed that they liked communicating with their classmates increased from 72% in June 2011 to 80% in February 2012, including a 6% decrease who strongly disagreed with it (see Figure 12). This is perhaps due to the increased familiarity with, and ability for, peer conversations.
7. Figures 15 and 16 show students' feelings about the two different methods used to generate ideas about the conversation topic: answering written questions and having conversations with classmates. Both were quite similar, with over 90% saying they were useful. This reflects, perhaps, how both individual reflection and interaction are important for cognition.
8. The percentage of students who found the activity of counting the CSs in their recorded conversations useful was high (over 80%, see Figure 17), although not as high as for other activities. One student pointed out:

"...it's not that the more CSs you use, the better."

This is a very reasonable statement. Although my intended purpose for students to count their CSs was to encourage their use, I do not want them to think that it is necessary to always use as many as possible. Another student wrote:

"I prefer to do the test in front of teachers rather than recording because I wanted our expressions and gestures and the atmosphere to be seen so you can see how much effort we are putting in."

This also reflects that the target CSs introduced into the class are not the only possible markers of a highly communicative interaction. However, as this course was intended as an introduction to oral communication, there was little time to expand beyond what was presented. It is encouraging that some students were able to recognize the limits of what they were taught and could focus on what is truly important for communicative competence.

9. Over 90% of students said that they could understand what their conversation partners said (see Figure 18) and almost 80% said that they could communicate what they wanted to say about the topic (see Figure 19). I believe that this shows an overall ability for students to communicate. Similar percentages for the ability and usefulness of the CSs demonstrates a possible link. Certain student comments also revealed an awareness that fluency and communication were not dependent on high levels of accuracy:

“Even if I couldn’t use correct English, I could talk using just a few words. I understood that I could communicate with other people without full sentences.”

“I understood that English is a language so grammar is very important but the most important thing is to enjoy the conversation.”

10. Less than half of the respondents in February 2012 said that they could continue a conversation in English for 3 minutes (see Figure 21). This is somewhat contradicted by the recordings of their conversation tests. This is possibly a sign of either self-doubt or modesty. One sign of improved confidence, however, is that the fraction was much lower - about a quarter - for students who said in June 2011 that they could continue a 2-minute English conversation (see Figure 20).

11. Although the favorite conversation topic of students was fairly well spread out among the four (see Figure 22), *Dream for the Future* was the most popular, probably because it is the most consequential. *Perfect Meal* was the second most popular, perhaps reflecting the fact that it relates to very personal tastes.

### Future Issues:

I would like to:

- introduce non-verbal CSs, such as gestures.
- have students practice conversations with very short answers in order to encourage more *Follow-up Questions*. An example activity could be the use of “*mentions*”.
- continue to revise the conversation test rubric to better reflect the communicative aims of the course.
- provide students with more comprehensible (and compelling) input before they are asked to produce their output.
- develop a clear syllabus for the ordered introduction of CSs.
- creating a system for recording emergent vocabulary from the student conversations.
- create and interview focus groups to obtain better information about students’ feelings about OC lessons.
- connect topics with grammar items that students are studying in their other English classes

## Lesson Plan

### Procedure:

#### Day One

- Students look at the average use of CSs in their previous Conversation Test, and the target average use for the upcoming Conversation Test.
- Students practice using Follow-up Questions (*CS#5.5: Follow-up Questions 2* handout), after looking at some different examples from the previous Conversation Test. They all begin their conversations with the same topic question (*How was your winter holiday?*), but the rest is based entirely on follow-up questions.

#### Day Two

- Students answer written questions on four different topics about their dreams for the future.
- In pairs, students have 2-minute conversations - one for every topic and with a different partner each time.
- HW: students choose a topic that connects to their strongest dream for the future and write more information about it.

#### Day Three

- In pairs, students have recursive 3-minute conversations about their dream for the future, beginning with the topic question *What's your dream for the future?* and followed by follow-up questions. Between conversations, they have time to write down any new information or unanswered questions that emerge from their interactions.
- HW: make a Conversation Card

#### Day Four

- Students look at *CS#6: Fixing Communication Problems* handout, while AET and JTE explain and demonstrate.
- Students practice using *CS#6* by playing "Taboo" in groups of four; they take turns picking up a card, each with a word written on it connected to Nagoya culture, and trying to explain it to their group-mates.
- Students have practice conversations about their Dream for the Future, using *CS#6* if/when necessary.
- HW: write first draft of Fun Essay

#### Day Five

- Peer-editing of first draft of Fun Essay
- HW: write second/final draft of Fun Essay

#### Day Six

- In pairs, students do a first practice Conversation Test, unrecorded, during which they can look at the final draft of their Fun Essay.
- In new pairs, students do a second practice Conversation Test, unrecorded, during which they can only look at their Conversation Card.
- In new pairs, students do the Conversation Test.

