

Engaging Students through Active Learning

A paper examining university teacher teaching & professional development ideas to help in-service junior and senior high school teachers move toward MEXT goals of teaching English in English and more active learning

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Abstract:

This paper offers a brief examination of active learning and its role in helping students to become more engaged in the classroom. It points to societal, historical, and institutional barriers that add to the persistence of the status quo of preferred teaching strategies, particularly at the traditional university, and secondary-school level in Japan. Without calling for a moratorium on using lectures as a medium for the delivery of knowledge, it offers some definitions and examples of active learning practices which can be incorporated into existing lecture-based teaching frameworks. Finally, it asks educators to re-examine their personal beliefs regarding learning and their own teaching practices while at the same time encouraging them to add new teaching practices to their classroom repertoires in order to facilitate deeper learner engagement with course content. The article is written in the hopes that it will bring about discussion and change in teaching at both secondary and tertiary levels in Japan.

Introduction

“Throughout the whole enterprise, the core issue, in my view, is the mode of teaching and learning that is practiced. Learning ‘about’ things does not enable students to acquire the abilities and understanding they will need for the twenty first century. We need new pedagogies of engagement that will turn out the kinds of resourceful, engaged workers and citizens that America now requires.”

(Eggerton, 2001, p. 38)

Long term educator, Russell Edgerton wrote the words above with an eye toward students in the U.S., however the same vision is needed for students no matter where they are in the world, and should certainly be applied to those in Japan. Surveying the local

situation, there are many positive things that can be said about the Japanese education system. Teachers are dedicated, schooling is available to both genders and Japan's students perform well on OECD PISA tests for reading, math and science (OECD, 2015). Additionally, kindergarten, primary and secondary schooling models here have been the subject of lengthy examination which determined that they have much to offer their Western counterparts (Benjamin, 1997; Rohlen & LeTendre, 1998; Sato, 2003; Thompson, 2006). On the other hand, there have also been many voices decrying the state of education at all levels. Two of the most highly denigrated aspects of Japanese education are its rigidity, and its focus on rote-memorization to the detriment of higher order thinking skills (Beauchamp, 2014).

In his observations of Japanese education, Apple tells us, schools "seem to be less concerned with the distribution of skills than they are with the distribution of norms and dispositions which are suitable to one's place in a hierarchical society" (Apple, 1979 as cited in McVeigh, 1998, p. 126). Top level government officials are not unconcerned with this situation; Beauchamp reported in 1987 on the anxiety held regarding preparedness for the future:

"if our nation is to build up a society that is full of vitality and creativity as well as relevant to the 21st century, it is a matter of great urgency to design necessary reforms (p.299)."

It is, however, relevant to point out that this quote comes from the Provisional Council for Educational Reform in a report they produced in 1978. Not unlike its predecessors, the current political administration also asserts that Japan will fall far behind its neighbors if it cannot produce more “global resources” (*globalaru jinzai*) among its youth (Burgess, 2013). Yet anyone who, scrutinizes these dates, and/or has worked in the Japanese school system can attest to the glacially-slow processes of reform that Sato (2003) highlights while comparing Japan’s progress during the last 40 years to that of other developed countries. Although the national curriculum is updated every 10 years or so, actual change does not seem to keep up with the need for reform. As a result, the words of McVeigh in 1994 (quoting Rohlen from 1983) still ring true:

“The Japanese are producing an average adult citizen who is remarkably well suited to four requirements of modern industrial society: (1) hard, efficient work in organizations; (2) effective information processing; (3) orderly private behavior; (4) stable, devoted child rearing (Rohlen, 1983 cited in McVeigh, 1998, p. 134).”

Additionally, one wonders how the cultivation of citizens who are ready and possess skills “relevant to the 21st Century” can be achieved when the persisting mainstay of many in-service teachers in Japan consists of two teaching methodologies: grammar-translation (*yakudoku*) teaching of English through Japanese language (Gorsuch, 1998; 2001; Cook, 2012) and lecture for nearly everything else.

Practical Interventions

“The information passes from the notes of the professor to the notes of the students without passing through the mind of either one.”

--Source unknown

So, what can be done? As we have seen, top-down reform is slow. Bottom-up innovation from teachers themselves definitely exists (Cook, 2012) and is spreading as more and more in-service teachers make use of high quality professional development (Matheny, 2005; Christmas, 2011; 2014; Moser, Harris & Carle, 2012). Another related answer is mid-level intervention, coming from universities, to elicit change. These interventions can emerge in the form of changing how university teachers (by this I am referring to traditional faculty in typical Japanese institutions) themselves teach. In addition, change can come in the form of workshops and teacher training programs which offer direct instruction for and make use of methodologies designed to engage learners and foster thinking skills rather than primarily rely on lecture modes and/or the requirement for students to memorize masses of facts.

