

SHORT REFLECTIVE ARTICLES | 小論**Ensemble: Extended Reflections on Active Learning****Abstract**

This is an ensemble short article with extended reflections following a Tokyo get-together on active learning (AL). In the first piece, Ken Ikeda draws on different interpretations of AL from Japan, the United States and Europe to look at how students characterise their own learning within an academic skills course. He furthermore explores possible connections between AL and foundational notions of learner development that the LD SIG started with in the early 1990s. James Underwood next questions how active learning practices vary according to context, situation, and the capabilities of the learners involved. What might strong or weak versions of active learning involve, and what roles might learners be asked to play in the design and development of appropriate AL systems and curricula? In the final reflective piece, Tim Ashwell argues that it is helpful to understand the "active" quality of AL as grounded in what learners do through speech or writing to negotiate with other learners as they act upon information they have heard or read. Tim concludes by inviting readers to consider to what extent such an interpretation of AL can be related to the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2000).

Keywords: Active Learning, academic skills, strong/weak versions of active learning, learner development, learner negotiation, Output Hypothesis

要旨

このテーマ企画は、東京で行われたアクティブラーニング（AL）をテーマにしたLD SIGの会合で話題に上ったトピックについて、さらに深掘した小論をまとめたものになります。1本目の小論は、Ken Ikedaが日本、米国、ヨーロッパにおけるALの様々な解釈を描き出し、学生たちがアカデミックスキルの授業の中で、どのように自らの学習を特徴づけているのかについて見ていきます。Ikedaはさらに、ALと学習者ディベロップメントが1990年代初頭にスタートした当初の基礎的な概念とのつながりについても踏み込んでいきます。次にJames Underwoodは、アクティブラーニングの実践が、コンテキストや場所、学習者の能力に応じて変化しているのだろうか、という点について疑問を投げかけています。本稿では、「アクティブラーニングの程度が強い、または弱いというのはどういうことか」、また「適切なアクティブラーニングのシステムとカリキュラム、それぞれの授業設計の中において、学習者はどのような役割を求められるべきか」という質問に答えています。最後の小論では、Tim AshwellがALの”アクティブ”な要素は、学習者が聞いたり書かれたものから得たインプットを、スピーチやライティングを通して、他の学生と意味の相互理解を行うプロセスに根ざしており、そのプロセスを理解することはALのより深い理解に繋がるとしています。TimはこのようなALの解釈がどの程度Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2000)と関係しているのかを読者に考えてもらえる機会を提供しています。

キーワード: アクティブラーニング、アカデミックスキル、アクティブラーニングの程度、学習者ディベロップメント、学習者間の相互作用、アウトプット仮説

Learning About the Active Element in Learner Development

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My interest in active learning (AL) was sparked when my university asked me at the beginning of this year to teach a course as part of a license renewal program to Japanese teachers of English. I decided my course would aim at strengthening students' language motivation. A number of teacher responses included queries on AL and how to bring it into being. I have often wondered if AL is just limited to being a pedagogical slogan for educators to guide learners into seemingly interactive discussions. Aware that the teacher license renewal course would end in August, I've aimed to maintain my interest in AL beyond that moment. I've been trying to actualize my insights gleaned through an academic English skills course this past semester, the results of which I'll report on at the upcoming LD Forum at JALT2019 in Nagoya.

I begin with an exploration of three views of AL, from the U.S., Japan, and Europe. I proceed to show how I've incorporated these views into my teaching this year and close with musings on the interaction of AL and learner development (LD).

In a pioneering report on AL, American educators Bonwell and Eison (1991) regard AL as basically "anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (p. 2). They observe five characteristics that students perform in AL: (a) doing more than listening; (b) developing their skills by themselves; (c) carrying out higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation); (d) engaging in reading, discussing, writing activities; and (e) exploring their own attitudes and values (p. 2). They encourage instructors to persuade their institutions that AL is effective (p. vi.) For Bonwell and Eison, the thrust of AL here is not really on actualizing learners' skills, rather, more on making instruction strategies active. Building on this early conceptualization, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has urged teachers in Japan to incorporate AL in their lessons (Tahira 2012), but in recent years has reworded it into a slogan "shutaiteki, taiwateki de, fukai manabi" (2017), translated as "proactive, interactive, deep learning" (Suzuki, 2007, p. 8). "Proactive" is best expressed by Ito (2017) to mean "taking action through changes" (p. 1). "Interactive" appears to involve active engagement between people, but "dialogic" may be a better rendering, because "interactive" does not necessarily mean activity that involves dialogue (Hanten Jugyo Kenkyukai, 2017). I would argue that "dialogic" fits well with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in sociocultural theory, by which learners engage with others who assist them enough so that they can perform at a higher level than which they might do without assistance (see Carr & Wicking, 2019, in this issue for further discussion and references). Whether "taiwateki" ought to mean "interactive" or "dialogic," MEXT's reformulation of AL is an improvement on Bonwell and Eison, since it directs focus more on the learners' activities than on teachers' efforts.

