

Integrating Active Learning into EFL Course Design: A Case Study

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Abstract

The case study presented here was carried out in an Oral Communication III (OCIII) English elective class and reports on the implementation and effects of a task-based syllabus that was developed in order to encourage active learning. The course tasks, which made use of mobile technology and computer-assisted language learning, allowed the program to be delivered within a blended learning environment thus increasing accessibility for learners. Following completion of the course, a questionnaire using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was administered to determine student opinions and overall levels of satisfaction. Whilst feedback was very encouraging and justified the rationale presented for the course design, it also allowed for some reflection as to how improvements could be made for the design of future task-based courses aiming to implement active learning methods.

Keywords: active learning, task-based language teaching, CALL, technology, blended learning, classroom research

Many of the ideas associated with active learning have been standard fare in EFL classrooms around the world for many years, and although it might appear that in Japan it has only gained traction relatively recently with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports Science & Technology (MEXT) – where the term has been explicitly used in reports related to educational reform at high school and university level (e.g. MEXT: 2014; 2016) – this assumption is a little misleading. The relevance of active learning in Japan has been highlighted well before the current directives, particularly in relation to the teaching of English as a foreign language. For example, back in 1997, the Resource Materials Handbook produced by the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) for Assistant Language Teachers

(ALTs) working on the Japan Exchange and Teaching program stressed the need for a move away from “the more passive activities of translation and grammatical analysis” towards greater “active participation” (1997, p. 2). Furthermore, the May 1999 edition of *The Language Teacher* produced by the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) was billed as a “special active learning issue” while aspects of active learning were also being mooted in MEXT’s *Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese With English Abilities”* (2003).

However, as MEXT’s more recent drive towards active learning seems to suggest, the adoption of active learning techniques at classroom level has arguably been a somewhat slow process. There could be numerous reasons for this, of course, such as problems over definitions of the term (Ito, 2016), teaching and learning preferences of teachers and students in Japan – which can in part be shaped by wash-back from high-stakes tests and examinations (e.g. Brown, 1995; Watanabe, 1996, 2004; Caine, 2005) – as well as uncertainty over how assessment itself fits into an active learning program. In the following study we will look at how a course designed to incorporate a task-based approach (with an emphasis on the use of technology) can promote active learning in the English classroom at Japanese university level.

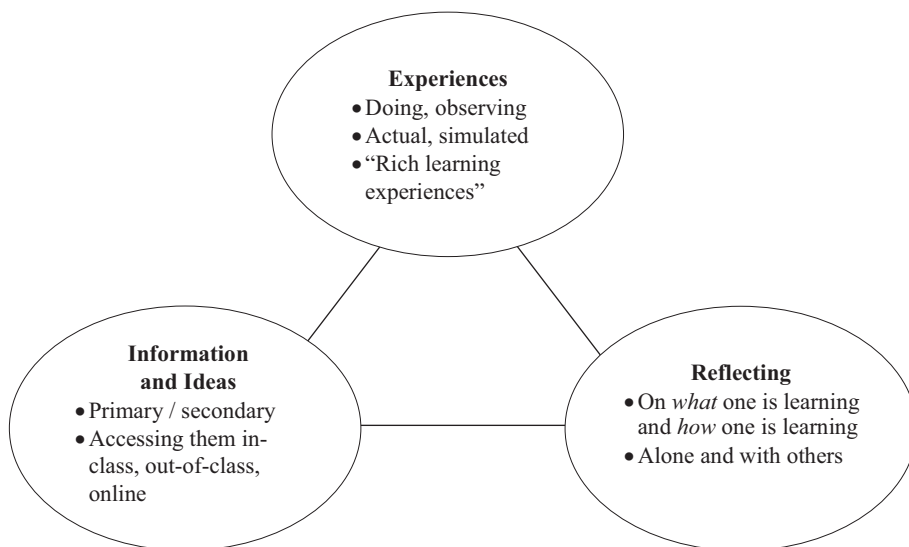
An Overview and Model of Active Learning

