

A Workshop That Enhances Active Learning

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Abstract

Active research and learning are not only beneficial for acquiring language and content, but they are also an effective means for motivating students to discuss, debate, and present on a variety of topics. This paper examines active learning in the context of Chukyo University's School of International Liberal Studies (ILS) freshman workshop classes, particularly in the area of final group projects. After introducing the structure and organization of the workshop course, this paper will examine the topics for each semester of the full-year course. The final projects will be given special attention, as they are the culmination of the course and the best examples of active learning. The paper details how the projects have been successfully carried out, and gives advice about what things to pursue and avoid. This advice is based on a decade of experience and close collaboration among participating teachers. Results of student surveys done by workshop participants will also be examined.

Introduction

The Chukyo ILS Department focuses on languages, Humanities and Social Science, and is designed to help students develop proficiency in two foreign languages: one major language (French, Spanish, German, Russian or Chinese) and English. The aim of the workshop is to help students develop and articulate ideas, beliefs, and values in a variety of social situations in order to express their thoughts using intermediate-level English. There are a great number of returnees and/or bilingual students in the department who have experience with various homestays and study abroad programs.

At the time the workshop was designed, the participating instructors decided not to use a textbook and chose topics that would be most practical for students. These include identity, interests, lifestyles and values, with a discussion/debate element at the end of the first semester, and society,

education, media and employment, with the survey element in the second semester. All classes are conducted in an English-only environment, and active discussion and debate are strongly encouraged. Classes consist of 15 students and last an entire year; however, the instructors rotate each semester in order to provide a new learning environment for each class. In the final weeks of the first semester, students are divided into groups and required to choose a social issue, thoroughly research it, and present their results and opinions while the audience is encouraged to raise questions and debate about content and opinions brought before them.

In the second semester, students choose another social issue, create a questionnaire that includes short, multiple-choice and open-ended questions in groups of three or four, gather their data by interviewing peers and people of other age groups, consolidate and organize their results, and present those results in front of the class. No two groups are allowed to cover the same topic(s). Every group must either choose a topic from a list the instructors provide to them, or come up with their original idea(s). The instructors check all grammar and spelling in the manuscripts before presentations, and students present using posters, PowerPoint, Keynote, overhead camera equipment, or the whiteboard. The project takes two to three weeks for preparation and practice before the final presentation. The presenting group members divide up their speaking parts equally. Students are required to summarize the information and draw conclusions, and they must add which responses from their questionnaire surprised or shocked them, which points they learned the most from, and what answers they agreed or disagreed with in their conclusions. The audience is again encouraged to pose questions and raise issues to foster debate. Students are given feedback from the instructor and their peers.

After nearly a decade of conducting these active learning first-year workshops, the instructors have expanded and improved upon their content and teaching techniques in a team effort with the purpose of providing students with as much up-to-date and practical information as possible. One example was the final presentation in the second semester. In the first few years of the curriculum, all students in the ILS program gathered in a large room and delivered their presentations in front of all the other classes, with various awards being presented. Although this was a nice way of ending the course, the final presentation/award day often went over the time limit, as it was difficult to prepare and carry out all presentations and give out awards within the three-hour time allotment. After the fourth year of the program, the instructors decided it was better to conduct their own class presentations which allowed instructors to better monitor speech time among their students while

allocating more time for other class topics. Another example of change was the final exams, which were jointly made and unified in the early years of the curriculum, but are now made individually by each instructor. The teachers realized that through various forms of team effort to improve the course curriculum, students have not only comprehended and applied the content more effectively, but improved their vocabulary, discussion, debate and presentation skills in a more efficient and practical way that may be useful for their future classes and employment.

Literature Review

Active Learning has a long tradition, emerging from the philosophy of John Dewey, which emphasized “learning by doing.” Active learning denotes “experiences in which students are thinking about the subject matter” as they interact with the instructor and other students (McKeachie, 1999). Active learning techniques yield many benefits: they are student-centered, maximize participation, are highly motivational, and give life and immediacy to the subject matter by encouraging students to move beyond a superficial, fact-based approach to the material (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). However, Bronwell and Eison (1991) acknowledged that this was a broad definition and many activities may be included. They propose a range of activities such as taking breaks during lectures to review class notes with peers to the more complicated such as creating programs for presentations or examining case studies. Such an approach also puts more responsibility for learning in students’ hands by encouraging them to create something which can serve to evaluate their progress and ability.

