

# Japanese Culture Review: An Active Learning Course at a Japanese Women's University

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## Abstract (概要)

Globalization and active learning have been the focus of many university curricula the past decade as institutions aim to develop programs to ensure Japanese students keep pace globally with their international counterparts. This report describes a 14-week semester course at a women's university in Tokyo that is designed to implement these two popular elements. The rationale, methods of implementation, and the results of an end-of-term student questionnaire concerning the course will be reviewed to show how active learning can be utilized to teach a content-based English as a foreign language course.

「国際化」と「アクティブ・ラーニング」は、日本人学生が、外国人と遭遇した際にグローバルな対応ができる能力を養成するためのプログラムの開発をめざして、過去10年の間、多くの大学の重点目標であった。今回の報告では、「国際化」と「アクティブ・ラーニング」という二つの重要な要素を授業のカリキュラムに取り込み、東京の女子大学で実施された14週のコースの内容を紹介する。アクティブ・ラーニングの理論をもとにした授業方法と、学期末の学生からのアンケートによる授業評価の結果から、アクティブ・ラーニングを取り入れた授業形式が、日本人学生に外国語としての英語の内容を教えるのに、非常に効果的であることを精査した。

**Keywords:** active learning, student-centered learning, Japanese culture and society, presentation skills, group work

**キーワード:** アクティブ・ラーニング、学生主体の学習、日本の文化と社会、プレゼンテーション・スキル、グループワーク

## Introduction

With much being made of the population decline in Japan, and its effects on university enrollment, institutions have been adjusting their stance on curriculum to showcase courses which reflect the need for students to become more aware of their own culture as well as becoming more internationally minded. Of course, nomenclature reflects this addition to

curricula. The use of terms such as ‘internationalization’ and ‘globalization’ has not been infrequent. To accompany this shift in promoting a world view is an understanding that classes based solely on a traditional style of lectures with no student input, or courses where simple rote memorization of material would be the norm, a more interactive approach is necessary. The promotion of a more active approach has been the focus at Japanese universities for over a decade now. ‘Active learning’ has been discussed at university faculty meetings nationwide attempting to explain what it is, how to implement it, and whether or not professors are on board with it. The topic of this report is a 14-week one-semester course, titled *Global Studies d*, and was taught at a women’s university in central Tokyo. The aim of the course was to help students recognize their own culture and society, while developing collaboration and presentation skills. This was done with components of active learning as a basis for in-class instruction. It is hoped that this model can serve as one example of how to base a content course on active learning.

## Active learning

The term active learning implies the opposite, which is passive learning. Passive learning is a traditional approach to the teaching-learning paradigm in Japan. Within the past decade, though, there have been efforts to pull away from this traditional teacher-centered approach in which students listen and professors lecture. Active learning allows for students to be ‘active’ in class. One question for educators in Japan is, how to implement it? Instructors often teach using the same methods they were taught with (Kawano, 2016). For many instructors at junior high schools, high schools and universities in Japan, this inevitably results in a more teacher-centered approach in many courses. This means instructors believe that in some way they must always be doing or saying something to promote learning in the classroom. For many, approaching the classroom with the conception that students can learn from themselves or that the teacher does not always have to be ‘teaching’ something is not only something new, but too difficult to understand in how to implement.

In Bonwell and Eison, 1991, the authors suggest that active learning be defined as “instructional activities involving students doing things and thinking about what they are doing.” This is a broad definition and has led to a plethora of additional ways to clarify the term. Many institutions of higher education have defined their own particular brand of active learning, posting extensive lists at their learning centers for what exactly active learning entails. For example, Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia, Canada lists 11 principles of active learning with a questionnaire to help students become more aware of their own learning. At Iowa State University, in their Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching lists 226

active learning techniques for instructors to make use of to promote attention and engagement from the their students.