#### Day Seven

- Students listen to the recordings of their Conversation Tests and 1) count the number of CSs they used (*CS Checklist* handout); 2) transcribe their conversations.
- HW: make corrections/improvements to their transcribed conversations.

## Follow-up Questions 2

Let's practice some more!

• What..?	• What kind..?	• Do/Did you..?
• Where..?	• For example..?	• Are/Were you..?
• When..?	• How often..?	• Have you ever..?
• Who..?	• How many..?	• Can you..?
• How..?	• How much..?	• Will you..?
• Why..?	• How about you?	• Would you..?

For example:

A: *How was your winter holiday?*

B: *Oh, it was great!*

A: *Did you do anything fun?*

B: *Well, I went to the cinema.*

A: *Wow! What did you see?*

B: *Um, I saw Tintin.*

A: *Oh, what kind of movie is it?*

B: *Let's see, it's an action movie.*

A: *Great! Was it good?*

B: *Yes, it was wonderful!*

A: *I see. How often do you go to the cinema?*

B: *Um, about once a month. How about you?*

A: *Me too, about once a month.*

Class: No.: Name:

## Fixing Conversation Problems

Sometimes in a conversation, we have a problem because we can't understand our partner or we can't say what we want to say. Here are some ways to fix those problems:

### 1. Speaking Japanese

If you really want to say something in your conversation, but you don't know the English word, it is OK to use the Japanese word (but don't forget to look it up in a dictionary later!):

e.g. A: *What's your favorite vegetable?*

B: *Well, uh, I don't know the word in English. It's **nasu**.*

A: *Oh, **nasu**! I like it too!*

### 2. Explaining

Sometimes you tell your partner something, but they can't understand you. Try to describe it or explain it in different words.

e.g. A: *My favorite vegetable is eggplant.*

B: *Eggplant? What is that?*

A: *Well, it's a **kind of** long, purple vegetable.*

B: *Oh, I see!*

### 3. Giving up

Sometimes you explain something to your partner, but they still can't understand you. It's OK to forget about it and continue the conversation in another direction.

e.g. A: *I love listening to podcasts.*

B: *Podcasts? What is that?*

A: *Well, it's a kind of radio on the internet.*

B: *Um, sorry, I still don't understand.*

A: *Oh, **nevermind**. Do you use the internet?*

Class: No.: Name:

Date:

### Conversation Test Score

SPEAKING SKILLS:				
<b>FLUENT / 流れるように</b> あなたのパートナーと3分30秒間、詰まることなく流れるように会話をする。				
1 <i>not very good...</i>	2 <i>try harder!</i>	3 OK	4 <i>good</i>	5 <i>excellent!</i>
<b>UNDERSTANDABLE / 相手に伝わるように</b> あなたのパートナーが理解出来るように適切な言葉、文法、発音、身振り等を使う。				
1 <i>not very good...</i>	2 <i>try harder!</i>	3 OK	4 <i>good</i>	5 <i>excellent!</i>

LISTENING SKILLS:				
<b>INTERESTED / 興味深く</b> あなたのパートナーの話を興味深く聞き、理解しようと努める。				
1 <i>not very good...</i>	2 <i>try harder!</i>	3 OK	4 <i>good</i>	5 <i>excellent!</i>
<b>CURIOUS / 好奇心</b> あなたのパートナーの話を好奇心を持って聞き、いろいろ質問してみる。				
1 <i>not very good...</i>	2 <i>try harder!</i>	3 OK	4 <i>good</i>	5 <i>excellent!</i>

Date:

### Conversation Strategies Checklist

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

How many?	
	<b>Showing Interest</b> Oh, I see. Really? Great! How interesting!
	<b>Fillers</b> um well uh Let's see.
	<b>Shadowing</b>
	<b>Follow-up Questions</b>
	<b>TOTAL</b>

Class:

Name:

No.:

Name:

