Promoting English-Major Students' Intercultural Understanding through Active Learning

英語専修生の異文化理解を深めるアクティブ・ラーニング

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In my presentation at JALT 2016 LD Forum, I shared my work in assisting English-major students to develop intercultural understanding through Active Learning (AL). Taking into account skills and competencies needed to survive in the 21st century, the Central Council of Education (2015) expects teachers to develop not only students' subject knowledge and skills but also their generic skills. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology (MEXT) is currently revising the Course of Study, emphasizing the integration of the three elements of true scholastic ability: (a) knowledge and skills, (b) ability of thinking, judgment, and expression, and (c) attitudes towards self-directed learning and willingness to collaborate with others. For this innovation in school education, MEXT (2016) encourages all teachers to implement AL (self-directed and collaborative learning for problem solving) in the classroom.

AL is now a popular buzzword in Japan. As a teacher educator, I have developed collaborative, autonomous, and reflective approaches (Kojima, 2012, 2013) where self-directedness and collaboration are essential like AL. Although I do not feel that the official line taken by MEXT is completely appropriate, I am for educational change and have introduced AL into my teaching practice.

In line with AL, I would like my first-year English major students to experience flipped learning in my "Introduction to Intercultural Understanding" class. A flipped classroom describes a reversal of traditional teaching where "students gain first exposure to new material outside of class, usually via reading or lecture videos, and then use class time to do the harder work of assimilating that knowledge, perhaps through problem-solving, discussion, or debates" (Brame, 2013, para. 1).

At the beginning of the semester, the students and I discussed the significance of intercultural understanding in English language education and how to carry out AL and flipped learning effectively. In this study, I aimed to examine to what extent I could help my students to develop their intercultural understanding through AL in a flipped classroom.

Method

Participants.

The class involved 32 first-year university students (English majors) in 2016, with low-intermediate to high-intermediate levels of English (STEP, TOEIC). The class met for 90 minutes every week during the first semester. All of them would like to obtain a teaching license to be an English language teacher in primary or secondary schools after graduation.

Materials.

In order to answer my research question "*To what extent could I help my students to promote intercultural understanding through AL?*" I used quantitative and qualitative materials: a questionnaire to survey the students' self-evaluation of their learning experiences, their

reflective comments on intercultural understanding and AL, as well as my observations and reflections.

Procedure.

Before class, as flipped learning, the students read the textbook on English language education and culture (Shiozawa, Yoshikawa, & Ishikawa, 2010) at home, and made a report on their findings. In class, based on individual reports, the students had group discussions about their findings and questions. They were encouraged to use English in discussion and to play various roles (chair, recorder, reporter, and monitor). As a facilitator of group dynamics, I advised them to consider the five key elements of collaborative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face promotive interaction, social skills, and group processing (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). After group work, each group reported the results to the whole class, and then the students exchanged their ideas freely. They continued their self-directed and collaborative learning with the same textbook during the semester. Finally, I assigned them short papers to work on various topics of their choice, requiring research and some analytical thought based on the textbook or their own materials. Two-thirds of the students completed their papers in English.

Results and Discussion

In order to answer my research question, I analyzed the following quantitative and qualitative data. (I translated the students' Japanese responses into English.)

Summative self-evaluation.

For the end-of-semester course evaluation, students at my university are usually asked to answer about 15 questions the university made. Then, we teachers are allowed to add several question items of our own to each course questionnaire. This time, I focused on the following macro statements in light of intercultural understanding and AL.

Question items.

1. I could recognize the importance of intercultural understanding in English language education.
2. I could recognize teaching practice to promote intercultural understanding.
3. I could consider the future of English language education in light of intercultural understanding.
4. I could work on self-directed and collaborative learning positively.

Table 1. *Summative Self-Evaluation* (N=32)

	5 Strongly agree (%)	4 Agree (%)	3 Neutral (%)	2 Disagree (%)	1 Strongly disagree (%)	Mean $\bar{x}$
Question 1	18 (56)	14 (44)	0	0	0	4.6
Question 2	11 (34)	15 (47)	6 (19)	0	0	4.2
Question 3	20 (63)	9 (28)	3 (9)	0	0	4.5
Question 4	12 (38)	19 (59)	1 (3)	0	0	4.3

Students' ratings in response to each statement were marked on a five-point scale. Table 1 shows that the majority of the students were in agreement with the positive aspects of their learning experiences in my class. The mean scores of the four questions were all over 4.0. The question that the students claimed to have the strongest agreement with was Question 1 ($\bar{x}$ = 4.6), which stressed the importance of intercultural understanding in English language education. They enhanced their intercultural understanding in light of various issues: language and culture, intercultural communication, international understanding, language policy, the Japanese and English, and teaching culture in language classrooms.

As for Question 2, six students' responses were "neutral." This might suggest that it was rather difficult for them to imagine integrating intercultural understanding with practical teaching methods and materials. First-year students have not done any teaching practicums yet. Moreover, in high schools, many students mentioned that they had studied English only to pass entrance examinations mostly through translation, grammar drills, and rote memorization of words and phrases. In other words, they had had limited prior opportunities to develop their intercultural awareness within the exam-driven memorization-focused preparatory system for university entrance exams.