The European University Association (EUA) goes further and explains AL as:

"...(consisting) of a broad range of pedagogical processes that emphasises the importance of student ownership and activation. It harnesses the benefits of curiosity-driven methods, research-based/problem-based learning and diverse assessment practices, thus stimulating the learner's critical thinking skills. It is defined by a student-centred approach to learning and teaching, in which teachers are seen as facilitators of learning." (EUA, 2018, p. 3)

Although critical thinking is present in both the American and European explanations, the EUA places stress on "student ownership," which is absent from the five characteristics of AL (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p.

19). Ownership implies purposeful action to make learning one's own. I agree with the EUA term of "student ownership" as it involves "curiosity-driven" searching, which I regard as similar to Byram's sub-skill of discovery (savoir apprendre/faire) within his model of intercultural communicative competence (1997, p. 99). The EUA paper states that AL is "iterative, dialogical and mostly collaborative; it is about the doing of understanding and, hence, about the application of knowledge in new and authentic situations" (p. 3). "Dialogical" certainly resounds with the "dialogic" interpretation raised earlier in this paper of MEXT's taiwateki; "dialogical and mostly collaborative" furthermore echoes the sociocultural approach to learning. Not only does the EUA paper call for encouraging students to take ownership of their learning, but argues that the roles of instructors and students be changed:

"Active learning casts the teacher in the role of facilitator and coach and invites the student to take responsibility for learning. Hence, they need to enter into a new contract and relationship and negotiate new ways of working and learning. There needs to be a cultural shift to accommodate an active learning stance and this shift is possible only in the context of nurturing and supporting learning communities for staff as well as students." (p. 3)

I concur with this cultural re-positioning of AL. Instructors also need to regard their roles to be more facilitators than evaluators in their local classrooms. I interpret "staff" to include instructors, who need to be active learners themselves.

This semester, I implemented AL principles in a class to raise learners' academic skills in English, but also to develop their own sense of their selves, which is the fifth feature of active learning that Bonwell and Eison (1991) identify occurring in classrooms (p. 19). Values are not simply abstractions, they are "clearly grounded in fear and desire" (Lemke, 2008, p. 27). Trainor (2008) argues that if people become clearly aware of their values, "the easier it is to put them into practice. Values provide the framework for decision-making" (para. 2). I would venture that I am treating "values" here in a broader context, to students coming to grips with what they hold important as members of society, not limited to being learners in a classroom.

My class consisted of seven students, five of them in their first year of university, the other two respectively in their third year and fourth year. The instructional approach I carried out (Ikeda, in press) has mirrored in significant ways with the EUA recommendations. Through curiosity-driven learning, students first studied a list of statements on various topics to select their degree of agreement or disagreement on an 8-point scale. They then polled each other in deep discussion to find those who agreed or disagreed to the same degree on one or more value statements. Their interaction and analysis resulted in them being placed into three groups in which they were tasked with constructing manifestos based on their shared values. These group manifestos were presented in a public lesson attended by several colleagues from my department who provided constructive feedback. This course ended with the students presenting proposals based on their group values in another public lesson attended by visiting high school students.

As facilitator, I perceived at least two responsibilities: (a) to encourage students to probe their ideas and hone their manifestos, and (b) refrain from knowing their test placement scores that put them into levels. At the end of the course, I gave them a questionnaire that asked them about initial barriers they perceived and the extent they had found ways to overcome these barriers. I will interview the students who answered the questionnaire and report these results at the LD Forum at JALT2019. I haven't thoroughly analyzed these results yet, but I close my reflection by commenting on two students.

One of them is currently a fourth-year student who has received an offer for a job when she graduates in March next year. She transferred into this department from another college. I am interested in how she regards herself as a student in her senior year and views English learning as part of her personal

development. Despite the pressures of job hunting, she was absent only twice, freely advised and discussed with others, including constructing her group manifesto.