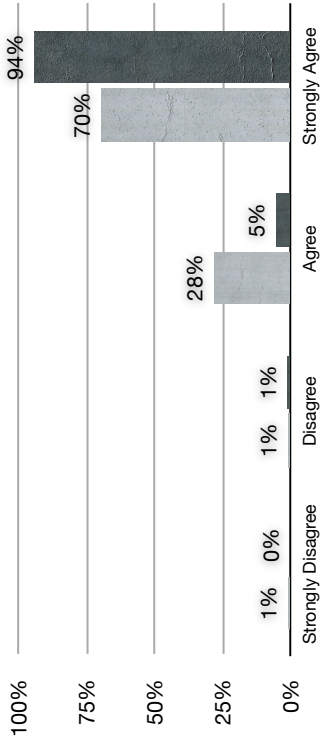
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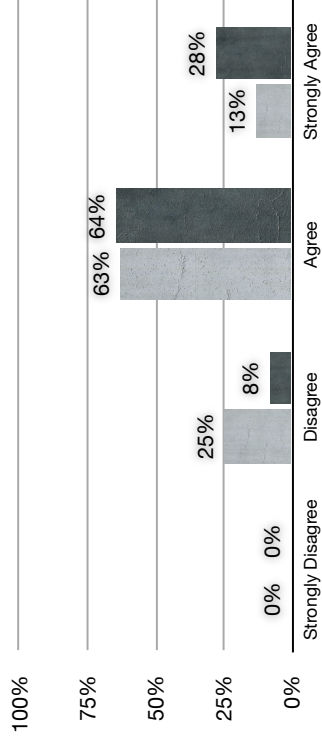
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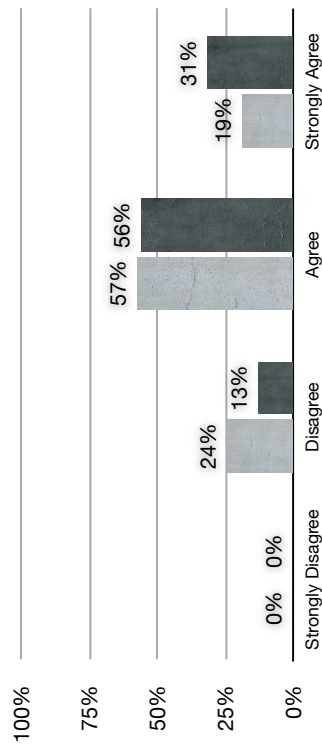
**Fig. 1. I want to be able to speak English.**



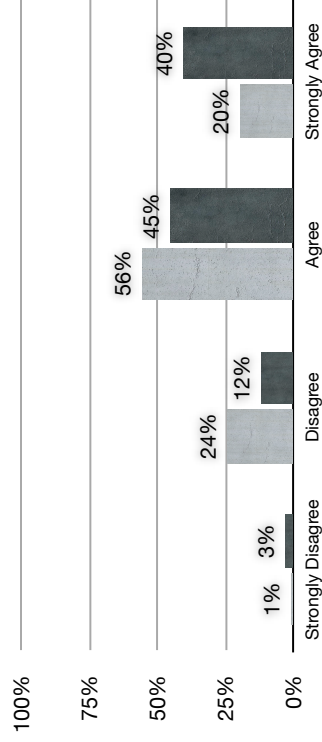
**Fig. 2. I have improved my conversation ability in OC class.**



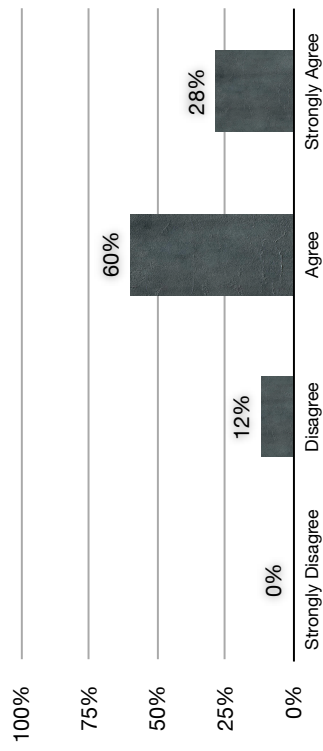
**Fig. 3. I can use Showing Interest expressions.**



