

# Putting an Active Learning Approach into Practice: The case study of a primary school English classroom in Japan.

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## Abstract

The primary school affiliated to the Miyagi University of Education is currently focused on developing an active learning approach for the education of pupils in all subjects as part of a four year research project. This paper will examine the general principles of active learning, the school's own definitions of active learning in its context and more importantly how the lessons they are producing match up to these aims.

Early results gauged by looking at lessons themselves and students' comments, show evidence of some early achievements, but by analyzing the lessons one by one, areas still in need of development have been identified too. These limitations can then be worked on in the remaining time this project continues for the benefit of the teachers involved. More importantly, however it will be favorable for the students experiencing classes in a more active way making their education more meaningful and developing essential skills for their lives in this ever-changing and advancing global society.

**Key words** : Active Learning (アクティブ・ラーニング)  
Problem solving (追究力)  
Development of skills (スキルの開発)

## 1. Introduction

Active learning is a term often used in educational circles, but what the main principles are and how can they be applied to a primary school English classroom in Japan is still not clear.

The present paper is a case study looking in detail at the initial aims and outcomes of two English lessons as part of a long-term research project lasting for a total of four years, with the aim of developing a more active learning approach to all grades and all subjects at the primary school affiliated to the Miyagi University of Education, in Sendai, Japan.

The school's research project began in April

2014 and this aim of specifically developing active learning was decided by the teaching staff themselves, after looking closely at both the overall strengths and weaknesses of the pupils in the school. Coincidentally this matches the same aims announced in recent MEXT outlines (2014), which call for a shift of focus from a traditional teacher-centered classroom to developing a more active learning approach in Japanese schools in the future. It should be mentioned though that no conscious link with this statement was made by the school when setting the aim for the research project.

By confirming the major principles for active learning in literature and comparing these to the

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schools own aims, as well as the lessons presented and pupils comments it is hoped that both progress and limitations will be identified and this feedback will further aid the school's research project in the future.

## 2. The principles of active learning

In looking for general principles of active learning Bonwell and Eison (1991) give five common elements that lead to active learning; student involvement beyond mere listening; more emphasis on the development of skills and less on transmittal of information; student involvement in higher order thinking; student involvement in activities, such as reading, discussing, writing; and emphasis on students' exploration of their own values and attitudes. However these elements focus on the higher education level.

Michael (2006) also breaks down active learning into five basic principles and these are based on constructivism, differentiating between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge, allowing transfer and application of knowledge, creating opportunities for cooperative, collaborative and peer learning, as well as a focus on problem based learning, but also the necessity for the transmission of learning to others for it to be truly meaningful. Michael (2006) talks of active learning principles from a science education perspective and states that teaching approaches should; “actively involve the student in the learning process… focus on problem solving as well as memorization, and that lead to more long-lasting, meaningful learning,” (p.159).

As for young learners, Hohmann, Weikart and Epstein (1995) define active learning as; “the direct and immediate experiencing of objects, people, ideas and events,” (p.16). Their definition includes problem solving and is driven by the child's own interests and intrinsic motivation. This process should also include guided reflection, so that deep

cognitive restructuring may occur.

Bonwell and Eison (1991), refer to Chickering and Gamson's quotation to explain their main definition of active learning and although the focus is on higher education, it can be said to be very relevant for primary education as well;

“Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing prepackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves,” (Chickering and Gamson 1987, p.3).

So for this paper, the principles of active learning for primary level classes will be defined as: first-hand experience, involvement in the learning process. Reflection on learning, development of skills, problem solving, discussion, personal interest, cooperative, collaborative and peer learning, and possible application to daily life.

## 3. Literature review

Farrell (2009) points out, the concept of active learning is not at all a modern one and the earliest record of such a method can be said to be the one practiced by Socrates in ancient Greece. Wallace (1991) defines this Socratic Technique as, “a form of teaching by question and answer gradually leading to the elicitation of certain truths,” (p46).