Looking at models in the West, there has been a movement in higher education within the U.S. and U.K. to wean instruction away from a high reliance on lecturing, and move toward a new mode of educational dissemination which involves a greater degree of engagement of students (Tickle, 2014). This focus or need to engage students emerged

during the 1990s in Engineering and other science-related programs. At the time, students in these programs expressed dissatisfaction with over use of the lecture indicating that they felt this mode of instruction was not helping them to learn in a hands-on, transferrable-to-future-scenarios fashion (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005). In Japan, a similar, although still-budding trend has arisen and has been dubbed “*active learning*.” One branch of this movement stems from the MEXT Course of Study mandate which holds that for high schools (but soon to wash down to the junior high school level) English classes, in principle, should be taught mainly in English (MEXT, 2011). The other arm is arising from washback in the wake of another MEXT mandate (MEXT, 2014), as well from rumors in proposed changes to the Center Test (N.A, 2015) that ask for methodology to be more problem and task-based.

Active Learning Definitions

Before we can add active and engaging elements to our own or others’ teaching it is necessary to first define active learning. To help us with this task, we can make use of Astin’s (1999) observations regarding the various theories of learning that are present in any given institution. To help us to understand the effects and interconnections of persevering theories of instruction and learning, we must look at what does *not* count as

active learning in the classroom. As we will see later on, the complete abandonment of the lecture and memorization of salient facts, favored by those who espouse “content theory” (p. 520) is definitely not called for, however, overreliance on the teacher-centered model of lecture mode and rote-memorization is decidedly not active learning. Simply arranging desks into small groups, or offering highly-individualized instruction (individualized, eclectic theory, p. 520) is also not active learning. Neither would supplying students with tablets, (resource theory, p. 521) without direct instruction as to the purposes and ways of their use being first taught to students, be considered a way of integrating active learning into a school or classroom (Astin, 1999). Even using the new, active learning, student-engagement buzz-word, “flipped-classroom” technique is not a guarantee that a teacher is actually utilizing active learning. The true embodiment of active learning can be seen when students are actively engaged with the content of the course and with each other in ways that truly foster long-term uptake of knowledge and use of critical thinking skills. Furthermore, active learning is seen when goals and outcomes of the course are known to students and become an integral part of the learning process. Active learning requires transparent, formative and summative assessment being used to inform both students—they are enabled with metacognitive skills to see where they stand in their learning, and teachers—they use assessment to make changes in

content scope and sequence based on student needs. Active learning means that students' brains are not empty vessels, waiting to be filled with knowledge, but that skills and understanding are better attained and better retained when students are heavily engaged in the learning process (Smith, *et al*, 2005). This contrasts rather strongly with the model of students as passive participants waiting to disgorge items they have memorized onto the next high-stakes test.

Techniques, Strategies, Methods and Activities

Many aspects of active learning are included in and can be borrowed from Cooperative Learning. Cooperative Learning itself is a complex mode of instruction and classroom management. It is a way of organizing learning which developed during the late 1980s and early 1990s and by design, originally focused on small groups of students working together, with a specific goal of helping students to help each other learn (Jacobs, Power and Inn, 2002). Cooperative Learning has since proven itself a marvelous and effective tool for fostering *positive interdependence* which means that students “see themselves as sharing a common goal or goals” (Jacobs, Power and Inn, 2002, p. 36). It is, however, a rather involved process to learn and integrate all of the complexities of Cooperative Learning and thus it is often prudent to borrow parts of it that fit one's own

classroom content and student population. Several easy to integrate and effective cooperative learning techniques include: Think-Pair Share (Jacobs, Power and Inn, 2002, p. 41), Write-Pair-Switch (p. 43), Traveling Heads Together (p. 63), Carousel (p. 64), Group Mind Mapping (p. 76), Draw-Pair-Switch (p. 77), and the exceedingly versatile Jigsaw I & II (pp. 32-36). As teachers begin to feel comfortable using student-centered, active classroom strategies, and as they see the benefits that students derive from them, more variation can be included.

Many educators feel a need to retain lectures in the classroom and are not pleased with seemingly off-hand dismissal of a long-cherished teaching mode. In truth, active learning does not require that one never lecture nor offer teacher-centered guidance; rather, it asks for a better balance of student-centeredness and teacher-centeredness (Tickle, 2014). Cavanagh (2003) assures us that students “who contribute enthusiastically in lectures retain information for longer than if they simply see or hear it” (p.23) and points to other benefits of active learning including improved motivation, attitude, and critical thinking skills. There are multitude ways to make the lecture more active. One method is simply to give the students a break during the lecture, allowing them to re-engage after they have mentally regrouped. Other techniques and types of activities (listed in the chart below), in a fashion similar to those in the section on Cooperative Learning, are inherently