Concerning intercultural understanding, 91% of the students agreed that they could consider the future of English language education (Question 3). They understood the close connection between language and culture, and would like to teach English in the future, taking this into consideration.

Regarding AL (Question 4), almost all the students agreed that they could work on AL positively. Their positive attitudes towards AL would help them to understand the educational effect of AL on learner development and how to implement AL in their future classrooms.

Students' reflections on intercultural understanding.

In their short research papers, the students also reflected on their intercultural understanding more deeply from general perspectives. They critically commented on Japanese people's general tendencies and today's English education in Japan. Their comments are briefly summarized as follows:

- *Japanese people tend to emphasize only English and lack multicultural perspectives. We need to accept different cultures and different values.*

- *English teachers should help students to develop intercultural competence, which makes it possible for students to communicate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.*

- *Teaching materials should be designed to promote students' intercultural understanding and autonomous growth as whole persons.*

- *It is necessary for Japanese students to have more opportunities or experiences to promote their intercultural understanding inside and outside Japan.*

- *The languages offered in educational institutions should be diversified, taking sociolinguistic or sociocultural differences into account.*

- *Japanese people should develop their original Japanese English to communicate with native or non-native speakers and to express their ideas and values more effectively.*

Most of the students criticized exam-oriented English language instruction in Japan. Considering the close relationship between language and culture, they pointed out the significance of teaching with a multicultural perspective and developing intercultural competence. They also mentioned that as teachers in the future they expected to redesign teaching materials so that teachers could foster students' autonomous growth as whole persons as well as their intercultural understanding.

With regard to intercultural experiences, the students enjoyed exchanging different information with each other. They would like to enhance intercultural understanding in a variety of contexts inside and outside Japan. Most of them also expressed an interest in studying abroad in the near future.

Worrying about the domination of one language over all others, the majority of the students agreed that a variety of foreign languages should be offered in Japanese educational institutions. Today, English is spoken by more non-native than native speakers. Some of the students claimed that they wanted to develop original Japanese English to communicate with both native and non-native speakers.

Students' reflections on Active Learning.

For further application of AL to my university classes, I needed to analyze the students' reflective comments on AL. Thus, as an open-ended question, I asked them what they thought about AL. Only one student preferred knowledge-based instruction to AL partly because he lacked confidence in his English knowledge and skills. In contrast, all the other students' responses were positive as follows:

- *Through flipped learning before class, I could raise my intercultural awareness. This was a good preparatory stage for group work in the classroom.*

- *AL helped me to consider the contents of the textbook critically and to enhance both intercultural understanding and technical knowledge through positive interdependence.*

- *I enjoyed listening to different groups and sharing different ideas about a variety of topics in the textbook.*

- *As a teacher trainee, I need to develop teacher-learner autonomy through self-directed and collaborative learning.*

- *I would like to improve my pedagogical skills so that I can apply AL to my English language classes in the future.*

Many students thought of flipped learning as an essential preparatory stage to support AL in the classroom, through which they raised their intercultural awareness. They were not used to this type of self-regulated learning, but they gradually understood how to engage in this stage for themselves.

As for AL, the students worked on group activities designed to provide them with a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. Classroom activities were followed by some form of whole-class synthesis facilitated by me, such as discussion or a mini-lecture. This approach seemed to enhance the students' abilities to work in a team, to consider the topics of the textbook critically, to make decisions and solve problems, to plan, organize, and prioritize work, to communicate verbally with each other, and to obtain and process information. Structured discussion and debates allowed the students to examine different perspectives of a controversial issue and to formulate effective arguments to support a stance.

The students' professional consciousness also seemed to be raised through AL. As teacher trainees, they will be more involved in various pre-service teacher education programs. They are expected to develop teacher-learner autonomy throughout their university lives, and to improve their technical knowledge, pedagogical skills, interpersonal skills, as well as personal qualities. These programs will help them to promote their professional growth and to carry out AL in the classroom more effectively.

Conclusion

In this study, I have examined to what extent I could help English-major students to promote intercultural understanding through AL. By analyzing quantitative and qualitative data, I found that the first-year English majors tended to raise their intercultural and professional consciousness as teacher-learners, who are expected to continue learning how to teach.

The majority of the students recognized the significance of intercultural understanding in English language education. They claimed that language and culture should be taught simultaneously and interactively. They also criticized exam-oriented instruction and the domination of English over all others in Japan. The specific textbook we used was rather difficult, but very useful for them to enhance intercultural understanding from various viewpoints. This would motivate them to consider 21st century skills and competencies, the integration of the three elements of scholastic ability, and the growth of school-age students as whole persons.

The social context of teaching and learning could be a key mechanism for how AL produced the positive effects on the students' experiences and on their learning outcomes. AL created opportunities for the students to act as a teacher, such as reciprocal teaching and peer learning. Each student occupied an instructor-like role with respect to his/her fellow students. I hope that my students will continue to learn autonomously and collaboratively, keeping in mind that the importance of relationships among students and between instructor and student is potentially meaningful for AL.