This brings to mind the question of what evidence exists that proves active learning really works? Freeman et al (2014) concluded a mega-analysis of 225 students in which they compared classes with at least some active learning versus traditional learning such as lectures. They compared failure rates and student scores on exams and concept inventories, and noted that the lecture-based students were 1.5 times more likely to fail than those in active learning environments. Students performed better on exams and in concept inventories by about a half standard deviation when some kind of active learning element was adapted.

These findings were similar across multiple disciplines. However, integrating active learning into curricula can present some obstacles and risks. These include:

- The difficulty in adequately covering the assigned course content in the limited class time available
- A possible increase in the amount of preparation time

- The difficulty of using active learning in large classes
- The lack of needed materials, equipment or resources
- The risk that students may not adequately participate, use higher order thinking, or learn sufficient content so as faculty members will feel a loss of control (Bonwell & Eison,1991).

Despite these challenges, the instructors of the ILS freshman workshop classes made full use of the active learning approach by providing students with topics and information relevant to their area of studies and daily lives. It also required them to utilize active learning to produce their own ideas, conduct surveys, discuss the results and make conclusions about each social issue in groups which enhances their learning satisfaction and gives them the results they wanted. Perhaps the most significant task was the group survey, in which students research, plan, organize and conduct surveys on current social problems in small groups. They must work as a team to research and present their results to the class. Another is the media activity in which they conduct a television or radio show in groups to the class. By incorporating this active learning element into the curriculum, students more efficiently and effectively comprehend the information given to them while fostering motivation and enjoyment in the learning process.

Positive Effects From Active Learning

“Active learning refers to the robust research finding that learning is more durable and lasting when students are cognitively engaged in the learning process.” (Lynch 2016, p.1). In the ILS workshop classes, students are expected to provide their thoughts and opinions about each segment of the course covered, and pair and group discussions are a key element in every class. All instructors agree that this active method of research and discussion, in addition to the class surveys at the end of the semester, has fostered better comprehension, vocabulary and conversation skills while boosting teamwork and motivation among students.

In the second semester debate element of the course, students choose a social issue topic, organize the flow of their presentation, and divide up the presentation duties. They are then given a questionnaire outline (see index below). They make their own interview questions, and the teacher checks and corrects the grammar and content of the questions, and suggests ways to improve them. After the questions and order have been finalized, students make between five and 10 copies for each member of the group and collect their information before the following class. It should be noted that

in addition to passing out and having recipients fill in the answers to the questionnaires, students are required to make active follow-up questions to respondents in order to acquire complete answers and reduce any ambiguity. By actively researching, arbitrating and presenting in pairs or groups, students comprehend course content more efficiently and effectively while becoming more motivated to challenge new topics.

To ascertain what the students thought about the active approach in our workshop, a questionnaire was given which confirmed that the majority agreed that the strategies used--group work, discussion/debate, presentations and pair-work, were indeed helpful for their language learning. All 81 students who took the survey noted that "they really enjoyed the class", while 96% noted they "would recommend the class to other students". Knowing that participants enjoyed the class and would recommend it to their peers or juniors illustrates that active learning was achieved and teachers provided a pleasant and rewarding atmosphere. An average of 83% of students agreed that the strategies used by the teachers were helpful, while the number of students who were "less afraid of speaking in front of the class" stood at 64%. Public speaking is rarely something students want to do, so the fact that two-thirds of the students were less afraid to speak in front of others towards the end of the course than they were before illustrates a boost in their confidence with public speaking. Many mentioned that they had never spoken in front of a class before and acknowledged that it was an excellent learning experience and practice for them.

Secondly, 80% of the students replied that they felt their language skills improved, and the same percentage stated that they felt more confident in their ability to study abroad. Students in the ILS are also strongly encouraged to study their chosen foreign language abroad, so this was an encouraging response. To elicit whether teachers were providing enough support to students, five categories including methodology, written work, feedback with writing, presentations and advice were asked. Virtually all categories confirmed strong agreement while an average of 91% of students noted that they felt their teachers supported their language learning process.

The questionnaire revealed other points of interest as well. First, surprisingly 21% prefer taking notes and listening to the teacher as the best means of learning English. In addition, 10% didn't feel that group work and doing presentations helped them learn English, supporting the fact that for at least some, traditional Japanese methods of teacher-centered classes is still preferred. In fact, there was an argument that for some activities, a teacher-centered class is necessary, especially when it

comes to reinforcing basics grammar, pronunciation, stress, etc. Therefore, especially with a group or pair-work class such as these workshops, it's imperative that teachers consistently supervise conversations and quickly correct errors so that they do not become habitual among students.

