

Action Research Year-End Final Report in 2023-2024

Tomoko Kaji

1. Title

The effects of Focus-on-Form Instruction on third-year junior high school students and developing their speaking and writing abilities

2. Context

Level: Third year students in junior high school

Class size: 36 (17 boys, 19 girls)

Time: 50 minutes, 4/week

Textbook: Here We Go, Mitsumura

Problems: Some of my students had difficulties with communicating with others in English. Even though they are able to understand grammar and get good marks on their tests, when they talk with peers in English, they don't know what to say or how to make sentences. Third-year students do not seem to care about speaking English because they focus on midterms or entrance exams for high school.

3. AR goals and objectives

My goal is to develop students' speaking competence in pairs or groups and to develop their writing competence through communicative grammar teaching based on focus-on-form instruction. By improving their competence, they are able to increase their motivation to learn English.

1. By March, 100% of students can continue a conversation in English for three minutes.
2. By March, 60% of students can write in English more than 100 words (about 10 sentences).
3. By March, 60% of students will answer positively to the surveys about learning English.

4. Literature review

English education in Japan has changed dramatically since the revised curriculum guidelines announced in 2017. More specifically, "to develop students' competencies that form the communication such as understanding, expressing and communicating simple information and thoughts..." (p. 1, Junior high school curriculum guidelines on foreign language chapter 2 section 9,

2017). The curriculum guidelines of foreign languages have focused on developing students' communicative competence.

(1) Communicative competence

Communication is the process of sending and receiving messages, emotions, intentions and information through verbal or nonverbal means. Savignon (1997) defined communication as “the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning; and communicative competence is always context specific, requiring the simultaneous, integrated use of grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence”. Savignon (1997) shows in the diagram a possible relationship between grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence as overall communicative competence increases.

Figure 1. *The Components of Communicative Competence (Savignon, 1997)*

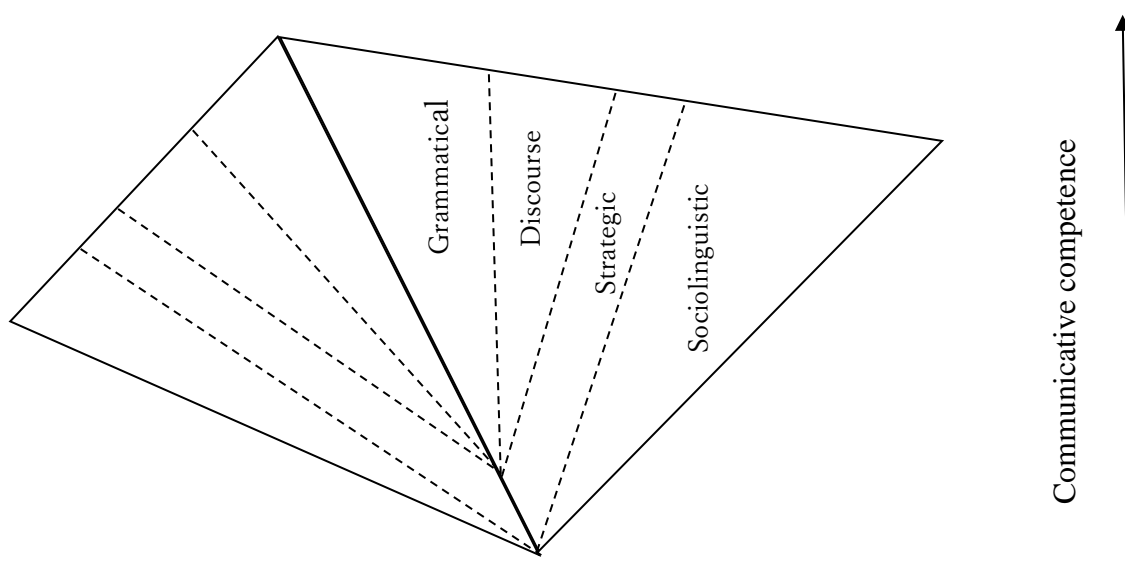


Figure 1 shows that strategic competence is always present whether you are a beginner or an advanced learner of proficiency. Strategic competence, an aspect of communicative competence, refers to the ability to overcome difficulties when communication breakdowns occur (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1995). Moreover, strategic competence is the most important competence for beginners.

(2) Communication Strategies (CSs)

Ellis (1994) mentioned that communication strategies (CSs) are what learners use “to overcome the inadequacies of their interlanguage resources. Moreover, communication strategies (CSs) as defined by Corder (1981), are “a systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his (or her) meaning when faced with some difficulty”.

(3) Communication language teaching (CLT)

A second language teaching approach that has attracted attention in recent years is communicative language teaching (CLT), which was created in the 1980s. CLT aims at developing learners’ communicative competence through communication. (Savignon, 2002). Brown (2007) claimed that classroom goals are focused on all of the components of CC and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence. CLT will lead to developing students’ communicative competence. In proceeding with lessons, students must be given opportunities to communicate with peers.

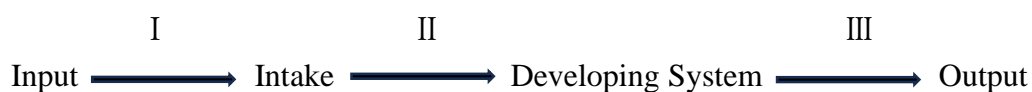
(4) Focus on Form Instruction (FFI)

Focus on form instruction was posited in the late 1980s. Lee & VanPatten (2003) affirm that learners 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 nonmeaningful or not part of some communicative intent. Lee & VanPatten (2003) defined that how learners attend to and process grammatical form in the input they hear. VanPatten (1996) has termed processing instruction that consists of three basic components:

- Learners are given information about a linguistic structure or form.
- Learners are informed about a particular processing strategy that may negatively affect their picking up of the form or structure during comprehension.
- Learners are pushed to process the form or structure during activities with structured input-input that is manipulated in particular ways to push learners to become dependent on form or structure to get meaning and / or to privilege the form or structure in the input so that learners have a better chance of attending to it (i.e., learners are pulled away from their natural processing tendencies toward more optimal tendencies).

