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Report on the 2016 1\textsuperscript{st} Year English Classes

— Active Learning —

Girouard ARSEN

Introduction
August 2015 marked the first time that Heian Jogakuin’s Faculty of Education sent students overseas for study. The two-week program at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand was comprised of intensive English classes and a brief internship at either a kindergarten or one of two training elementary schools (also known as “normal” schools (What is a Normal School?, 2016), attached to the University of Waikato (Hillcrest Normal School. Our Place., 2016).

The internship consisted of either a two or three day bloc, spent entirely at the elementary schools. Heian students were directly exposed to a variety of teaching techniques and methodologies that are uncommon in contemporary Japanese public schools. A strong focus on independent, learner-centered instruction, high use of the latest computer and information technologies, as well as various means of facility use and classroom design were just some of the elements that the students experienced.

It was felt that this experience was beneficial for our students, and at the beginning of the fall semester the Faculty of Education requested that the English classes be revamped to expose the students to some elements of contemporary Western-style teaching techniques, not just English instruction. The administration determined it would be advantageous for Faculty of Education students to experience different educational and instructional philosophies, with the goal of adding to their instructional skill sets and therefore making them more well-rounded educators.

To achieve this goal, it was decided to implement an active learning strategy in the English classes, where students would alternate between language learning and language teaching practice. This article is a brief review of the first semester of the new English class teaching strategy; the changes that have been made, and student response to this approach.

Class Overview
For the 2016–2017 academic year, the Faculty of Education offered two 1\textsuperscript{st} year and 2\textsuperscript{nd} year English classes; this article will focus on the 1\textsuperscript{st} year courses as it was these classes where the new active learning strategy was used. The two 1\textsuperscript{st} year courses had 25 and 21 students respectively, and the majority of students’ prior English language learning experience consisted of the standard 3+3 years of junior/senior high school English education in Japan. (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology — Japan. [MEXT] 2013, 2015).

Classes were taught in a large, open room which had a number of tables, but no desks. Students were permitted to sit where they chose and with whom they chose; there was no formal seating plan implemented. There were usually 4 to 7 students per table, and the tables were arranged in such a way that facilitated easy movement by the instructor, which made progress monitoring easier.
Instructional Overview — Active Learning

For many students, active learning was a new experience; the students were more comfortable with a teacher-centered, traditional methodology. As a result, a period of acclimation was required for students to get comfortable with their roles and expectations in this class. This period lasted for approximately four weeks, and involved group-oriented class activities mixed in with traditional single-student activities (e.g. quizzes). After this point, it was felt that students were familiar enough with each other and collaborating in groups to proceed to the active learning portion of the class.

Entering the second phase of the class, sessions alternated between one class of English language learning and one class of active learning. The language learning class would function in part as preparation for the active learning class. The students worked in groups of 4 to 7 and spent the language learning lesson practicing English based partly on the Japanese National Curriculum for elementary schools, Grade 5/6 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology — Japan [MEXT] 2010). At the conclusion of the lesson, the theme for the following week’s active learning lesson would be set. The following week, each group, or team, was required to submit a written plan (in English) and team teach a 10 minute learning activity of their own choosing and design. All students (teachers and students) were required to speak in English at some point during the activity. Each team was free to use whatever teaching aids they wished.

Team-teaching was chosen as the active learning component because it is similar to role playing, which is seen as a viable activity to promote active learning (Bonwell & Eison 1991, pg. 47). Role playing puts students into stressful situations to allow them to develop and practice skills required to deal with that situation (Bonwell & Eison 1991, pg. 47). It also fulfills many of the basic requirements of active learning, such as:

I. Students are more involved in learning than just by listening.
II. More importance is placed on developing student skills.
III. Students are engaged in activities (Bonwell & Eison 1991, pg. 2).

Team teaching also has the advantage of resembling student teaching internships, and as such it provides “an effective way to give training... about the real world of work... (in order to) integrate theory and practice, plan and deliver lessons properly, (and) critically analyze their own and peers teaching styles” (Parveen 2012, pg. 496). It is also is a valuable activity in developing metacognition, as it placed students in a situation where they had to “use prior knowledge to plan a strategy for approaching a learning task, take necessary steps to problem solve, reflect on and evaluate results, and modify one’s approach as needed” (TEAL staff. 2011, pg. 32). Additionally, team teaching has the advantage of being a group activity, which many studies have shown has “a significant positive effect on student achievement” (Slavin 1981, pg. 656). Therefore, active learning in the form of team teaching is well suited for education students to be introduced to, develop and practice skills that would be useful in their role as a teacher of English, and not simply for learning English.