Before offering a more detailed definition of active learning, it is also useful to clarify the term, *passive* learning. In short, passive learning would refer to any activity that conforms to the ideals of a more traditional teaching approach where the classroom is teacher-centred and learner participation is minimal – a situation that upholds the “empty vessel” maxim of behaviourist theory in which students are viewed as passive recipients of the instructor’s knowledge. Within this type of framework, the learner might listen to a teacher giving a lecture during class time and then work individually on an assignment that has perhaps been set as homework. If included as just *one* of the elements of a course of study, there would be nothing wrong with this lecture-based approach per se – indeed, many of the conference presentations we attend as educators display the traits of passive learning and it would be unwise to neglect it on the basis of it being “old-fashioned” or “outdated”. Rather, the key is to strike an effective balance in terms of the methodolo-

gies and techniques we adopt in the classroom – as noted by Fink (2003), receiving information and ideas via passive learning “is an important part of learning, but by itself, it is very limited and limiting” (p. 104).

By comparison, active learning sees students “doing things and thinking about the things they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 2) – in other words, it is an approach that supports the notion that students should be actively involved and engaged in the learning process. Fink (2003) presents a holistic view of active learning via the following model (Figure 1), offering a useful conceptualization and more expansive definition of the idea. The model consists of three core components: *information and ideas*, *experiences* and *reflecting*.

Figure 1. A holistic view of active learning (Fink, 2003)



Starting from the bottom left of the model, the first component highlights the ways in which students get information and ideas, which can be done by direct or indirect means. When students access original sources and data, which haven’t been organized or interpreted by others, they are getting information directly – i.e. from a primary source. If, on the other hand, students get information and ideas from a textbook or by listening to a lecture, they are getting that information indirectly – i.e. via a secondary source. Going back to the earlier point about the importance of finding the right balance between the different approaches we adopt in the classroom, it is interesting to note that the indirect mode of learning appears to encapsu-

late passive learning here.

The second component of the active learning model is represented by “experiences” and again this can be divided into two areas – this time, “doing” and “observing”. A “doing experience” might seem fairly self-explanatory in that it refers to any learning activity in which the learner actually does something in relation to the learning outcomes of a given course. For example, if students were required to interview members of the local community in order to collect data for a class project, that would represent a *direct* “doing” experience. Alternatively, the experiences could be *indirect* if they consisted of activities like role-plays or other such simulations. Either way, there is a clear commitment to the concept of “learning by doing” – an underlying principle of constructivist¹ and social constructivist² theories of learning. As well as shaping project-based learning, these two theories have also served to influence elements of task-based learning – which, as we will see in the next section, played an important part in the design of the course outlined in this case study.

The other “experience” on the Fink model, referred to as an “observing experience”, is when learners are given the opportunity to listen to or watch somebody doing something that is related to their course of study. Once again, observation can be direct (actual) – e.g. watching a demonstration by the teacher or other professional – or indirect, (simulated) – e.g. gaining information through a video, movie or other informative source. All of these experiential examples – both direct and indirect – would be classed as “rich learning experiences” which help to serve a learner-centred classroom more effectively than the “understand and remember” kinds of learning associated with a traditional teacher-centred environment (p. 8).

The third component of the active learning model is known as “reflecting” and this has also been divided into two areas: reflection on the “what” and “how” of learning and reflection in terms of whether it is done alone or with others. The first

¹ The vision of experiential learning which developed from constructivism (e.g. Dewey: 1938; Bruner: 1961) moves away from the belief that any learning that takes place in a classroom comes as a result of information passed on from the teacher to the student (passive learning). Instead, constructivists emphasize the importance of what the learners themselves bring to the process, believing that learning is constructed upon learners’ background knowledge.

² Social constructivism shares many of the characteristics of constructivism, but places greater emphasis on the roles of social interaction and culture. For example, a person can broaden their knowledge and change their opinion as a result of social interaction. Within a classroom, this might be achieved through peer interaction during discussion, problem-solving or via collaborative / cooperative tasks.

area stresses the importance of reflecting on the initial meanings that we give to, or elicit from, a new experience or idea. Without reflection, these initial meanings “may remain buried at the unconscious or subconscious level” and risk becoming “limited, distorted, or even destructive” (p. 106). Therefore, we need to consciously reflect on our experiences in order to make meaning from them. This period of reflection, as the second area highlights, can be done alone (e.g. keeping a journal during a course; writing a post-task reflective report), or with others (e.g. collaborative feedback via a group discussion; peer-to-peer feedback).

