

Make Your Classroom a Place for Active Learning

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Introduction

The literature confirms that many English students in Japan really like English in Chu I, and then, unfortunately, research shows that too many of them grow to dislike English by the time they get to high school. Having 25 years teaching EFL, I can certainly confirm that when students are working with me in class it is a pleasure to teach them, but when they are working against me, every single minute can be painful! These days, one popular approach in Japanese education circles is called Active Learning, and it is not only something you should learn about, but also a fundamental key to better learning outcomes for students and overall deeper satisfaction for teachers as well.

It used to be that Japanese students had to “study English,” but they were not required to “learn English.” This means that English has been taught and studied as an academic exercise that was more about decoding grammar and solving translation puzzles. High school students could pass university entrance exams simply by memorizing grammar rules and long lists of vocabulary. However, with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) planning to implement a four-skill exam system by 2020, students will soon need to actually learn to use English more than ever before. Luckily, Active Learning is an effective approach for both you and your students to reach your goals.

What is Active Learning?

Active Learning simply means getting students to participate in class (be active) and for them to think about the things they are doing (think actively). A second layer of active learning is to slowly engage students in the decisions that are made in the classroom. The more that students take responsibility or ownership of their learning, the better the results will be.

An Active Learning classroom is a blend between how good Japanese Teachers of English (JTE) usually teach, and how good Native English-speaking Teachers (NEST) usually teach. This means combining the JTE’s grammatical expertise, cultural awareness, and understanding of the Japanese educational testing system with the NEST’s motivation to have students actually and purposefully use English, as well as the NEST’s implicit understanding of what works and doesn’t work in English.

If you choose to use an Active Learning approach in your classroom, there are a number of specific benefits for both you and your students.

Benefits of Active Learning

1. Active Learning can lead to a **Virtuous Cycle**, and hopefully decrease the number of classrooms where a **Vicious Cycle** has too often become the norm in English classes. Figure 1 illustrates some typical stages of vicious and virtuous cycles in the EFL English language classroom.

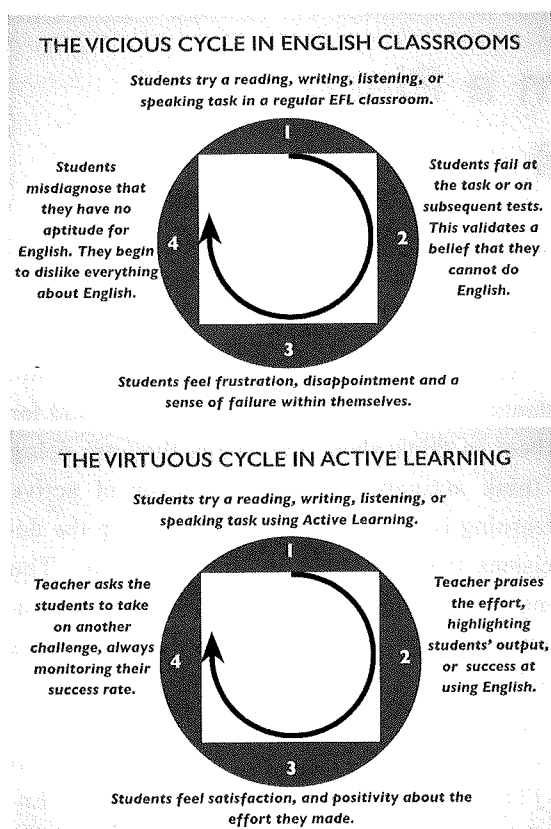


Figure 1. Vicious and Virtuous Cycles in an EFL classroom

2. Active Learning is well known for **creating interest** in English among students. The days of passively listening to lectures or “chalk and talk” will soon be over. The concept of becoming interested in something is the single largest factor triggering the magical powers of Intrinsic Motivation. Students with intrinsic motivation make efforts because they want to and it makes them happy to improve their English.

3. Recent **brain research** says that learners must move their bodies about every 20 minutes to maximize the capacity to learn. Moving gets your blood circulating and helps you to learn. Beyond that, humans start to lose concentration after 10-15 minutes of passive listening. Active Learning encourages students in many ways to stand up, move around, and interact with others.

4. Some of the latest findings in **motivational**

psychology can be seen in Active Learning. Remember the acronym CASE whenever you are in the classroom. In an Active Learning approach, we want to Challenge students, Arouse interest, Stimulate thinking, and Engage learners. It took me years to gain enough confidence to adapt my textbooks, skip sections or reject activities outright, but now if what I am teaching is not challenging, arousing, stimulating or engaging students, then I don't hesitate at all to stop and try something different.

5. Active Learning supports **Learner Autonomy**, which simply means teaching learners how to learn. This can mean teaching general study skills like using a notebook efficiently, showing students the infinite number of free language related Internet sites and Apps for learning English. Moreover, it is useful to teach students how to measure their own input and output abilities, including their reading speed (words per minute - WPM), speaking speed, vocabulary level, and the frequency and kinds of errors of their output. Once students know how to learn, they can carry those skills and strategies with them throughout their lives.

6. **Student-centered Learning** is a key element of Active Learning. Consider these two unique and challenging questions: 1) When is teaching not teaching? And, 2) When is not teaching teaching?

1) Teaching is not teaching when students are not learning.

2) Not teaching is teaching when the teacher is in the background and students are learning among themselves.

