Education Report

Students' Perceptions of Fun, Motivating, and English-Proficiency-Enhancing Activities and Intercorrelations

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This education report has three aims: 1) to identify which activities from the author's Fundamental English I classes in 2022 spring term at the University of Toyama were regarded as fun, motivating, or serving to improve English proficiency by the students, 2) to note whether those activities were cooperative learning activities, and 3) to see if there are intercorrelations among those activities. Discussions are based on the results of surveys conducted at the middle and the end of the term in three classes.

1. Introduction

There has been extensive research on motivation. Learner motivation is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and one reason for the focus of this report is found in Dörnyei (2001): "creat[ing] a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom" (p.42). Although this is listed as "Strategy 5", the actual practices of my teaching incorporated more of Strategy 6, "Promote the development of group cohesiveness", which includes: "Try and promote interaction, cooperation and the sharing of genuine personal information among the learners"; "Use ice-breakers at the beginning of a course"; "Regularly use small-group tasks where students can mix"; and "Try and prevent the emergence of rigid seating patterns" (Dörnyei, 2001, p.45). Similarly, Altamimi and Attamimi (2014) found that cooperative learning (CL) affects students' attitudes toward English learning positively. They note that in CL, the class is student centered and student oriented, and teachers "should maintain a safe, non-threatening and learner centered environment" (Altamimi and Attamimi, 2014, p.30).

In seeking to provide this type of environment, I start each class by having students sing an English song, distributing playing cards to mix up their seating patterns, and trying to include at least one pair work or groupwork activity in the hope of providing CL. The purposes of this educational report are to 1) identify which activities in the classes I taught during the 2022 spring term were regarded as fun, motivating, or serving to improve English proficiency by the students, 2) note whether those activities were CL activities, and 3) see if there are intercorrelations among those activities.

2. Course and Class Overview

- 62 -

2.1. Overview of the Fundamental English I Course and the Course Objectives

The surveys were conducted at the middle and the end of the Fundamental English I course in the 2022 spring term. This is a one-credit English course under the new curriculum launched in April 2022. Course objectives and goals were pre-decided by the working group for the Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences English curriculum development of the university, and each teacher was to incorporate them into their syllabi. The course objectives were: "To improve TOEIC scores in order to develop fundamental English skills needed for more specialized courses and potential careers [and]; To build independent self-study habits via an e-learning system" (University of Toyama, 2022). Teachers were to spend at least 60 minutes of each 90-minute class explicitly on learning that would serve to improve the students' TOEIC scores. One new thing about this curriculum was that ALC NetAcademy NEXT was included as 10% of the entire grade, though ways to incorporate it into the course were left up to each teacher. In my class, I used one of the many courses ALC NetAcademy NEXT offers for the 10% part of the grade. I entrusted the students to complete it in their own time. I also used another ALC NetAcademy NEXT course as a part of weekly assignments.

2.2. Class Profile

I conducted surveys in three different classes consisting mainly of freshman students at the University of Toyama. Their majors were as follows. Class A (49 students): 32 in engineering, 12 in sustainable design, 3 in science, and 2 repeaters (1 in engineering, 1 in education). Class B (49 students): 30 in economics, 9 in education, 5 in humanities, and 5 repeaters (2 in economics, 2 in engineering, and 1 in science). Class C (45 students): 28 in economics, 9 in humanities, 7 in education, and 1 repeater (economics). The students were divided into classes according to their April TOEIC scores, and the three classes discussed were all "Standard 3," which was ranked the lowest among the classes. I was able to obtain informed consent from 40 students from Class A, 45 from Class B, and 42 from Class C.

3. Questionnaires

To find out which of the activities the students found fun, motivating, and English-proficiency enhancing, I created questionnaires. The questionnaire for the mid-term survey included 19 items: 1–8 concerned independent learning activities and 9–19 CL activities. Ten more activities were incorporated for scoring on the end-of-the-term survey that were introduced after the first survey. The activities included in the questionnaires were as follows:

1. *Listening Activities Using the Textbook*
2. *Reading Activities Using the Textbook*
3. *Overlapping*
4. *Shadowing*
5. *ALC NetAcademy NEXT*
6. *Singing English Songs*
7. *Listening Activities Using English Songs*
8. *Learning Pronunciation*

