

Maximizing and Balancing “Active Learning” Approaches for English and World Language Teaching

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Abstract: “Active Learning” has become a popular catchphrase for educational reform and innovation in Japan. It can be argued, however, that Active Learning approaches are based in or related to the foundational principles of the fields of TEFL/TESL, e.g. Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Learning, Student-Centered Learning, etc. Recently, TEFL publishers in Japan have touted the “active learning” qualities of their textbooks, riding the wave of popularity of the term. This discussion aims to reclaim the glory of interactive learning for this side of the educational aisle, demonstrating the depth and breadth of CLT-based engagement, interaction and creativity--as developed over decades of research and practice. The discussion will include advice for maximizing and balancing CLT/Active Learning approaches, highlighting aspects of testing for communication, student motivation, activity sequencing, time management, etc. It is my contention that interactive learning is most effective and valuable when it enhances conventional approaches of learning, not when it supplants or diminishes them. Moreover, this presentation will offer original and innovative CLT/Active Learning approaches and activities toward these aims. The advice and ideas offered will be applicable to language learning and general education.

Key words: active learning, engagement, classroom management

Introduction.

Active Learning has been bandied about like a cure-all or great hope in education in recent years in Japan. It has been promoted for general education by Japanese Ministry of Education officials in Japan and touted by Japanese academics even outside of the TESL/TEFL arena. Judging from the numerous FD (Faculty Development) presentations that attempt to employ or focus on Active Learning, the form and focus of the appeal is still a nebulous or nuanced calling. As presently practiced and approached, Active Learning seems to be attached to anything that is active or creative--sometimes even if remotely so.

In order to relay the wide appeal of the campaign and to set the backdrop for the discussion of this paper, consider an anecdotal example of an Active Learning lesson from a popular television show. In Nov. of 2017, a popular new TV series began which centered on the theme of Japanese high school teachers struggling to implement innovative teaching methods. The series stars Sho Sakurai of the Japanese pop group Arashi. In an early episode, Sakurai's character, a young high school teacher, fails to impress “observing” colleagues with a lesson in which students spend an entire class period supporting each other in mastering a mathematics concept. In the story, the teacher refrains from teaching; the students are challenged to peer-teach in order to achieve the goal of all students mastering

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the math concept. After drawing wide criticism and disdain from colleagues who observe the lesson, the students stage a mini rebellion against the newfangled and unfamiliar approach to learning.

In a following episode, the hero teacher arrives on the scene. In animated fashion for the entertaining drama, he ensues to present a “masterful” Active Learning lesson in which students share and collect information from handouts that contain the “opposite” information from a partner’s handout. The intrigue, engagement, and output among the students for the lesson format are exaggerated in the drama. The hero teacher saves the day.

All the while, as I was viewing the drama, I could not help but complain, “An information-gap exercise? Is that all? Is there more?” No, there wasn’t. There were no pre- and post- activity exercises. There were no unique spins on the classic English activity from TESL lore (e.g., as offered in: *Person to Person*, Jack Richards, 1985; *Fifty Fifty*, 1990, Roger Barnard). However, in the drama, the stand-alone activity “magically” exhibits the wonderful attributes of an Active Learning lesson.

I assume the directors and writers of the drama investigated Active Learning approaches in education in order to construct the storyline. Perhaps an information-gap exercise was an easy concept to relay in a short episode. Still, the fact that it was selected to relay novelty and intrigue to a wide TV audience reflects the infancy of the movement and the struggles that lie ahead. However, the drama accurately relayed the significance of the bewilderment that the students faced, instigating their revolt.

In real life, I experienced a similar backlash from the opposite perspective. For three years, I served as a member of a government sponsored education committee in my prefecture. Twice a year, the committee members—government officials and university

professors—gathered at a local high school to observe English lessons. Following classroom observations, a joint meeting convened with the high school teachers and committee members, whereby the committee officials relayed advice and criticism to the teachers. There were many occurrences and insights that shed light on the state of the art of Active Learning, circa 2006. I will relay a couple of them here.

