

1. Title: Helping Beginner Learners Build Communicative Competence Through Communicative Language Teaching and Music

2. Context

- a. Level: Elementary School (third to fifth grade, 8 to 10 years old)
- b. Class size: 5 students (one male and four female)
- c. Level: Beginner (been talking English lessons since February 2022)
- d. Time: 50 minutes, 1/week
- e. Material: Mostly grammar worksheets and some Eiken Grade 5 worksheets
- f. Problem: Since the age of students differ, the exposure to English and their speed of learning varies.

3. Goals and objectives

My AR goal is to implement Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in a beginner class to enhance the students' communicative competence. Since this target class consists of beginner learners, I would like students to have as much exposure to English as possible even though we only meet once a week for 50 minutes. I aim to achieve the goal by using timed-conversation activities, Focus-on-Form approach, and integrating learning English and music. I would also like students to feel excitement in speaking in English because this is the first time that they are studying English.

Objectives

- (1) Teacher will talk for less than 15 minutes per class.
- (2) Students will be able to talk in pairs for one minute using Communication Strategies (CS).
- (3) Students will be able to use model dialogs without pausing for more than 3 seconds.

4. Literature review

(1) Communication Strategies (CSs)

The key tool for language learners is Communication Strategies (CSs), which are known to improve speaking skills. When a speaker faces a challenge, Corder defines CSs as “a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his or her meaning” (Corder, 1981). Moreover, Cohen (1990) asserts that an important characteristic of successful speakers is to use CSs to continue the conversation.

(2) Focus on Form (FFI)

Ellis (2006) divides a focus-on-form approach into two types; planned focus on form and incidental focus on form.

a. Planned focus on form

A planned focus on form is arranged into three parts: input, noticing and output with a focus on the target grammar (Sato, 2012). Input is the first stage of a planned FFI. There are two crucial characteristics of high quality input: (1) comprehensible, (2) meaning bearing (Lee, J. F. & VanPatten, B, 2014). Instead of providing explicit explanation, the first input activity encourages learners to notice the target grammar through audio and visual input. There is no evidence, in terms of grammar, that explicit explanation and information are required for acquisition. Then students begin a structured output activity since output is crucial for developing the ability to use language in a communicative context. In addition, studies conducted since the late 1980s have shown that “...students who are engaged in meaningful or meaning-based approaches to grammar (called focus on form) do as well as or better than those who are engaged in activities that are non-meaningful or not part of some communicative intent” (Lee, J.F. & VanPatten, B, 2014).

b. Incidental focus on form

Students can revisit what they learned by using an incidental focus on form which focuses on a particular topic after a unit is complete (Sato, 2012). According to Lee and VanPatten (2014), learners need opportunities to build a developing system to improve fluency and accuracy in a second language (p.181). Also, it is recommended to employ the incidental FFI as a speaking test. As Lee and VanPatten (2014) claim that “if there is to be an oral test with content related to classroom activities, learners will have additional motivation not only to participate in the class but to strive to improve their communicative language ability” (Lee, J.F. & VanPatten, B, 2014). Moreover, the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning are three crucial aspects of communication. The negotiation of meaning within a specific situation is particularly crucial to learning a second language. As incidental FFI entails questioning one another, sharing information, and negotiating meaning, it aids learners in becoming more task-oriented. Then, students have the chance to practice their communication skills. Also, there is more communicative drill practice than in a

planned FFI; as a result, students are better equipped to communicate themselves (Lee, J. F. & VanPatten, B, 2014).