By being pushed to process form and meaning simultaneously, they not only could process better but also could access their newfound knowledge to produce a structure they never produced during the treatment phase. (Lee & VanPatten, 2003, p. 148). In order to acquire the second language, the process involved in producing language. These processes include access (retrieval of correct forms), monitoring (editing one’s speech when one realizes” something is wrong”), and production strategies (stringing forms and words together to make sentences). (Lee & VanPatten, 2003, p. 168).

Figure 2. *Outline of processes in second language acquisition (Lee & VanPatten, 2003)*



Sato, Fukumoto, Ishibashi & Morita (2012) report the results of action research projects by three junior high school teachers who implemented FFI in their classrooms. Their studies show that FFI is more effective than traditional English grammar teaching.

(5) Information-exchange task

The important thing when constructing lessons is setting a goal. As a lesson goal, information exchange task is effective. Moreover, setting a lesson goal leads to creating lesson plans specifically and setting subgoals become clearer. Lee & VanPatten (2003) defined that a lesson goal that is represented by an interactive information-exchange task allows an instructor to map out the lesson, specifying subgoals along the way.

5. What I did

(1) Focus on Form Instruction (FFI)

Beginning in the second semester, I started using focus on form instruction in the classroom. New grammar is introduced each unit. First, I prepared handouts for new grammar based on FFI and had my students do it. The main point that I was focusing on was providing more input and a theme that was familiar to students. Although this was my first challenge, they responded more positively than I expected. In Unit 4 and 5, I provided activities to help my students use relative pronoun “which” and “who”. I gave them a FFI lesson as structured input and output. In Unit 6, I offered activities to help them understand how to use present and past participle “-ing”, “-ed”. In Unit 7, the targeted grammar was subjunctive past “If I were~, I would~”. (see Appendix 1-B). The new

curriculum guidelines of foreign languages for junior high school in 2021 announced that subjunctive past perfect was added to the textbook. It used to be taught in senior high school. I offered activities based on FFI. I was planning the speaking test in February, so I prepared a handout and had my students practice talking with peers many times for the speaking test with a conversation card. (see Appendix 1-B).

When I created the handouts, I tried to use illustrations to make them imagine, rather than using text on the handouts as much as possible. Second, in order to establish students' grammar acquisition that they have learned based on FFI, I had them practice it many times in ways such as reading content from their textbook and practicing orally, and also proctoring a mid-term test that focused on the content rather than accuracy. After the mid-term test, I continued teaching new grammar based on FFI. My students gradually got used to it, and when they learned new grammar, they did not have much resistance and worked diligently on handouts. The handouts included a conversation part and a writing part. In the conversation part, students had to talk with peers using new grammar, but they always enjoyed the conversation. At first glance, the context seemed difficult for them, but the structure of the sentence was clearly explained in Japanese and example sentences were included. Therefore, it was easy for students who were not very good at writing to get started.

(2) Speaking test (information-exchange task)

For my students, speaking tests had been conducted between an ALT and a student so far. The speaking tests were conducted three times over six months period from September to March. For the first speaking test in October, my students talked about their own treasures. For the second speaking test in December, they talked about their favorite places. They had a conversation with peers for three minutes (two minutes and a half in December) while showing their treasures or pictures of their favorite places. They also did not know who will be their partners until the day of it. This was a first challenge for my students. I told them to include new grammar that they had learned when showing and explaining things they wanted to talk about. When they prepared for the speaking tests, they began to focus on memorizing all rather than communicating with peers. Therefore, they were able to explain about what they wanted to introduce but they were unable to ask follow-up questions and did not pay attention to rejoinders. As a result, some pairs were unable to continue the conversation until the end. For the third speaking test in February, I prepared a handout with some questions and asked my students to write their answers about them. After that, they exchanged information orally so many times.

(3) Rubric

In the speaking test conducted in October, I gave ranking on a three-grade evaluation (ABC) for three categories. (see Appendix 1-C). However, the next speaking test conducted in December, I changed to a point system instead of a three-grade evaluation (ABC), and the contents of the categories were also detailed. Because they are able to understand what their good points and bad points obviously when they get a result back. In the final speaking test conducted in February, the format of the rubric was the same, but the content of the communication strategies was a little more detailed. This was because I wanted them to focus on what they had to pay attention to communicate with peers.

(4) Fun essay

I made a more enjoyable (fun) essay format to develop my students' writing skills after the third speaking test. Many students feel that they are not good at writing. The first fun essay that they wrote was connected to the content they talked about in the third speaking test.

Table 1. *Number of sentences in fun essays*

Number of sentences	March
More than 10 sentences	19
9-8 sentences	3
7-5 sentences	7
Less than 3	3

Table 1 shows how many sentences they wrote in English for the first essay conducted in February. One of my research goals was making sure 60% of students can write English more than 100 words (about 10 sentences). There were nineteen students who could write in English more than 10 sentences. There were still seven students who could write only 7-5 sentences in English. I understand that there are many students who struggle with writing in English. I would like to help them write in English and I am going to conduct fun essays at least three times a year next year.

