

# How can English Lessons be Turned into Active Learning?

— From the Perspective of the High School-University Articulation —

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## 1. Introduction

According to the guidelines recommended by the Central Education Council (2012), educational institutes at all levels are expected to introduce active learning to develop and enhance their students' ability. Active learning has been introduced into the university and college curriculums. The number of such universities and colleges has rapidly increased since the 'Deregulation of Standards for Establishment of Universities' in 1991, and today the majority of universities and colleges in Japan offer programs incorporating active learning. The primary interests of such universities and colleges are to raise the retention rate of the students by helping them adjust themselves into the study in higher education smoothly, to deal with the diversity among the students, or to achieve better learning outcomes.

As the number of universities and colleges introducing 'First Year Experience programs' incorporating active learning increases, awareness of the importance of the high school-university articulation is growing. The practice of high school-university articulation was originally introduced in the form of assignments to high school students from the universities or colleges they would enter after graduating from high

school. Basically, this kind of assignments had two purposes; one is to keep the students busy until the time of graduation, and the other is to prepare them for the study at universities or colleges. These days, other types of practices such as on-campus workshops and online programs are being introduced, and the focus of the practice seems to shift from “learning assistance” to “student care” with an intention to improve the retention rate in the freshman year. There is yet another option, catered lectures to high schools. This has been considered as a practice to recruit students, but the meaning of this practice seems to be changing after educational institutes at all levels started incorporating active learning in their curriculums.

In this paper, the way to turn English lessons into active learning as well as the role of the catered lecture in the high school-university articulation are explored by examining the results of a catered English lesson.

## **2. The Change in the Needs for Catered Lectures at High Schools**

English education in Japan is becoming communication focused on the surface, however the reality seems to be different. The ultimate goal of English education for the majority of high schools is to prepare their students for entrance examinations to national, public, or prestigious private universities. This is assumed by the comments from many university students saying that they often worked on grammar problem sets in communication classes and the like.

The introduction of active learning seems to have an influence to change this situation. Active learning is based on the philosophy of promoting spontaneous learning and of facilitating learning, and as yet

there is no reliable methods for this. That is why a lot of high school teachers are having a hard time introducing active learning into their curriculums. As symbolized in the prescribed textbooks, high school education is teaching-focused, that is, high school teachers are good at effectively teaching subjects following the guidelines, but not so good at inventing methods (for active learning) from scratch.

On the other hand, at universities and colleges, measures such as offering FYE (First Year Experience) programs, providing academically underprepared students with developmental education, incorporating active learning in the curriculums, streaming students into several groups based on the results of placement tests, and allowing 24-hour access to e-learning programs have been taken to deal with the growing diversity in English proficiency and basic academic skills among students. In reality, the majority of the students, with the exception of English or communication-major students, are likely to lose interest in studying English, and many universities and colleges have to provide remedial English programs setting their levels at around STEP 4 or 3, although STEP 2 is said to be the level high school graduates are expected to reach according to the STEP criteria.

Considering this situation and the fact that high schools requesting catered lectures with active learning contents are increasing, now is the time for universities and colleges to seek a fresh development of the high school-university articulation by providing needed support to high schools through catered lectures incorporating active learning. Therefore, it is pertinent to sort out the points of active learning in English education referring to the learning assistance theories and the current English educational practices at universities and colleges.

### 3. Features of English Lessons Incorporating Active Learning

In order to develop English lessons incorporating active learning, some key definitions of active learning need to be inspected.

Bonwell & Eison (1991) defined active learning as something that “involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” after integrating the following characteristics of active learning from educational literatures.

- Students are involved in more than listening.
- Less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on developing students' skills.
- Students are involved in higher-order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation).
- Students are engaged in activities (e.g. reading, discussing, writing).
- Greater emphasis is placed on students' exploration of their own attitudes and values.

The definition by the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (2012) sheds light on the autonomy of the learners in active learning and the non-traditional style of active learning. Matsushita (2015) points out that acquisition or comprehension of knowledge by the learner is prerequisite for the success of active learning, that traditional lectures and active learning are compatible, and that the learning cycle must be visible to both teachers and students.

According to Mizokami (2014), the learning through traditional style lectures can be turned into active learning by integrating with activities such as writing, speaking, and presenting.

To sum up, advance guidance including necessary input to promote the learners' comprehension of the task, contrivances to motivate

learners, and integrating tasks for the learners to actually use English are the key to success of English lessons incorporating active learning. Also, the role of the teacher as the facilitator and/or the interlocutor should not be forgotten especially when the learners' proficiency is low.