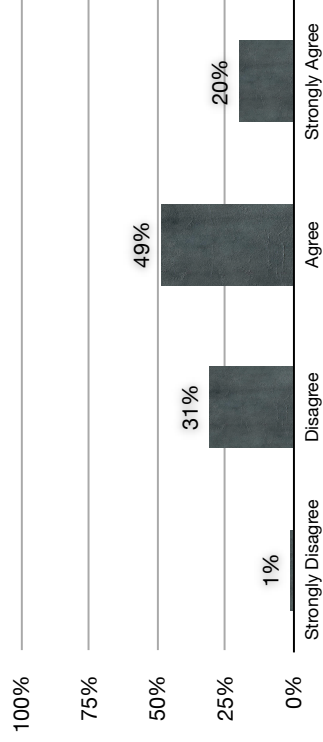
**Fig. 4. I can use Shadowing.**



**Fig. 5. I can use Fillers.**

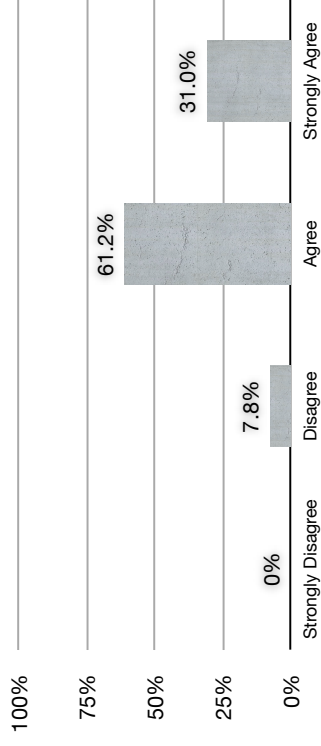


**Fig. 6. I can use Follow-up Questions.**

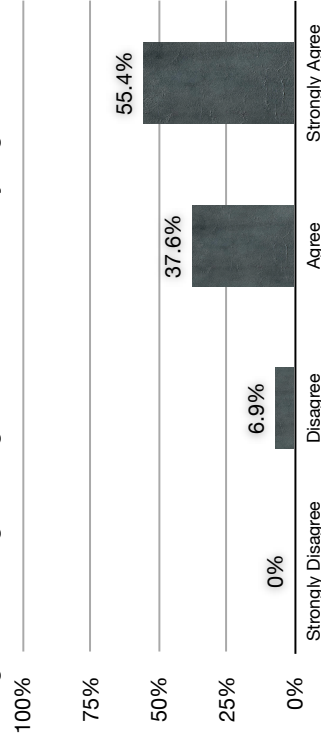




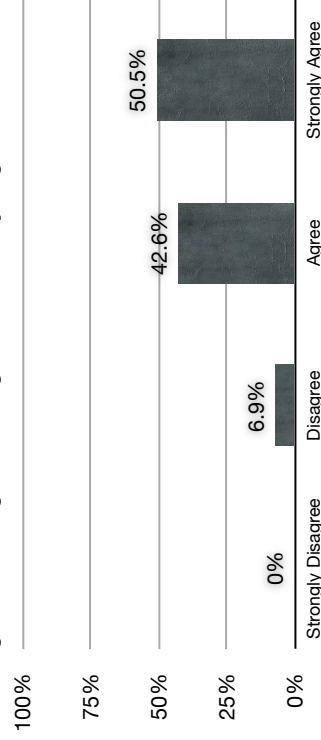
**Fig. 7. Practicing Conversation Strategies is useful for my English conversation.**



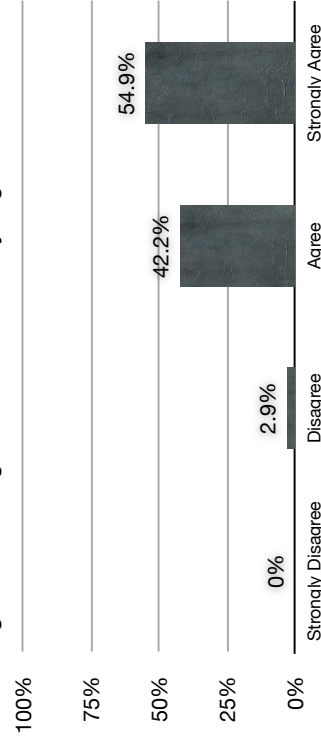
**Fig. 8. Practicing Showing Interest is useful for my English conversation.**



**Fig. 9. Practicing Shadowing is useful for my English conversation.**



**Fig. 10. Practicing Fillers is useful for my English conversation.**



**Fig. 11. Practicing Follow-up Questions is useful for my English conversation.**

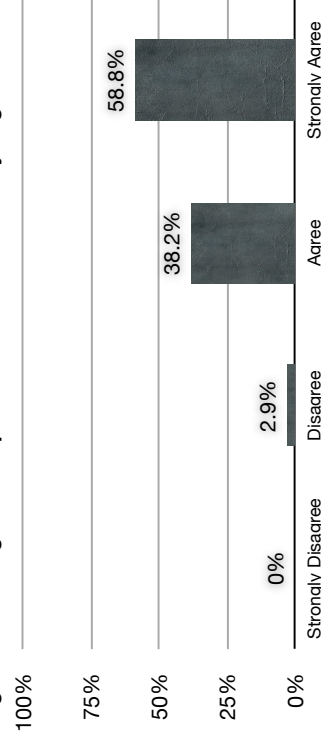


Fig 12. I like communicating with my classmates in English.