Also Piaget's recommendations as analyzed in detail by Donaldson (1978), promote learning through play and can also be said to be examples of active learning. Donaldson believes, as Piaget also did, that schools should try to create an environment where children are allowed to learn naturally and make sense of the world themselves by actively participating, questioning and through trial and error. In this way children would ideally

construct their own knowledge rather than receive it from a teacher.

Moving onto practical active learning approaches, Michael (2006) emphasizes problem based and cooperative or group based learning and in his conclusion he includes evidence showing that if such principals are followed and an active learning classroom environment is achieved there are clear benefits in the education of those students. He cites Burrowes's (2003) study which clearly showed the exam scores in an active learning group to be significantly higher than the traditional teacher-centered learning group, even though it was taught by the same teacher. However, he points out that; "active learning doesn't just happen; it occurs in the classroom when the teacher creates a learning environment that makes it more likely to occur," (p.164).

As a reason to make such changes to active learning at this point in time, Farrell (2009) notes that particularly in this modern and ever-advancing world, learners need to be able to solve new problems creatively, analyze situations and think independently rather than be passive receivers of knowledge. Farrell continues by recommending a combination of teaching approaches to foster this in the younger generation.

In the same way, Richards and Rodgers (2001), after introducing a number of major approaches to teach second languages such as Communicative Language Teaching or Task-Based Learning, mention the importance of combining various principles to govern the way teachers approach the task of teaching, which include: engaging all learners; making learners the focus of the lesson; increasing learner participation; developing learner responsibility; developing confidence and building on learners' interests. It can be said that these all fall under the banner of active learning, as defined above, and are important factors to be considered when developing ways to improve the education of children.

All of the above show that there are many supporters, including the Japanese Ministry of Education, for the promotion of a less-passive, more-active learning approach in all levels and all subject areas of education.

#### **4. This case study**

In April 2014 the primary school affiliated to the Miyagi University of Education started a four-year research project to develop active learning in all subjects and the first open classes to demonstrate their change to this way of encouraging learning were conducted on June 5, 2015.

The English department presented three classes based on the active learning approach in grades 4, 5 and 6, but in this paper I will discuss just two of these classes in depth.

##### **4.1 The main aims of the school and English department to develop a more active learning approach.**

The general aims for this study, as defined in the project outline, are to develop lessons based on the principles of active learning, and these are defined as: developing lessons where pupils are drawn in to the content naturally, have interest and feel relevance in topic, are encouraged to begin to question the content individually and continue to scrutinize information for themselves. Also, later in the lesson, it is hoped that there should be opportunities for students to discuss their opinions with others and draw personal conclusions through reflection either spoken or written, which lead to learner confidence and motivation to learn more in the next class.

When comparing this definition created by the school to the more general one above, the matching key words and concepts are very similar and can be noted as being: personal interest; application to daily life; involvement in the learning process; first-hand experience; problem solving; collaborative, cooperative and peer-learning; discussion and

reflection on learning.

The only key concept found in the general definition, but not in the school's is the "specific focus on the development of skills," which contrasts the school's focus on developing free or original thinking and cognitive development. Also the school's aim, that the learner should question content, form their own conclusion, then reach a level of learner confidence leading to motivation is an original concept.

#### 4.2 Description of the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade English class - How many? (7<sup>th</sup> lesson in a unit of 9 lessons)

In this unit the main target phrase from the curriculum guidelines to be focused on was "How many ~ do you have?" The teacher devised a lesson plan drawing on the principles of active learning stated above, so that the pupils would be involved in a problem-solving task. They would interview their class members and have to work out the average number of siblings in the class, by asking as many people as possible the question, "How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

To initiate interest and relevance to the pupils' daily lives, the teacher introduced her own family, naturally bringing in the necessary vocabulary; (ie., father, mother, brother, sister). Also she raised consciousness on general population trends, through questioning the pupils, and drawing attention to, for example, how in the past in Japan families were quite large, sometimes with up to 10 siblings, but now the current trend is for less children per household.