#### **4. A Catered English Lesson Incorporating Active Learning**

An English lesson incorporating the key definitions of active learning mentioned in the above chapter was given for 2 hours at a public high school in the Tohoku District in August 2016.

The participants were 10 high school students (3 second-year and 7 first-year students). Considering that they had chosen this class out of 16 options and that the high school is a high-ranked school in the prefecture in terms of its educational offering, it was assumed that these participants were motivated and the level of their English proficiency was not low.

After a brief explanation of active learning, the flow of the lesson, and the general outline of each activity, the participants were divided into three teams. They decided the name of their own team and worked on 6 activities as a team. For each activity, each team got points for the speed in completing the task and for the quality of the completed task. When all the activities were over, the winner was decided by calculating the points each team gained. The following are the outlines of the activities.

##### **4.1 Input of useful expressions**

The first activity was the input of useful expressions. For this activity, explanation was given in Japanese. The participants learned English expressions to use during the lesson and pronounced them until they felt

confident of their pronunciation. The instructor helped each participant if support was needed. The expressions the participants learned are shown in Appendix A.

#### **4.2 Warm-up**

The second activity was listening for warm-up. The activity was intended to generate a sense of accomplishment and confidence in each participant, and also to promote cooperation among the team members. In this activity, the participants listened to the instructor's self-introduction in English, then worked on questions in the worksheet as a team. They were encouraged to help each other within the team and to ask questions or request support using expressions they learned in the first activity. For this activity, hidden support was given in advance because the most part of the self-introduction was taken from what the instructor said at the beginning. The self-introduction and the questions (with answers) are shown in Appendix B.

#### **4.3 Reading for meaning**

The third activity was to get meaning without translation. For each group a different set of short and simple definitions of words was given and they worked to find the right words for all the definitions. Each set had 10 definitions taken from an old picture dictionary for American public schools and the initial letter of the word for each definition was given as a hint. The participants were encouraged to use dictionaries or ask the instructor for additional hints or support. The sets of definitions are shown in Appendix C.

#### **4.4 Dictation and Dialogue Puzzle**

The fourth activity consisted of dictation and a dialogue puzzle. First, the participants worked on dictation of a dialogue between A and B using dictation sheets for each part. Statements in the dialogue were scrambled, and the participants in each team were divided into two groups; the one to do dictation of A's statements in a dialogue, and the other to do dictation of B's statements. After completing the dictation, two groups merged in each team to put statements in the correct order and make a full dialogue. The dictation sheets with answers and a full dialogue are shown in Appendix D.

#### **4.5 Brainstorming and Composition**

The fifth activity consisted of brainstorming and composition. After the instructor's brief explanation about "brainstorming," the topic of composition was given. It was to introduce "Nebuta Matsuri" in four sentences, and the participants brainstormed in each team about what information should be included in their introductory passage. The participants were encouraged to use dictionaries or ask the instructor for hints or support in organizing ideas.

#### **4.6 Presentation**

The last activity was presentation. Since time was running out, the introductory passages were not presented orally. Instead each team was asked to e-mail the instructor their introductory passage, which was to be shared with other teams by the PowerPoint projection. Unfortunately, one team failed to complete the composition, but they seemed to be inspired by the compositions of other teams. Completed introductory

passages are shown in Appendix E.

## **5. Questionnaire Results**

After the lesson a questionnaire was conducted to get participants' feedback and comments on the English lesson incorporating active learning. There were four questions; (1) satisfaction level (four-point scale), (2) interest in the contents (yes/no), (3) pros and cons about the lesson (free description), and (4) the most impressive aspect of the lesson (free description). The results for the questions are shown below. (All free descriptions by the participants were in Japanese, which were translated into English by the author.)

### **5.1 Satisfaction Level**

This is a four-point scale question with options of “very satisfied,” “somewhat satisfied,” “somewhat dissatisfied,” and “very dissatisfied” to choose from. To this question, 6 participants answered “very satisfied” and 4 answered “somewhat satisfied.” The result of this question tells that the satisfaction level of the participants was extremely high.

### **5.2 Interest in the Contents**

This question was to ask if the participants were interested in the contents of the activities. To this question, all the participants answered “yes.” Therefore, the choice of the contents was appropriate to motivate the participants.

### **5.3 Pros and Cons**

In order to accurately grab the characteristics of the English lesson

incorporating active learning perceived by the participants, the question was open-ended.