Case Study

The Learners and Learning Context

The case study outlined here consists of 12 Japanese learners of English, who were participating in a 15-week elective Oral Communication III (OCIII) course at the University of Nagasaki, Sasebo. Classes lasted for 90 minutes and the group met once a week. OCIII is an elective class and is usually offered as one of the language courses available to second grade students who wish to continue their English studies after completing their compulsory classes in the first grade. However, the course is not strictly limited to second grade students and, as a result, the sample group was made up of 3 first grade students, 8 second grade students and 1 third grade student.

In terms of educational backgrounds, most of the group had graduated through the various stages of the Japanese system, although one student had lived in Germany until the age of ten. On the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), language levels could be placed in the A2 band, with TOEIC scores of around 400 recorded for those who had taken the test. Motivation seemed fairly high with students listing overseas travel, self-improvement and “getting a higher TOEIC score” as their reasons for taking OCIII at the start of the course. In addition to the student who had lived in Germany, only one other student in the group had experience of travelling abroad. However, following completion of the course a further two students were going to Canada on a homestay visit and one was going to Cambodia to participate in a volunteer program.

Course Design Rationale

When developing a new syllabus for the group an important consideration in its design was that it should offer students the opportunity to engage in active learning as much as possible. To some extent, previous OCIII courses (structured around a communicative textbook) had always leaned towards the principles of active learning in terms of task design and implementation. However, despite post-course evaluations revealing overall levels of student satisfaction, it was felt that improvements could still be made in order to increase motivation and optimize the active learning environment that was already in place. Three key areas were addressed: approach, textbook & syllabus, and the role of technology.

Approach. It was decided that in order to establish a more *direct* learning experience, the new syllabus should adopt a series of creative *tasks* to replace the somewhat restrictive textbook-based approach. Much has been written about what constitutes a “task” and how they fit into task-based language teaching (TBLT³) as a whole (e.g., Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; Ellis, 2003). A common thread among the many definitions of the term is that a *task* should provide an opportunity for content-orientated meaningful language use, with an emphasis placed initially on *meaning* rather than grammatical *form*. Willis & Willis (2007) present a review of some of the principal definitions of *task* taken from the literature on task-based learning and suggest that the more confidently we can answer *yes* to each of these questions the more task-like the activity.

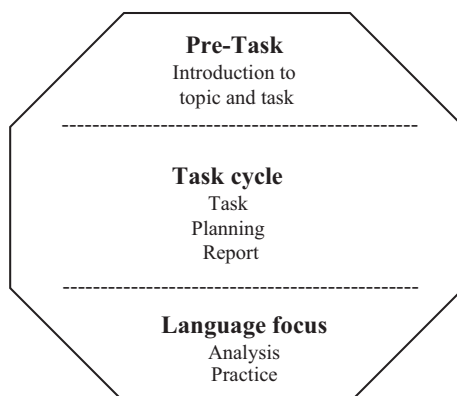
1. Does the activity engage learners' interest?
2. Is there a primary focus on meaning?
3. Is there an outcome?
4. Is success judged in terms of outcome?
5. Is completion a priority?
6. Does the activity relate to real world activities? (Willis & Willis, 2007, pp. 12-13)

For the course design outlined in this study I returned to the earlier influential work of Willis (1996) which presents a task-based learning (TBL) framework that incorporates a common task cycle – the components of which are summarized below

³ Throughout the literature the acronym TBLT (Task-Based Language Teaching) appears to be synonymous with TBL (Task-Based Learning), TBLL (Task-Based Language Learning) and TBI (Task-Based Instruction). For the purposes of this discussion, I use the term TBLT – unless citing another source or study.

in Figure 2. This served to influence the choice, design and classroom implementation of the new tasks that were introduced.