First the pupils thought and made guesses about the average number of siblings and then asked classmates to find out the answer. Once the pupils were on task asking each other, the teacher stood back and only supported when necessary.

To raise confidence and support language skills at the beginning of the lesson, the pupils practiced a chant with numbers and at the end of the class engaged them in writing skills related to the topic

as an extension writing exercise. Also, a written self-reflection on the activity was included at the end of the lesson, (see Table 3).

#### 4.3 Description of the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade English class—Let's go to~! (8<sup>th</sup> lesson in the unit of 8 lessons)

In this unit the main target phrase from the curriculum guidelines to be used was "Let's go to ~!" in the context of traveling to a foreign country, combined with the phrases, "You can eat, play, see ~," "I like ~," and "I want to see, eat, play ~," as reasons to visit that place. This unit was chosen for the open class as it is generally one of high interest to pupils, who have to decide which country they want to visit and explain their reasons to other pupils.

The situation that the teacher devised on the principles of active learning rather than the regular format of choosing a country and just talking about it, in a show and tell format with little interaction, was that the pupils were told that they were working in an imaginary travel company and had the task of selling trips to other students. In this way they chose the country to promote, did research and tried to persuade their classmates to visit that country rather than others on offer. In this way the target phrases would be used naturally and because the element of choice was involved, outcomes would be varied and depend on the pupils' opinions and skills in presenting the information.

In addition, iPads were used to present the information on each county by the salesperson to the potential customers, which would add excitement and develop additional ICT skills. To maintain excitement, interest and develop skills in both presenting information and analyzing and selecting information, roles were reversed between agency worker and customer, during the 45 minutes available.

To raise confidence and support language skills at the beginning of the lesson the pupils practiced a



chant lead by the teacher, but as the pupils started the main activity of presenting their country and information, the teacher stood back and just gave support when necessary.

Writing the key phrases was added at the end of the lesson as an expansion activity, but relevance to content to the lesson was a key consideration. The pupils only wrote the name of the country they had chosen to visit. A short written self-reflection on the activity was included at the end of the lesson, (see Table 3).

## 5. Results and discussion

As can be seen in the Tables 1 and 2 below, the main stages of the lesson relate well to many of

the principles of active learning identified in the introduction and by the school themselves. For example, the teachers were successful in drawing the pupils into the content of the English lesson naturally and creating real interest and relevance in the topics.

Furthermore, the focus of building skills prior to the problem-solving collaborative learning activities, rather than pure transmission of information, fits in well with the principles of active learning.

By including the self-reflection activity at the end of class, learners can feel involved in the learning process and this also provides ideal data for the teachers to gauge how the learners perceive the English lessons they are providing.

**Table 1 Comparison of class activities to active learning principles 5<sup>th</sup> Grade class**

	Content of lesson stage and teachers aim	Active learning principle
1	Greetings: To familiarize the children with daily phrases such as, "How are you?"	Development of skills.
2	Warm-up: To review and consolidate country names in a fun chant, so that key phrases can be used with confidence later.	Development of skills.
3	Practice of the target phrase: To use the main phrase, "How many ~ do you have?" with other classroom objects such as pencils and erasers.	Confidence building.
4	Lead in to the main activity: Show pictures of the teacher's family to raise pupils' interest and lead into the interview activity, "How many brothers and sisters do you have?" Elicit the meaning through hints and practice these phrases with children individually.	Development of skills.
5	Interview activity: For pupils ask others in their class the question and collect data to find out the average number of siblings. Pupils have to stand up, move around, approach others, then ask and answer the questions, noting the answers in a worksheet.	First-hand experience, problem solving, collaborative learning and development of skills.
6	Reflection: To look back on the activity and the results.	Involvement in the learning process and reflection.
7	Greetings: Finish the lesson on a positive note.	

