

# A Review of Active Learning in an English Reading and Writing Classroom in Japanese Higher Education

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## Introduction

It has only been less than a decade since Active Learning (AL) method was introduced as an official policy to Japanese higher education. With the development of globalization, Japanese higher education has resonated with its government and business world to follow the global trend of applying AL to nurture global citizens that could negotiate and achieve the desired results in the international arena. This trend has been reflected not only in the field of TESOL, but also in other disciplines in humanities and sciences. However, from studying this trend from the students' perspective, is AL indeed "*the*" preferred pedagogical method? As a lecturer and a researcher in the field of TESOL, this has been a concerning inquiry for me.

This study will introduce an ongoing investigation that explores undergraduate students' preferred method of learning in an English classroom at a Japanese university. The study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design and conducts a questionnaire survey (N=21) and semi-structured interviews (N=21) with student participants. The results at the beginning of the semester indicate that a majority (N=12) prefers the traditional lecture-style, while only three participants prefer AL. The remaining participants expressed that they do not mind either, or like both styles. Interestingly, by the end of the semester, preference levels out to be almost equal with five students for AL, and six, for lecture-style, with the remaining participants expressing that they do not mind either, or like both styles.

In accordance with previous studies, the research reveals limitations in both AL and lecture-style approaches, of which some may perhaps be unique to Japanese culture. These results suggest that to fulfill student expectations for a preferred learning method, a combination of AL and lecture-style may be the ideal option compared to applying just one. The study will conclude with a discussion of implications for practi-

cal teaching methods in an English classroom at a Japanese university— for acquiring and retaining knowledge.

### **Research Background & Purpose**

According to Nagata & Hayashi (2016), “Active Learning is a general term for a pedagogic methodology involving and engaging students in learning activities” [translated by Mori] (p.1), while Marrone et al. (2018) claim further that “Active Learning has been evaluated as raising student motivation, engagement, and understanding of course material. It promotes deep learning, helping to develop critical thinking and writing skills in students” (p.1).

In the Japanese higher education context, it is depicted as “encourag[ing] students to actively engage with learning, enhancing their generic and employability skills” (Ito, 2017, p.1). As seen from these examples alone, “there is no clear definition of AL” (Yamaguchi, 2016; Ito, 2017), and in fact, lecturers are conducting AL based on their own ‘image’ of this methodology.

The purpose of this study lies in the hope to better understand AL by studying the responses of students since this has been under-investigated in past literature. As Osterman (2014) asserts, “One key missing part to prior research [on Willingness-to-Communicate, which is, for Japanese students, a notion deeply related to AL] was actual students’ interviews and opinions... now future researchers can have actual students’ voices to add to the literature” (p. 8).

### **A Brief Literature Review**

Japanese university lecturers typically understand AL to be using instructional methods such as CL (Cooperative Learning) and PBL (Problem/Project-Based Learning) (Nishikawa, 2015), but some lecturers have the impression that students often learn little (Ito, 2017) from them. Ito’s claim (2017) that students often learn little from AL resonates with Dewey (in Yamauchi, 2016) in that unless students have active ‘thinking caps,’ learning will not occur. For instance, in choral reading, which may be interpreted as one method of AL in the sense that students are ‘actively’ reading, there exists criticism in literature that while students may be physically reading, some may not be comprehending their reading since they are too occupied in keeping up with the whole group (Yoneoka, 1994). In another instance, Medina (2017) argues that it is essential to make the learners’ thinking visible to close the AL loop in an

activity. For example, asking the students to write a summary of what they have just read would be one method of making the learners' thinking visible. Meanwhile, some studies show evidence that AL enhances learning (Deslauriers et al., 2011).

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to answer the following seven questions:

1. Do students prefer AL to lecture-style teaching?
2. What are the reasons for preferring AL to lecture-style teaching?
3. What are the reasons for preferring lecture-style teaching?
4. Which methodology (AL/lecture) did students feel they acquire more knowledge and experience at the end of a semester?
5. What are the reasons for liking both at the end of a semester?
6. What are the reasons for no preference at the end of a semester?
7. What theoretical concept(s) help better understand how the students perceive AL?

