

An approach to incorporating the diversified patterns of activities in English classes at Japanese junior high schools: Introduction of reading practice for a better environment for students

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Introduction: Standardization of the Methods to Improve Students' Communicative Skills in English Classes

The necessity of incorporating 'active learning' into class activities as one of the valuable methods to improve students' communicative skills is now recognized as an essential prerequisite at almost all the grades of school in Japan, ranging from elementary schools to junior high schools, and even at universities. The phenomenon has rapidly penetrated the teaching methods for all subjects at public schools since the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) reformed the guidelines for educational curriculum in 2017 and set a goal which each school should achieve for a required number of subjects.

The concept of active learning is especially prominent in English classes because teaching English at schools inexorably aims to improve students' language ability, which, according to the current guidelines for English education at junior high schools announced by MEXT, helps 'to develop students' basic communication abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages'.¹ The guidelines for English education also include precise instructions on teaching methods for each grade and indicate that 'teachers should give sufficient consideration to actual language-use situations and functions of language in order to comprehensively cultivate communication abilities'.² English teachers at public schools are increasingly required to develop strategic methods to improve students' communicative skills with scrupulous adherence to the governmental guidelines, and at the same time provide students with as many clues as possible so that they achieve fundamental skills to express their ideas and opinions in English. As a consequence, introducing 'active learning' in class seems to have become one of the shared missions among English teachers as an efficient teaching method in classes environment.

In this paper, I suggest that teaching methods in English classes should be varied and that different practice

methods, including not only conversation practice in pairs or groups, but also other kinds of practice such as reading aloud, silent reading, writing diaries or emails, creating a story, and many other activities should be included in the concept of 'active learning'. The interpretation of the definition of 'active learning' is itself too broad and there is no universally accepted definition of the concept, so each teacher is obliged to rely on his or her own understanding of the word 'active' and make an original lesson plan.³ This situation often confuses many teachers, but the other side of the coin is that the diverse interpretations enable them to choose from a wide range of methods to improve students' communicative skills. I particularly focus on the effects of reading practice because it has a lot of possibilities in terms of improving students' communicative skills through verbal (reading aloud) as well as intellectual (reading and thinking) engagement. Reading something is not just a technical work. It requires higher levels of engagement as a human being. The idea of acquiring the ability to read something, understand it, and think about it motivates students. I focus on English classes at Japanese junior high schools and provide several examples of reading practice based on the currently authorized textbooks.

Preparations for Class Activities: The Current Problems

The new curriculum guidelines for English course published by MEXT in 2017 contain implicit instructions for school sites to combine five skills as essential goals to be achieved in class: reading, writing, speaking (conversation), speaking (presentation), and listening.⁴ However, there are various obstacles for teachers to overcome when preparing a teaching plan. First, the imposition of a fixed curriculum for the entire academic year increases the amount of workload both of teachers and students because of the time constraints. This situation inevitably causes another problem as teachers feel obliged to select one or two specific skills of the five skills, although it is impractical to separate these skills when learning languages. According to the curriculum guidelines, communicative skills should be linked to utterance comprehension and, therefore, speaking and listening practice are more likely to become the priorities for teachers. Consequently, they tend to adopt conversation practice in pairs or groups in every class, and this reduces the total number of hours for reading and writing activities. It is possible for teachers to expend time on these activities only when they manage to find extra time after accomplishing the required tasks. The fact that teachers at public schools are required to use authorized textbooks as main resource also leads them to concentrate on specific skills, because many of these textbooks strictly accord with the educational curriculum guidelines and set well-selected skills which suffice the conversation-style practice in each unit.

The problem is that these constrained environments sometimes cause monotonous patterns of activity. For example, teachers might persuade their students to make pairs and practice conversation in class, and this pattern of practice becomes the only way of engaging in 'active learning' in class. It is true that repetition and routine work are important for learning languages, and simulation practice alleviates students' anxieties. However, the situations which students get accustomed to are least likely to motivate them, so teachers should

consider changing the teaching patterns constantly while continuing with routine work.