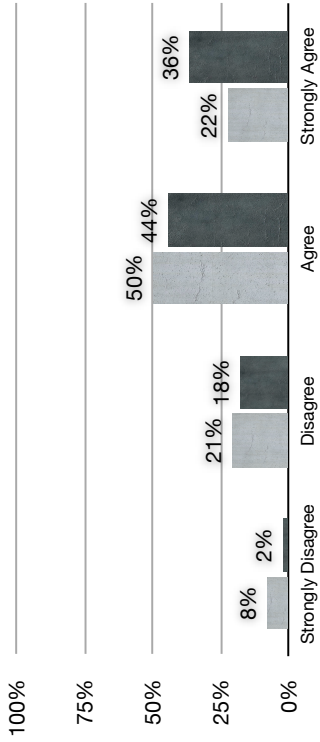


Fig. 13. I want to continue practicing the CSs that I learned in OC class.

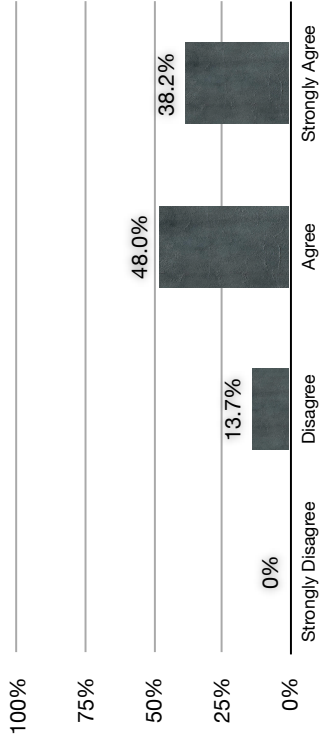


Fig. 14. I want to learn more Conversation Strategies in the future.

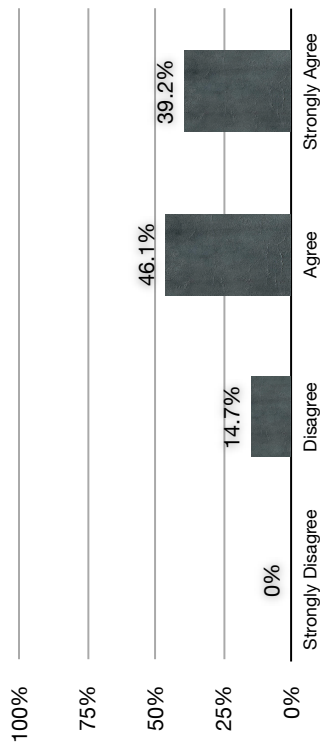


Fig 15. Written answers helped me think of new ideas about the conversation topic.

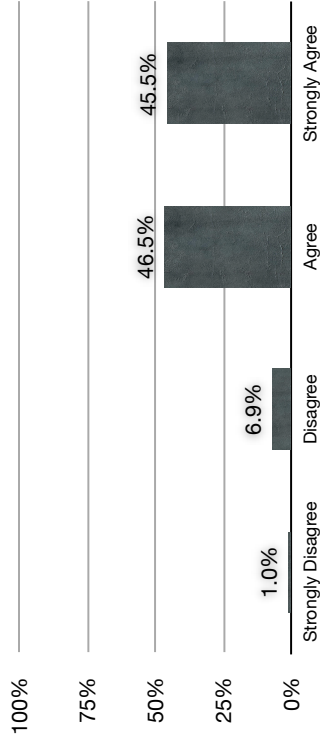


Fig. 16. Conversations with classmates helped me think of new ideas about the topic.