Innovation in English language teaching should be promoted from primary through tertiary levels of education. Thus, considering the different teaching contexts in different institutions, we teacher educators should collaborate with each other and promote innovation in pre- and in-service teacher education, critically exploring different issues around AL and learner autonomy.

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Reader Response to "Promoting English-Major Students' Intercultural Understanding through Active Learning"

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On seeing the title "*Promoting English-Major Students' Intercultural Understanding through Active Learning,*" I thought the article would focus on how Kojima Sensei educates his English major students who would study abroad in the future about intercultural awareness. However, as I finished reading this article, I noticed that he was trying to promote intercultural understanding to the students who are in the teacher-training course. Kojima Sensei was concerned not only with teaching intercultural understanding through Active Learning (AL), but also with conveying to his teaching license course students the importance of learner autonomy through carrying his classes out using an AL method. As an English teacher at a university in Japan, I am familiar with AL. Since my higher education was earned in the United States, I had realized that teacher-centered learning is not effective anymore, especially in foreign language classes. I myself prefer teaching my language classes more student-centered and allocating more time for students to discuss with their peers. However, I have never managed to run a well-organized Active Learning class as the author of this article did, so I was able to learn a good example of how to carry it out such as giving each student in the group a role in discussions.

As explained in the procedure section of this article, students do the reading assignment at home and write a report on their findings and questions. Then, in groups, they share what they found and talk about their questions with each other. Each group reports what they discussed in the group to the entire class. And finally, students exchange their opinions freely as a class. It seems a very autonomous classroom to me because of the author's clear and repetitive instruction. Kojima Sensei is not only successful implementing his teaching method, but his students also react very positively to his teaching content and style. For example, some of the students stated that they would like to apply AL into their teaching when they start teaching English. However, Kojima Sensei doesn't mention how he integrated intercultural understanding into teaching practice. He states that his students' reaction to questionnaire item 2— "*I could recognize teaching practice to promote intercultural understanding* —was rather neutral.

I myself sometimes refer to how I was taught in schools when I have difficulties teaching in classes. How people were taught greatly influences the way they teach. Therefore, promoting the importance of implementing intercultural understanding and AL in language classes in the early stage of English teacher education and changing teacher trainees' mind of improving the way they were taught English in junior and high school could have a lasting impact on future English education in Japan. Although the participants received their English education in a rather traditional way in public schools, they are fortunate to have these kinds of opportunities to learn and experience new ways of teaching and learning. Now that the participants have been

exposed to a new way of teaching, I would like to see how these students preserve the teaching/learning method they acquired through Kojima Sensei's class and utilize it in the future teacher training courses or in their own English classes they will teach in the future.

Reader Response to "Promoting English-Major Students' Intercultural Understanding through Active Learning"

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As Hideo Kojima mentions, Active Learning (AL) is the current buzzword in Japanese education and Kojima offers a definition covering a very large area of pedagogy: self-directed and collaborative learning with a focus on problem solving. Whenever I hear the term "Active Learning," I am reminded of a poster for a recent conference in Kyushu about AL in the physical sciences. The poster showed a photo of a group of teachers sitting in fixed rows of seating listening intently to a professor. The irony of the photo is the passive way in which we as teachers often learn about AL, and this mirrors the irony of MEXT dictating that teachers should teach students to work collaboratively and with self-direction.

Like the teachers in the photo, many of us who attempt to implement AL have to work around physical and social barriers within the classroom, such as those rows of bolted down seats in the photo, student and teacher expectations, and the exam-orientated education system here in Japan. Kojima mentions this last barrier as being an important factor in student reflections on AL and the flipped classroom. In my own teaching, I have found that students are not inclined to prepare for a lesson and I think many teachers hesitate to flip their classrooms because of this, so I would like to know more about how to prepare students for this shift in focus from homework being proof of knowledge acquisition to being self-directed knowledge exploration.

Other reflections included student recognition that as future teachers they needed to understand and develop approaches to AL and student autonomy. As experienced teachers who have worked in the real world, I am sure we have all met (or been) teachers who just pay lip-service to AL. In the extremely busy working lives of teachers in the Japan, many find themselves teaching in ways that they do not prefer for the simple reason that they are too busy to overcome all the barriers. How might these ideal methods be adapted for such everyday high school realities? Initially, teachers and teacher educators need to work together on making AL more accessible as an everyday teaching method, thereby bridging the divide between theory and real practice.

The final question that I want to raise relates to the one student who did not prefer AL. Was his preference really just because of a lack of confidence? As social animals, we all like to say what is expected of us—what pleases our

teachers. I wonder if this specific student stated a lack of confidence in his skills because he did not want to be seen as being critical of his teacher. There is something reassuring in fixed answers that are obtained by a specific method. This question goes to the very heart of Active Learning because AL requires a certain level of discomfort and risk-taking, which are keys components of problem solving and self-direction. This one student might provide a wealth of further information by being a rare outlier in the data and is worth exploring further.