### **My study**

This study was conducted at an urban women's college in Japan. The 21 participants were all second-year undergraduate students in a mandatory Intensive Reading & Writing class with a Japanese medium of instruction.

This class has an assigned textbook, and the 90-minute lesson consists of approximately a third in lecture-style approach, and the remaining two-thirds, in AL. The lecture-style part of the class consists mainly of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension guidance, while the AL part is made up of classic 'read after me' shadow reading, or 'read together' choral reading, which is believed to decrease anxiety and build the students' fluency, self-confidence, and motivation in a language learning classroom (Bane, 1954). For writing, since the end of semester summative assessment is a presentation on what the students had been formatively writing during class time, students practice in pairs and in groups to best present their compositions. The students' essays are submitted, then, fed back, later revised, and submitted at the point where no more revision is necessary. The lecturer creates many occasions in a casual atmosphere, where students present their themes or ideas for constructing the presentation.

This study adopts a mixed method research design, which is believed to be the most appropriate when combining "statistical trends (quantitative data) with stories and personal experiences (qualitative data)" (Creswell, 2015, p.2). This method pro-

vides “a better understanding of the research problem than either form of data alone” (Creswell, 2015, p.2), or when considering an exploration of the breadth and depth of issues for the most comprehensive answers (Ivankova & Greer, 2015). This research employs a sequential explanatory design and uses quantitative (written questionnaire) and qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews). Its sequential process allows the author to review and analyze the questionnaire results (in phase 1) and tailor the subsequent interviews (in phase 2) to follow-up on ambiguous or prominent responses (Driscoll et al., 2007), creating a comprehensive picture of the students’ preferred method of learning.

### **Data Analysis**

For the questionnaire, after transferring completed questionnaires into electronic format, the author calculated frequency, mean, range, and standard deviation for the quantitative data. For the open-ended questionnaire responses, the author first analyzed the answers by identifying major themes. Secondly, the author quantified the data by taking note of the number of times a subject was mentioned. Such quantified frequencies (Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, & Rupert, 2007) illuminated prominent themes. As for interviews, each audiotape recording was transcribed into a Word document, with no identifying information. The author conducted a content analysis to order, structure, and provide meaning to the qualitative data (Lucas, 2016). Recurring themes were identified and coded under common topics.

### **Selected Findings according to Research Questions**

Q1. Do students prefer AL to lecture-style teaching?

- No, not at the beginning of a semester. Only three students preferred AL, while the majority (N=12) preferred lecture-style. However, by the end of the semester, the preference leveled out to be almost the same with five students for AL, and six, for lecture-style. Also, there was an increase in students that answered they like both.

*Examples from data: Change of preferences from the start to the end of a semester*

Preferences	Start of Semester	End of Semester
active learning	3	5
lecture-style	12	6
like both	5	8
no preference	1	2
total number of students	21	21

Q2. What are the reasons for preferring AL to lecture-style teaching?

- Positive reasons: "It is proactive"; "I enjoy being able to use mind and body"; "I find it interesting to listen to others' thoughts"; "I feel that I have acquired knowledge more".
- Negative reason: "Lecture-style could be sleepy and boring, thus, AL."

*Examples from data [translation by Mori]:*

Participant (P)9: "I become **sleepy** in lecture-style, whereas, in AL, there is time to think actively for longer length of time."

P10: "Just listening to lectures makes me **sleepy**, whereas, I enjoy using my head, body, and mouth in AL."

P14: "I find it very interesting to listen to my classmates' opinions and thoughts in an AL, whereas, in lectures, I often become **sleepy**."

P16: "I find that I have learned and acquired more from AL than from a lecture-style class."

P20: "Just listening to the lecturer makes me **sleepy**."

Q3. What are the reasons for preferring lecture-style teaching?

- Positive reason: "I am able to listen deeply to the lecturer."
- Negative reason(s): "feel anxiety"; "lack confidence in AL, vs. lecture-style."

*Examples from data [translation by Mori]:*

P1: "I have come to enjoy AL, but since I **get nervous** in AL, I prefer lecture-style."

P2: "I am **not fond of\*** presenting in class."

P5: "I prefer to listen to lectures."