Figure 2. The task-based learning framework (Willis, 1996)



The Willis framework contains the three phases that are common in the design of a task-based lesson: the pre-task stage; the during-task stage and the post-task stage (Ellis 2006, p. 355). Emphasis is placed on a student-centred approach, whilst the framework also allows time for the reflective activities that are essential to active learning. If we apply the principles of active learning highlighted in the Fink model to the TBL framework, the informative and experiential elements are likely to be incorporated at the *pre-task* and *task cycle* stages. Reflection, on the other hand, might occur towards the end of the task cycle (when students are required to “report”) and also during the “analysis” step of the *language focus* stage when learners will be thinking explicitly about *what* they are learning in terms of new language. However, it has to be recognised that in practice it may not always be possible to confine language focus entirely to the final stage of the cycle. Indeed, Ellis (2006) adopts a different position here stating that, “focus on form constitutes a valuable during-task option” and that “one way or another, can occur in any (or indeed all) of the phases of a task-based lesson” (p. 370). Willis (1996, p. 41) also stresses the flexibility of the framework depending on the learners’ needs. For example, the amount of time spent on each component can be varied, as can the amount of time spent on reflection. It is also noted that the task cycle need not necessarily be confined to just one lesson – if reports are presented in the following lesson then learners have “more time to reflect and work out how to express themselves, thus providing an even

richer learning opportunity”. This would see us moving more towards the territory of project-based learning (PBL) which, as highlighted by Thomas (2017), is more likely to consist of “a series of interconnected *extended tasks* that take place over a more significant period of time, from one class period to one week, one semester or longer” (p. 2, emphasis added). Indeed, students in this study were required to work on many of the tasks over a period of two or three lessons.

Textbook and syllabus. Goodman (2010) notes that teaching without a textbook can be an effective way of keeping classes fresh and interesting for students, and also carries benefits for one’s own teacher development. In fact, the “scope for creativity, flexibility and originality in such circumstances is limited only by teachers’ ability, energy and time” (Cunningsworth, 1995, pp. 10 – 11). Up until now students taking OCIII had previously studied with a published communicative textbook throughout the duration of a semester. Although the activities contained within the book were conducive to active learning, it was through my own classroom observations and reflection that I felt that this “textbook as syllabus” approach was too restrictive. Students did not seem to find the material particularly stimulating or motivating and time constraints made it difficult to include more enterprising supplementary tasks – whether they be original ideas or some of the additional activities that were suggested in the accompanying teacher manual. As is the case with many course books, students struggled to relate to the topics in some of the units and there was little opportunity for what Bonwell & Eison (1991) refer to as “higher-order thinking” (p. 2) – for example, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. To go back to our working definition of active learning for a moment, students were clearly “doing things” when engaged in textbook activities, but the extent to which they were actually *thinking about* the things they were doing was questionable and – in reference to the earlier model of active learning (Figure 1) – perhaps needed to be challenged by more *direct* learning experiences whenever possible. In order to address this issue, I wanted to introduce a more “hands-on” approach – one that might help to increase interest and motivation – and so when it came to revising and restructuring the syllabus, it was decided that a textbook would not be used.

The role of technology. Classes were held once a week in a computer room where each student had access to a desktop computer with internet connection. As such, it was possible to make use of online applications in addition to the open-source

learning management system (LMS), Moodle – a platform already in place at the university. All students in the group had mobile phones, which would also influence task design and delivery. In this respect, consideration was given not just to the devices themselves and the creative tools on offer (for example, audio and video recording applications), but also to the fact that they would enable “mobile” learning in the sense of providing the opportunity for study outside of the classroom, particularly in cases where students didn’t have access to computers.

Mobile devices also provide learners with the necessary tools to create their own media which very much adheres to the experiential aspect of active learning, i.e. the “learning by doing” approach discussed earlier. In the case of video production, for example, Donaghy (2015) observes that “asking the learners to create their own short films and videos is a very effective way to engage them in active learning”, noting the following advantages:

- Producing moving images is intrinsically motivating for learners.
- It helps them develop the types of skills which are in demand in the modern-day workplace.
- It foments collaboration, decision-making and creativity. (p. 73)

As noted above, such devices also afford students the opportunity to engage in work outside of the classroom (which was particularly important in the case of some of the course tasks). In addition, with an LMS such as Moodle, we are also able to ensure that course content and materials are accessible to students at any time on either computers or mobile devices, thus maintaining a “blended” learning environment in which online and technology-based components can be easily integrated with a weekly face-to-face lesson.