9. *Find-Someone-Who Bingo*

10. *Making Self-Introduction Posters and Introducing Themselves to Each Other*

11. *Asking and Answering Questions*

12. *2 Truths and a Lie*

13. *Planning a Dream Week with Classmates*

14. *Alibi*

15. *Asking A Have You Ever…? Question and Follow-Up Questions*

16. *Picture Taboo*

17. *Being Grouped with Different Classmates Each Week*

18. *Groupwork in General*

19. *Pair Work in General*

20. *Speaking Activity (Changing Topics Every Minute)*

21. *Mid-Term Exam*

22. *Vocabulary Quizzes*

23. *Listening to Exam Explanations*

24. *Researching One's Hometown and Asking Questions*

25. *Hearing About Canada*

26. *Hearing About the Instructor's Experience of Studying Abroad*

27. *Guessing the Character or the Animal Their Groupmates Came Up with by Asking Only Yes/No Questions*

28. *Tic-Tac-Toe*

29. *Making Stories by Filling in Blanks According to Parts of Speech*

The surveys also included questions asking the students if they liked English, if they thought they were good at English, which of their skill(s) of English they thought had improved, and how to improve the class (see appendices for full questionnaires in Japanese). I will also discuss some comments I received from the students in the discussion sections below (translated from Japanese to English by me).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Results [Mid-Term]

The results from the mid-term survey are shown in figures 1, 2, and 3 (Class A hadn't tried *16. Picture Taboo*).
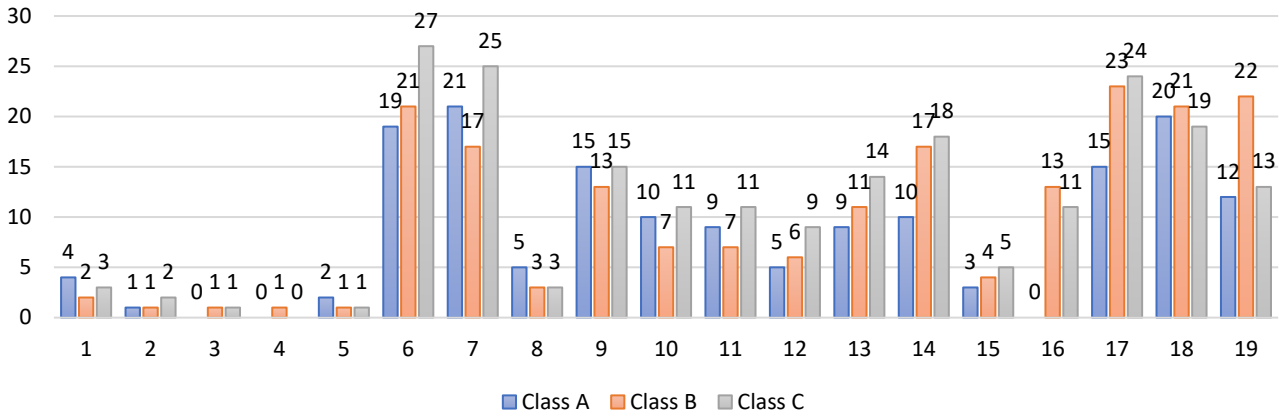
Figure 1

Fun Activities (Mid-Term)