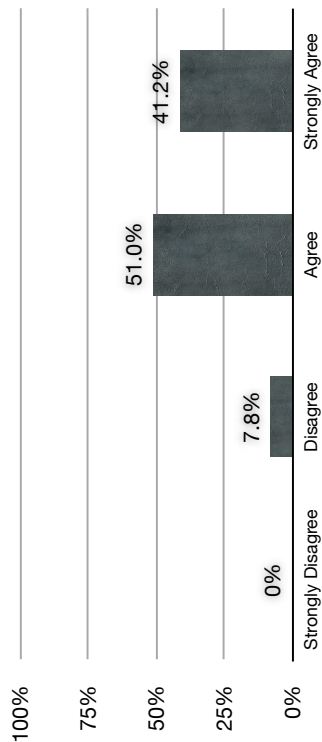
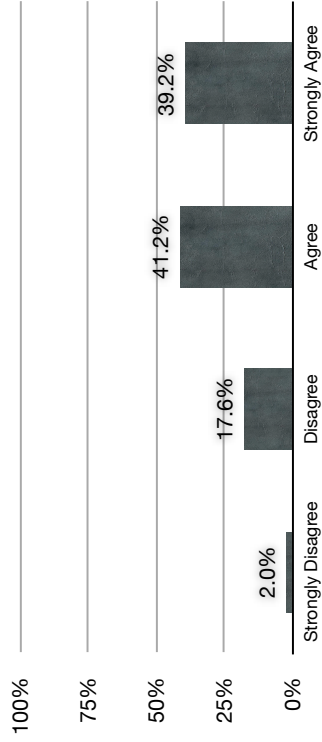
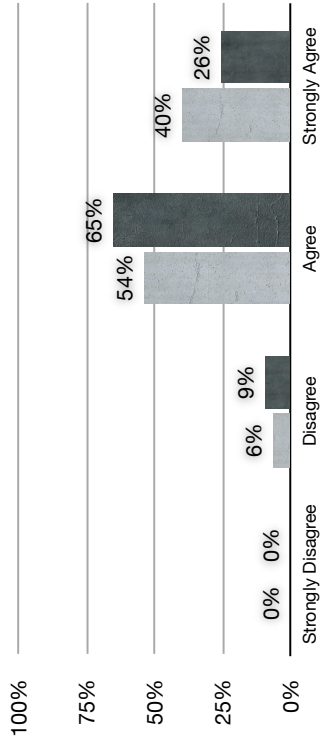


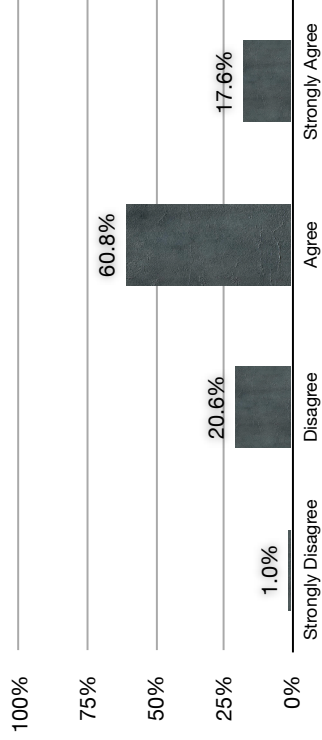
Fig. 17. Counting the CSs in my conversation helped me realize what I need to improve.



**Fig. 18. I can understand what my conversation partners say.**



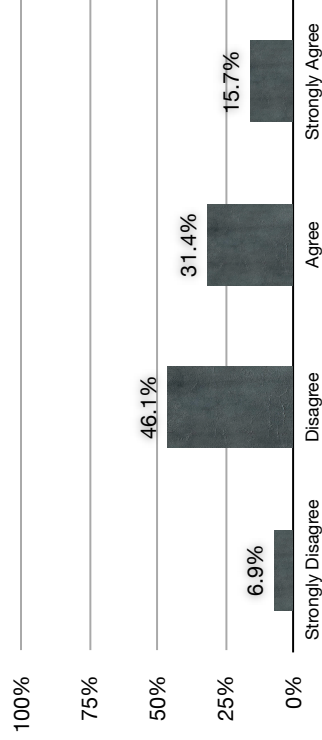
**Fig. 19. I can communicate what I want to say about the conversation topic in English**