6. Results (Date from students' survey)

The first survey was conducted in November after the first speaking test. There were thirty-two out of thirty-six students who took the survey. The second survey was conducted in March after the third speaking test. The same number of students took the survey. First, I was asking about the four

skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing. Second, I asked about their level of understanding of English class and their motivation toward learning English.

Figure 3. *Students' perception of being able to listen to the content*

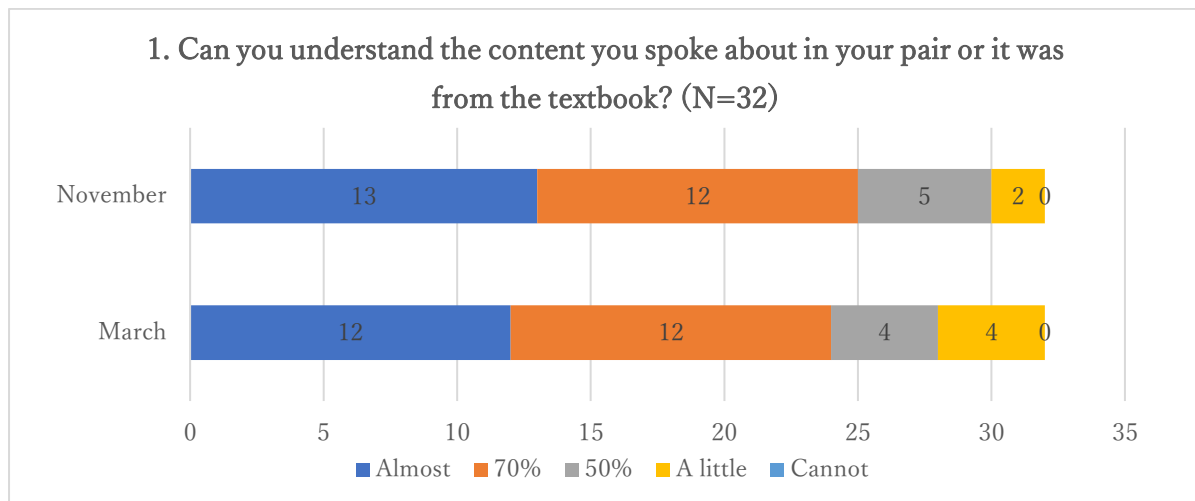
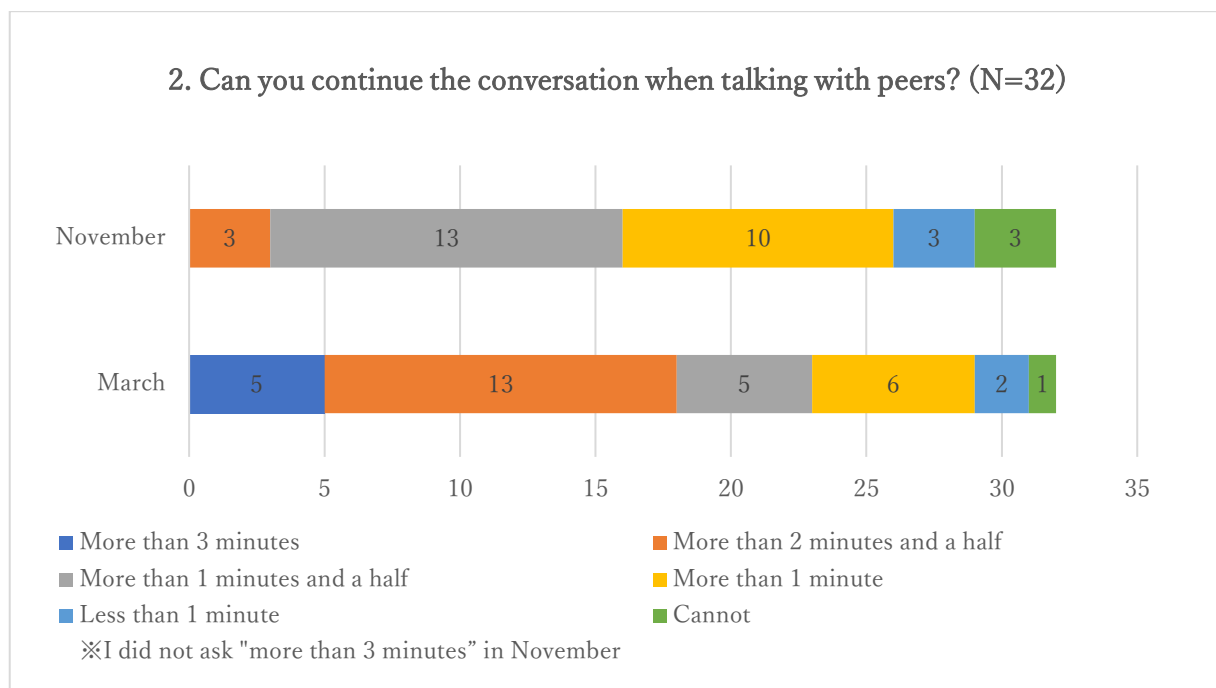


Figure 4. *Students' perception of how long they can continue the conversation*



Regarding their speaking skills, figure 4 shows that there were only three students who could continue a conversation in two and a half minutes in November. In comparison, the number of students increased from three to eighteen students in March. Moreover, figure 4 shows that five out of eighteen students answered they could continue a conversation for three minutes. I did not make a

category for three minutes in November as per figure 4. Although I did not achieve one of my goals, that being all of my students could continue a conversation for three minutes, I was satisfied with the results.