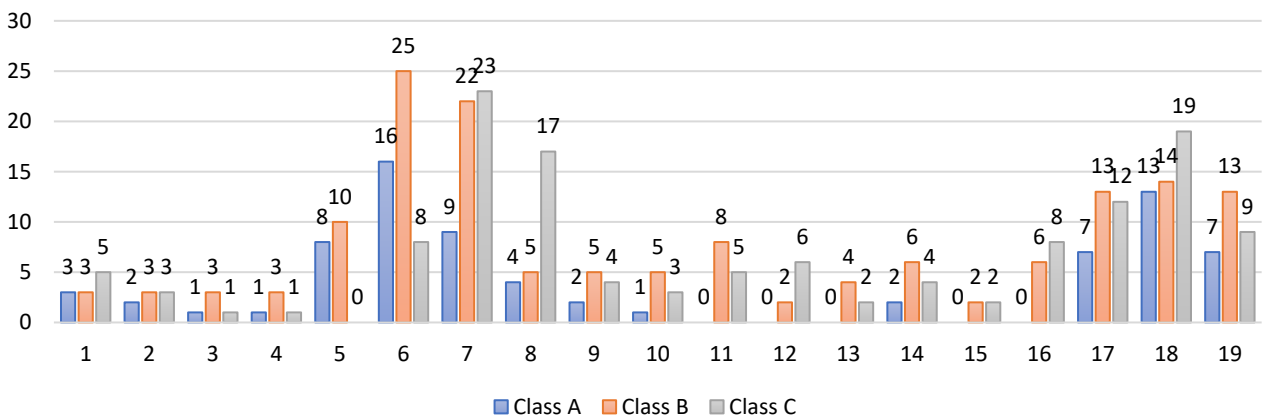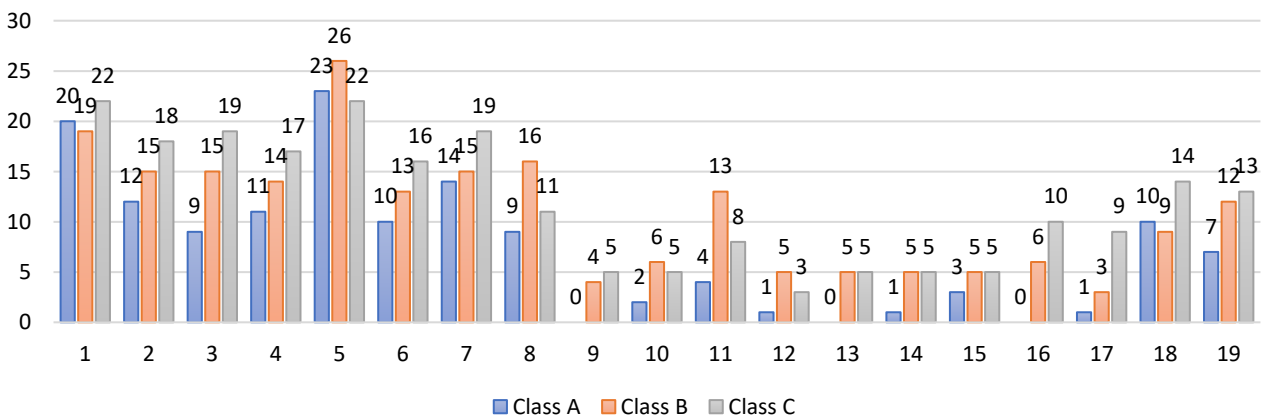**Figure 2**

Motivating Activities (Mid-Term)

Figure 3

English-Proficiency-Enhancing Activities (Mid-Term)

4.2. Discussion [Mid-Term]

What students found fun and motivating had much in common, and there were two trends. One trend was, as assumed, toward interactive activities. *18. Groupwork in General* received the second highest points in both fun and motivating categories for Class A. *17. Being Grouped with Different Classmates Each Week* and *19. Pair Work in General* were the two activities that Class B found most fun (the third highest was *18. Groupwork in General*). These two activities received the third and fourth highest scores in the fun category in Class C.

The other trend concerned English songs. *6. Singing English Songs* and *7. Listening Activities Using English Songs*, though they were not considered CL activities, ranked high. Activity 7 was considered most fun by Class A, and Activities 6 and 7 were regarded most and the second most fun activities by Class C. What Classes A and C found most motivating was Activity 6, while Activity 7 was considered the second most motivating by Classes B and C. This was somewhat surprising because I used English songs mainly to set the tone of each class and to mentally prepare the students for class. My intention was for students to simply experience English music as "authentic teaching materials but not the primary materials used in class" (Takagi, 2022, p.6). However, some research has shown that the use of authentic materials, especially those connected to popular culture, can have more pronounced effects. Henry (2020) states: "when popular culture experiences become a resource in developing academic skills, learning can be perceived as inherently meaningful and intrinsically rewarding" (p.14). This is because popular culture helps students to see that what they learn in the classroom is part of their larger reality. Tada (2022) notes: "The benefits of using songs in the language classroom extend into five key areas: language learning, socio-emotional growth, physical development, cognitive development, and cultural understanding" (p.11). Petrone (2013) also contends that "popular culture represents important sites of meaning making, identity formation, and political activity" (p.244). Some comments in the questionnaires affirm these findings. In total of all three classes, 21 students in the mid-term survey and 19 students in the end-of-the-term survey referred to singing or listening to English songs as the reason why they liked English better than before. Four students in each survey commented that they started listening to more English songs outside of class. One iconic comment was from a student who thought she was better at English than before because "[she] could sing *What Makes You Beautiful* (one of the songs used in class) well at karaoke!" These comments indicate that some students brought what they experienced in classroom to other parts of their lives by becoming familiar with English songs. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that these comments were found in the free writing section of the questionnaires without being specifically asked about English songs. It is possible that there are more students who started incorporating English more to their daily lives because of their experiences with English songs in class.