Another student is in her first year of university. She wrote on the questionnaire that she feared if she would do well in my class primarily due to her section level, which was lower than she expected. This first-year student has excelled in this class, becoming one of the more influential motivators. For her group manifesto presentation, she conducted an Instagram poll on Japanese people's awareness of refugees and presented many graphs with professional-level citations. I learned from her that both of her parents graduated from universities in the United States, but finances have prevented her from having an extended study abroad. This student is now preparing her application for a long-term study abroad program next year. This reflective piece is just a probing foray into various conceptions of AL to see how they could be actualized in a class. I seek to find ways to carry out these understandings of AL in my academic skills class that has equipped students through discovering their values. I close this exploration with this query: How does AL relate to learner development (LD)? As Smith (1994) has put it:

“...learner development as an aim could be construed as implying both or either of: (1) helping students “learn how to learn”, and deploy what they’ve learned, as a route towards more effective language acquisition and use; and (2) weaning learners away from an attitude of teacher-dependence and towards an assumption of greater responsibility for and control of their own learning, as a means of more general empowerment.”

Smith's second point of LD certainly relates to AL. “Weaning” is an apt word to encourage learners to become autonomous users of the language, particularly in “control of their own learning” and “empowerment”. Too often instructors are overly influenced by the institutional constraints and expectations of their teaching environments and lose sight of their actual roles as encouragers toward independent learning. For Bonwell and Eison (1991), their “strategies promoting active learning” are primarily directed to faculty, not the students themselves (p. 8). Reviewing the three conceptions of AL, the EUA (2018) stance on student ownership and encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning is the clearest view of active learning that coincides with aims of LD.

AL and LD would seem to make good bedfellows, yet, a clear understanding of these has not been entertained in my opinion. I hope my extended definition leads to further exploration into these seemingly compatible ideas.

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Conceptualizing the Degrees of Active Learning

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The more I read about active learning (AL) the more I noticed parallels with Everhard's (2016) proposed model for the Assessment Autonomy Research Project (AARP). Her model graphically shows the degrees of autonomy in foreign language learning. It outlines various characteristics that courses exhibit from **no autonomy** through to **high autonomy** in the following four categories:

- content knowledge and skills
- motivation and context
- strategies and process
- feedback evaluation and assessment.

For **no autonomy**, she proposes that the language teacher controls the content of the course through the syllabus that determines the material used and the skills that will be developed. The learners are extrinsically motivated by their desire to pass the assessment designed and evaluated by the teacher. Success in passing is based on the learners' ability to reproduce the knowledge imparted by the teacher during the course. To do so, they complete tasks designed by the teacher in the order the teacher prescribes. In **high autonomy**, the learners are in control. They decide the course content, materials used, and the skills that will be developed based on their needs and objectives. The learners decide how they will realise their objectives through the selection of appropriate strategies. And as they learn, they monitor their performance and adjust these if necessary. Throughout their learning, the learners are intrinsically motivated by their curiosity and interest. In between these two extremes lie **low** and **medium autonomy**, which vary according to the degree that the learner is in control and gradually bridge the gap between **low** and **high autonomy**.

As I tried to conceptualize what active learning involves through examining the literature, I started to wonder if it would be possible to realize active learning not as a fixed or static concept but a process that varied according to the context, situation, and the capabilities of the learners involved. And furthermore,

could this variation be contextualized on a scale that described degrees of active learning from weak to strong? After all, there seems to be a wide gap between the original description of active learning described by Bonwell and Eison (1991), and that described by the European University Association (2019), especially when it comes to student involvement in curriculum development and beyond.

In the interview with Katherine Isbell (1999) it seems that for Eison the teacher or “active learner practitioner” is still very much in control of this process. In this interview he hypothesized that during the planning stages the practitioner will ask themselves the following three questions:

- (1) *What knowledge, skills, and attitudes do I want students to examine and employ?;*
- (2) *What exercises or assignments can I have students complete to demonstrate their understanding of, skills with, and beliefs about important course content?; and*
- (3) *What instructional materials might I prepare to help maximize student effectiveness and efficiency in achieving these important learning outcomes? (p. 4, emphasis added)*

With the foci of these questions very clearly on the practitioner, it is clear that Eison believes the student is not a part of this process (Isbell, 1999). In contrast, the EUA (2019) proposes that the students should be involved “in all levels in redesigning higher education, i.e., academic strategies, the design of the learning space and time, assessment practices and the use of technology” (p. 6). For many institutions, this level of involvement may be unfeasible. Thus the EUA model of active learning could be seen as “**strong**” **active learning**, with “**no**” **active learning** at the other end of the scale. Taking inspiration from Everhard’s (2016) model, I wondered if there could be a **low and medium version** of active learning that will bridge the gap between the two extremes.