Figure 5. *Students' perception of being able to read the content*

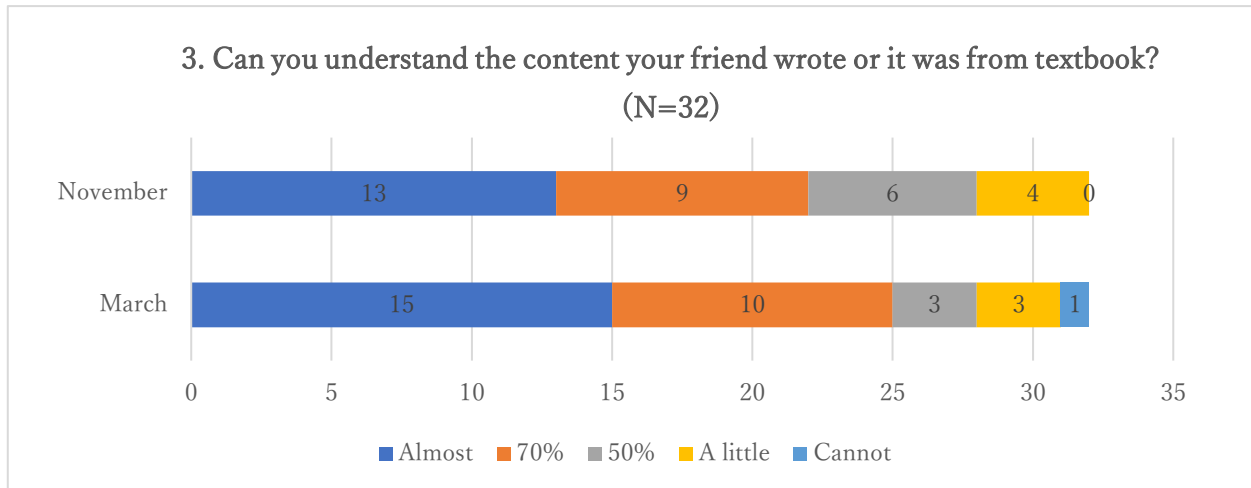
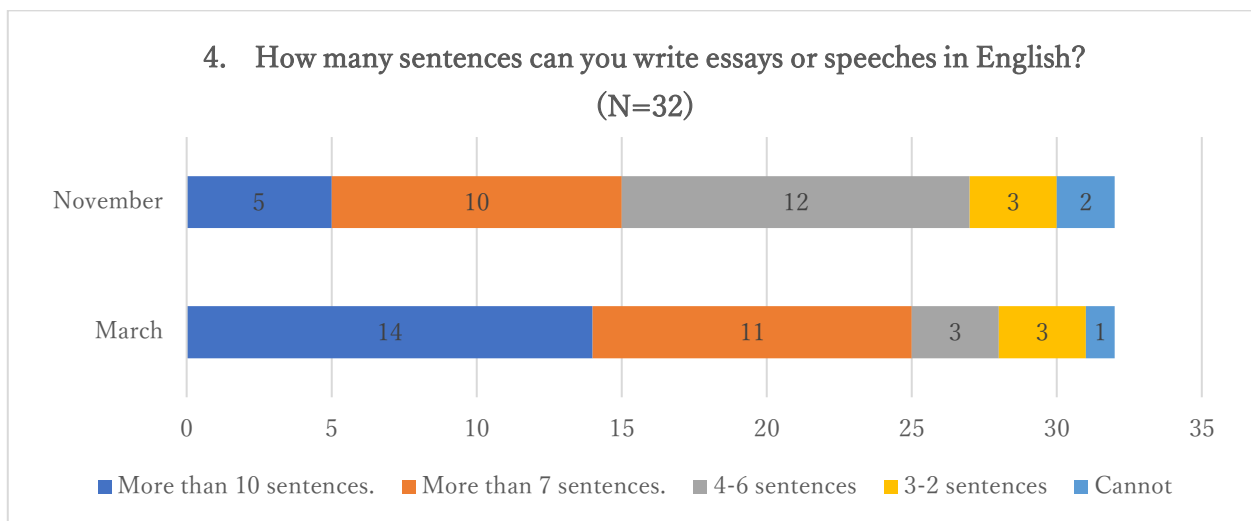


Figure 6. *Students' perception of being able to write essays or speeches*



Regarding their writing skills, figure 6 shows that there were only five students who could write essays or speeches in English with more than 10 sentences in November. In comparison, the number of students increased from five to fourteen students in March. My research goal that 60% of students can write in English using more than 100 words (about 10 sentences) was not achieved, but about half of the students answered that they could.

