

An Attempt at Active Learning in English Grammar Classes

-A View of Joint Teaching Two Classes-

Julien SAINTE* and Ken ICHIKAWA**

Abstract

This paper presents a practical example of an English class where grammar is taught to students to prevent them from being passive, and takes into consideration joint classes.

The first half of this practical report covers active learning ideas for English grammar classes. First, rules about class etiquette are explained to the students to make a more pleasant and efficient learning environment. In addition, the authors report on implementing student presentations to prevent them from being only passive, as well as activities in which students are challenged to compose grammar questions.

The second half of this practical report covers large-group lectures at National College of Technology Kagawa (Takamatsu Campus), starting in 2015 on a trial basis in subjects other than English, and introduced in some English courses from 2016. The school has noticed benefits from the joint classes in English IIA, including reduced lecture time and easier delivery of lectures with the same content. Possible problems include a potential decrease in educational effectiveness, difficulty changing classes, and difficulty conducting quizzes. Fortunately, no major disadvantages were found in the English classes, and it was found that English reading comprehension and grammar classes could be implemented using some ingenuity.

Keywords: Active Learning Style, English Grammar Classes, English Education, Joint Classes.

1. Introduction;

In this article, the authors would like to consider a method to prevent students from being passive as much as possible in an English class where grammar is mainly taught. We will also report on practical examples of classes that take into account the case of joint classes, and examine their effectiveness and challenges.

The first half of this report will introduce active learning in English grammar classes (for lower second-year students), including “confirmation of class etiquette and manners”, “presentations by students who actively motivate students”, and “group competitions to try to make up grammar questions”, followed by a look at large-

* Department of General Education, National Institute of Technology, Kagawa College.

** TOYOTA Technological Institute.

group lectures at National College of Technology Kagawa (Takamatsu Campus).

2. Active learning in English grammar classes;

Teaching English grammar is difficult and cannot be done without ingenuity. In a class where the focus is on teaching grammar, the teacher has to explain the grammatical points in the text, and then the students have to do the exercises. This will lead to low motivation and boredom among the students. In addition, it is easy to become monotonous, and students cannot enjoy the content itself as they do in English reading. Therefore, the following is proposed.

2-1. Confirmation of courtesy and manners for classes - as a groundwork for promoting active learning;

Setting rules will be important in terms of maintaining class tempo and creating an environment conducive to learning. In other words, the first priority is to manage behaviors that inhibit learning. Therefore, we offer the following three “class rules” that should be communicated to students at the beginning of class.

1) Thoroughly treat students as adults; the basic premise of adulthood would be to “avoid bothering others”. In class, private conversation is strictly forbidden and will be subject to removal from the classroom (first time with a warning, and after the second time, the student will be removed from the classroom).

2) Present the importance of thinking for oneself; students will be chosen / called on for questions numerous times according to seating order ¹⁾. In addition, “I don't know” is not acceptable when answering questions. They are expected to have done their homework (preparation for the class), so they should be able to contribute something towards answering the question. In addition to designating questions according to the order of seating, students should be encouraged to raise their hands from time to time. If an attempt at answering is made, no matter what the content, it is a contribution to the class, and points will be given to the speaker. Pair and group work should be introduced as much as possible to increase opportunities for everyone to discuss, express opinions, and make presentations. The above approach is also effective in preventing students from falling asleep during class.

3) Thorough preparation for the class (absolute policy of preparation) ²⁾; preparation is just as important as review, but it is not enough for teachers to simply tell the students, “Please prepare for class!” Most students will simply ignore this order. If the teachers make sure your students do their homework, they can save time during class by looking up unfamiliar words, etc., and they can read the English text. In other words, if the students can do it at home, they can do it on their own. If students are thoroughly prepared, they can concentrate on content which can only be performed in class (confirming what they have studied in advance, learn what only the teacher can explain, pair work, group work, discussions, etc.). This will speed up their learning progress efficiently. As a result, it will be possible to come into contact with a lot of English texts.

In the case of English Grammar classes, students are required to prepare for each unit by writing important example sentences and confirmation exercises in a notebook or other written form. After the class begins, the instructor will go around the desks, check the examples and stamp them with an inspection mark to check the students' preparation. The number of stamps is part of the grade evaluation (about 30-40%).

These three points will lay the groundwork for active learning.