I recall a session of morning classes that involved pairwork and small group discussion, culminating in a wide discussion led by the teacher through eliciting “reports” from each group. In my opinion, the teacher had created an interesting extension of the textbook focus. Students were engaged, a clear task was set, and ample practice of the target language was carried out. I recognized that the mundane textbook hampered the teacher’s creativity. I concluded that the lesson was organized and effective. However, only harsh criticism by committee members was relayed in the post-lesson meeting. One colleague remarked in Japanese that Active Learning should be more “impactful”. He pointed out that the picture used in the lesson by the teacher needed to be larger with more vivid color. With each turn, some of the young high school teachers hung their heads in disappointment. One even appeared to shed a tear.

When asked to speak, I offered balanced praise, not as a token offer of support but genuine approval for the efforts of the young high school teachers toward “Active Learning”. And then I boldly added:

“If we so-called experts from the ‘outside’ can claim to know the answers and to know how to teach effectively, I think these observations should be reversed. We should welcome the high school teachers to observe our own university classes.”

I was fully aware that my colleague who had called for more “impact” did not conduct his university

classes in an Active Learning manner at all. I wondered what values and initiatives were being espoused through the Active Learning campaign. Was Active Learning a haphazard and arbitrary concept? Was there a gatekeeper’s mentality being imposed on the young high school teachers by the establishment?

Fastforward to my final year on the committee. Two years later, the English lesson that we observed focused on describing people. In the post-lesson meeting, I mentioned that I had recently conducted a successful activity on the theme through the use of facemasks as props. I coincidentally had samples in my backpack as the lesson had been conducted in my university classes that week. I ensued to describe the activity with the props. (It was a simple class lesson, and one that I would present at international conferences in 2015 and 2017, winning the “Most Outstanding Presentation” awards.)

But in 2006, I was approached during lunch by one of the leaders of the committee. He sternly relayed to me, “This is Japan. We cannot do that.” He imparted this reprimand and walked away. I was stunned but it provided more insight into the challenges of employing Active Learning approaches in Japan.

Unfortunately, my former teaching practicum instructor for my MA program in TESL at the University of Hawaii, Prof. Jack Richards, was subjected to nearly the same criticism when he made a presentation to a local chapter of JALT a few years later. For two hours he expounded on the benefits of Communicative Language Teaching, offering tips for motivating students and summarizing the state of the art of the field. It was dismaying when an older Japanese high school teacher complained, “This is Japan. We must rise up our students our way.” Prof. Richards took the comment in stride. But the comment was repeated by the high school teacher.

Over the years, I have been mindful of the backlash to Active Learning approaches. After all, “active” curriculum approaches have had many detractors in the general education arena in the U.S., namely the resistance to cooperative learning in its formative years—which lingers to this day (Blake, et al., 1999; Lazerson, et al., 2000; Savoie, et al., 2017).

These are some of the growing pains that need to be traversed for Active Learning approaches in Japan. It is against this backdrop that I offer a summation of my explorations and experiences as a practitioner of active and creative lessons over two decades in Japan.

Bridging the gap.

I contend that it is critical to understand and heed the context for language learning and teaching in Japan. Even “standard” approaches based in TESL/TEFL which are practiced the world over need to be introduced through a period of adjustment. There needs to be acknowledgement of the learning style and patterns that have been ingrained in Japanese students through the mandated national curriculum (Saeki, et.al., 2001). For example, popular approaches aligned with CLT, Active Learning, Task-Based Learning, CALL, etc. need to be integrated in a timely and careful manner, sometimes if at all. As a case in point, those of us who have taught in Japan know that many of the “open-ended” or opinion questions in pre-lesson activities that often introduce a chapter in international textbooks fall very flat in Japanese settings. “Look at the picture. Who are they? How do they feel? What do you think is going to happen next?” There are no clear answers. Students refrain from offering an answer in English due to unknown and unfamiliar factors.

Considering the effects of the top-down regulations and control, Japanese students have “set” patterns of learning ingrained in them through their public

school experiences. For example, they tend to value and expect more repetitious practice before open-ended output. They are used to sequential and organized progress along a carefully controlled continuum. And they are motivated by challenges that infuse their learning with “accountability” factors, such as an abundance of quizzes and tests—all tediously marked and graded with a “red pen” by their teachers.