Figure 7. *Students' perception of how much they can understand English class*

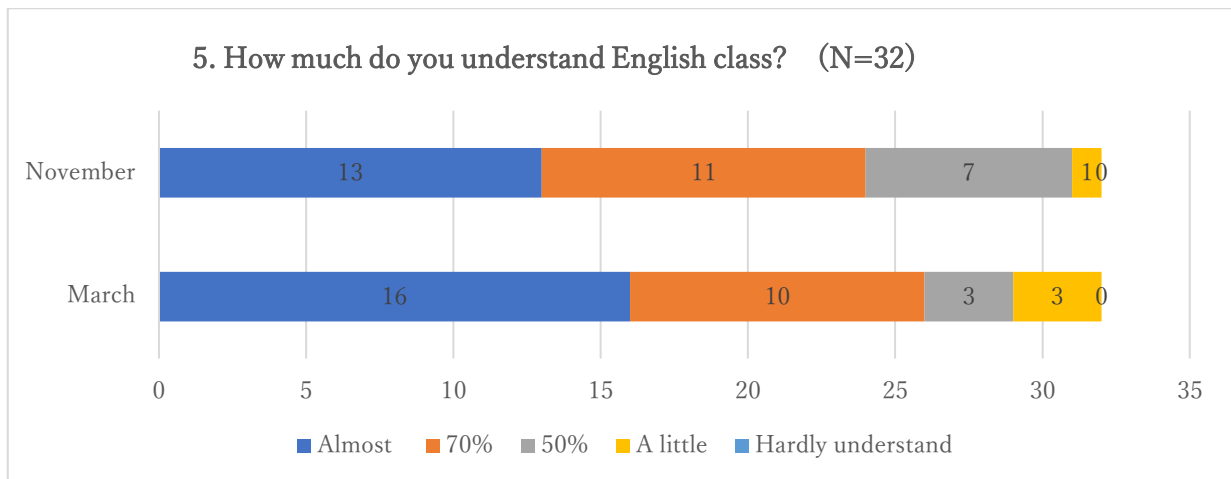


Figure 8. *Students' perception of how much they can enjoy English class*

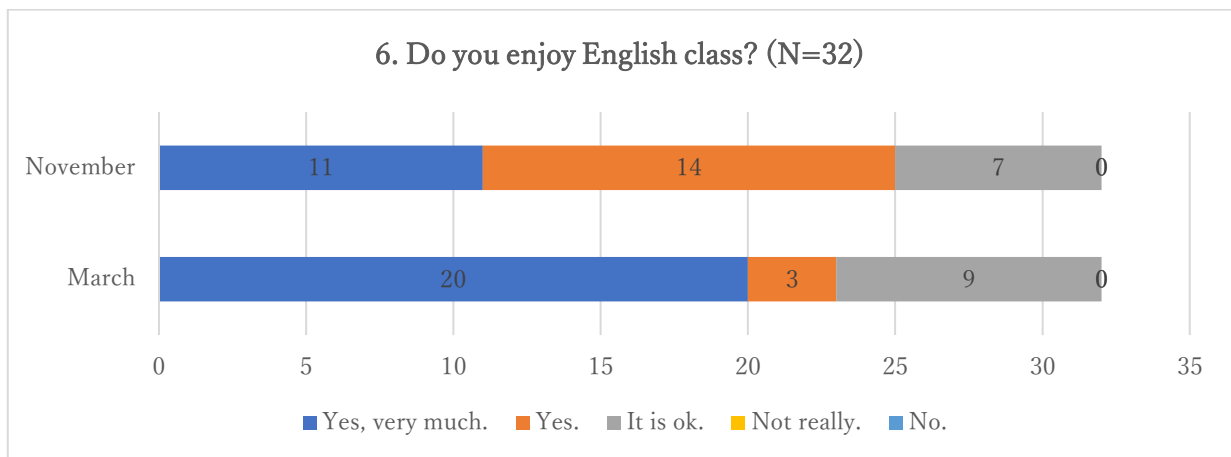
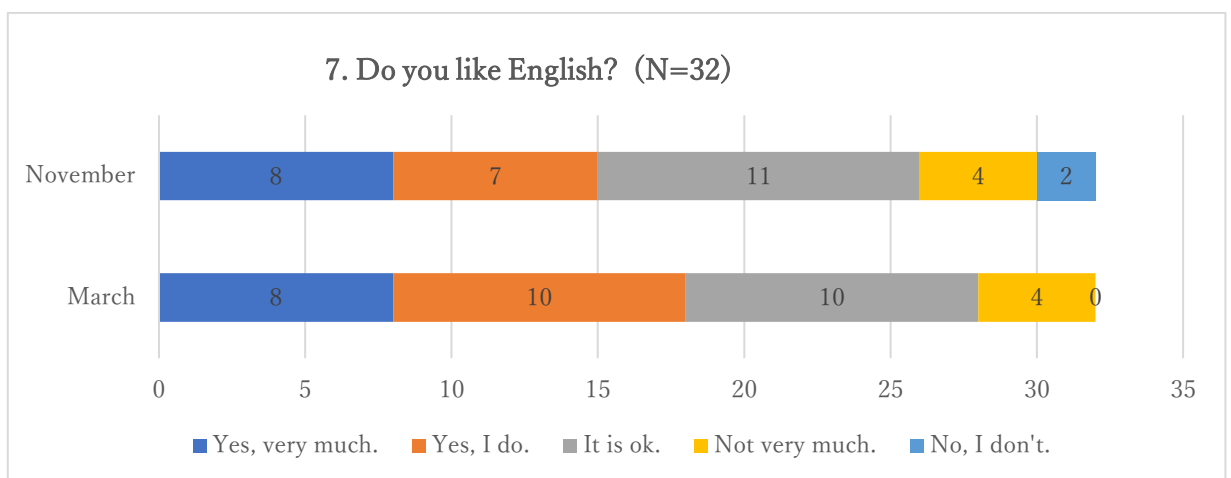


Figure 9. *Students' perception of how much they like English*



Regarding their level of understanding of English class, figure 7 shows that thirteen students answered they mostly understand English class in November. On the other hand, sixteen students answered the same in March. There were no students who hardly understand English class both months.

Regarding their motivation toward learning English, about 80% of students answered they were enjoying English class in November. In contrast, the overall figure decreased to 70%, but the number of students who were enjoying English class very much had almost doubled. Figure 9 shows that there was an increase in their interest in English. About half of the students answered “It is ok.”, “Not very much.” or “No, I don’t.” in November. More than half of the students answered they liked English, and there were no students who didn’t like English.