The recent movement towards addressing active learning in higher education in Japan continues. From attempts to have high school teachers define it, (Kamegai and Crocker, 2017) to an analysis of its effectiveness in an a graduate program (Yamada and Yamada, 2018), it has been pointed out that many university instructors in Japan are not comfortable with implementing active learning (Ito and Takeuchi, 2022). Understanding the uneasiness instructors may have when it comes to active learning, it is necessary to demonstrate how concrete frameworks for the classroom that can be readily implemented, in which active learning had been previously lacking.

### **Course purpose**

The primary objective of the course was to help students develop a more objective perspective on Japanese culture and society, and then to present information relevant to specific topics in an articulate manner through group presentations. This was done with particular aspects of active learning as a foundation for the way each class was conducted. The aspects employed were as follows:

1. To better understand Japanese culture and society
2. To develop collaborative skills in a group with a common goal
3. To improve presentation skills

By both researching their chosen subtopics and presenting on them, students inevitably acquired a deeper knowledge about both familiar and unfamiliar Japanese socio-cultural traits. In regard to groupwork, individual accountability and equal participation were left for the groups to decide among themselves and students were given the freedom to work things out on their own on how best to organize their presentations. Kagan (1992) regards these two points of accountability and equity in workload necessary to facilitate successful groupwork.

### **Course procedure**

Students were given the common goal of delivering a group presentation concerning different aspects of Japanese culture and society to a fictitious class of junior high school age students in a country where English would be the medium of instruction. Structuring the course around

presentations was an excellent way to help students bridge the divide between language study and language use (King, 2002). The decided goal ensured students' need to deliver information and was also to help set the tone for reaching the goal of creating informative presentations with clarity. Creativity and cooperation were encouraged. The only definite restrictions given were a time limit and the prohibiting the use of reading scripted material, either from a paper or phone. These rules however, were implemented after the first presentations due to individuals within groups using more time than expected and the number of students reading instead of speaking. The use of flashcards placed on the podium, however was permitted. The list of 15 instructor-selected categories (Appendix 1), related to Japanese culture and society were provided at the beginning of the course, five for each of the three presentations. Before each group presentation day, several preparatory activities were conducted. The first of which was a brainstorming exercise.

*Step 1:* The instructor lists 5 categories concerning Japanese culture and society on the whiteboard.

*Step 2:* Students were instructed to brainstorm each category individually, coming up with as many subtopics as possible.

*Step 3:* Students formed pairs, and compared and discussed their lists and brainstormed further.

*Step 4:* Students formed groups of four and were given ample time to discuss their findings.

*Step 5:* Finally, each group of four lists their ideas concerning a particular topic on the whiteboard. Each of the students-generated subtopics were reviewed and commented on by the instructor.

*Step 6:* Students were again randomly divided into different groups. With 20 students enrolled in the course, five equally numbered groupings of four was ideal. These final groups would be their presentation group.

These 6 steps would be repeated for all three presentations, inevitably giving students the opportunity to work with new classmates on each of their three presentations. This increase in contact consequently increased the amount of negotiation and exposure to opinions. Providing opportunities for students to collaborate helps deepen students' learning. (Kamegai and Crocker, 2017). Additionally, the intensive brainstorming ensured that all subtopics/presentation topics were generated by students, not the instructor. Once groups of four were formed, students were given time to discuss which of the subtopics listed on the whiteboard during the brainstorming session they planned to cover. Each member was responsible for introducing one of four aspects

during the presentation for an estimated duration of 3–4 minutes. In addition to the content of the subtopics, groups were responsible for giving an introduction and a closing statement for each presentation.

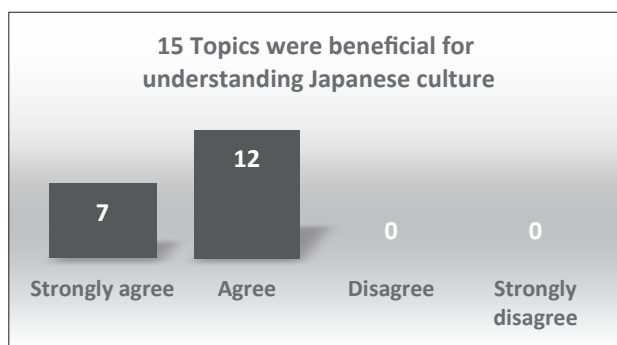
The course culminated with a final video assignment aimed at creating cultural awareness and was intended to help students further focus on understanding Japanese cultural norms, for whom most is their native culture.