The English portion of the Center Test (national exam), which is one of three main sections, provides insights into the compulsory skills that students feel they need to attain through 6 years of formal English studies nationwide. Basically, it is a test of passive skills with no communication component. The grammar and reading sections are long and grueling with many “tricky” questions interspersed (Honna, 1995). The listening component is an “academic” exercise that does not train students for authentic, real world listening ability in my opinion.

And then they arrive at the doorsteps of our university—mostly hating English studies through the onslaught to that point. These are some of the challenges that set the context for introducing new ways of learning in the university arena. In short, innovation has to be mindful of the past in order to provide non-threatening, practical and interesting segues for the future. (For a review of traditional vs. innovative approaches see Park, et. al. 2014.)

10 Key Points.

My explorations with an Active Learning approach to language teaching have been honed over many years, through process and error, settling on key aspects that have served my purposes very well. Here I summarize the approach through 10 key points.

1. Be creative. Nothing else matters if the approach is not offered in creative ways that match and

connect to student diversity—in terms of interests, personalities, goals, English and academic level, gender, etc. Venturing into Active Learning requires striving for creative connections and thinking “outside of the box” to make learning situations intriguing and exciting. Basically, the aim is fun, engagement, interaction, and practice (more on practice later).

Making an impactful “first impression” with the “unique” offerings is critical—while being mindful of the cultural context. It should be a measured step—not too long, forceful, or out of the ordinary. But it definitely needs to be intriguing. Sometimes a teacher only has one or two chances to make a great “first” impression. If a sentiment of displeasure or resistance pervades the class, it can be difficult to change the tone. (Having said that, second, third, etc. impressions will avail. So if at first you don’t succeed, try and try again, as the saying goes. Depending on the situation and setting, this is sometimes easier said than done.) Your “first impression” lesson will likely be similar or the same with various classes. Put great effort into an impressive first lesson that you can repeat again and again to give you the chance to make connections and in-roads for “change” from day one.

2. Practice. Make sure that your initial (first few) Active Learning tasks and activities features abundant, even repetitious, practice. After all, students are still restrained by their high school approach to learning through this time. Free and open communication can be perceived as useless and aimless play. Make sure the tasks are infused with language practice. If the practice is connected directly to the target language of the textbook, the purpose is clearer. Also, provide ample pre-activity preparation and instructions. Depending on the activity, you may need to include Japanese instructions (through a memo if you cannot speak Japanese). You want to avoid any frustration or misunderstanding with the steps of the activity at

this early stage. Provide “image training” by role-playing with two students in the front of the class to demonstrate the steps of the activity. Support or feed them the language necessary for the exchange to avoid embarrassing them. Finally, engage in post-activity exercises to underscore the importance of the language practice--within the fun and engagement.

3. Test for communication as soon as possible. It is imperative to make the connection between practice and testing. It relays to the students that they will be held accountable for the target language of the engaging tasks and activities. A quiz, test, IC recording (Higa, 2018B), or worksheet to be graded drives this point home. This begins the process of bridging the gap between their high school mode of learning and new ways of learning. It also makes this critical connection for students: “I practiced a lot; I had fun; and I scored well on a follow-up test.” It also begins to illuminate the purpose and goals of the Active Learning approach, not just for intrigue and fun but for serious learning--retention of target language, expansion of communication dialogs, improvement of fluency and pronunciation, etc. This awareness can be gained intuitively by students. But it should also be emphasized directly by the teacher: “All of the practice of our activities will be tested. The more you practice, the more you will learn. And the better your test scores will be.”

In the first lesson, I often conduct a “classroom English” activity utilizing a card game. Students challenge partners to correctly recite the target language. Correct answers allow them to collect cards and a chance for a bonus point for the lesson. The following week, a unique listening quiz is given on the “classroom English”. Through the practice and subsequent quiz, students are made aware of the importance of the communication exchange of the tasks. The testing component promotes accountability, while the engagement of the activities coaxes students away from their comfort zones in incremental and non-threatening ways.