(3) Communicative Competence (CC)

Savignon (1997) states that “communication is the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning” and that there are four components to communicative competence (CC), which are *grammatical competence*, *sociolinguistic competence*, *discourse competence*, and *strategic competence*. Grammatical competence, in other words *linguistic competence*, “is mastery of the linguistic code, the ability to recognize the *lexical*, *morphological*, *syntactic*, and *phonological* features of a language and to manipulate these features to form words and sentences” (Savignon, 1997). In other words, it is about forming a sentence using the right grammar. Sociolinguistic Competence is to be able to judge what to say and which words to use in an appropriate manner when using L2 in the L2 community. Also, it is the use of gestures, facial expressions, and any other available means to get a message across without the use of language. Discourse Competence, or *textual competence*, is the ability to combine a series of sentences or utterances both in writing and speaking. Without the discourse competence, L2 speakers could connect sentences in an awkward way because grammatical competence alone will not provide meaning. “To summarize, discourse competence is the ability to interpret a series of sentences or utterances in order to form a meaningful whole and to achieve coherent texts that are relevant to a given context” (Savignon, 1997). The fourth component of CC is Strategic Competence which is present at all levels of proficiency. It is the ability to communicate with empathy even when there are restrictions, such as imperfect knowledge, the differences between the speed of speech, or misunderstanding. The strategies needed for the competence are rephrasing, repetition, emphasis, seeking clarification, circumlocution, avoidance and modification. According to Savignon (1997), strategic competence is important because having “the ability to cope within limitation is an ever-present component of communicative competence.”

(4) Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative language teaching (CLT) represents both processes and goals in classroom learning. The concept of communicative competence is essential to CLT. Research on second language acquisition is used to define competence in terms of the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning and to explain how it develops (Savignon, 1997). According to Brown (2007), there are four aspects of CLT. (1) Classroom objectives include

all aspects of CC and are not limited to grammatical or linguistic competence. (2) Language teaching methods are intended to include students in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language structures are not the primary focus, but rather language features that help the learner achieve those goals. (3) Communication approaches are said to be underpinned by complementary ideas of accuracy and fluency. Sometimes it could be necessary to prioritize fluency above accuracy in order to maintain meaningful language use among students. (4) Students must eventually utilize the language in the communicative classroom both productively and receptively in natural situations.

5. What I did

(1) Timed-Conversation with CSs

For each week at the beginning of the class, I have implemented Timed-Conversation activities while gradually introducing CSs since June 2022. Since there are a total of six people in the class (including myself), students have one-minute-timed-conversation with five different people. Before the class, I write out model dialog on the whiteboard including two to three questions and CSs that we have already reviewed. After the second round, I erase everything on the board for students to do the activity from their memories and eventually to do the activity by using CSs naturally. Since there are only six people in the class, I have students rotate with only one student staying in one place. Since September 2022, students are able to use five CSs which are opener, closer, how about you?, rejoinders and shadowing. Starting February 2023, I have extended the length to one minute and fifteen seconds and the number of questions from two to three questions. I am also using this activity as a review of grammar content that the students learned in previous lessons.

(2) Focus on Form

I have used planned focus on form tasks for each grammar content throughout the year since June. Students learned the target grammar through planned FFI first, and they were given the worksheets that Eikaiwa school provides as homework to review the grammar content at home. For planned FFI, I tried to integrate music and FFI by using some short music as audio input for the grammar content. After three to five lessons with planned FFI, students reviewed the grammar content through incidental FFI. Since June 2022, students were given three incidental FFI.

(3) Music and Dance

For every class, I play some music with words after a timed-conversation activity, usually about the grammar content we are to learn in the class. Each recording is about a minute long. Since we usually study the same grammar content for about a month using planned FFI, we listen and learn the same song for a month. After the second lesson, I gradually encourage students to sing and dance with me. In January 2023, I started integrating music and planned FFI by using music as an audio and visual input. I have written out lyrics of the song on the worksheet to use it for visual input. Since September 2022, students have learned five English songs.

6. Results

Data from students' survey

I could collect data from 4 out of 5 students.