P6: "I know that I am talking from my comfort zones, but I am **not good at\*** speaking English, so I don't want to present in class."

P8: “I **am afraid** of silence between communication during AL.”

P13: “I don’t like to **get nervous** in AL.”

[\*Many mentioned being “苦手 *nigate*”(adj): NOT being fond of, or, NOT being good at something, and having a “苦手意識 *nigate ishiki*”(noun): awareness of NOT being fond of, or, NOT being good at something (in this context, communicating in English)]

Q4. Which methodology (AL/lecture-style) did students feel they acquired more knowledge and experience at the end of the semester?

- The majority responded, ‘Active Learning’ (13/22 students)

*Examples from data: Students’ impression of acquiring more skill and knowledge*

Students’ impression of acquiring more skill and knowledge in:	End of Semester
active learning	13
lecture-style	1
both	6
neither	1
total number of students	21

Q5. What are the reasons for liking both educational styles?

- One student’s response: “I appreciate positive aspects of both AL and lecture-style.”

*Examples from data [translation by Mori]:*

P3: “I think lectures are necessary to learn new knowledge, but for English, I feel, the more you practice, the less resistance you feel towards the language.”

P4: “In AL, by working together with your classmates, you get to help each other and feel a sense of togetherness. Also, I want the lecturer’s input, so I think the lecture is important, too.”

P12: “I think it is important to **think** on paper, and also to actually use English **with your voice**. You need both to sense that you are learning.”

P15: “In AL, you can enjoy inspiring moments when you find out new things from your classmates. However, depending on whom you are pairing up with, if your partner doesn’t talk, it can be uncomfortable. In lectures, I enjoy the lecturer’s episodes, but lectures can become boring.”

P17: “I like both because in lecture-style teaching, I can **sort out my thoughts**, and in AL, by listening to my classmates, I can **broaden my thinking**.”

Q6. What are the reasons for no preference?

- “I do not have a strong positive or negative impression for either, so, no preference.”

*Examples from data [translation by Mori]:*

P7: “I used not to favor the small-sized AL classes, but now I’ve got used to them.”

P21: “I think we can learn from both styles.”

Q7. What may be the key theoretical concept(s) that may help better understand how the students perceive AL?

- First, the concept of Willingness-to-Communicate (WTC) (Yashima, 2002) that helps to explain in what situation people feel confident and perceive themselves as effective communicators (Peng, 2007) would guide lecturers for building a safe learning environment for students since (as examples from data show) many “feel anxiety” and “lack confidence” for AL. Along with WTC, the concept of Unwillingness-to-Communicate (UTC) (Burgoon, 1976) may assist with creating strategies for lecturers so that students can “enjoy inspiring moments” and not feel “uncomfortable” in AL classrooms. Burgoon (1976) defines UTC as a chronic tendency to avoid or devalue oral communication, and to view the communication situation as relatively unrewarding. This concept adequately describes the overall passive attitude of Japanese English learners to communicate (Fukuta, 2017), as gleaned in many student voices at the beginning of the semester in this study. For these students many of whom express their feelings about English communication as “苦手 *nigate*”, or, having a chronic “苦手意識 *nigate ishiki*,” WTC and UTC are two essential wheels believed to better understand and resolve the students’ concern regarding English communication.

Second, the concept of high-context (Japanese language) and low-context (English language) will help the lecturers better understand how the students perceive AL. According to Oyamada and Watanabe-Deluca (2019), there is a necessity to communicate explicitly in English since many people from diverse backgrounds speak the English language, and people have different interpretations even for

the same words, phrases, and sentences. On the other hand, in a relatively homogenous culture such as in Japan, people do not have to speak so explicitly since a single word may imply and may hold a common interpretation among the communicators. According to the two authors, the difference between a high-context language and a low-context language (high or low meaning the degree of same interpretation people derive from a given context) is especially prominent given a background of emotions. Compared to the English language, there are many words such as '*aimai* [vagueness],'*tamamushi iro* [iridescent color],'*tana age* [set aside]' which imply the value of leaving expressions vague in the Japanese culture. Understandably, students brought up in such a culture of 'reading between the lines' may perhaps be hesitant to speak clearly of their feelings and opinions, or "feel anxiety" about communicating in a way so different from their culture. The sharing of intercultural awareness is believed to help both the lecturers and the students that it is only natural that a little hesitance may occur in learning another language with a different cultural background.