Somewhat surprisingly, all three classes found ALC NetAcademy, the new e-learning curriculum, the most helpful activity to improve their English proficiency levels. This may indicate that students tend to feel their English skills improved when they can see they are completing something tangible. A similar type of activity, *1. Listening Activities Using the Textbook,* was also regarded as very helpful by all three classes. It ranked either the highest (tied with ALC) or the second highest in the category.

4.3. Results [End of Term]

The results from the end-of-the-term survey are shown in figures 4, 5, and 6.
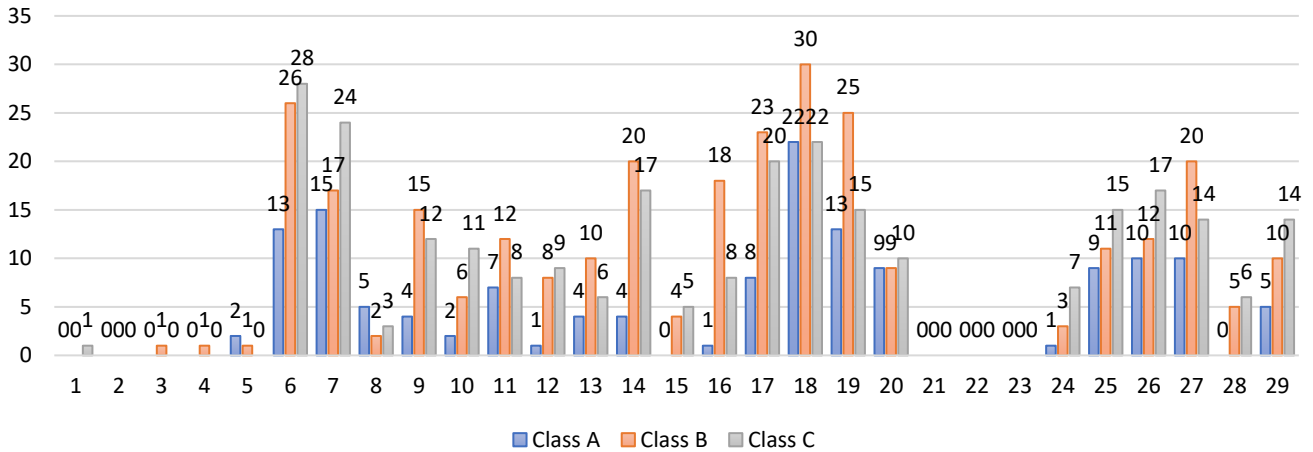
Figure 4

Fun Activities (End of Term)