Table 2 Comparison of class activities to active learning principles 6<sup>th</sup> Grade class

	Content of lesson stage and teachers aim	Active learning principle
1	Greetings: To familiarize the children with daily phrases such as "How are you?"	Development of skills.
2	Confirm the main activity in the lesson: By clearly explaining the aims of today's lesson, allow the students to focus on the tasks, be confident and clear about today's lesson.	Confidence building.
3	Warm-up: To review and consolidate country names and key phrases in a fun chant, so that they can be used with confidence later. To use the main phrase "Let's go to ~?" in a demonstration	Development of skills, confidence building.
4	Travel Agency Game: For pupils in two groups A and B, to take turns using their iPad, to either talk about a country they selected to a customer, or to be a customer coming to decide their holiday destination.	First-hand experience, collaborative learning, development of skills.
5	Writing activity: For the pupils to write just the name country they had chosen to visit.	Development of skills.
6	Reflection: To look back on the activity and the results.	Involvement in the learning process and reflection.
7	Greetings: Finish the lesson on a positive note.	

The pupils comments themselves (see Table 3) demonstrate the high motivation and interest shown during these lessons, confidence gained, and even possible application to daily life. One pupil writes: "I want to use the names of countries and this kind of question in various situations in the future."

There were clear examples of cooperative, collaborative and peer learning, as another pupil writes: "My friend OO helped me when I couldn't remember what to say."

So overall it can be said that the students' positive feedback to this active approach to learning is a promising start for the school's ongoing research project.

## 6. Limitations and future directions

When looking at the aims set by the school, in these lessons there was little opportunity to question the content individually and continue to scrutinize information and this is an area to work on in the future. In the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class, there was some anticipation of the result, "What do you think the average number of siblings will be?" However in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade class, there was no elicitation of ideas of which country would be the most popular or confirmation at the end of which was in fact most popular. Also, in both the school's aims and general aims learners should be given opportunities to discuss their opinions with others and although this may not be possible in English only, simple discussions in easy English or Japanese should try to be included in lessons in

**Table 3** A sample of students' comments from their written self-reflection sheet.

5 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Finding out the average for this class was two (siblings) surprised me, I thought it would be three.
In today's lesson I tried hard and asked many people the question, because it was interesting and fun. I was surprised at the results.
Usually I'm shy, but today I tried hard to ask many people. My friend OO helped me when I couldn't remember what to say.
It was interesting to find out the average siblings in our class today. Especially finding out if they were elder or younger brothers or sisters was difficult, but I did it.
If I go abroad I want to use this phrase with many people.
6 <sup>th</sup> Grade
We used many English phrases and we listened to others' English too. We researched and promoted the country we chose and listened to lots of information on other countries. We could learn about the culture of many countries which was good I think.
Next time I want to research and present a different country if possible.
We learnt about the good points of many countries.
I can read and write "Let's go to ~, You can ~, I like ~, I want to go to ~, Where do you want to go? so I'm pleased. Everyone really worked hard researching their own chosen country.
I want to use the names of countries and this kind of question in various situations in the future.
I cleared all the aims for this lesson, but especially "enjoying" the speaking activity.
At first I didn't know what to say about Vietnam, but by rehearsing and getting advice I learnt that <i>kawa</i> is river and other new words.
When presenting I took care to speak slowly and clearly, and use gestures so the others could understand.
I learnt a lot about Hungary in my preparation for this lesson, but also my English communication skills got better.

the future to truly follow the principles of active learning.

Blaz (1999) suggests various techniques for introducing active learning into the foreign language classroom and facilitating simple discussions even with beginner students through the use of such techniques a Buzz Groups or Inside-Outside Circle questioning. Other techniques such as ordering vocabulary picture cards between extremes, for example animals which are most and least dangerous in a Line-Up activity would initiate individual thinking and discussion of opinions in even a low level English class.

## 7. Conclusion

As this research project has really just begun, it is a little early to see positive results for all the principles in active learning, and the difference between the school's aims and general aims is an area for possible input into the project. But even in these first two lessons many positive points to develop active learning were taken into account and lead to encouraging feedback from the pupils themselves.

Areas to work on such as facilitating simple discussions and pupil involvement in the learning process, such as selecting themes and activities from their own interests are topics to be considered in the future.

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