Surveys to Manifest Discussion and Debate

As active learners in the ILS program, students are required to do research on a variety of social topics to enhance discussion and debate. The ability to engage in a constructive discussion of controversial topics fosters an appreciation of opposing viewpoints and is a key element of good citizenship (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1997; Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004). Fallahi and Haney (2007) note that: "Classroom debate, a related teaching technique that may provide a significant learning experience for students, and increase classroom participation. To engage in a debate is to discuss opposing views through social interaction" (p. 84). For the discussion and debate segment in the second semester, students choose a topic from categories of social issues, including: politics, economics, education, military policy, social issues, and medical issues. After each group chooses a topic, the members complete a questionnaire (see attachment in index). The first section has short true or false--yes or no questions; the second part has multiple-choice questions; and the third section has short answer questions. Students are free to rearrange the questionnaire format as they like. They create questions for each section and the teachers check their English and/or offer further suggestions on the content. Afterwards, the students make five to 10 copies for each member and conduct interviews with peers, seniors, juniors, family members, and/or the elderly. They are required to finish this task by the following week and organize their data according to their questionnaire sheets. Students then input the data into an excel program, a cell phone application (Survey Monkey, PowerPoint, etc.), or on paper to create graphs and tables. For poster presentations, they should present a clear flow of events and can include illustrations or pictures. For electronic presentations, the presenters should create clear, easy-to-read slides using PowerPoint, Keynote or a cell phone application which can all be connected to a TV monitor and display font letters and numbers large enough to be read from at least five meters away. Graphs, pictures and illustrations may be included, and the groups are free to choose any kind(s) of slide animations they like. Presenters receive feedback from the instructors, and some teachers incorporate peer evaluations. Students are judged by their eye contact, gestures, visual aids, pronunciation, creativity, intonation, vocabulary, teamwork, and content. The presentations represent 30% of the course grade, while other classwork and presentations account for another 30% and the final written exams

comprise the remaining 40%.

Responses

To obtain more details about what topics were helpful and what students felt about them, two long answer questions were asked:

1. What sections of the first semester course (Identity, Individualism, Values, Media, Discussion/Debate) did you like the most and why?
2. What sections of the semester did you learn the most from and why?

Students noted that “Discussion/Debate” was the most popular part of the course with 85% responding in favor of it, while “Identity” was the second most popular element with 69% of respondents noting positive approval. Meanwhile, “Values” came in third with a 62% approval rate. Typical comments made regarding why discussion/debate was helpful included: “It was useful to get to know my classmates more”, “I could talk to and discuss with my classmates about serious topics”, “I was able to learn more vocabulary”, “Before this class, we had no opportunity to speak in English, and it gave us a chance to speak more and learn new things.”

Comments made in support of “Identity” included: “I could talk and learn more about myself and my classmates deeply”, “I could have a chance to speak in front of the class and talk about myself”, “It gave me confidence in improving my English skills”, “I could learn about my own identity which was very important.” Comments regarding “Values” included: “I could understand my other classmates values more”, “I could see how different my classmates were from me”, “It helped me understand other people better through discussions and presentations”, “we couldn’t learn about values in Japanese schools, so this was a good opportunity to learn about them and listen to other classmates”, “I was able to think back to my childhood and remember important things.”

From these responses we could conclude that both the topics chosen and the strategies used were seen by a majority of students as beneficial in their language learning process. In addition, all 81 respondents stated that they enjoyed the workshop classes while 96% said they would recommend them to other peers and juniors, a clear indication that they were satisfied with the chosen course content as presented by the instructors.

Conclusion

Overall, the workshop format in the ILS Department has been successful, mostly due to motivated students, long-term teacher coordination, dedication, and practical content. In addition, the questionnaire results confirmed that most students agreed that active learning helped their English language skills. The content has been modified and expanded over the years to benefit students' learning process and promote active learning. Since students choose their own topics for their presentations, they can further develop autonomy and become motivated by their selected focus. With the aim of helping students develop and articulate ideas, beliefs, and values on a variety of social situations, the teachers realized that through various forms of team effort to improve the course content, students have not only comprehended and applied it more effectively, but improved their vocabulary, discussion, debate and presentation skills in a more efficient and practical way that may be useful for their future classes and employment.