## Results

In the final class session a questionnaire was distributed to students concerning (1) whether the 15 topics introduced were beneficial for understanding Japanese culture; (2) whether changing groups for each presentation was beneficial; (3) whether presentation skills had improved; (4) whether the final video assignment was beneficial in helping to recognize something about their own culture.

19 of the 20 course participants gave feedback on four questions concerning the course. The topics for the course were chosen by the instructor before the course began with the aid of textbooks geared towards non-Japanese unfamiliar with Japanese customs and society.

Figure 1

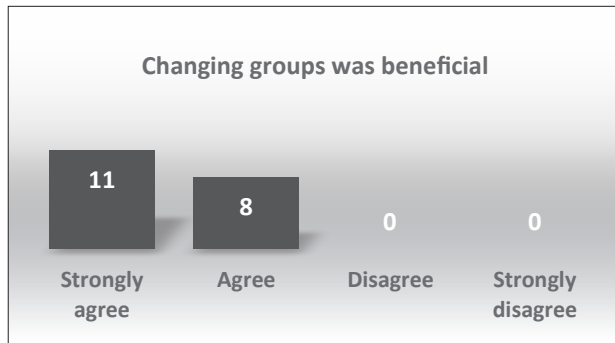


In addition to the favorable agreement to the topics from students', free comments offer a slightly more focused perspective with 10 of the 19 students in some fashion mentioning they learned things that they hadn't previously known.

*"I was able to think about my country from various points through the superficial culture and the deeper aspect. I wish I took this class before I went to study abroad." Student #13*

*“...to search my topic and to listen to other groups’ presentation I had a better understanding”*  
Student #8

Figure 2



To increase the amount of contact among course members, groups were rearranged using a random lottery method of drawing numbers. This was done to decide each of the three presentation group members. Participants responded favorably to having the opportunity to meet new classmates. A few of their free comments reflect this.

*“I could talk with different department students. It was exciting.”* #19

*“Everyone have a different idea and it’s normal... ...we have to listen to and think about different ideas...”* #18

*“Everyone has different thinking so every time I can learn various things.”* #9

*“I could share ideas with many people.”* #15

*“I think my communication skills have improved by changing groups.”* #14

*“It was good that I could talk with several students regardless of age.”* #12

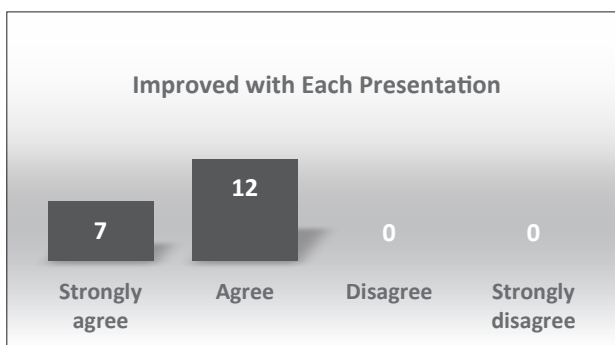
*“I made some friends and could have a good time.”* #11

*“...my communication skill might be better than before.”* #8

*"I was able to work together toward the presentation in various ways each time." #7*

*"It was so fun to cooperate with various classmates because each people has each ideas." #6*

Figure 3



All students agreed that their skills improved over the course of giving three presentations. Many also mentioned a heightened sense of self-awareness with regards for the need to improve further and the need to be more confident when giving presentations. Their open-ended comments reflect this.