4. Praise and encourage to allay “communication” fears; but set clear expectations for behavior and partner interaction. Teachers need to carefully monitor behavior early in the semester in order maintain the balance of practice and engagement. It is easy for some students to become complacent due to the “fun” nature of the interaction. The students may not be mindful of the ideal balance. However, in simple terms, as long as students and the teacher get what they want, all is fine in the Active Learning world. In other words, the students have fun and the teacher observes focused practice. Additionally, the balance should culminate with good scores on tests.

Rules and limitations should be enforced to ensure that the interaction is cordial, respectful, and proper, considering the nature of the approach--with multiple partners, through heightened emotion, and with a goal or through a competition.

Rude behavior should not be tolerated, especially in order to support and protect the students who are more reserved (shy, quiet, smaller in stature, etc.).

Losing control of the balance and spiraling into chaotic horseplay is very unfortunate. But there are ways to remedy the situation. What cannot be overcome so easily, however, is a bad first impression due to rude and unacceptable behavior by a partner. Therefore, I intervene immediately if I witness any signs of student-to-student disrespect.

Some related points are discussed here.

--Committing student names to memory as soon as possible is very important for classroom management. If possible, try to commit student names to memory within the first two weeks. I take a picture with their nametags. You can arrange the pictures through websites for classroom management, creating convenient yearbook-like reference pages. Calling students by name gets their attention right away. (Sometimes teachers can warn or scold a

class numerous times without any traction. But once a teacher starts using specific names, the effect can be immediate and impactful.)

--Using an assigned seating chart serves to break up “cliques”. I assign seats randomly on the first day of class with a “lucky” card set. Thereafter, students sit in the same seats for the semester unless there are problems. I feel it is vitally important to separate groups of friends. The Active Learning curriculum will be, by its very nature, extremely lively; allowing friends to add to the merriment in unnecessary and unruly ways should strongly be suppressed.

--When the students are practicing in their “communication line” format (two parallel lines, switching partners in unison according to the timing of the teacher) it is relatively easy for the teacher to control a bad behaving student by simply saying a student’s name and imparting a stern look. They almost always understand the non-verbal warning. Sometimes I don’t need to say their name. Sometimes I need to strengthen the reprimand by pointing to the student. It relays “don’t do that” or “do the task the right way”. Amidst the loud classroom chatter (in English!) the “good” student often does not notice that his partner has been reprimanded, nor does the class. As students are facing each other, I simply stand behind the “good” student while subtly gaining the attention of his partner. (It has been my experience that reprimanding students in a fair way without embarrassing them in front of their peers is a good first step.)

5. Plan ahead. Not all lessons of a textbook or curriculum lend themselves to fun and engagement. Over time, I have explored creative ways to make the mundane interesting and fun (Higa, 2018B). However, there are aspects of any textbook or curriculum that cannot be turned into “fun”. Those aspects often need to be “plowed through” in a straightforward way.

My students can readily persevere through arduous practice as they trust that an interesting activity will be offered in a timely manner. It is a trust that is built through the Active Learning experience. From the students’ perspective, it means that the teacher will not allow us to strain through laborious bookwork and mundane drilling without offering a reprieve through an engaging activity. Additionally, the students recognize that the heavy lifting (mundane task) is essential for the fun and useful activities up ahead. In other words, they persevere and hold out for the “carrots” (rewards), recognizing that the process enhances their learning and prepares them for tests. This may sound too ideal for the real world classroom, but I do contend that the majority of students “get it”. Some get it in different ways, but they still “get it” enough to eagerly follow.

Given these inevitable “lulls” in the textbook lessons and curriculum, planning ahead for the “carrots” becomes imperative. Numerous aspects of the assigned textbook do indeed align perfectly with Active Learning approaches. Planning ahead literally entails “bookmarking” these aspects to serve as “stepping stones” for the course. They represent timely and intermittent steps throughout the semester that motivate and rejuvenate students. They also, of course, provide extensive practice and reinforcement of the target language and communicative focuses. Bookmarking these topics and developing activities for practice and engagement will require teachers to prepare in advance.