Chart 1: Survey conducted in February (Listening ability)

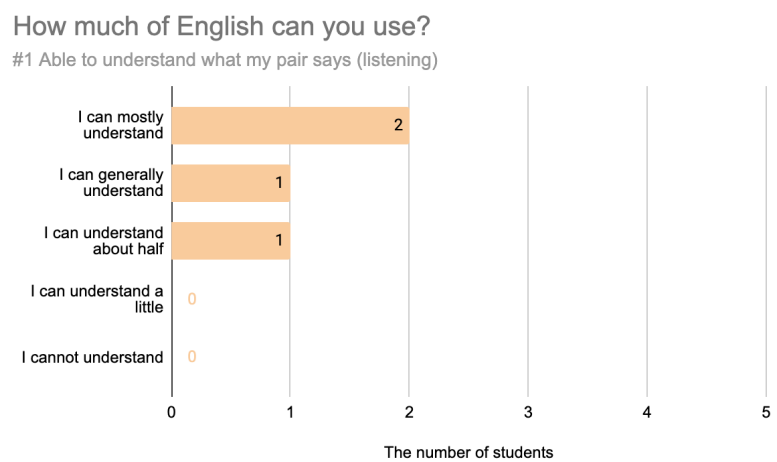


Chart 2: Survey conducted in February (Speaking)

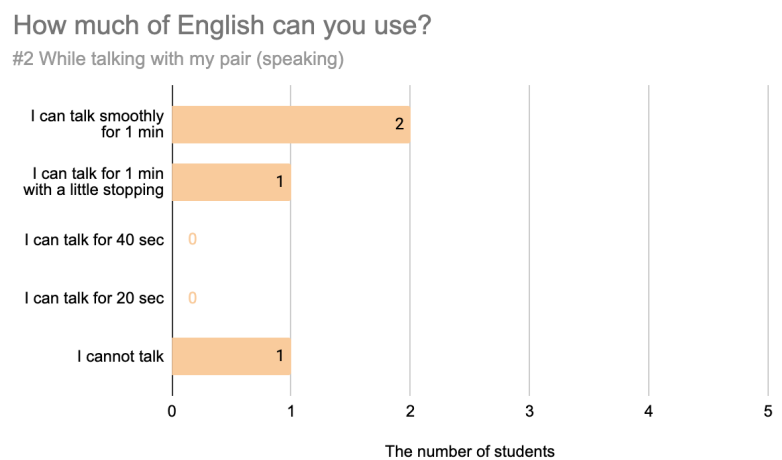


Chart 3: Survey conducted in February (reading)

Most of the students have confidence in their listening and reading ability. The youngest student in the class felt like she could not talk. Writing is not included here considering the age of the students.

How much of English can you use?
#3 Able to understand the worksheets (reading)

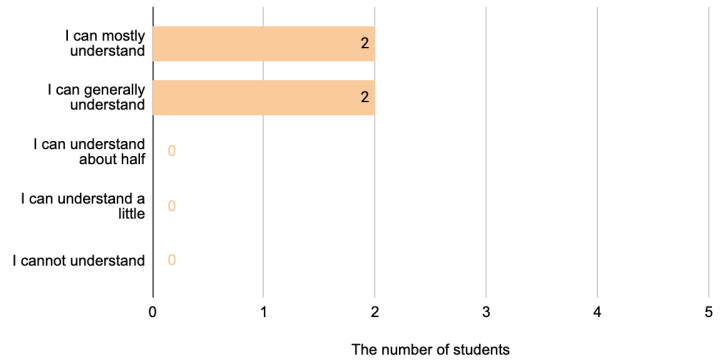


Chart 4: Survey conducted in February

#4 Do you understand English class?

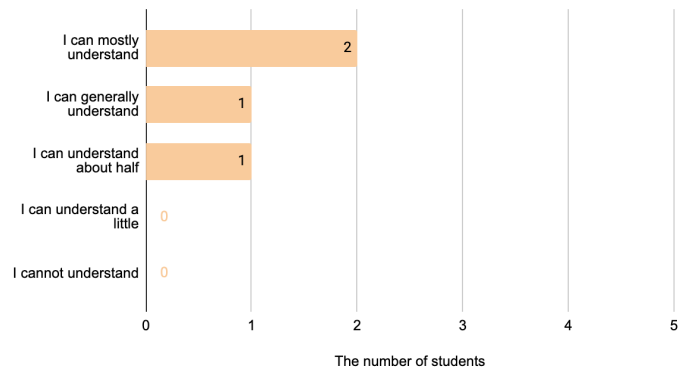


Chart 5: Survey conducted in February

#5 Is English class fun?