At the start of the scale lies “**no active learning**” or as it is more commonly known “**passive learning.**” For this type of learning the teacher is very much in control as the main source of information. They often require that the students reproduce an almost exact copy of the information that they provide through the assessment that they design. Often this assessment will take place at the end of the semester, meaning that the student is unable to use this assessment as an indicator of their strengths and weaknesses and work on fine-tuning these so that they can improve in the short term. Following on from passive learning is low active learning where the students are slightly more involved in the learning process. As the students gradually become more involved, they are, as Chickering and Gamson (1987) claim, able to “make what they learn a part of themselves” (p. 5).

In **low active learning**, the students will be doing more than note-taking and will be actively processing what they have learnt through reading or discussion. Although the teacher is still the main source of information, the students will be more able to supplement this with their (and other students’) knowledge and experience through working collaboratively with other students to understand the material. Throughout this collaborative inquiry, the teacher would have some degree of control as they will be deciding not only when it will happen, but often the form it will take. One example of this could be the “pause procedure” described by Eison in the interview with Isbell (1999) where during a teacher-fronted lecture, the teacher pauses the delivery to give the students time to discuss and share understanding every 12-18 minutes. Another way the teacher would be able to control the sharing activity would be by preparing discussion questions or writing tasks and essay questions, which would direct what is shared. In this **low active learning** stage, the content would not all come from the teacher, and the teacher would assign readings for homework to add to the students' understanding. By assigning these readings for homework as preparation for the lecture and the sharing sessions, the teacher would be supporting the active learning process. Mori (2018) suggests that it takes at least one week for the learners to internalize the content so that they can effectively

share their understanding. In terms of assessment, the students' performance in these activities will be still assessed solely by the teacher. And in terms of reflection, the students will probably complete tasks designed by the teacher during the time allocated. Taking all these characteristics into account, the level of student involvement is much like that in Everhard's (2016) description of **low autonomy** where the students are developing skills with the framework, and materials, designed by the teacher. In the next stage of active learning, these responsibilities are shared.

In **medium active learning**, the teacher and students work together to negotiate a framework for the learning that will take place. Unlike **strong active learning**, which I will describe later, this framework will be put in place on a course level, not on a university-wide level. In terms of materials used, there will be more variety, and the students would be free to choose those that are relevant and of interest to them. This variety would enrich the quality of the collaborative inquiry as the students would not all be reading or listening to the same texts, and would thus be able to share more varied perspectives on the content. The impetus for this sharing through presentation, discussion or writing assignments will come from the students themselves as they create discussion questions or writing prompts with guidance from the teacher. Unlike **low active learning**, these tasks will be assessed collaboratively through a combination of self, peer and teacher assessment. There will also be more room for the reflection which would be in-depth, and could, for example, include both a self-assessment of their performance and a section devoted to outlining their weakness and addressing how they will plan to overcome these. Considering all the characteristics I have outlined above, this quality of active learning could be seen as an interim or transition phase as the students take more and more control in the learning process. As I have said above, exactly how much control the learners have depends on the learning context and the institution's readiness and willingness for the "cultural shift" that the EUA report is advocating. For many institutions, the **medium active learning** I have described may be the best they can do given the institutional constraints.

For the **strong version of active learning**, learners and instructors are not only co-creators of the course content but are also co-creators of the curriculum and learning space itself as they both are redesigned to realize the full potential of active learning. The EUA (2019) report advises that when redesigning takes place it should be done with design thinking principles and "include needs analysis, an experimentation and evaluation phase and enough flexibility to adjust if needed" (p. 6). When suggesting ways how this flexibility could be introduced, the EUA report suggests using e-learning platforms to address the problem of limited physical resources. Although these learning management systems are already in place in many universities in Japan, I found it interesting that in relation to the development of these the report suggests that the universities "acknowled(ge) the potential of students to provide smart, creative, functional and targeted solutions for a better way of learning" (ibid.).