**Fig. 20. I can have a conversation in English for 2 minutes**



**Fig. 21. I can continue a conversation in English for 3 minutes.**



**Fig. 22. My favorite conversation topic was:**

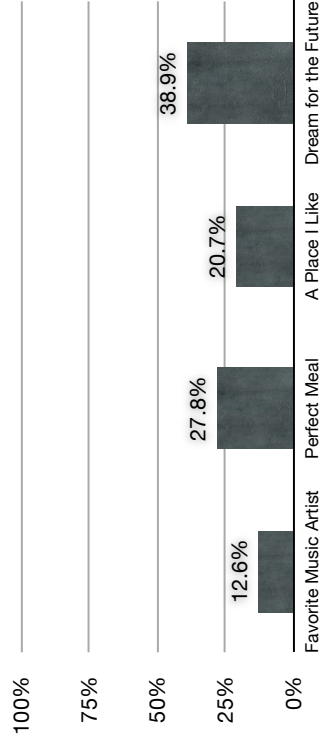


Table 2: Selected Student Comments by Theme (some translated from Japanese)

<p><b>Conversation Strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I want to learn more CSs.</li> <li>• If I have the chance to practice more CSs, I would like to do more Fillers and Showing Interest.</li> <li>• The first few times, CSs were fun, but from the third time, I was getting bored. I wanted to do something else too.</li> <li>• I can't say what I want to say, but CSs are basic English and you can't communicate without them. I think it's very good that I can learn these in a SHS class.</li> <li>• I felt my communication skills got better because I learned CSs.</li> <li>• I didn't have communication class in JHS so I didn't have a skill for communication or CSs. But I learned a lot this year and I got a basic of communication skills.</li> <li>• The CSs that I learned in the class are definitely very useful when I talk in English.</li> <li>• We counted use of individual CSs, but I think it's not that the more you use, the better.</li> <li>• I want to use the CSs in my life.</li> <li>• I enjoy practicing the CSs every class.</li> <li>• There were basic sentences but I'd never used the CSs before - I became able to use them.</li> </ul> <p><b>Showing Interest</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't know when to use Showing Interest.</li> <li>• I could use Showing Interest to respond immediately.</li> <li>• I could use 'I see' a lot but not other Showing Interest expressions.</li> <li>• It was fun to use Showing Interest because the conversation continues a bit more.</li> </ul> <p><b>Shadowing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think Shadowing was very useful.</li> <li>• I couldn't use Shadowing well...</li> <li>• Shadowing was good to show other people that I'm listening. This is important and useful - if I can use it more, it will be more interesting.</li> <li>• I want to become better at more practical conversation. For that reason, I would like to use more conversation skills, like Shadowing</li> </ul> <p><b>Fillers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I didn't use Fillers much... If I have the chance to practice more CSs, I would like to do more Fillers</li> <li>• In the final recording class, my partner was my friend, so I didn't think about Showing Interest and Fillers, but in the next class, when I listened to the recorded conversation, I realized that I used them without thinking, so I was happy.</li> <li>• When I speak in English, I try to make a sentence carefully and then start thinking, but if I use Fillers, the conversation will be more natural.</li> </ul> <p><b>Follow-up Questions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't know when to use Follow-up Questions. When I think about what I should ask, I can't listen to my partners, but if I'm listening, I can't think about questions. I feel a bit bad when I ask a question because I have to interrupt my partner.</li> <li>• In most of the conversations, I could talk loudly and I could use Follow-up Questions.</li> <li>• I could use Follow-up Questions well.</li> <li>• It was difficult to use Follow-up Questions without stopping the conversation. In order to not stop the conversation and to have a deeper conversation, I thought I had to guess what my partner was going to say next.</li> <li>• I still can't do Follow-up Questions yet so I'd like to use them.</li> </ul> <p><b>Conversation Topics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was good that Matt gave some topics, so I could start thinking about the conversation.</li> <li>• The topics were easy to consider.</li> <li>• It was interesting to talk about many different topics in English.</li> <li>• I especially liked the conversation topic "Dream for the Future". It was interesting to know about other classmates' dreams.</li> <li>• All the topics were very good chances to think about myself and of course for studying English but also good to reflect on myself.</li> <li>• What I enjoyed most was the perfect meal conversation. Everyone was really excited.</li> </ul> <p><b>Difficulties</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I felt it is really difficult to tell and make my partner understand, not only grammar.</li> <li>• It was very difficult to talk about things that I don't know the words for.</li> <li>• "speaking" is more difficult than "reading" and "writing", but I think it is the most important.</li> <li>• I think it's difficult to tell other people what I want to say, but it's very important so I want to practice more.</li> <li>• To make long English sentences was very difficult but fun.</li> <li>• It was very difficult to talk for three minutes.</li> <li>• It's very difficult to talk in English, but I was happy that I could gradually increase my vocabulary.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Recording Conversations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was very useful to record myself - I noticed what I need to study more.</li> <li>• I don't think I need to record my conversation. Because I wanna speak more English.</li> <li>• In the final recording class, my partner was my friend, so I didn't think about Showing Interest and Fillers, but in the next class, when I listened to the recorded conversation, I realized that I used them without thinking, so I was happy.