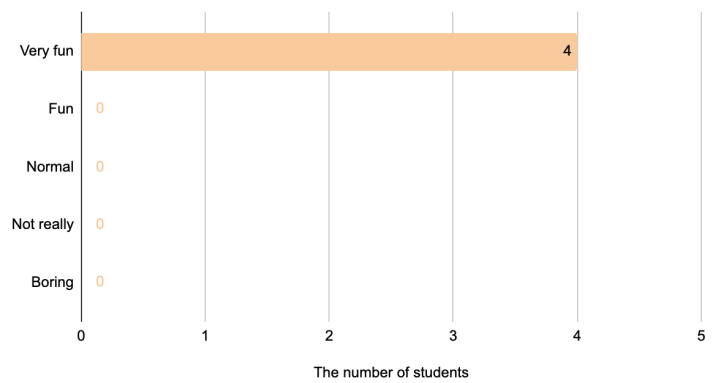


Chart 6: Survey conducted in February

#6 Is singing English songs fun?

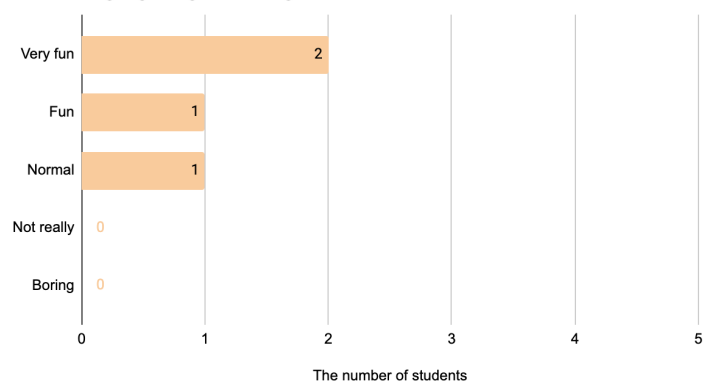
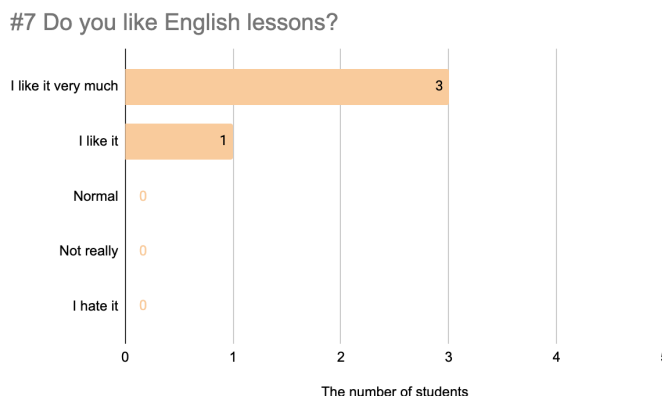


Chart 7: Survey conducted in February



All of the students have said that they enjoy English class and that they liked English lessons. They have also said that they enjoy singing English songs.

Even though I could only collect data from only a couple of students in the November survey, Table 1 still shows that some students felt good about the class. In the March survey, every student felt positive about the class. Four out of five students used the word “fun” in the comment. Three of the students commented that their speaking skills have gotten better after a year of taking the class. Students are getting better at explaining what they can do and at answering what they are asked.

Table 1: Sample Students’ Comments about what they feel about the class. (November)

- ❖ I love singing English songs in class. This class is really fun.
- ❖ I want to work hard on studying English.
- ❖ English is fun! It is so fun!
- ❖ I enjoy talking with my friends at the beginning of every class.