6. Assess, refine, and expand. Throughout the semester or course, refinement of the approaches, activities, and tasks is an ongoing reflection. Teachers may need to adjust the activities according to the levels in the class, the balance of practice and engagement, the behavior of the students, etc. Of course, these are spontaneous adjustments week by week, but hindsight (after a period of several weeks or months) can provide

additional insights. A review of weekly lesson plan notes will highlight tendencies and patterns which should be considered going forward. Also, hindsight provides insights into the personalities, styles, interests, etc. of the class. Plan ahead with these aspects in mind.

Additionally, I like to make full use of all the equipment available in the classroom setting. It is an opportunity to harness the intrigue factor inherent in each component available. I plan ahead, matching textbook units with possible connections to the equipment throughout the semester. For example, it may seem unnecessary to make use of the overhead projectors (OHP) that are still available in many classrooms. I take notice of it right away and consider it part of my Active Learning “arsenal”. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to explain in detail my use of the OHP. Briefly, I offer that it is an excellent way to display student artwork. Artwork? Yes, I have brainstormed ways to turn certain textbooks focuses into drawing activities. Then, I display the “answers” to the communication tasks on the OHP. Students “howl” with joy seeing funny renditions of the “answers” displayed so vividly and enlarged on the big screen. Of course, I make use of the DVD, computer, audio, etc. equipment available in the classroom as they enhance the Active Learning approach. I also bring in my own equipment. I consider these explorations the new “realia”. The old school relia entailed bringing in authentic items connected to the lesson focus, e.g. clothing items for a focus on clothing (Pegrum, 2000). The new realia embraces computer graphics, iPhoto slide shows, Youtube clips, etc.

Finally, throughout the course, teachers need to assess the “practice” and testing aspects of the approach. Have the students been on task? Has the proper “balance” been attained? Is the amount of repetitious practice been worth the time spent in class and the effort/time spent as the teacher for preparation? Have the quizzes, tests, and other

assessment measures reflected student focus, motivation, and practice? Have the students “bought into” the program of study? Is student appreciation for the approach continuing and increasing, or waning?

7. Work toward a “cycle of increasing returns”. With the program of study solidly established, the momentum can build from within. The key components of the approach—fun, practice, tests—can generate deeper and wider success. For example, fun and engagement can lead to abundant practice, which in turn can lead to success on tests. Success on tests motivates students to participate more eagerly. It increases the fun and engagement of subsequent activities, leading to increased practice, resulting in further success on test and assessments, including self-assessment. And the cycle continues.

I have consistently witnessed this cyclical effect through the Active Learning approach. I believe it has been pivotal in overcoming the “I hate English” syndrome embodied by freshman students in their first semester. These are anecdotal observations, but they are based on comments on student evaluations for the course.

Regarding student evaluations for courses, in over 20 years of teaching in Japan, there has never been a single negative comment regarding the use of nametags, assigned seating, or the abundance of face-to-face communication. The most prevalent and consistent comments have included, “It was fun”; “I could make new friends;” and “I like English!”

8. Build your treasure-trove of engaging lessons and activities. Continue to build a collection of “can’t miss” lessons and activities to reinforce a range of language focuses, provide extra practice, and invigorate lessons during “lulls”. With these tools in the Active Learning arsenal, teachers can mix-and-match according to needs and adjust on the fly. (I go

to classes with a cart. I only use about 50% of the materials in the cart. But I am prepared to go in different directions, depending on the energy and focus of the students.)

Spend the most time on activities that can be repeated in another lesson or another course. I tend to be wary of spending too much time preparing an activity that looms as a one-off lesson, never to be used or repeated again.

9. Promote longer-range student goals. Having built and attained success over the semester or year, encourage students to consider long range goals, beyond the course. Discovering their purpose for studying English can have meaningful and lasting effects. The purposes for studying English may be for work, hobby, travel, making friends, attending graduate school, conducting research, etc. Through an Active Learning approach the students have realized that English can be fun, interesting, useful, and attainable. Solidifying this base and springboarding to bigger dreams and goals can be life changing.