From the results of the above, it is apparent from the survey that speaking and writing skills have improved. Their level of understanding of English class had also improved. In other words, as their level of understanding increases, their interest in English learning will increase as well. I would like my students to continue to be interested in learning English when they become high school students.

Table 2. *Majority of students’ comments in November*

Category	Students’ comments
Fun	I like English. Because it is fun. (4)
Growth	Reading comprehension has improved. (3) I feel that I could develop my English language skills. (2)
Motivation	I want to speak English fluently. (2) It was fun. I want to learn English more (listening, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing) more. (9)
Difficulty	I am not good at writing in English, I want to write more in English. (6) Grammar and vocabulary have become difficult. (3)

Table 2 shows that their comments were listed by four categories from the survey in November. As I noticed from students’ comments, there are many about listening, reading, vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing. Moreover, six students had stated that they were not good at writing in English. Regarding students’ comments about speaking, only two students, who like English very much, made notes on speaking. The reason why most students did not comment on speaking was

because they probably thought it wouldn't matter as much for high school entrance exams. I would like them to make comments about speaking, regardless of the reason.

7. Interview

The interview was conducted in Japanese in March. First, three students were selected from the classroom. From the results of the survey, the first person likes English very much and understands the need for English well. The student has a high level of proficiency and is actively engaged in English class. The second student has a high level of proficiency as well, but the student answered "English is ok.". The third student has an average level of English proficiency and they do not like English very much. The interview was recorded and the data was analyzed according to three questions.

Table 3. *Participants in the interview, including the results of the survey in November*

Name	proficiency	Answer of Q7
Kazu	high	Yes, very much.
Yuma	high	It's ok.
Kana	intermediate	Not very much.

All names are pseudonyms.

Reflection on English class. In the first question, I asked whether they enjoyed English class throughout the year. When I asked, "Do you enjoy English classes this year?" the students replied:

Yes, I do. I was able to learn various types of English, especially listening. (Kazu)

Yes, I do. I really enjoyed speaking tests. Because I recognized that it was fun to talk with my friends in English. (Yuma)

When I was in the first and second grade, I only spoke with the ALT by reading my script I created. I had never had the experience of improvising without a script, and it was a lot of fun. (Kana)

All three students answered that they enjoyed English class and two out of three students started to talk about speaking tests. To talk with peers in English in speaking tests inspired them and it would have been fun for them.

Reflection on speaking tests. In the second question, I asked about speaking tests more specifically. For example, what you think about speaking tests which you talk with peers and why you think so.

I gradually began to understand vocabulary and what the other person was trying to say, so I was able to respond better. I prefer doing speaking tests with peers than doing with ALT. Because it is easy to express my feelings. (Kazu)

I had only participated in speaking tests with ALT so far, but I think it is good that speaking tests are conducted with my classmates. The reason is that I can only communicate with my ALT on the test days, but my classmates and I can communicate regularly. So, it is easy to communicate when I talk with them in English. (Yuma)

I used to look at the script and repeat the same phrases over and over again, but I can use more sorts of words now. (Kana)

All three students said that they would prefer taking a speaking test that involved talking with peers. To communicate and express their feelings with classmates who spend most of time together lead to talk more naturally and make a situation where it is easy to talk. Therefore, this type of speaking test can be said to be effective in improving their communication competence.

About learning grammar including FFI. Each unit has a new grammar point that was introduced. I created a handout based on FFI and gave it to them each time. In the third question, I asked them what changes brought them by using the handouts that were created based on FFI.

It would be been nice that there was a clear explanation on the handouts. Good. (Kazu)

It was easier for me to understand that it started with listening and then explained in text on the handouts. (Yuma)

I did not really understand the structure of sentences before, but it was getting easy to understand it. Because the structure of sentences and rules were written on the handouts. To write sentences following the explanation was easy for me. (Kana)

All three students gave positive opinions. What they have in common is that the explanation is detailed on the handouts and easy to understand.

8. What I learned

After conducting my research the first time, I had tried new methods over the past six months. First, I taught grammar based on FFI. Then, I created original handouts outside of the textbook. As my students answered in the interview, I found that giving well-instructed input improved their understanding of grammar. For example, the handouts included a concise explanation in Japanese and providing example sentences were effective. In step 4 on the handouts, they were assigned to do an output activity in groups or pairs that led them to better performance on the speaking test that was conducted later. In other words, doing the communicative activities based on FFI made them communicate with peers better. Also, the speaking test was related to the content covered in each unit they had learned. The format of the speaking tests among students made them feel comfortable during the tests and led to the improvement of their speaking abilities as per the survey. In addition, using conversation cards taught them not to rely on memorization. Beforehand, they relied on memorization, but as they became more confident with the speaking tests, they learned to converse impromptu. Thus, more than double the number of students compared to November answered that they could speak for more than two and a half minutes. I realized that setting subgoals for a lesson goal and mapping out lessons would help improve their speaking abilities through my research.

9. Future issues

This kind of research had been a completely new experience for me since I became an English teacher. I had to do a lot of trial and error, but after six months, I was able to figure out what I should do more clearly. My six months of action research was meaningful. As you can see from the results, my students' speaking ability has improved significantly. This proved that incorporating FFI and CSs seemed more effective for increasing student motivation. However, six months' research is not enough to reach this conclusion with absolute certainty. I need to study more how to improve students' speaking abilities while reflecting on this research.

Regarding students and improving writing abilities, in retrospect, I did not have enough time to have them write a fun essay. I would like to spend more time on writing essays, peer editing and sharing common errors in class next time, so that they can learn and grow.