Course Outline

The course syllabus, approach and aims were explained in the first lesson – as was the mode of assessment, which was based on coursework and participation. In other words, continuous assessment was used, each learner accumulating points throughout the course in order to attain a final credit score for OCIII at the end of the 15-week program. As active participation was an important component of the evaluation procedure – and in view of the fact that the course incorporated a range of collaborative and cooperative learning tasks – the significance of using the target

language during group work was also stressed to students from the beginning. In order to complete the tasks, students were expected to set aside some time for work outside of class and, of course, regular attendance was another important requirement.

An outline of the course is presented below with the amount of lesson time devoted to each task shown in parentheses.⁴

Course Introduction (1x 90mins)

Task 1: Icebreaker: The video and picture scavenger hunt team challenge (2x 90 mins)

Task 2: PADLET information page (2x 90mins)

Task 3: Giving instructions 1: Make a class worksheet (2x 90mins)

Task 4: Giving instructions 2: Make a “how to” video (3x 90mins)

Task 5: Two-minute conversation and transcription (2x 90mins)

Task 6: Song questions (1x 90mins)

Task 7: Logic puzzle: character adjectives (1x 90mins)

Task 8: How do you feel? (Adjectives of emotion) (1x 90mins)

A further two tasks not listed above ran concurrently throughout the course and were introduced in the first introductory session. Firstly, prior to the start of the semester, the whole group had been enrolled onto the International Virtual Exchange (IVE) program. This is a huge project involving over 3000 university and college students worldwide – primarily from Japan and Colombia, but also including participants from China, the UAE and Taiwan. Each group of students signed up to the program are partnered with another group (or groups) – in this example, students worked with groups from Hokusei Gakuen University Junior College in Hokkaido, Japan, and a national institute of technology in Colombia⁵ – and have the task of communicating and exchanging information via a secure online forum accessible only to the groups themselves and their teachers⁶. Over the course of the semester, students were provided with 5 core topics on which to exchange information: *My introduction*; *My places*; *Events in our lives*; *Future dreams* and an *Open forum*. Students had to make one main post to each forum and reply to at least three other

⁴ See Appendix A for a more detailed explanation of each task.

⁵ The National Service of Learning (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje) also known by the acronym, SENA.

⁶ The International Virtual Exchange program was accessed via an external Moodle site.

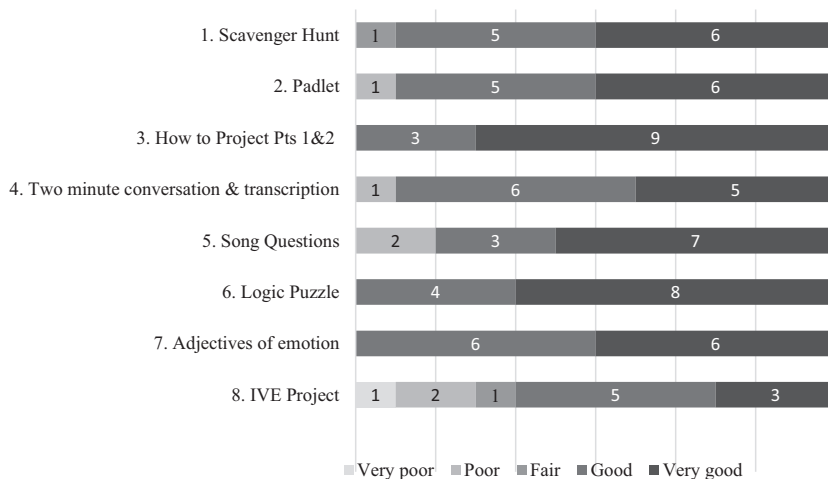
posts, from then on trying to maintain a vibrant chain of communication. Posts and replies took the form of written information, but students were encouraged to attach supplementary media files (pictures, audio, video etc.) and hyperlinks as much as possible in order to keep up a high level of interest. Whilst for the most part this task was done outside of class, some time was set aside at the beginning of each lesson for students to work on the exchange and also to share their experiences with each other from that week's participation on the forum.