Table 2: Students’ Comments about what they feel about the class. (March)

- ❖ I can speak better than when I started.
- ❖ Everything was so fun.
- ❖ It was so fun. I was able to learn a lot about English and it helped me at school. I always look forward to coming to the class.
- ❖ Playing games is fun.
- ❖ I could speak in pairs. Playing games was fun, too.

Table 3 shows that almost every student has positive feelings about the timed-conversation activity. A lot of students felt that this activity is a bit challenging because they have to ask their partners different questions each week. Two of the students commented that they liked the activity because it helped them get

to know each other better and get along well. Almost all of the students commented that they enjoyed the activity.

Table 3: Students' Comments about how they feel about timed-conversation activity (March).

- ❖ It was a bit difficult because we had to ask different questions every week, but it was fun.
- ❖ It was nice because it felt like we got closer thanks to the activity.
- ❖ I was happy to do the activity because it gave us an opportunity to get to know each other better. It is a fun activity because we ask different questions every week. Also, it was a great activity to learn new vocabularies.
- ❖ I can do it ok.
- ❖ I tried my best to do the activity because the questions changed every week.

There is no data about how they felt about their English skills in April because there was no survey conducted then. However, from the survey taken in November and March, it seems that students have grown confidence in their English skills as the same student said that she could write and read a little bit in November and in March she said that she could write sentences and words. The student who commented that she thought she could talk about herself a little better in the March survey has always mentioned and commented that she could not speak English.

Table 4: Students' Comments about the change (November)

- ❖ I can write and read a little bit better.
- ❖ I can understand the handouts a little bit better now.
- ❖ I am happy that I can sing English songs. I love music, so it is fun singing English songs.

Table 5: Students' Comments about the change from April (March)

- ❖ I think I can talk about myself a little better.
- ❖ I can talk more smoothly now and I can do English better now. I can do rejoinders, too.
- ❖ I can write sentences and words and answer questions in English very well.
- ❖ I can memorize what I learned in class and I can review and practice at home now.

The question about music was also conducted as a survey. In November, every student thought that singing English songs is a useful tool for English learning because of the lyrics, melody and rhythm. In March, students were asked if music was helpful for a speaking test. Five out of five students said that it was helpful.

Table 6: Students' Comments about their thoughts about music for English learning (November).

- ❖ It is useful because we can study English more with music.
- ❖ It is useful because we can sing and there is rhythm to help us remember better.
- ❖ I think it helped because we are speaking in English as music.
- ❖ I think it is useful because we can learn and remember the English words in the lyrics.

Table 7: Students' Comments about the helpfulness of music on the speaking test (March).

- ❖ It was helpful because my pronunciation has gotten better.
- ❖ It was helpful because we can use it for the next time, too.
- ❖ It was helpful because it is easy to remember the words thanks to the rhythm. Also, it is fun!
- ❖ It helped me get the feeling of the phrase.
- ❖ It was helpful because the words on the lyrics were the same as the speaking test.

Transcription 1: **Mary** and **Sera** (incidental FFI in November “What’s this? What’s that?”)

((timer))

1 Sera: How's it going?

2 Mary: Pretty good. How about you?

3 Sera: Great.

4 Sera: I have two question. (2.0)

5 Sera: What's that?

6 Sera: (gesturing a lion)

7 Mary: (5.0)eh(.) It's lion.

8 Sera: Great. (.) What's that?

9 Sera: (Pointing at the picture)

10 Mary: (0.5)e, matakore.etto (.)It's lion.
またこれ

11 Sera: No, it's..

12 Mary: Eh, ah, assokka
あっそっか

13 Sera: No, it's (.) basketball.

14 Mary: etto (1.0)

15 Mary: I have a two question.

16 Mary: What's (.) What's that? Ah (.)this (.) What's this?

17 Mary: (Gesturing a rabbit)

18 Sera: It's rabbit.

19 Mary: Great.

20 Mary: eh (0.5) What's that?

21 Mary: (Pointing at the picture)

22 Sera: It's basketball.

23 Mary: Great.
((timer))

24 Sera: Nich talking with you.

25 Mary: You, too.

Transcription 2: **Mary** and **Ken** (incidental FFI in March “Who is your hero?” for one minute and 15 seconds)