### **5.3.1 Pros (positive comments)**

Positive comments about the English lesson incorporating active learning contain the following.

- (1)The whole lesson was given in English.
- (2)More English was used than in the regular lesson, and it was fun.
- (3)The instructor taught us useful expressions to ask questions in the advance guidance.
- (4)I enjoyed working on games using English. The instructor's English was easy to understand. This lesson made me love English even more.
- (5)I enjoyed studying English in a different way.
- (6)In the end, I was able to understand what I studied today.
- (7)I learned there are various ways to study English.
- (8)I enjoyed using English in the lesson.
- (9)I worked on the tasks actively. I was able to complete many tasks cooperating with other team members.
- (10)Through working on games in English, I was able to improve listening and reading comprehension. I reconfirmed the fun of studying English.

While most comments refer to the fun of studying English in a variety of ways or using English, it is noteworthy that there were comments about the effectiveness of advance guidance, the importance of comprehension, and the effect of working in a team. These comments strengthen the appropriateness of the key points of the English lesson incorporating active learning stated in the earlier part of this paper.

### 5.3.2 Cons (negative comments)

Negative comments about the English lesson incorporating active learning contain the following.

- (1) I wanted to know more about how to study English.
- (2) I wanted to know how to study English.
- (3) I was not able to complete the task within the time limit.
- (4) I was not able to keep up with other students because there were words I did not know.
- (5) I was not able to communicate well with other members in the group.
- (6) Our team was not so active in the group work activities.
- (7) My English proficiency was low.
- (8) I was not able to complete some tasks within the time limit.

These comments show the participants' low self-evaluation and a compelling need for effective learning methods. However, the low self-evaluation by the participants seems to be caused by insufficient recognition of the English lesson incorporating active learning, and it can be improved as the participants gain experience in such a lesson. Even so, considering the results of the question 2 showing the participants were motivated, insufficient recognition of the activity could be a stumbling block for the introduction of active learning in English education, and due attention and appropriate measures will be needed.

### 5.4 Most Impressive Aspect of the Lesson

The participants' comments on the most impressive aspect of the lesson contain the following.

- (1) In Activity 2, I learned some expressions useful in conversation.
- (2) The lesson was different from the regular class where we work on

- workbooks or English problems. I was interested in the contents.
- (3) In every activity, I had to think hard.
  - (4) Working on questions about Mr. Kabeya's self-introduction was fun.
  - (5) It was good to know that I could learn English in a different way.
  - (6) I was convinced that active communication with people around me is important.
  - (7) Looking at other groups' presentations, I learned a task can be approached in different ways.
  - (8) You never learn anything unless you enjoy what you work on.
  - (9) Reading for meaning was fun.
  - (10) I enjoyed studying English through game-like activities. The instructor's pronunciation was excellent.

These comments show the participants' perception that this untraditional way of learning is fun, that interaction and cooperation with other people are important in active learning, and that intellectualization is needed to complete the active learning tasks.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, some key points for turning an English lesson into active learning were specified. They contain “advance guidance,” “learner motivation,” and “integration of tasks.” Paying attention to these points, a catered English lesson incorporating active learning was designed, and implemented at a public high school. In spite of the fact that it was limited to a small number of high school students, the catered lesson proved to be successful. Although the posteriori survey results implied that insufficient recognition of active learning could be an obstacle, the potentiality of the English lesson incorporating active

learning discussed in this paper could surpass such a concern. There is high expectation that a lot more effort will be made to incorporate active learning into English education taking Japanese mentality into account.

## References

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## Appendix A

### List of Useful Expressions

- Can you say it again?

- Could you repeat it?
- Can you give me a hint?
- Could you give me some clues?
- What does ... mean?
- What is the meaning of ...?
- How do you say ... in English?
- Can you give me the English for ...?
- How do you spell this word?
- What's the spelling for this word?
- Could you speak more slowly?
- You're speaking a bit too fast, Mr. ....
- We can't hear you here in the back.
- We're having trouble hearing you in the back.
- Could you write a bit bigger/neater?
- I'm having trouble making out what you wrote on the board.

## Appendix B

### Self-introduction

My name is Kazuhiro Kabeya. I am teaching English at Hakodate University. This is my fourth year in Hakodate. I used to teach English at a junior college in Fukushima City, but after the earthquake the situation has changed greatly, and I had to find a teaching position at somewhere else.