Figure 5
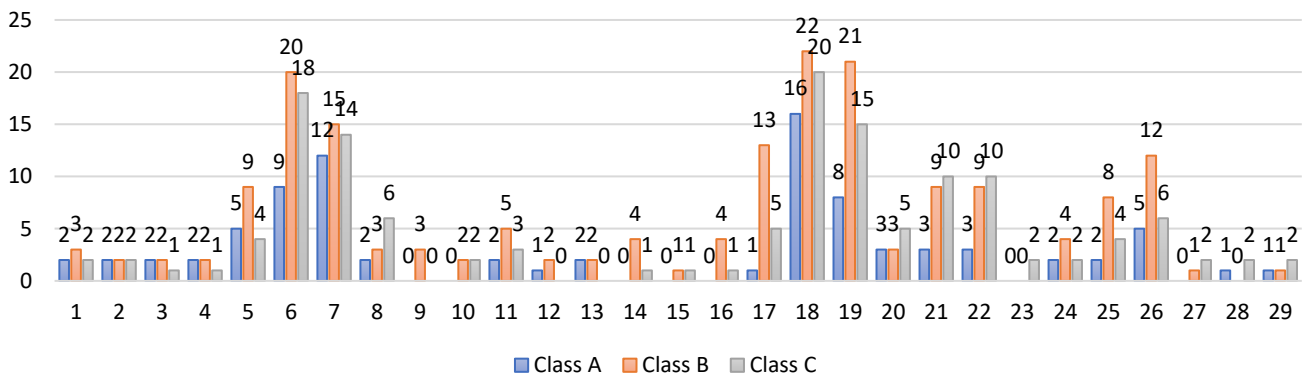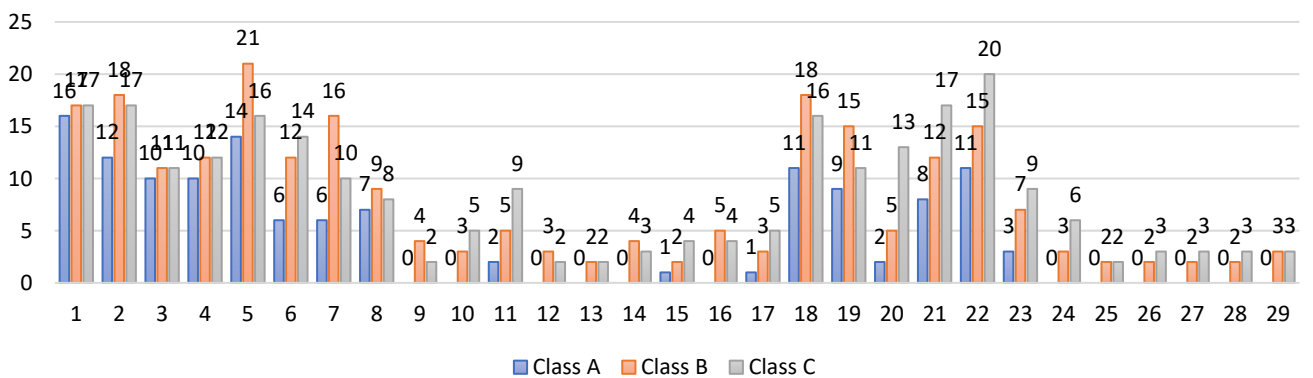
Motivating Activities (End of Term)

Figure 6

English-Proficiency-Enhancing Activities (End of Term)

4.4 Discussion [End of Term]

In both fun and motivating categories, the two trends of cooperative activities and English song-related activities were still apparent. *6. Singing English Songs* and *7. Listening Activities Using English Songs* were considered most and second most fun in Class C. *18. Groupwork in General* was seen as most fun by Classes A and B, and third most fun in Class C. What was most noticeable in the end-of-the-term survey, however, was that all three classes found *18. Groupwork in General* as the most motivating. It was considered more motivating than pair work or English song-related activities (though those activities still received high scores). This could be because the students became more comfortable with communicating in English and also with their classmates toward the end of the semester.

What students thought was helpful to improve their English proficiency skills differed from class to class. An interesting finding is that *2. Reading Activities Using the Textbook* ranked the second highest in all three classes. This could be because the second half of the course was focused on the reading section of the TOEIC test and reading activities were well incorporated in classes.

5. Conclusion

I have discussed the activities that the students found fun, motivating, and as serving to improve language proficiency in Fundamental English I course in the 2022 spring term. Although I initially thought the students would find activities that incorporate cooperative learning fun and motivation-enhancing, the results were slightly different. All three classes reported singing and listening to English songs to be fun and motivating, even though they were not intended to be such a motivation booster. However, as the course progressed and the students became more familiar with their classmates, their preference for more cooperative learning such as groupwork became apparent. In each survey, 30 students explicitly commented that groupwork in class was the reason why they liked English better than before. In the section asking how the class could be improved, 14 students (mid-term) and 5 students (end of term) wrote they wanted groupwork or speaking activities to continue, and 11 students (mid-term) and 9 students (end of term) noted even more groupwork would be welcome. Again, these comments were found in the free-writing section of the questionnaires, and there could be more students who would agree with them. Furthermore, there were students that wrote they liked English better than before because "the classes were fun." In future research, the questionnaire needs to be more specific to determine what these comments mean.

Though there were strong connections between fun activities and motivating activities, no solid relationships between these activities and the activities seen as helpful in improving students' English proficiency levels were found. The results of the survey showed largely that the students saw more independent and tangible learning activities such as textbook-related learning and e-learning to be helpful in improving their English skills.