Possibilities of Stressful Environment

Another, and a more serious, problem is that pair practice and group activity is closely related to classroom environment. This applies not only to English classes but also to all other subjects. The influence of the educational curriculum guidelines in Japan has inevitably increased the opportunities for students to engage in pair practice or group activity in every class. This means that students are constantly obliged to make groups among the members of the class, and the method of grouping itself has the potential to cause a lot of stress to some students. For example, a student might feel scared if he or she has to engage in pair practice with a bullying student. Whether or not pair practice is conducted harmoniously often depends on the individual relationships between students.

In worst cases, some students might lose the motivation to study English itself due to the stress they feel when they are forced to converse with the students with whom they find it difficult to get along. In case of the students who feel stressed when involved in group activities, they could begin to reject the very situation that obliges them to communicate with others. Their refusal is not directly related to their interest in learning English. However, their uncooperative attitudes might affect the assessment of their achievement in the subject.

Teachers should pay attention to the classroom environment when introducing pair practice and group activity so that each student can participate without feeling stressed regarding things which are not at all related to the contents of subjects. The lack of information about the classroom environment among teachers could have bad effects on students' communicative skills even if teachers believe pair practice to be the best method of 'active learning'.

The Effects of Reading Long Stories for Cultural Understanding

We should recognize that communicative skills could be acquired not only by practicing conversation in pairs or groups but also by many other methods. In this section, I suggest that reading practice, including reading literary works or articles individually and silently, should not be excluded from 'active learning', nor should it be undervalued. I discuss the effects of reading popular stories in English classes.

It is often said that quick response is important in communication. However, the availability of time to 'think' for developing a deeper understanding is also important for good communication. Securing time to 'think' enables students to reflect on other people's ideas and opinions. They have time to consider the meaning of each word which other people utter before responding to them, and thereby become considerate to their surroundings. Reading literary works silently, thinking about the scenery or the meaning of the words in each part of the story, and reading between the lines help them improve their communicative skills. This should also be regarded as a part of 'active learning' because thinking while reading is a creative activity. Literary works offer multiple opportunities for this activity and for developing a better understanding of other people, even though the effects of intensive reading on each student are difficult to determine.

If teachers find it difficult to use specific materials for their class, it is possible for them to use the authorized textbooks and expand the contents of units effectively. I analyze some examples by citing two of the authorized textbooks, *Sunshine English Course: 3*, and *New Horizon English Course: 3*. In both textbooks, each unit consists of basic dialogues or passages, lists of new vocabulary, basic exercises, and other optional exercises. *Sunshine English Course: 3* includes three stories at the end of the text as ‘Extensive Reading’, which is rather regarded as appendix, and categorizes them as a different section from the other units. The first story is adapted from ‘After Twenty Years’ by O. Henry (1862-1910) (98-101). Teachers could lead students into multiple directions through reading this story. They can start by explaining the historical background of the period, the biography of the author, and the origin of his pseudonym. If teachers could make interesting comments about the story, reading practice could acquire a completely different meaning to the students. Reading the story aloud helps them practice the phonation and pronunciation of vocabulary; however, silent reading helps them not just to articulate a certain group of words and sentences but also to ‘interpret’ the meaning of each sentence intuitively. The stream of the narrative enables the students to ‘think’ about the feelings of characters. The sensory experience of students while reading these stories can become the basis for communicating with other people. It nurtures their ability to ‘imagine’ the feelings of others and respect different cultures. This practice also has the effect which teachers believe ‘active learning’ aims to achieve.

New Horizon English Course: 3 also includes the adaptation of O. Henry’s short novel, ‘The Green Door’, with illustrations and several questions regarding the story (100-04). In the textbooks, this story is included in the section categorized as ‘Let’s Read’, which is separated from the main units, and gives an impression that this could be used for optional practice. However, if teachers utilize this section and lead the students by asking them what they think about the story, the very question that is shown on the last page of the story as ‘Review’ (104), they can expand the topics from that point because students need to read the sentences in detail and interpret the meaning of each scene to answer the questions. This practice could be linked to motivation for cultural understanding and further activities. In such cases, silent reading is more effective than reading the skit aloud. Students also need to learn the words on their own to express their ideas and opinions, and this helps them when they go on to writing practice. These activities do not necessarily require pair practice, though it could be helpful if they have a chance to share their opinions with other students. However, independent activity suffices for the purpose of acquiring language ability.