((timer))
1 Ken: Hi, Mary, how it's going?
2 Mary: Hi, Ken. I (.) I'm pretty good. How about you?
3 Ken: I'm pretty good.
4 Ken: Who is your hero?
5 Mary: My hero is Aiko sensei.
6 Ken: (0.5) Oh, Aiko sensei. I see.
7 Ken: She is your hero. Ah she (.)What's she is your hero?
8 Ken: (1.5) eh (.) please tell me two things.
9 Mary: She is good at speaking English.
10 Mary: She is always energetic.
11 Ken: Sounds great.
12 Mary: (.) How about you? How about you? Who is your hero?
13 Ken: My hero is grandfather.
14 Mary: (.)Oh, (.) your grandmother. Sounds great.
15 Mary: What, Why is she, he your hero?
16 Mary: Please tell me two things.
17 Ken: He is playing(.)He is good at playing shogi.
18 Ken: He is always (.) nice to me.
19 Mary: Sounds great.
20 Ken: Nice talking with you.
21 Mary: You, too.
((timer))

Analysis (1)

Mary was able to continue a one minute conversation in pairs with several pauses and a few Japanese in November. The speed of her speech was quite slow and she only used four CSs which were opener, closer, how about you? and a rejoinder, which was “great.” On the other hand, she was able to continue talking for one minute and fifteen seconds with a minimum pause of no more than one second, and the speed of her speech was significantly faster. She did not use any Japanese, even filler words such as “etto” which she used quite often in the speaking test in November. Also, she was able to use five CSs which were opener, closer, how about you?, rejoinders and shadowing. Although she misheard the word “grandfather,” she still managed to use “he” on the following question which was “Why is he your hero?”

Transcription 3: **Kate** and Lee (incidental FFI in November “What’s this? What’s that?”)

((timer))
1 Lee: How’s it going?
2 Kate: Pretty good. How about you?
3 Lee: Great.
4 Lee: What (.) What (6.0)
5 Lee: Nandattakke (.) I have (.) I have a two question.
なんだったっけ
6 Lee: What’s this?
7 Lee: (Jumping as a gesture)
8 Kate: It’s a rabbit.
9 Lee: Oh, no. It’s (.)kangaroo.
10 Lee: What that? (Pointing at the picture)
11 Kate: etto, it’s a apple.
12 Lee: Great.
13 Kate: etto, (2.0) I have two question.
14 Kate: What’s this? (Throwing balls as gesture)
15 Lee: (2.0) It’s dodgeball?
16 Kate: Great. What’s that? (Pointing at the picture)
17 Lee: It’s rabbit.
18 Kate: Great.
((timer))
19 Lee: Nice talking with you.
20 Kate: You, too.

Transcription 4: **Kate** and Lily (incidental FFI in March “Who is your hero”)

((timer))
1 Lily: Hi, Kate. How’s it going?
2 Kate: Hi, (.) Lily. I’m (.) pretty good. How about you?
3 Lily: I’m pretty good.
4 Lily: Anyway, who is your hero?
5 Kate: (.)My hero is my Joe.
6 Lily: Oh, your Joe. I see.
7 Lily: Who is he she your hero? Please tell me two things.
8 Kate: He is good at playing the sports.
9 Kate: He is usually funny.
10 Lily: Sounds great.
11 Kate: How about you? (.) Who is your hero?
12 Lily: My hero is Aiko sensei.
13 Kate: Oh, your Aiko sensei. I see.
14 Kate: (1.0) Why, why(.) is she your hero?
15 Kate: Please tell me two things.
16 Lily: She is good at speaking English.
17 Lily: She is always nice to me.
18 Kate: Sounds great.
19 Lily: Nice talking with you.
20 Kate: You, too.
((timer))

Analysis (2)

Kate was able to continue a one minute conversation in pairs with several pauses and a few Japanese filler words in November with a couple of grammar mistakes. On the other hand, even though she had to rephrase herself and recollect her dialog a couple of times in March, she did not use any Japanese during the test and almost all of her pauses were under one second. There are fewer grammatical mistakes in March compared to November. Since both of them were so fluent and smooth, the conversation did not last for one minute and fifteen seconds which was originally set. Kate was able to use more CSs in March with additional shadowing and rejoinders naturally.