The other ongoing task required students to keep a weekly study log detailing every single activity that they had carried out in English during each week. This could include anything from actual timetabled English classes (including OCIII), homework tasks or self-study (including TOEIC test preparation) to activities that were not related directly to study – for example, watching a TV drama in English or listening to (or singing) an English song. For each activity or “action”, students had to note down in their study log what they had done and how much time they had spent doing it. Study logs were then used for paired discussion warm-ups at the start of each session when, in addition to talking on a given topic (e.g. “last weekend”) and reporting on their activity on the online exchange, students also had to explain what tasks or activities they had performed in the target language during the previous week.

Student Feedback

In order to gauge student reaction and opinions of the course, a questionnaire was administered at the end of the final class. Students were asked to rate each task on a scale of 1 – 5 (“very poor” to “very good”) and were also required to offer comments giving reasons for their score ratings. Ratings for each task are shown in Figure 3 with the numbers on each bar indicating student totals – for example, in the case of the “Scavenger Hunt” task, one student considered it “fair”; five students, “good” and six students, “very good”.

Figure 3. Student ratings of course tasks



As we can see, in quantitative terms, most tasks received very positive feedback, the majority of students rating each task as “good” or “very good”. Four tasks

Table 1 A Summary of Student Ratings with Written Feedback

Task	Average rating	Reason for rating	Sample comments
1. Scavenger Hunt	4.36	Collaborative	“It was very fun and I can know about my classmates.” “It was difficult for me to gather with all team members, but this challenge was good opportunity to talk with many people.”
2. PADLET Information Page	4.27	Cooperative	“It was fun to make a page and check other classmate’s page.” “It need a lot of information about myself. So I could know how to explain on my own things. And it was fun to be able to see another member’s Padlet page.”
3. “How to...” Project	4.73	Motivational	“Making “how to” video with my friends was very interesting.” “I enjoyed making the video by ourselves.”
4. Two-Minute Conversation / Transcription	4.18	Linguistic	“It’s very useful for me because I could listen to my English objectively.” “I thought that I have to improve speaking skills.”
5. Song Questions	4.18	Linguistic & Motivational	“It was difficult, but very useful to listen English.” “It was very fun because I like music. I wanted to do this activity more.”
6. Logic Puzzle	4.64	Collaborative & Motivational	“I could enjoy solving a logic puzzle with my classmates.” “It was a good activity which we could talk English.”
7. Adjectives of Emotion	4.45	Collaborative & Linguistic	“I enjoyed talking about many questions with my classmates.” “I think I can improve vocabulary.”
8. IVE Project	3.45	Motivational	“We can contact foreign person. It was exciting.” “I enjoyed communicating with them in English.”

did receive some negative feedback and, in the case of the IVE project in particular, we will look at possible causes of this in the discussion section. In total, though, negative ratings occurred just seven times within the quantitative feedback data.

Written feedback offering reasons for score ratings for each task generally fell into one of the following areas:

- Motivational – students enjoyed the task and found it motivating.
- Collaborative – students enjoyed working together with their classmates on the task.
- Cooperative – students enjoyed checking and assessing classmates' work.
- Linguistic – students believed the task would help them improve a particular language skill or area of language study, for example, vocabulary.

A summary is provided in Table 1 with a sample selection of unedited comments.

Discussion

The feedback received suggests that for the most part, students enjoyed the course and choice of activities. However, there was some negative feedback, although in the case of the IVE Project, this needs qualifying somewhat. One reason for lower ratings here can perhaps be attributed to the amount of student engagement in the activity. The success of an exchange such as this very much depends on active participation from students on both sides – in this case, the students here in Japan and their counterparts in Colombia. A student who contributes to the exchange forum regularly and receives prompt replies to his or her posts is naturally going to feel more motivated and have a much better overall experience. On the other hand, a student who posts intermittently or who perhaps posts onto the forum and, for whatever reason, doesn't receive a reply will likely have a more negative impression of the activity. It was clear that students recognized the importance of both sides accessing and participating on the forum regularly, with one commenting, *"I must work harder, but Hokkaido and Colombia students too"*. Other factors that are difficult to control, such as breaks for national holidays or differences in semester scheduling, can also have a detrimental effect to the success of this type of exchange. In spite of these difficulties, however, the fact that learners could engage in authentic communication and share cultural experiences on an international scale

meant that the advantages of the project far outweighed any negative aspects – as noted by the student who said, “*We can contact foreign person. It was exciting*”.