*"At first I didn't know how to do it, but I was able to improve in cooperation with others." #19*

*"...in this class I changed a little bit. I know I need more confidence." #18*

*"I was influenced by my classmates. I think I want to be a good speaker." #16*

*"I gave as many ideas to my group as possible." #13*

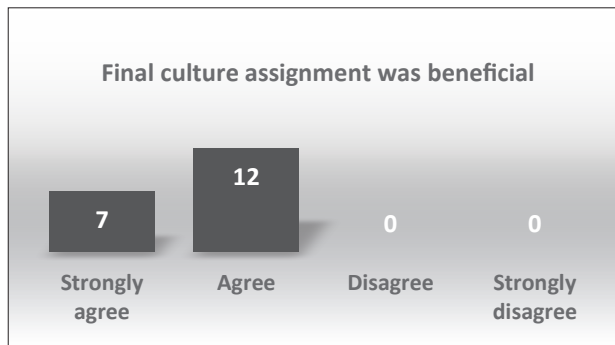
*"I got used to giving presentations in English." #12*

*"First I presented with a paper and I read it, but last presentation I presented without paper, than I feel improving!" #9*

*"...third presentation I practiced hard and I could speak fluently." #8*

*"I try not to remember and to do it ad lib." #1*

Figure 4



The final assignment incorporated a Ted Talk lecture entitled, *How Do We Understand Our Own Culture?* The theme of the lecture focuses on the importance of recognizing one's own culture as well as the need to understand that we view different cultures through the lenses of our own culture. Students took notes during the viewing and shared them in small groups afterwards. A 200-word reflection was a take-home assignment. Many of the remarks mentioned in their writings reflect the agreement responses of the questionnaire as well their taking an introspective look at particular behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes attributed to social-cultural norms in Japan.

## Conclusion

The official course titled *Global Studies d*, was sponsored by an international programs department at a university in Tokyo, Japan. This review has highlighted the satisfaction among students when active learning is employed in a content course. The primary goals of the 14-week course were met using elements of active learning as a framework for the course design. Students focused on Japanese culture and society for 14 weeks, while learning to better work with various class members, and improving on their presentation skills. This course model can serve as one way by which active learning can be utilized effectively in university courses in Japan.



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## Appendix 1. Presentation topics and students-generated subtopics list

### Presentation 1

- Japanese neighborhoods
  - Convenience stores
  - Park radio calisthenics
  - City vs. country
  - Safety
- Regional dialects
  - Characteristics and origins of dialects
  - Osaka dialect
  - Okinawan dialect
  - Interesting dialects
- Transportation
  - Trains, subways, and busses
  - Differences between users in Japan and America
  - Private elementary school students and transportation
  - IC cards / Certificate of train delay / Strict time schedules
- Geography
  - Seasons
  - Rivers, lakes, and mountains
  - General outline of the Japanese archipelago
  - Natural disasters
- Marriage
  - Japan's unique marriage culture
  - Searching for a marriage partner online
  - Japan's falling marriage rate
  - The flow of the traditional Japanese ceremony

### Presentation 2

- Japanese Mentality
  - Honne and Tatemaie*
  - Opinions from non-Japanese
  - Compassion for others
  - Japanese mentality and Korean mentality
- Fashion by era
  - Kimono in the Heian and Edo periods
  - Daily fashion by decades from 1900–2020
  - Japanese school fashion by era
  - Hair styles and make up by era
- Festivals
  - Spring festivals
  - Summer festivals
  - Autumn festivals
  - Winter festivals

Work

- Working hours
- Salary
- Part-time jobs
- Quality service

Cuisine

- Food routine
- Wagashi
- Regional foods
- Tea

Presentation 3

Japanese anime

- The history of anime
- Japanese nationality and anime
- Children's anime and general anime
- Techniques in making anime

Art and architecture

- Japanese art and relationship with nature
- Ukiyoe
- Japanese modern architecture
- Origami

Literature and poetry

- Haiku and Tanka
- The Tale of Genji
- Haruki Murakami
- Fairy tales

Education

- School rules
- Club activities
- Compulsory education and conformity
- Entrance examinations

Sightseeing

- Okinawa
- Hokkaido
- Kanto
- Kansai