more apt to foster deeper levels of learning.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ask students to do short, focused writing tasks mid-lecture, then restart the lecture ● Give the PowerPoint to students prior to the lecture and ask them to summarize parts of it ● include authentic tasks pre and post lecture that represent or include elements of the real world e.g. how knowledge can be applied in real life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● require small group discussion with focus questions at various points throughout the lecture ● assign roles to students during discussion of lecture ideas in order to facilitate the offering of different perspectives and opinions ● assign jigsaw note-taking ● offer formative practice tests that include questions similar to those which will appear on summative quizzes or tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● have students paraphrase or summarize segments of the lecture to a partner ● require students to summarize their group or a partner's ideas to the class or to another student not in their own group ● include connections to students' present and future lives so that learning feels relevant to them
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—ideas adapted from Cavanagh, 2003; Jacobs, Power & Inn, 2002

Properly integrated active learning, however, is not simply a series of Band-Aid activities that a teacher can slap onto his or lecture. More than a quick fix, it is an approach to learning that strives to place students and their learning at the center and to ensure through deep engagement with the content and objectives, that learning is actually taking place.

Benefits and Caveats

Above all, many students who have experienced both “traditional” and active learning modes express more satisfaction with the latter or a combination of former and latter. Not only do they feel that it is beneficial but higher levels of involvement with course content has shown to have positive effects on learning (Smith *et al*, 2005; Cavanagh, 2011; Eddy & Hogan, 2014). Additionally, active learning has a positive effect on levels of student engagement with their schooling and not only supports achievement, but also helps freshmen or students seen to be “at risk” (of failing or dropping out) and therefore can assist in lowering attrition rates (Horstmanshof, 2004; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Christmas, 2009).

The complete success of active learning is not guaranteed due to a variety of factors including, the number and types of students being served by the institution, the skills, preferences, and teaching style of individual instructors and the content of the course (Cavanagh, 2011; Eddy & Hogan, 2014). Active learning “demands more active engagement from the students themselves, which may be unwelcome to those looking for a spoon fed educational experience” (Tickle, 2014, n.p.). Student characteristics or variations in preexisting knowledge of content can also affect the efficacy of any given active learning activity (Dunlosky, Rawson, Marsh, Nathan, & Willingham, 2013). It is

furthermore important to remember that with younger learners or with learners for whom English is not a first language, direct instruction and training in how to do active learning techniques is necessary for maximum benefit to students (Dunlosky, *et al*, 2013). Additionally, while active learning is clearly a useful tool for improving the quality of learning that students receive in the classroom, it is only one factor in the complex mechanism of *student engagement* which includes studying, learning and belonging to a school (Astin, 1999; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Christmas, 2009).

Conclusions and Future Steps

Teachers often teach using the methods by which they themselves were taught. The organization of education as well as “teachers’ own conscious and unconscious theories, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and intuitions about the nature of learning, about their subject area, about curriculum, about proper sequencing and presentation, and about the circumstances in which they teach (Gorsuch, 2000, p. 678)” are major influences on the choices teachers make with regard to the delivery or dissemination of knowledge. Unless there is mindful intervention, instruction is a very stable factor in schooling. This is particularly true of those teaching at universities (anywhere—not only in Japan) whom have never been trained in instructional methodology and also for secondary school

teachers in Japan (Gorsuch, 2000; 2001).

Further reading of Gorsuch (2000) can help us grasp the character of Japanese career educators and the mechanisms of institutionalized education in Japan to better our understanding of why change has come so slowly. She points out that the national curriculum is handed down to teachers while making “no systematic reference to instruction” (p.679) and highlights research demonstrating that this type of situation often leads to drill-based classroom practices which encourage students to focus on discrete knowledge rather than higher order thinking skills (p. 677).

All of the factors listed above are reasons for universities to include active learning within their own classrooms (for regular and teacher-in-training students alike) and to offer professional development for in-service teachers. Both secondary EFL and content area teachers alike can benefit from “intervention” that will help them to incorporate other ways of learning into their methodological repertoires.

Again, in the words of Russell Edgerton, students will be better prepared for their future lives if we help them to:

“acquire habits of the heart in situations in which they are intensely and emotionally engaged: not just reading a play but acting in it; not just reading about the homeless, but working in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter, and then reflecting on what they have experienced (Edgerton, 2001, p. 37).”

There is still much research to be done regarding the efficacy of various learning techniques, however, as educators, given the already concrete and confirmed benefits, it seems irresponsible not to take some time to re-examine our own classroom practices and the beliefs behind them. Questions to ask and to help others ask are those such as “Why am I teaching this concept this way?” Or, “Is there a better way to help students engage with this subject matter/learn this skill?” By asking ourselves these types of questions we are taking the first step toward integrating more active learning and engagement into our classrooms and school systems.

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