Malala Yousafzai’s speech as study material is also a good example. Her speech and educational background are included in both textbooks. The second part of ‘Further Reading’ section in *New Horizon English Course: 3* introduces a brief extract from her speech (150-51). This offers numerous hints to teachers to devise creative ways of reading this topic. Students just read the passage aloud for practicing pronunciation or capturing the flow of words, read it silently to think about her situation, poverty around the world, and the meaning of education for themselves. They even have the chance to write a short essay on this topic. They might also want to practice delivering a speech in front of a mirror, imagining that they are delivering the speech just as

Malala did. All these activities do not need relentless pair practice or group activity, and yet they enable students to concentrate on their active performance.

Reading practice also enables students to read and interpret the passages quickly. It seems to be inconsistent with the importance of reading in detail or reading between the lines, but getting accustomed to reading long stories enhances their ability to understand literary language and consequently, it leads to the improvement of their communicative skills. In this sense, teachers should not be reluctant to allow more time for reading practice in their class.

Reconsideration about Communicative Skills

A better understanding of cultural differences is essential to good communication. It is true that conversation practice is effective in learning to talk about our daily lives or chatting, particularly when people need quick responses to maintain the flow of a conversation. In addition to this, more attention should be paid to other aspects of communication: the sincere attitude to try to understand the person in front of us, display of positivity to maintain a smooth relationship with each other, and tolerance to accept different views or backgrounds. The purpose of achieving communicative skills should be based on these ideas and ‘active learning’ should also be understood from these perspectives.

Conclusion

As argued above, every single aspect of learning languages, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening, is included in ‘active learning’, regardless of its form and style; and reading practice should be considered with such a perspective and be included in class activities just as pair practice or group work. It is important for teachers to create an enabling environment for individual students so that they are able to perform to the best of their potentials. It is also important to nurture the unique abilities of individual students because each student has a different way of learning to deliver their best performance. When considering the methods of teaching communicative skills in class, teachers do not need to be tethered to a specific assumption about preferred activity styles. If the purpose of improving communicative skills varies from person to person, the ways to achieve this goal should also be diverse.

Notes

1. A Curriculum Guideline for Junior High Schools. Chapter 2, Section 9: Foreign Languages. 1. Overall Objective. English translation is cited from ‘Chugakko gakusyu sidouyouryou eiyakubann (kayaku): Monbu-kagaku-syo’.

(http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/04/11/1298356_10.pdf. 3 September, 2018.)

Original guidelines are written in Japanese. (‘Chugakko gakusyu sidouyouryou’.

http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2015/03/26/1356251_1.pdf. 27

August, 2018.)

2. A Curriculum Guideline for Junior High Schools. Chapter 2, Section 9: Foreign Languages. 3. Lesson Plan Design and Treatment of the Contents. The site for English translation is shown in note 1.
3. The concept of ‘active learning’ was first introduced by C. C. Bonwell and J.A. Eison in 1991. See the details of their definitions and explanations in *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom (J-B ASHE Higher Education Report Series (AEHE))* (Washington D.C.:The George Washington University, 1991). Many other organizations introduce their original definitions and teaching strategies both on their sites and in publishing.
4. See ‘Gakusyu Sidou Youryou announced in 2017’ 145.
(http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/05/07/1384661_5_4.pdf. 7 September, 2018.)

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New Horizon English Course: 2. Eds. Junichi Kasajima and Noriaki Seki. Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki, 2016.

New Horizon English Course: 3. Eds. Junichi Kasajima and Noriaki Seki. Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki, 2016.

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Sunshine English Course: 2. Ed. Kiichi Matsuhata. Tokyo: Kairyudo, 2018.

Sunshine English Course: 3. Ed. Kiichi Matsuhata. Tokyo: Kairyudo, 2018.