For me, the answer to question 1) reminds me of my early years when my English classes were almost completely teacher-centered and I spent most of the time bouncing around the classroom trying to make something happen, even though very little learning was taking place. Luckily, as I continue to learn more about the art of teaching, I spend much less

time teaching, and invest that time into walking around, listening to students, observing their interaction and giving formative feedback — that is the answer to question 2) — I'm now leading a very student-centered class.

Upon hearing the argument for an Active Learning approach, a growing number of Japanese English teachers are impressed and appreciative of the benefits, but often they don't know where to begin. Many teacher trainers advise taking small steps at first, focusing on being successful. This means it is best to implement ideas that are clear and easy for the teacher to introduce, and ideas that are certainly within the students' ability so that teachers and students can begin to build success upon success, hopefully leading to the virtuous cycle.

Ways to Introduce Active Learning into EFL

As a balanced four-skill approach continues to gain popularity in EFL teaching in Japan, several ways to implement Active Learning will be introduced from three perspectives: 1) General Ideas, 2) Input Ideas (reading & listening), and 3) Output Ideas (speaking & writing). Many of the ideas can be adapted within each skill. For instance, a writing idea like free writing can also be effective as free speaking (see 適当 Talk). Additionally, a listening idea like focusing on the gist of a speech, can work in the same way as getting the gist of a written article. So, feel free to mix and match as you can.

General Ideas

- Use pauses to keep students fresh. In a 50-minute lesson, it could be very helpful to take a 2 to 3-minute pause every 10-15 minutes to allow students to react in pairs to the lesson. They could ask each other questions, confirm meanings, provide other examples, etc. Furthermore, research shows that concentration abilities increase with short

breaks.

- Increase wait times. Typically, teachers ask a question and then wait less than 1 second before they provide the answer themselves. Research clearly shows that waiting 3 to 5 seconds for a student to answer has a huge impact on participation, better answers, more details and risk-taking by students.
- Use humor. For example, implementing a joke of the week, or English cartoon, or funny anecdote can be something that students really look forward to every "Funny Friday." In the school where I taught for 20 years, a Japanese English teacher colleague was famous for his "ムダ話," where he told short stories about all of the strange things about the English language.
- Increase pair work, small group work and team work. Collaboration is a highly effective tool in the language classroom. There is an almost endless list of ways to work beyond the individual level collaboratively: 1) brainstorming, 2) interviewing, 3) comparing opinions, 4) debating, 5) surveying, 6) building layered stories, 7) role playing, 8) playing word games, 9) chain making, 10) competing against other teams.

Reading and Listening Ideas

- Fluency — There are a number of free speed reading downloads available on the Internet. Initially, raising awareness about reading speed is eye opening, useful and fun for many students. No one wants to spend twice as long reading because their speed is half as fast as their friends. Everyone can increase their reading speed with just a little bit of practice.
- Accuracy — Comprehension checks can be fun, interactive and failure proof if you make just a little bit of effort to be deliberate. The safest way for students to be active and not fearful of embarrassing themselves is to have

them answer in pairs and raise their hands. There are ample opportunities for team games quizzing students on vocabulary, phrases and sentences. Translations being written or spoken are also a wonderful way to confirm comprehension of listening or reading activities.

- Complexity — Vocabulary development is one of the best ways to encourage students to increase their English abilities. The Internet is full of websites that offer students a chance to play vocabulary games, learn antonyms, synonyms and idioms. For students without Internet access, it is very easy for teachers to download and print tons of Google image posters about a wide variety of vocabulary for use in class.

Speaking and Writing Ideas

- Fluency — For writing classes, a regular 5 or 10-minute free writing activity (for practice only — not to be corrected!) can lead to immediate writing fluency gains over a relatively short period of time (many of my high school students doubled their output in 25 sessions).

For speaking classes, a pair work activity I call “**適當 Talk**” is a great fluency builder. Each day the teacher introduces a new letter of the alphabet and students aim to meet the target (0:30 — 3:00 over time). For example, “Today is ‘A.’ Player 1, your word is APPLE, Go!” After he/she succeeds, player 2 stands up and talks about ADULT’S DAY (成人の日). This activity always works!

Finally, for raising awareness about the importance of speaking fluency, I always measure students’ words per minute (WPM). We repeat this activity a set number of times throughout the year (5 or 6) and any student who makes an effort will certainly see their output improve a lot. For some students, developing some initial confidence with fluency

may take all year or longer. However, for those who gain some fluency with their output, they often have enough confidence to want a new challenge — and for some it is better accuracy and for others it becomes a desire for more complexity.

- Accuracy — one of the most useful accuracy activities I have ever done (according to my students) has been coined, “Three Kinds of Errors.” This is based on my own idea that there are really only 1) careless mistakes, 2) my own weakness mistakes, and 3) mistakes beyond my level. It is easy to show students the range of their mistake types, but it does take a time investment by the teacher (I only ever do this once a year). Each student must write something of about 150 words. I correct every mistake on the page and hand back the paper. Students must do two things: First, identify and write down the type for each mistake (1, 2, or 3), and then calculate what percent of their errors are careless, a personal weakness, or beyond their level. Students always learn a lot about themselves from this activity.
- Complexity — One of my colleagues has had great success having high school students tackle big and complex issues in the news. Her students wrote, debated and presented about many of the top issues of the day including politics, religion, love, Japan, etc. These students were totally impressed that their opinions were respected, validated or challenged by the teacher.

Conclusion

Don’t hesitate to make your classroom a place for Active Learning. If you would ever like to contact me I would be very happy to hear from you, and I can be reached at steven.herder@gmail.com for the next few years!

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