I was born and brought up in a town called Funehiki, which is now the central part of Tamura City in Fukushima Prefecture. I have a house in Koriyama City in the same Prefecture, but I am living in Hakodate away from my family. We have a son, and he is working in Sendai. We have a

turtle. We used to have a pet dog, but it died three years ago.

When I have time, I work out to stay in shape and watch DVDs to keep my English from getting rusty. As a whole, I am enjoying living in Hakodate.

### Questions

1. When did I start teaching in Hakodate?

You started teaching in Hakodate four years ago. / in 2012.

2. Why did I move to Hakodate?

You moved to Hakodate because the situation changed after the earthquake.

3. Where was I born?

You were born in Funehiki / Fukushima prefecture.

4. What pets do I have now?

You have a turtle.

5. What do I do in my free time?

You work out or watch DVDs.

### Appendix C

#### Reading for meaning (List 1)

1. absent : away, not present
2. accident : something harmful or unlucky that happens
3. bake : cook food in an oven
4. bean : a smooth, somewhat flat seed used as a vegetable
5. bicycle : a vehicle with two wheels, one behind the other, and moved by pushing two pedals
6. cloud : a white or gray mass in the sky, made up of tiny drops of

water

7. dam : a wall built to hold back water
8. dream : something thought, felt, or seen during sleep
9. erase : rub out or scrape away
10. field : land used to raise crops or animals

Reading for meaning (List 2)

1. acorn : the nut of an oak tree
2. alligator : a large crawling animal that lives in rivers and swamps
3. ball : anything round
4. beetle : an insect that has two hard, shiny cases to cover its wings  
when folded
5. catch : take and hold something that is moving
6. cousin : the son or daughter of your uncle or aunt
7. deer : a swift animal that has antlers
8. eat : chew and swallow food or have a meal
9. face : the front part of the head
10. fin : one of the parts of a fish with which it swims and balances  
itself

Reading for meaning (List 3)

1. ankle : the part of the leg between the foot and the calf
2. autograph : a person's name written by himself
3. beach : an almost flat place at the edge of a lake or ocean, covered  
with sand or stones
4. bend : curve, be crooked
5. chain : metal rings joined together

6. crayon : a stick or pencil of colored chalk or wax for drawing or writing
7. dentist : a doctor whose work is to care for teeth, filling them, cleaning them, making them straight, and sometimes pulling them
8. elbow : the joint in the middle of the arm
9. factory : a building or group of buildings where things are made, usually by machines
10. finish : bring to an end

## Appendix D

### Part A (Assistant's statements)

1. Certainly. Do you have any particular food in mind?
2. Yes, sir. Walking distance.
3. We have a few quite nice ones in the neighborhood. Would you like me to make a reservation for you?
4. Hello. May I help you?
5. You're welcome. Have a nice day.
6. Well, we have a very nice place around the corner here – the Carnegie Deli is lovely. It's on the 54th and 7th Avenue.

### Part B (Guest's statements)

1. Is that nearby?
2. I see. Also, could you recommend a couple of Japanese restaurants in the area?
3. Not really. Just something not expensive.

4. No. I think today I'll go to the deli you mentioned. Thank you very much.
5. Yes. Could you help me find a good restaurant in the neighborhood?

#### Full Dialogue

A : Hello. May I help you?

B : Yes. Could you help me find a good restaurant in the neighborhood?

A : Certainly. Do you have any particular food in mind?

B : Not really. Just something not expensive.

A : Well, we have a very nice place around the corner here – the Carnegie Deli is lovely. It's on the 54th and 7th Avenue.

B : Is that nearby?

A : Yes, sir. Walking distance.

B : I see. Also, could you recommend a couple of Japanese restaurants in the area?

A : We have a few quite nice ones in the neighborhood. Would you like me to make a reservation for you?

B : No. I think today I'll go to the deli you mentioned. Thank you very much.

A : You're welcome. Have a nice day.

(The dialogue was cited from “The Sounds of New York” by Asahi Press.)

#### Appendix E

Introductory passage of “Nebuta Matsuri” by the team of 4 first-year students

- Typical summer festival in Aomori.

- Saying “Lassela” and walking on road with festival car.
- Origin is remove calamity.

Introductory passage of “Nebuta Matsuri” by the team of 3 second-year students

- It is a famous and big festival in Aomori prefecture from August 1 to 7.
- Big and traditional floats travel around Aomori city.
- Participants who jump and say shout are called Haneto.
- This festival came from China.