Some teachers may feel that this content is a bit harsh. And some may think that it is not necessary to go through such lengths. In fact, the authors have used this method and have received no push-back from students. The above information is given during an orientation in the first class, which may cause the students to think, “Now I have a strict teacher for this class”. However, the students get used to this rule and feel that they cannot skip class with this teacher, so they just follow the rules and prepare for class. As a result, the level of understanding of the class content will increase, which, in turn, causes learning to become more effective.



**Pictured Above:
Introducing a proactive approach through pair-work activities**

2-2. Avoiding becoming passive in class:

The authors would like to recommend that the students give presentations in order to develop cooperation, cohesion, and summarizing skills through passive class development. However, it would be more efficient to do this in the second (fall) semester. The students will be asked to work in groups of 3 to 5 in the second semester to summarize the grammatical points of a unit in 30 minutes, and they will act as “teachers”. While, 30 minutes is not too much work, considering the fact that this is a joint class, it is possible that not all groups will be able to do this, so about half of the groups will be volunteer groups for presentation, and the rest will be report assignments.

Let us take a look at the instructions shown to the students on the projector to see how to proceed.

* Have students perform group presentations in class:

Everyone in this class gives presentations to the students. In a grammar-centered class, it is easy to lose focus. Therefore, the students themselves will play the role of “teacher” and conduct the class within a set scope. In consideration of the low grade level and shyness of the student teams, students may choose not to give a presentation, but instead submit a presentation outline or a report. In other words, the remaining 6 teams may submit reports. However, half of the 12 groups in the class (6 groups in this case) will give a presentation.

• Presentation outline:

- 1) Form teams of 3~5 members.
- 2) Decide which part of the second half of the text you are in charge of from Lesson 13~24.
- 3) Choose either a presentation or a report. The report group must submit a report by the due date.
- 4) The presentation team will come to the front as the teacher and give a lecture (about 30 minutes).

The report team will be given 30 minutes by the teacher in charge of the class based on their report. After completion, a question-and-answer session will be held by the students, and the faculty member in charge of the course will provide supplemental information and revisions.

The presentation will last approximately 30 minutes, after which questions will be taken and answered by students in the audience (points will be given to students who ask questions and to respondents who give good answers). The report team's report should describe what the class would be like if they were in charge of the part

of the presentation. Class notes should be written in report form, in approximately 5 printed pages.

When they actually participate in class, it is livelier than a top-down classroom lecture. We rarely see students sleeping or skipping class through this approach. The reasons may be that they are forced to be active, the audience pays attention to the fact that their peers are playing the role of teacher, and they can use it as a reference for their own presentations and reports. After the 30-minute presentation, the instructor will evaluate and comment on the presentation and also explain any supplementary information.

2-3. Group competition to compose English grammar questions;

It is difficult to motivate students when teachers simply give explanations of English grammar or explain exercises. Therefore, how about having students create and present grammar questions in groups? It is much more motivational if the method is to give extra points to groups that create excellent questions, and questions that are similar to ones which appear on the class final exam. As an advantage, since appropriate questions cannot be created without a deep understanding of the subject, the group will be forced to diligently research and work as a group, which we believe will build unity and English language skills.

Here the authors present the actual composition question-and-answer sessions that we conducted. These were conducted in 90 minutes per session in the second half or at the end of each semester. The following are the instructions shown to students on a projector.

* A Challenge for composing an English grammar questions;

- How to proceed (first 45 minutes for group creation, second 45 minutes for presentation)

1. Form groups of 3~4 people around you.
2. Check the Japanese translations of five English sentences (common to all groups) given by the instructor.
3. Extract 1~2 words (in principle, one word).

Questions should be designed to test English language and grammar skills, not meaning and vocabulary skills
(excluding subjunctive questions).

4. Since the question will be a four-choice question, create three trick answers (wrong answers).

- The trick is to arrange them in the same grammatical category (part of speech, etc.).
For example: in / from / without / by (preposition).
- Avoid making questions that grammatically make sense, even though its meaning is odd.
- Auxiliary verbs have a broad meaning, so they are easy to apply to tricky and difficult to compose questions.

★This is quite a difficult task and requires good English skills! So that's why it's a great learning experience!

5. The time of presentation. For example, when presenting English sentence 1, all group representatives will come to the black board, one by one. The best / better question will be determined from among them, and points will be given to the best group.

* As you can see, this is a great way to “use your head”, “improve your English”, “unite” and also “not skip class” (those who skip class will be marked as absent!). Do your best to get points from your group and get your questions accepted for regular final exams!