</li> <li>• I thought I'm still not good when I listened to the recording of my conversation - sometimes the grammar was strange and sometimes both of us stopped talking, in silence. But it was good to know where I have to change and get new ideas of how to say what I want.</li> <li>• As you said, it's difficult to talk very naturally in front of teachers, so recording was a good idea.</li> <li>• I thought it was very fun to record our conversations and then listen to them.</li> <li>• I prefer to do the test in front of teachers rather than recording because I wanted our expressions and gestures and the atmosphere to be seen because you can see how much effort we are putting in.</li> <li>• When I listened to the recording, I noticed that I forgot to use Showing Interest and was just looking at my partner and nodding without saying anything, but I want to express with my voice to other people and do communication with them.</li> </ul> <p><b>Miscellaneous</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel a bit embarrassed to talk with classmates. To be honest, I feel like I'm the worst English speaker in the class, so I feel classmates think I'm stupid.</li> <li>• I think a good thing about talking in English is that I become better at listening to other people because you have to really concentrate on the conversation - you listen carefully.</li> <li>• In this class we didn't take notes much - usually just conversation with my classmates. But I thought it was important to not just remember English, but to use English.</li> <li>• I was always looking forward to this class because I always think I want to be able to speak English, but I don't have the chance to speak it.</li> <li>• It was fun because I could get to know my classmates better.</li> <li>• Even if I couldn't use correct English, I could talk using just a few words. I understood that I could communicate with other people without full sentences.</li> <li>• When I was in JHS, I just learned grammar and I didn't enjoy that. There were stupid sentences like "This is a pen", but in this class I learned how to tell something to other people in English. I think I got the way of telling a story and listening to a story and I could think that English is fun.</li> <li>• I understood that English is a language so grammar is very important but the most important thing is to enjoy the conversation.</li> <li>• Always sitting in different seats or talking to many different people and communicating with them was good.</li> <li>• I think that the conversation test was very useful. It's because of the test that I have to ask other people, and because of that I could practice communication. Also, it was very good that the class was all in English. In JHS and English 1, the class is always in Japanese, so I wanted to take classes in English. Even if I didn't understand some words, I could understand the general meaning. I think this is very important, not for only communication but also for tests, like university entrance exams.</li> <li>• I think the power of our favorites is nice; it's important to be interested in many kinds of things because they become the power of something. In OC class I had a good time because I could think of my favorites and I could learn favorites of others. It was a lot of fun to talk with my classmates.</li> <li>• I have to write an essay beforehand and think about what I'm going to say - I can't talk without it.</li> <li>• I can't say that I like English. I don't like talking in English, and I can't speak it like I speak Japanese, I can't say what I want to say, but CSs are basic English and you can't communicate without them. I think it's very good that I can learn these in a SHS class.</li> <li>• When my partner was reading their essay in the conversation, it was difficult to ask questions, so I think it's better to answer with just one sentence and then the conversation will continue longer.</li> <li>• I think it's good to talk between students, but I thought that I wanted to have conversations in a group of students and teacher.</li> <li>• The most useful hint was 'try not to make silence during the conversation'.</li> <li>• I thought I'm still not good when I listened to the recording of my conversation - sometimes the grammar was strange and sometimes both of us stopped talking, in silence. But it was good to know where I have to change and get new ideas of how to say what I want.</li> <li>• I think studying is important to understand English; but using is more important. Conversations in English is the best way to use English in life.</li> <li>• The teachers' English was very clear and easy to understand; they choose words carefully so we can understand them, so I think it was a good class. But even though they did that, I still didn't know some of the words. I now feel that I should have asked more questions.</li> <li>• In the beginning, I didn't like it so much, but in the end I enjoyed it a lot. I think it's very useful for Eiken exam. As you said, it's difficult to talk very naturally in front of teachers, so recording was a good idea. I guess this class was for communication (the main purpose), but I personally wanted to learn more about pronunciation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Hopes for the Future</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 29 students wrote about how they would like to continue studying OC and/or CSs.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Improvement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 31 students wrote about how some aspect of their English skills had improved.</li> </ul>