10. Create and brainstorm some more. Organize. Success breeds success. Allow your creative juices to flow and roam. Think outside of the box. But be mindful of the balance as well. By this time, you will find that you may be accumulating materials in your office connected to your explorations. If so, it is high time to organize your materials, handouts, electronic equipment, etc. A filing, labeling, and storage system will help you to access everything you need, when you need—immediately and completely. Early in this Active Learning venture, I admit that I wasted too much time and effort re-creating materials that I had either misplaced or lost (“pieces” to the set). So heed my warning here if possible.

World Languages.

Increasingly, I have been involved with training and supporting teachers of World Languages, mainly Chinese and Korean, to implement my Active Learning approaches. Although the fields of ESL/EFL and even SLA (Second Language Acquisition studies) are solely and predominantly attached to English language teaching and learning, the concepts, theories, and practices are applicable to World Language instruction. In the realm of language teaching, there has been no equivalent to the research into the English language. A momentous KSL or CSL--Korean as a Second Language or Chinese as a Second Language--movement has not yet developed. The interest in World Languages is certainly growing (Tochon, et. al., 2009). But the theories, approaches, and practices still draw from the vast research in the English arena. My Active Learning approaches are practical, hands-on, and useful. Many of the aspects of this discussion have been applied and have matched well to the teaching of World Languages. This exploration is ongoing.

Conclusion.

Active Learning holds the potential to take education to new heights. Harnessing the passion for teaching, it creates connections to students that make learning intriguing, engaging, practical, and authentic. For teachers, it is a venture that requires commitment and dedication in order to realize the goals of the approach. But the overarching fundamental requirement is a genuine love for teaching and a genuine desire to inspire and advance students. In this way, it can be extremely rewarding for the teacher and the students.

As presently practiced, Active Learning represents different things to different practitioners. This discussion has attempted to outline my perspectives and approaches to Active Learning through

practical examples and observations. “Active Learning” is a relatively new title. However, I have contended that many of the basic tenets of the approach are aligned with the foundational approaches and practices of the field of TESL, Teaching English as a Second Language. Different “labels” may have been attached to the approach but the practice, purpose, and outcome were the same.

In fact, I have applied and expanded upon my influences within the field, attaching the label “Active Learning” as apropos for the current trend. For example, Prof. Robert Gibson introduced “Strip Stories” as a communicative “reading” strategy (Gibson, 1975; Nation, 1989). I have modified his strategy for my Active Learning practices. Also, in a poignant moment in class, he remarked, “If you are going to be a teacher, you need to be a ‘picture person’”. I have taken that advice to heart and developed a wide range of activities and materials utilizing pictures (Higa, 2003). An extensive picture file that I store in several crates remains one of my most valuable components in my Active Learning arsenal. Developed over many years, the artwork and wording attached to the pictures were completed by my students. (Laminating the pictures for long term use is key. That work was also done by students.)

At one of my presentations on Active Learning, an attendee remarked in an agitated manner: “This is good. But I cannot afford to do this.” Meaning, who can afford the time and effort to follow this approach? To which, I replied, “I cannot afford NOT to do this.” I explained that over time and through experience, the approach is actually a time-saver for me. As discussed, utilizing a treasure trove of “can’t miss” activities provides a teacher with options for mixing-and-matching according to theme, topic, target language, class energy, etc. The ability to repeat activities as “ready made” and customized mini-lesson components saves preparation time and energy. (The head-mask activity that I

briefly described above has been used about three times per semester in every class, as a 20-minute activity. The students request to “play” the game more but three times per semester strikes the optimal balance of play and practice from my perspective. For my course load of about 6 classes per semester, the activity is conducted up to 18 times per semester—or 36 times per year. It has been a mainstay in my arsenal for over 10 years. So, up to 360 times the past 10 years.) Of course, I maintain that the most significant returns are the engagement and success within the lessons.

Truth be told, Active Learning is still a time and energy consuming venture for me as I am always exploring new and improved ways to align with the textbook lessons. It is my role and participation in the “cycle of increasing returns” that I appreciate. Still, I have the option of falling back on my “treasure trove” and can explore new additions according to my time and energy. I have enjoyed the ride and continue to do so.

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