- 68 -

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Appendix A

Questions For the Mid-Term Survey

I. 英語の好き嫌い:

　5.大好き・4.好き・3.ふつう・2.嫌い・1.大嫌い

　理由

II. 基盤英語 I の授業を通して、英語が以前よりも好き・嫌いになりましたか。

　以前より好きになった・以前より嫌いになった・以前と変わらない

　理由

III. 英語の得意、不得意:

　3.得意 2.ふつう 1.不得意

IV. 基盤英語 I の授業を通して、英語が以前よりも得意・不得意になったと思いますか。

　以前より得意になったと思う・以前より不得意になったと思う・以前と変わらない

　理由

V. 基盤英語 I の授業を通して、上達したと思うスキルは何ですか。 (複数回答可):

　Listening ・ Speaking ・ Reading ・ Writing ・Others (　　　　　　　　　　　　　)

VI. このクラスをもっと良くするための提案

VII.以下のアクティビティの中で、楽しかったと思うものはどれですか。(番号を書いてください。もしくは
　自由記述してください。複数回答可)

VIII.以下のアクティビティの中で、あなたの英語学習モチベーション向上に貢献したと思うものはどれです
　か。(番号を書いてください。もしくは自由記述してください。複数回答可)

IX.以下のアクティビティの中で、あなたの英語力向上に貢献したと思うものはどれですか。(番号を書いて
　ください。もしくは自由記述してください。複数回答可)

　1. 教科書に則したリスニング

　2. 教科書に則したリーディング

　3. オーバーラッピング

　4. シャドーイング

　5. ALC ネットアカデミー

　6. 英語の歌を歌う

　7. 英語の歌でリスニングをする

　8. 発音を学ぶ

　9. Find Someone Who ビンゴ

　10. ポスターを作り自己紹介し合う

　11. 質問をし合う

　12. 2 truths and a lie

13. クラスメイトと夢の一週間の予定を立てる
14. アリバイを見破る
15. Have you ever…?の質問をし、YES と答えて追加の質問に答える
16. Picture Taboo (写真の単語を説明し、パートナーに当ててもらう)
17. 毎回違うクラスメイトとグループになること
18. グループワーク全般
19. ペアワーク全般

Appendix B

Questions for the End-of-the-Term Survey

I. 英語の好き嫌い:

　5.大好き・4.好き・3.ふつう・2.嫌い・1.大嫌い

　理由

II. 基盤英語Iの授業を通して、英語が以前よりも好き・嫌いになりましたか。

　以前より好きになった・以前より嫌いになった・以前と変わらない

　理由

III. 英語の得意、不得意:

　3.得意 2.ふつう 1.不得意

IV. 基盤英語Iの授業を通して、英語が以前よりも得意・不得意になったと思いますか。

　以前より得意になったと思う・以前より不得意になったと思う・以前と変わらない

　理由

V. 基盤英語Iの授業を通して、上達したと思うスキルは何ですか。 (複数回答可):

　Listening ・ Speaking ・ Reading ・ Writing ・Others (　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　)

VI. このクラスをもっと良くするための提案

VII.以下のアクティビティの中で、楽しかったと思うものはどれですか。(番号を書いてください。もしくは
　自由記述してください。複数回答可)

VIII.以下のアクティビティの中で、あなたの英語学習モチベーション向上に貢献したと思うものはどれです
　か。(番号を書いてください。もしくは自由記述してください。複数回答可)

IX.以下のアクティビティの中で、あなたの英語力向上に貢献したと思うものはどれですか。(番号を書いて
　ください。もしくは自由記述してください。複数回答可)

　1.　教科書に則したリスニング

　2.　教科書に則したリーディング

　3.　オーバーラッピング

　4.　シャドーイング

　5.　ALC ネットアカデミー

　6.　英語の歌を歌う

　7.　英語の歌でリスニングをする

　8.　発音を学ぶ

　9.　Find Someone Who ビンゴ

　10. ポスターを作り自己紹介し合う

　11. 質問をし合う

　12. 2 truths and a lie

13. クラスメイトと夢の一週間の予定を立てる

14. アリバイを見破る

15. Have you ever…?の質問をし、YES と答えて追加の質問に答える

16. Picture Taboo (写真の単語を説明し、パートナーに当ててもらう)

17. 毎回違うクラスメイトとグループになること

18. グループワーク全般

19. ペアワーク全般

20. Speaking activity (1 分ごとにテーマを変える)

21. 中間テスト

22. 単語テスト

23. テストの解説

24. 地元に関して調べて、質問し合う

25. カナダについての話を聞く

26. 教師の留学体験の話を聞く

27. Yes/no questions のみをして、相手が考えてきたキャラクターや動物を当てる

28. ３目並べ

29. 品詞で穴埋めをして、物語を作る