Note: This paper would not have been possible without the superb advice and support from the full-time ILS faculty, in particular Steve Clark and John Esposito. We greatly appreciate your support and it has been a pleasure working with you. Also, a big thanks to our colleague Paul Tanner for his invaluable contributions to the program and this paper.

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APPENDIX



Questionnaire for OCI (B) Class Survey



Instructions: Rewrite your corrected survey questions below. Then, ask the questions to classmates **not** in your group and record their responses (answers). Finally, copy your questions to the **Questionnaire for OCI (B) Main Survey** and hand in this worksheet.

Survey Topic: _____

Survey Group: (1) _____ (2) _____
(3) _____ (4) _____

Survey Questions and Responses

I) Yes/No (True/False) Questions (Circle the responses from six different classmates (CM) for each question)

1. _____ ?

CM#1: Yes/True No/False	CM#2: Yes/True No/False	CM#3: Yes/True No/False
CM#4: Yes/True No/False	CM#5: Yes/True No/False	CM#6: Yes/True No/False

2. _____ ?

CM#1: Yes/True No/False	CM#2: Yes/True No/False	CM#3: Yes/True No/False
CM#4: Yes/True No/False	CM#5: Yes/True No/False	CM#6: Yes/True No/False

3. _____ ?

CM#1: Yes/True No/False	CM#2: Yes/True No/False	CM#3: Yes/True No/False
CM#4: Yes/True No/False	CM#5: Yes/True No/False	CM#6: Yes/True No/False

4. _____ ?

CM#1: Yes/True No/False	CM#2: Yes/True No/False	CM#3: Yes/True No/False
CM#4: Yes/True No/False	CM#5: Yes/True No/False	CM#6: Yes/True No/False

5. _____ ?

CM#1: Yes/True No/False	CM#2: Yes/True No/False	CM#3: Yes/True No/False
CM#4: Yes/True No/False	CM#5: Yes/True No/False	CM#6: Yes/True No/False

II) Multiple-choice Questions (Circle the responses from three different classmates for each question)

1. _____ ?

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Classmate #1: 1 2 3 Classmate #2: 1 2 3 Classmate #3: 1 2 3

2. _____ ?

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Classmate #1: 1 2 3 Classmate #2: 1 2 3 Classmate #3: 1 2 3

3. _____ ?

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Classmate #1: 1 2 3 Classmate #2: 1 2 3 Classmate #3: 1 2 3

III) Long Answer Questions (Write the responses from two different classmates for each question)

1. _____ ?

Classmate #1: _____.

2. _____ ?

Classmate #2: _____.

The surveys for respondents (Clark, 2008).

Survey Results Verify Course Objectives

Questionnaires were given to 81 students to gather data on a number of issues related to the workshop content to get a sense of what the learners felt about the strategies and content of the course and whether they were helpful in their language learning. Below are the results for the 19-point questionnaire that were distributed to the students. For the purposes of this study, only Agree, Disagree totals and the percentages are shown.

Questions		Agree	Disagree	Percent
1	The instructor stimulated my interest in English.	79	2	96
2	Learning English by doing pair work, group work and presentations is helpful.	78	3	96
3	The instructor used a variety of methods to reach course objectives such as homework, discussions group, individual presentations etc.	78	3	96
4	Feedback was given on how to improve my presentations.	76	5	95
5	The instructor gave me advice on how to improve my written language skills	72	9	89
6	The homework, projects and presentations helped me to improve my language skills.	73	8	80
7	I prefer learning English by listening to the teacher talk and taking notes.	64	17	79
8	I would recommend this this course to other students.	78	3	96
9	I contributed constructively and tried my best during class activities	75	6	93
10	I feel that my English is better now than it was before I took this class	65	16	86
11	11. I enjoyed the class	81	0	100
12	Doing the presentations helped me gain confidence in speaking English	71	10	88
13	I want to be able to communicate freely with people from other countries.	73	8	80
14	I feel more confident to study abroad because I took this class.	66	15	88
15	I enjoyed communicating with my classmates in English.	70	11	86
16	I think learning English is important for my future.	80	1	99
17	Learning English is helpful for learning another language.	4	77	95
18	I'm not as afraid to speak in front of the class as I was before.	52	29	64
19	Doing group work and presentations did not help me to learn English.	8	73	10