## Discussion

Students at the study site preferred lecture-style to AL at the beginning of the semester, with most students lacking familiarity with each other, the lecturer, and the classroom atmosphere. But as students get to know each other, their instructor, and the class atmosphere, some changed their thinking and found AL the preferred approach, or thought both are equally good. Interestingly, as many as 13 students (the majority) acknowledged the effectiveness of AL, though, if asked about the 'preference,' some still chose the traditional lecture-style as their preferred learning methodology.

The critical issue for lecturers would be, "Why is this gap occurring? Why do students continue to prefer lecture-style methodology even after they realize the positive effects of AL?" The author infers from her study that it may be the accumulation of negative experience of anxiety and lack of confidence in learning English throughout education (Yashima, 2002), or, perhaps, the Japanese cultural trait of shyness, *haji*. The term *haji* may also mean embarrassment or shame about making mistakes. This echoes a Malaysian study on English language anxiety (Chi et al., 2016) in which the "cultural emphasis on saving face" (p. 53) is highlighted.

From the voices of students in the current study, the essence of a successful AL is believed to be creating "a safe learning environment" (Osterman, 2014) for students



where they do not have to feel afraid of making mistakes, but rather one in which they are able to think that mistakes are a part of success. The following three points by Sisson (2016) may be worth sharing with the students at the beginning of any semester:

1. Mistakes are an essential part of one's transformation.
2. Mistakes free us from sabotaging fears and help us take positive risks.
3. Mistakes reboot our motivation [to acquire new skills and knowledge].

It is unrealistic to try to 'change' strong cultural traits like shyness and the preference to express one's feelings and opinion not in a clear-cut way. However, being aware of these cultural traits and to try to build upon such characteristics by sharing that it is important to make mistakes in language learning would be one constructive way of accumulating a positive learning experience through the AL methodology. Indeed, "[mistakes] are an inevitable part of the language learning process, and learners should embrace them, and not be afraid to make them" (Saundz, 2016).

## Conclusion

So, returning to the central inquiry of this study, "Is Active Learning for all in Japanese Higher education?" One may conclude that in Japan, perhaps not at the beginning of the semester. Based on the study result, it almost certainly could become a 'yes' from mid-semester depending on how well the lecturer facilitates each student "to think" between the process of "learning by doing" (Dewey in Yamauchi, 2016) in each activity, how effectively the lecturer conveys cultural awareness into the classroom (McAllister, & Irvine, 2000) and how well the lecturer "creates a safe learning environment" (Osterman, 2014; Dornyei & Muir, 2018) for students to feel comfortable in presenting their feelings or opinions. A robust foundation for accepting each other's mistakes, which can only be achieved through steady and sincere confidence-building, is believed to be in the hands of every participant in the classroom.

Efforts were made to ensure the validity and reliability of the study; however, a few limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study was limited by its small sample size. Recommendations for future research include surveying larger samples in different universities with similar English classes, so that the results could be generalized. Second, the participant sample was limited to female students since the study

site was a women's college. Future research could include studies from co-ed universities in Japan. Third, the data was collected over a relatively short time. More time for face-to-face interviews could lead to a more in-depth understanding of students' perceptions towards AL. A triangulation of methods by including student journals may also be useful for gaining deeper insights into future research. Finally, a longitudinal study format may also be practical to keep track of the classes' long-term influences on students' perceptions of AL. The limitations of this study set the platform for future research of what needs to be done further in an English reading and writing class with an active learning approach. The author believes that the notion of WTC and UTC, together with the theoretical framework of high-context and low-context suggests a powerful tool for better understanding student perceptions of AL. Most importantly, this study provides further opportunities for a better understanding of student behavior and performance in the second language acquisition process, and the importance of teaching and learning in English classrooms and beyond.

To end, the author would like to introduce an inspiring excerpt by Moeller (2019):

“In order to serve our profession, we too must change and grow. As researchers, we must improve the core of our craft as research, best practices, and the world evolves.”



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