7. What I learned

(1) Timed-Conversation with CSs (Small talk activity)

Comparing how well students did in October and March, they are talking more smoothly and their fluency has gotten better. I am fortunate to see the differences between a student who just started doing the activity and those students who have been doing this activity for more than eight months because there is a student who just joined the class on February 24th. The difference is significant; the student who just joined the class a month ago has more difficulties remembering the questions compared to the other students. Also, it might be because other students had done the activity with only two questions for about eight months instead of three questions which we started in February. Comparing the recording of the activity in October and March, the use of CSs is much more smooth and there are more varieties of rejoinders used in March. I have realized that doing small talk activities every week is definitely helping students build their communicative competence.

(2) Focus on Form

When making the worksheet, I have learned that it encourages students to use more English during output when the objectives for the task are clear, such as BINGO and filling the information gap. Students enjoyed speaking with the model dialog and using CSs on their own occasionally while doing the output activity. Also, it is amazing how students realize the meaning of the content in step 3 (noticing) without the explicit explanation. It showed that students truly understood the contents when we were doing the small talk activity using the grammar content that we have previously learned and every one knew exactly what they were asking, for example, “Are you good at playing the piano?” after learning about “are you good at ~?” the week before. Students still understood and remembered the contents even though

I briefly explained it to them in Japanese. It is obvious that comprehensible input and output are more important than explicit explanation. I wish to continue teaching grammar with FFI.

(3) Speaking Test (Incidental FFI)

Students had three incidental FFI this year based on what they have learned through planned FFI. For the first two speaking tests, I had only planned one class of preparing and practicing for the speaking test and one class of assessments. Students felt overwhelmed by how little practice they felt they were able to do even after they practiced at home. For the third speaking test, I had planned to have two class times of preparing and practicing before the test and have them practice at home as homework. After having plenty of practice time, almost every student felt confident doing the speaking test. It was more natural and smooth compared to the other two speaking tests. I have learned that since we only meet once a week for 50 minutes and considering the age of the students being so young, one class of preparing and practicing before the test might not be enough, especially for the younger students.

(4) Collecting data as survey and reflection

I have learned that to do well-organized AR research, it is crucial to collect data throughout the year. It would be easy to see the results if there is some data that we could compare, such as conducting and asking the same questions at the beginning, the middle and at the end of the school year. Also, it would be useful for research and for students to have students fill out reflection sheets to reflect on how well the students did on their tests.

8. Future issues

I am able to teach the same class with minimum changes to the students next year. Having timed-conversation activity at the beginning of every class seems to be working on building students' communicative competence, so I would like to continue doing the activity by gradually expanding the length and the number of questions.

Most of the parents, especially the parents of younger students, have commented that they would like their children to try taking the Eiken Grade 5 test next year. However, I was not able to do much with Eiken materials or focus on building the students' vocabulary knowledge in class this year except giving out a vocabulary worksheet as homework every week. Therefore, I would like to implement some activities to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge and reading skill as a warm-up or with a Focus-on-Form approach because reading skill and vocabulary knowledge is crucial to passing the Eiken exam.

Also, since two of the students in the class are above fifth grade in elementary school next year, I would like to encourage more writing of a full sentence. This year, since most of the students were young, I did not make the writing portion of Fun Essay an assignment when doing incidental FFI, but only encouraged them to write. Therefore, next year, I would like to make the writing portion as an assignment.

As for research, I would like to conduct surveys asking students about what they think of their English skills and also reflection after every incidental FFI to give students opportunities to reflect on themselves as well as for research purposes.

References

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