It is important to note that team teaching in this case is not the same as peer teaching (or tutoring); peer teaching is grouped into 5 basic categories (Bonwell & Eison 1991, pg. 50), none of which apply to the activity conducted in the English classes. Peer teaching usually involves smaller groups and is more co-operative between students (Bonwell & Eison 1991, pg. 50). Student team teaching in the 1st year English classes more closely resembled the traditional teacher/student model of instruction, with one group fulfilling the role of teacher.
Assessment was both verbal and written; at the end of each activity the strengths and weaknesses of each team’s approach would be pointed out, and how they could be improved. Each group’s team teaching activity was video recorded, which, along with the written activity plan were subsequently reviewed and subjected to a rubric-based written evaluation. Upon completion of the written evaluation, the written plan and evaluation was returned to the students.

**Instructor Perspective**

As this was the first attempt to incorporate this level of active learning into regular English classes, there were a number of unforeseen issues that arose. Classroom management was problematic at times; it appeared that many students were not familiar with taking this level of ownership over their learning. It took several weeks for the students to make the transition from a passive learning mentality to an actively engaged one. Class at times could be quite boisterous, and this in turn occasionally presented a problem for teams trying to focus on the planning phase of their activity.

Another issue was group size; during the course of the semester, it became apparent that larger groups (6 or more students) were unwieldy; usually the strongest one or two students would effectively take charge of the group. Smaller groups of 4 or fewer students seemed to have a more equal and less hierarchical attitude. In addition, during the team teaching phase of each assignment, weaker students would often “hide” behind stronger ones and try to avoid speaking. Smaller groups permitted for better contribution from weaker students, as there would be more time for each student to speak during their allotted team teaching segment.

Time management was also impacted by group size; trying to accommodate the condition that all students speak during the team teaching phase meant that larger groups took more time to present and conduct their learning activity; smaller groups required less time as fewer students had to speak. As a result, the larger of the two classes would take more time to complete their team teaching which meant at times there was not enough time in a 90 minute lesson to accommodate all groups. This meant that the larger class would require additional time the following lesson for all groups complete all of the learning activities.

**Results**

At the conclusion of the semester, the students were requested to answer the following questions in the “comments” section of the class student survey. The questions were:

I. What new things about teaching skill did you learn in this class?

II. Was this style of class useful in learning how to teach?

These questions served two purposes: first, to gauge the effectiveness of incorporating an active learning approach into the English classes, and secondly to provide the instructor with information to make necessary changes in order to better improve the student learning experience. Based on student responses, two general conclusions can be reached:

I. The majority of students saw some benefit in the class with regards to understanding how to use different types learning activities via an active learning approach (Appendix 1).

II. The majority of students found that the active learning approach was useful or somewhat useful in acquiring general knowledge of teaching skills (Appendix 1).

Reviewing the responses to the questions, for question #1 there were no negative responses ("I
didn’t learn anything”) in either class. All students felt that they had acquired some new technique or skill. Most of the new skills students learned involved the use of group-centered activities (games) or various ways to use teaching aids (worksheets, flashcards, information technology, etc.). Almost a quarter of the students in each class felt that they learned how to make English an enjoyable learning activity, which is an important component when trying to motivate young learners, as Gardner (as cited in Tu & Zhou, 2015, pg. 214) states that motivation is “the effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language”. In addition, a notable percentage of students in each class felt that they had a better understanding on how to approach teaching children-important as well, as these students wish to become kindergarten or elementary school educators.

**Conclusion**

2016 marked a new direction in English class instruction in the Department of Education at Heian Jogakui University, where emphasis shifted from traditional English learning to active learning involving team teaching in English. This was a challenge for both students and instructor, but based on student responses at the end of the classes it can be concluded that it was a beneficial experience that allowed students to discover and explore their strengths as future educators.

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**References**


Appendix 1 — Student Survey Results

**Question #1 – Class #1**
What new things about teaching skill did you learn in this class?

- 38% Using technology
- 27% Using games
- 8% How to teach children
- 4% Using flash cards
- 4% Using songs
- 4% Making English enjoyable

**Question #1 – Class #2**
What new things about teaching skill did you learn in this class?

- 35% Using technology
- 20% How to teach children
- 15% Using flash cards
- 5% Using songs
- 5% Making English enjoyable
- 35% Using games
Appendix 1 — Student Survey Results

Question 2 – Class #1
Was this style of class useful for learning how to teach?

- 8% Yes
- 58% Somewhat Useful
- 33% Not Useful

Question 2 – Class #2
Was this style of class useful for learning how to teach?

- 17% Yes
- 22% Somewhat Useful
- 61% Not Useful