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Appendix 1-A

My lesson plan (subjunctive past)

Time	Interaction	Activity and Procedure
	T-Ss, S-S, S	
(5) 5	T-Ss S-S	(1) Greeting (2) Pair talk (Use the textbook)
(10) 5 2 3	T-Ss S-S T-Ss	(3) (Step1) *Focus on form instruction (Step1~5) Listen to teachers' talk about our ideals Have students write the information they hear on the handout Check the answers in pairs Check in whole class
(5) 2 1 2	T-Ss S-S T-Ss	(Step2) Circle the answer students hear Check the answers in pairs Check in whole class
(5) 5	T-Ss	(Step3) Explain about subjunctive past in detail in Japanese
(15) 5 10	T-Ss S-S	(Step4) Write about students' ideals and talk in pairs Explain how to do it and show a model conversation Talk about their ideals with pictures on the handout in pairs
(10) 10	S	(Step5) Write about their ideals and other students' ideals Collect the worksheets Give homework and say goodbye

Total Time: 50 minutes

S-S: 18 minutes

S: 10 minutes

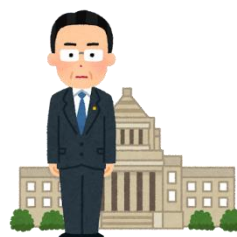
T-Ss: 22 minutes

あなたの理想は？

Class No. Name

Step1 Please listen and write in the box.

もし〇〇だったら	すること
1.	
2.	
3.	



Step2 Listening and choose the correct one.

1. If I (was / were) a hero, I (will / would) save the earth.
2. If I (have / had) one million yen, I (can / could) buy a car.
3. If I (will / were) the prime minister, I (will / would) reduce taxes.

Step3 Grammar points

1. If I were a hero, I would save the earth.

意味 ()

今回の文法は ()

If + 主語 + () ~, 主語 + 助動詞の () + 動詞の ()

⇒ () という意味になる。

※仮定法過去では if 節の動詞が主語に人称に関係なく **were** になる。

Step 4 Let's tell your friends about your ideal.

Practice:

1. If you were Doraemon, what would you do?

If I were Doraemon, _____

【Model dialog】

A: Hello, how are you?

B: Hi. I'm ____ . How about you?

A: I'm _____.

B: (reactions). (Please look at the picture.)

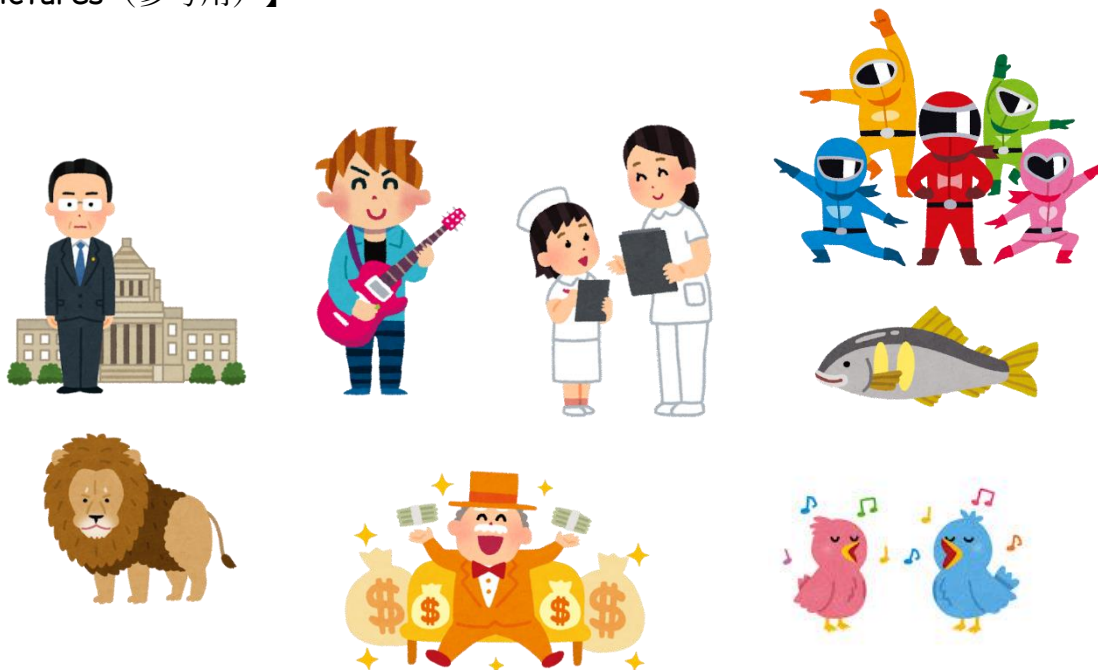
*A: If you were ○○, what would you do?

B: If I were○○, I would ○○.

A: (reactions). Thank you.

B: No problem. *Change roles

【Pictures (参考用)】



Step 5 Write 3 sentences about what you talked with your friends.