Already the institutions I work at acknowledge the students in the curriculum and course design process to some degree when they collect feedback from the students through the course questionnaire. However as this feedback is often closed in nature, with the learner evaluating the course by reading a pre-prepared statement and signalling their level of agreement to this on a Likert scale, there is little room for the students to "provide" their solutions. Added to the design of the course questionnaire, the timing of when the teachers see the results becomes important so that the teachers can adjust if necessary. Another aspect that becomes important is whether or not the instructors can respond to the questionnaire. Furthermore, if the teacher and student are going to be true "co-creators," there needs to be a channel of dialogue that is open throughout the year and beyond.

Through this extended reflection I have attempted to conceptualize degrees of active learning from "**no**" **active learning** to "**strong**" **active learning**. When I reflect on the different contexts I have taught at through the lens of this scale, it appears to me that teachers at different levels of education are more able than others

to incorporate a higher degree of active learning. When examining my current context and universities I teach at, I realised I am more likely to implement a higher degree of active learning at those institutions that support and encourage learner and teacher autonomy throughout their curriculum. By supporting and encouraging both, they facilitate the teachers' *and* learners' "potential ... to provide smart, creative, functional and targeted solutions for a better way of learning" (EUA, 2018, p. 6). With the 2019 autumn semester about to start, I hope to allow **a higher degree of active learning** to take place by involving the learners more in those classes where in the past I have been very much in control due to the culture of the institution. I hope the scale that I have proposed can help other SIG members to do so at a level applicable to their contexts.

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Active Learning – Some Observations Based on Interactionist Metaphors

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Reading the interview with James Eison by Katharine Isbell in the “Special Active Learning Issue” of *The Language Teacher* (1999) in which they discuss how active learning (AL) can be used at the tertiary level, I was struck by how the AL activities mentioned involve learners in producing output in one form or another in speech or writing. Unfortunately, this does not mean that so long as students are speaking or writing they are involved in AL. They might appear to be active, but this may not be the “active” we are seeking. For AL to happen, students need to be speaking or writing in order to process, interpret, translate, or transform information they have heard or read. When they act on that information in some way and transform it so that it becomes understandable and manageable for them, they are engaged in AL. Ultimately, the aim is for students to transform the information so that it is rendered in such a way that it can become part of their own understanding. This requires making connections to previous knowledge and experiences and finding ways to integrate new ideas into existing frameworks, a process that is negotiated through speech or writing. Of course, it is highly likely that many students are active learners without the need to verbalize and it is clear

that much (most?) learning can occur implicitly and unconsciously. However, one way we as teachers can encourage students to be active learners is to require them to verbalize their understanding of the material they encounter and thereby trigger processes, conscious or unconscious, that may lead to a reconfiguring of their knowledge or skills.

The interview article also makes it clear that the information contained in course materials may not be the primary focus for a teacher who wishes to promote AL. In promoting AL, the teacher is probably just, if not more, concerned with the way activities can contribute to the development of particular skills, attitudes, and dispositions. Working through one's understanding of material is an exercise in taking control of the learning process. By seeking to engage with the material through speech or writing, the students are being encouraged to take a critical stance and are being shown that individual understandings can be valid even if they differ from one student to the next. They are being encouraged to take up a point of view and to accept that there may not be a definitive answer. They are thus being shown that knowledge and understanding are mutable and that it is, in fact, sensible and mature to draw out tentative and temporary interpretations that can be refined and revised and even rejected through further rounds of negotiation.

There is a danger of making the learning process seem like a purely mechanical activity by using terms such as "input" and "output," but sometimes these information-processing metaphors can help us clarify what we mean. In this case, I think it is useful to revisit Swain's (2000) Output Hypothesis to gain a deeper understanding of what we mean by AL. Swain has famously posited the need for learners to be pushed to produce output as part of the second language acquisition process. Describing output, she writes: "With output, the learner is in control. In speaking or writing, learners can 'stretch' their interlanguage to meet communicative goals. To produce, learners need to do something. They need to create linguistic form and meaning, and in so doing, discover what they can and cannot do" (p. 99). If I can take an almighty leap here and extend the argument beyond second language acquisition to learning in general, Swain's description sounds very much like AL to me. By being pushed to respond to some form of input by speaking or writing about it, learners are made to see what they do and do not understand. My feeling is that the input may not be limited to second language grammar, vocabulary or pragmatics, but may extend to other forms of input.

I have chosen to dive into the debate from an interactionist viewpoint to see what light this can cast on AL. I think the idea of output highlights the importance of speech and writing in AL and how these can help push learners to work on the ideas they have been presented with to render them in a form which they can integrate into their own framework of understanding. I have deliberately used the term "negotiation" above because I think this is also a useful way of thinking about AL.

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