Overall, the evidence presented in this case study suggests that active learning can be implemented successfully in the EFL classroom in Japan, particularly when it is incorporated into a task-based syllabus, with many of the techniques associated with active learning going hand in hand with the TBLT approach. However, it is important to remain wary of potential problem areas, particularly at the stage of syllabus planning and design. For example, it should be reiterated that learners in this study were reasonably well-motivated and showed a willingness to communicate, for the most part, in the target language. Less motivated or larger groups may present additional challenges in this regard as the temptation to revert to L1 becomes more difficult to resist in monolingual classrooms – particularly during the type of small group/paired activities illustrated in this case study.

In addition, whilst there are many advantages of having students engage in active learning within a task-based environment, educators may still face some resistance to this approach within the Japanese context. The societal, historical and institutional barriers (Christmas, 2015) which serve to maintain more traditional teaching styles, may in turn also affect the preferred learning styles of students. However, as this case study demonstrates, even if the approach is unfamiliar at first, Japanese learners are able to adjust their styles of learning and, as such, active learning principles should not be dismissed as something only compatible within Western pedagogical contexts. Goal setting and reflection were vital elements of the learning process in this study and created an awareness amongst learners that allowed them to adapt to different styles of learning, where necessary. When students were faced with a task, it was important that they could not only understand *what* they were being asked to do, but also *why* they were being asked to do it before going on to think about *how* they were going to do it. This “what, why and how” approach also helped in post-task reflection activities, e.g. reflective discussion or written reports.

It was also noted how the use of technology – namely mobile devices and the LMS, Moodle – aided the implementation of a blended learning approach, thereby extending learning beyond both the physical environment of the classroom and the one 90-minute scheduled lesson per week. Of course, this also places greater responsibility in the hands of the learners who must devote time for study outside of class

in order to be sufficiently prepared each week. Although there were some drawbacks to this approach – for example, it wasn't always easy for students to schedule meetings for face-to-face group work between classes – the fact that they had continuous access to course tasks and explanatory materials on the class Moodle site enabled the teacher to utilize lesson time more effectively, freeing up time for discussion and collaborative tasks or, to put it another way, for more *active learning*.

The cooperative and collaborative nature of the group tasks meant that each student needed to perform their given roles effectively in order to help their team achieve a set of collective learning goals – a factor that also served to motivate when it came to meeting deadlines. This form of extrinsic motivation could also be beneficial in the flipped classroom – particularly in view of the fact that one of the criticisms of this approach is that it might not always meet pre-course expectations due to the personal responsibility placed on learners. The flipped classroom (in theory at least), enables passive learning activities (e.g. listening to a lecture or explanation) to be carried out *before* a lesson via the use of online materials or teacher-made videos etc. which allows more time for student-centred activities during class. A potential problem here is that if left as a *passive* learning task – that is to say, simply watching a video at home – students won't always spend enough time, if any, doing the required amount of pre-study and will turn up for class ill-prepared. However, by working in pairs or groups and giving them a *purpose* for watching a video-lecture (e.g. What does the speaker say about...? / Find out more information about .../ Do you agree? / Present your ideas to your group in the next class), we start to turn a passive activity into an active one.

The purpose of this case study was to design and deliver an English course based on the principles of active learning. Results were encouraging and it was suggested that a technology-based, TBLT approach was an effective strategy with positive implications for the EFL classroom. However, it is hoped that some of the findings and observations will also be of relevance to other disciplines and teaching situations as active learning techniques can be incorporated into most classrooms, regardless of any preferred teaching philosophy or pedagogical approach.

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Appendices