(自分のこと 2文)

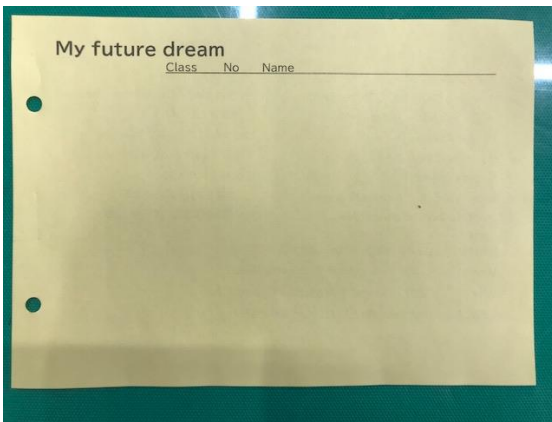
If I _____

(友達のこと 1文)

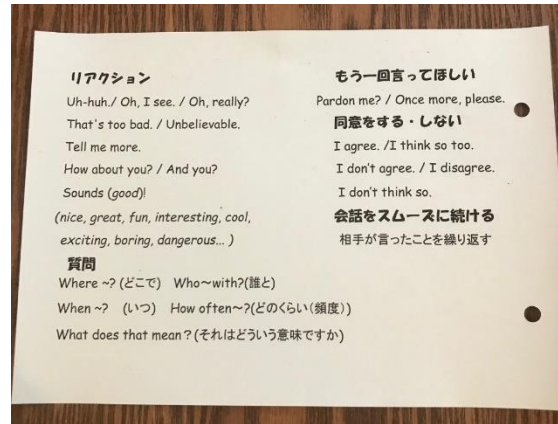
If _____

Conversation card

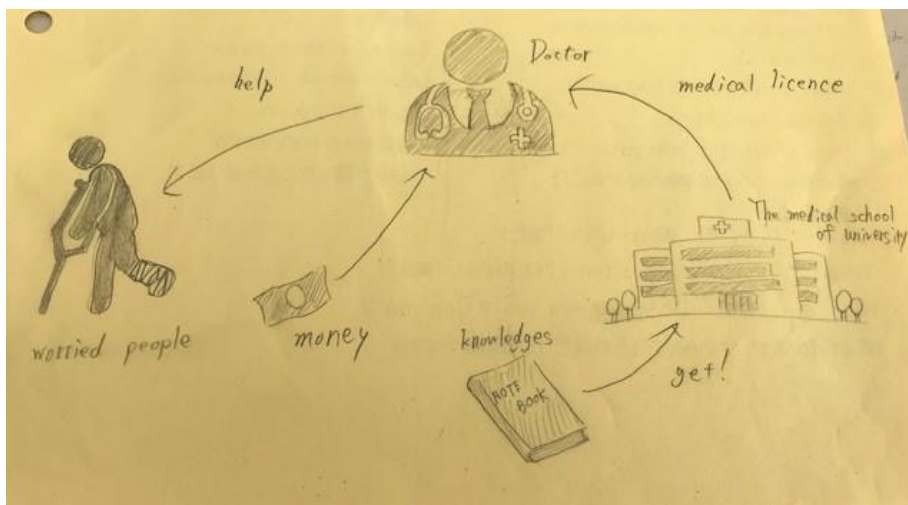
Front



Back



Created by students



Evaluation sheet for speaking test in October

	A	B	C
Accuracy	Basically, no mistakes in vocabulary selection, grammar, or pronunciation.	Some mistakes, but we could understand the message.	Didn't reach the standards for B. Many mistakes, and we could not understand the message.
Fluency	Continue a conversation for 3 minutes perfectly, and use a lot of Follow-up questions.	Continue a conversation for 3 minutes, but you could not use Follow-up questions much.	Didn't reach the standards for B. Few Follow-up questions.
Attitude	Speak loudly and clearly. Eye contact. Talk actively.	Speaking loudly and eye contact are OK, but you could not talk actively.	Didn't reach the standards for B.

Evaluation sheet for speaking in February

Categories	Criteria	Points
Accuracy (Grammar & Pronunciation)	There were no mistakes in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.	7
	There were a few mistakes in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.	5
	There were some mistakes in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.	3
	There were many mistakes in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.	1
Content & Fluency	Continuing the conversation smoothly for 3 minutes. The content was very sufficient.	7
	Continuing the conversation for 3 minutes. The content was sufficient.	5
	Continuing the conversation for 3 minutes. The content was not enough.	3
	Not continuing the conversation for 3 minutes. The content was not enough.	1
Voice & eye contact	Clear voice and eye contact are excellent.	3
	Clear voice and eye contact are good.	2
	Not clear voice and eye contact are not enough.	1
Communication strategy	Be able to use opener, closer, reactions and shadowing.	3
	Be able to use opener and closer, but not be able to use reactions and shadowing.	2
	Not be able to use opener, closer, reactions and shadowing.	1

Total

Survey in March (By google form)

1. 聞く力について

(ペアで話した内容や教科書リスニング)

1. ほぼわかる
2. 7割ぐらいわかる
3. 半分ぐらいわかる
4. 少しわかる
5. ほとんどわからない

2. 話す力について

(ペアやグループで話す)

1. 3分間以上話が続く
2. 2分30秒間以上話が続く
3. 1分30秒間以上話が続く
4. 1分間以上話が続く
5. 1分間未満である
6. ほとんど話せない

3. 読む力

(友達を書いた内容や教科書の本文)

1. ほぼわかる
2. 7割ぐらいわかる
3. 半分ぐらいわかる
4. 少しわかる
5. ほとんどわからない

4. 書く力

(まとまりがある作文やスピーチなど)

1. 10文以上

2. 7文以上
3. 4-6文
4. 3-2文
5. ほとんど書けない

5. 英語の授業はわかりますか？

1. ほぼわかる
2. 7割ぐらいわかる
3. 半分ぐらいわかる
4. 少しわかる
5. ほとんどわからない

6. 英語の授業は楽しいですか？

1. とても楽しい
2. 楽しい
3. 普通
4. あまり楽しくない
5. つまらない

7. 英語は好きですか？

1. とても好き
2. 好き
3. 普通
4. あまり好きではない
5. 嫌い

コメント