* It's OK to ask questions to the teacher! Come on in!

* 5 Example English Sentences:

1. The zookeepers heard the news of the birth of a baby lion, and it made them happy.

Example: (them/theirs/their/they) Personal Pronoun

2. Mary has wanted a dog as a pet since she saw one in the pet shop.
Example: (since/before/while/when) Conjunction
3. Near our school, there is a museum which is looking for volunteer guides.
Example: (which/where/who/what) Relative Pronoun
4. The discovery of a new star may help researchers become much more famous than before.
Example: (more famous/famous/as famous/most famous) Adverb
5. Climbing the mountain, we enjoyed the beautiful view around us.
Example: (Climbing/Climb/Climbed/To climb) Participle Construction

The authors have conducted this event several times before, and everyone took it seriously and seemed to enjoy it. Since it was a group competition, there were many students who were motivated to mobilize all the grammatical knowledge they had learned so far. Students will receive extra points for their efforts, and their own work may even be used in the final examinations. It is much more motivating than having students do one-way exercises, and they will probably have a higher level of comprehension and retention through group discussion than if teachers were to have students do the exercises unilaterally. This activity is recommended for English grammar classes.

3. About large-group lectures at National College of Technology Kagawa (Takamatsu Campus);

The following is a description of joint classes of two or more English language classes. At the National College of Technology Kagawa (Takamatsu Campus), joint classes of four classes in physics, chemistry, health and physical education began on a trial basis in FY2015 ³⁾. In general, joint classes could be applicable classes for common courses in lower grades at technical colleges. The program began when it was both difficult to secure part-time lecturers and to reduce the workload of faculty members ⁴⁾. In the following year, 2016, for the first time in the liberal arts subjects, the two classes were combined on a trial basis in some English classes conducted by the authors. If it is to be implemented, the question becomes how to ensure that the quality of education is not compromised, even in large groups, and especially how to minimize the number of students with a lack of understanding, and how effective it is. In addition, the authors would like to look at what can be done in the free time created by large-group joint classes.

First of all, the advantages of joint classes include:

- The progress of each class is aligned.
- The burden on teachers is reduced
- Only motivated students remain reducing class problems (e.g. bullying)

On the other hand, possible disadvantages include, but are not limited to:

- It is difficult to remember the faces and names of students.
- It tends to be a one-way classroom lecture.
- For part-time lecturers, they may lose income because they are assigned fewer classes through the nature of the classes being combined.

Okano and Endo ⁵⁾ report the results of a survey conducted in their physics and chemistry classes when they conducted a four-class joint class. In their classes, the first 45 minutes were basically classroom lectures, and the second half included exercises in addition to classroom lectures. During exercises, students were divided into two groups: those with higher grades and those with lower grades, and the lower grades were placed in an adjacent room with a technical assistant from the Technical Education Support Office as a teaching assistant. This was also the case when experiments were conducted in the second half of the class. In addition, supplementary classes were also offered to take advantage of the teachers' free time created by joint classes. The report did not confirm any serious adverse effects, instead, it could be stated that some behavior based on underachieving has somewhat

decreased. Naturally, it has the effect of reducing the burden on teachers' classes, allowing them to spend their extra energy on additional work, research, and school affairs. According to them, there are some unique advantages to large lectures, which can be understood by trying them out. Okano and Endo state that teachers should interweave regular classes, and large lectures as appropriate.

From this point on, the authors report on the joint classes of English Grammar. Unlike the subjects mentioned above, the two classes jointly (about 85 students) were introduced on a trial basis in the 2016 academic year. Among the innovations that the authors have incorporated are:

- With the doubling of the number of students, faculty members move around the classroom as much as possible.
- In the author's classes, there is little writing on the board to begin with, but even when there is any writing there are two screens on either side of the board that project the content of the writing for easy viewing.
- It takes twice as long for the instructor to stamp the confirmation of the checks on the prerequisites. Therefore, once every two classes, neighboring students exchange notes and check each other's work. After checking each other's notes, the students are asked to sign their own confirmation of their notes.
- Make-up classes were held before the final exam. Attendance was not taken as this was not a regular make-up class.
- There were no student presentations.
- The group competition to compose English grammar questions was held at the end of the semester. Since it was impossible to have all the groups present in front of the class, half of them submitted a report on the content of their questions.

3-1. Results and Discussion:

The results and discussion are described below:

Although the same subject was taught for two consecutive years, the results of the joint examinations of the two classes showed no change in the average scores in a simple comparison with the classes that did not, at the same level of the examinations. In other words, there was no difference in learning effectiveness.

The authors feel that two classes together (about 85 students or so) instead of four classes together could be done with some ingenuity. At this point, we do not feel that there has been a significant decline in educational effectiveness. There are currently no complaints from students (confirmed directly or through questionnaires at the end of semester, etc.). However, this applies to classroom-based classes such as English grammar and English reading comprehension, and is indeed considered impossible for listening and speaking classes. In the case of joint classes, it would be better to make sure that make-up classes are provided, because of the necessary to check the students' performance. The only concern, in the authors' opinion, may be the stamina of the faculty. As much as possible to avoid compromising the educational effectiveness of the class, desk-to-desk patrols are conducted, resulting in a walk-around. This is because teachers need to walk around the class quite often to ensure the educational effectiveness of the class. Teachers will need to be in decent physical condition so that they do not become fatigued.

So, how would it be in the case of four joint classes (about 170 students) in English classes? We predict that it would be tough in English classes. Indeed, except for the reported English class, the four classes reported above were combined, with the use of microphones, many group exercises, quizzes assisted by the Technical Education Support Office staff, and weekly supplementary lessons. However, it has not been well received by students. Direct feedback from students included: "I don't understand well", "There are many students who talk or doze off" and "I don't go to supplementary classes because they are a hassle (for lower grade level students' attendance is compulsory)". In addition, when the author once observed a joint class of four classes, there was one assistant instructor, however, he could not check all 170 students. After the attendance check by the instructor, some students exchanged seats with their peers and talked for a long time, despite the assigned seating system, which seems to be a limitation of a four-class joint class.

4. Conclusion:

So far, we have looked at some innovations for English classes focusing on English grammar and the case of joint classes of two classes. With some ingenuity, it is possible to develop active classes in which students take the lead, and even in the case of joint classes, it is possible to try to reduce the disadvantages as much as possible. In modern institutions of higher education, the burden of school duties and other responsibilities on full-time faculty is only increasing. In addition, it is often difficult to secure part-time instructors, especially in regional cities. This increases the teaching load of full-time faculty members. In these days of increasing school workloads, a strong ally is the joint class. Teachers with a negative view, or those who have never had joint classes, may tend to emphasize the disadvantages. However, they, too, would like you to actually try it once first. With enthusiasm and ingenuity, the disadvantages they mention should be mitigated. The time freed up by large lecture classes can be used for supplementary lessons, research, and school duties, thereby reducing the burden on teachers. The importance of trying different things and refraining from criticism before trying out a method cannot be overemphasized.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1) The act of appointing students and asking them to answer questions is an important part of teaching, as it elevates the students to the stage of the class. However, when students are assigned at random, they are in such a hurry to answer the questions properly so as not to embarrass themselves that they cannot concentrate when their turn approaches. This is especially true for serious students. In this respect, it is better to guess in order of seating so that students can predict where they will be picked.

On the other hand, there is also a way to thoroughly avoid guessing / calling students. The instructor explains the points and explanations. In this method, the instructor explains the points to be checked in the English text and what students should fill in throughout the course. The teacher speaks continuously and as loudly as possible without pauses in order to keep the students focused. Naturally, some students prefer this method. Students can concentrate on checking and writing down important points, and teachers can proceed quickly. In short, it is up to the teacher.

2) Instead, the authors state that review is not required. If students prepare for the class, their understanding of the class will improve, so review may not be necessary. If the level of understanding improves, students may review on their own. In class, we can ask students to briefly explain the English grammar of the text and read example sentences. Those who have given model answers are asked to present them to the class once again. The instructor then explains supplementary information and goes on to the next item, and so on. After that, students will do exercises, check their answers (quiz), etc., and go to the next section (chapter).

3) Four classes continue to be taught jointly, however, due to the spread of the new coronavirus, only two classes will be taught jointly from FY2020.

4) College of technology faculty members are extremely busy with a workload that is equivalent to having two jobs: the work of high school teachers and the work of university faculty members. Many faculty members are so

busy that they cannot find time for brushing up on teaching and research. In addition, the amount of work to be done (miscellaneous duties) continues to increase year after year. In such a situation, an attempt was made to reduce the time burden of teaching through joint classes.

5) Okano and Endo, 2016.

References

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