Online Japanese Intermediate Grammar Classes Incorporating Active Learning:
A Case Study of Thai Learners at Sripatum University

Yasumasa MORI

(Sripatum University)

Abstract

In recent years, the importance of Active learning (hereinafter referred to as AL) has been discussed among many educators, and a number of classroom activities incorporating AL have been reported in various media. Classroom activities are not limited to direct face-to-face classes, in fact, the potentiality of online classes (live classes or live-streamed classes) with synchronous interactive teaching and learning has also been socially recognized. In an attempt to verify this potentiality, this paper focused on the AL of Thai learners studying intermediate Japanese grammar in online classes, although it was still in the trial-and-error stage, and aimed to examine the learning process and learning outcomes of intermediate grammar learners. In light of this focus and purpose, the following extensive literature was reviewed and referred to as previous studies; papers on the meaning and significance of AL, literature on practical reports of AL classes in foreign language education, discussions on AL method class or classroom activities in synchronous interactive online classes, and discussions on the effects and outcomes of learners' own foreign language learning that could be acquired through AL were reviewed. The concept and role of teachers' classroom activities in online classes incorporating AL were also discussed. Based on findings from previous studies, this paper was written in accord with the following seven points: 1) Confirm the meaning of AL, 2) Discuss the possibility of AL in online classes, 3) Explain how to promote AL in online classes of intermediate Japanese grammar, 4) Describe learning activities in an online class focused on grammar learning through AL, 5) Provide a pedagogical discussion of learners' responses to an intermediate Japanese grammar class, 6) Consider the benefits of AL from the perspective of foreign language learning theory, and mention four perspectives; i) Meta-linguistic ability, ii) Language learning styles, iii) Language learning strategies, and iv) Interlanguage, and 7) The importance of AL will be confirmed by mentioning learning outcomes that lead from the self-conscious learning process to the development of multidimensional language skills. In conclusion, from the practical report of this paper, the learners' own awareness of learning and how they learned could

enhance the quality of learning leading to learning outcomes, through AL online classroom activities and learners' learning process supported by various important roles of teachers. At the same time, the possibility was obtained that this approach could be effective in achieving the goals of foreign language learning.

1. The meaning of active learning

Active learning (hereinafter called AL) is defined as "Anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (p.2), according to Active Learning Creating Excitement in the Classroom, co-authored by Bonwell and Eison in 1991. A wide variety of interpretations of content are currently being made from this definition as a starting point, and numerous teaching and learning practices are being attempted on the basis of these interpretations.

It was mentioned, here, that the prior literature in which many of these practices were described. Needless to say, the earlier literature has provided valuable suggestions. Looking at the previous literature from this perspective, Yukawa (2018) discussed ideas for foreign language classes incorporating AL, including a discussion of the definition and concept of AL, by using examples of learning activities. The examples of activities in foreign language classes incorporating AL designed by teachers could be very useful (Kondo et al., 2018). Although there were some trial aspects, the focus on AL in the learning process provided an opportunity to reconsider the nature and quality of learners' learning. Sugiyama (2017) and Yamamoto (2019) discussed the incorporation of AL into grammar learning, which was the main content in foreign language classes, although from a different perspective. Furthermore, there were many examples of classes that incorporated AL not only in direct face-to-face classroom teaching, but also in synchronous interactive online classes, such as Tagami (2020), Imahori (2021), Shao (2021), and Song (2021). On the other hand, Sugita (2021) and Hoshino et al. (2022) proposed a design for an online class that introduced AL by creating a guide that summarized approaches to AL in online classes. Kasahara (2021) advocated an affinity for AL. Palihawadana et al. (2021), in their report on the practice of online Japanese language classes, reported the advantages and disadvantages of AL from the perspective of improving Japanese language proficiency through the results of a questionnaire survey of teachers and learners. Regarding specific learning activities incorporating AL, as detailed in Yasunaga (2019), the discussion on cooperative learning as a major form of

learning was very helpful. In particular, Furuta (2023) discussed cooperative activities in online Japanese language classes. From the discussions of AL, online classes, and online-style foreign language classes incorporating AL, the effects and results were observed in foreign language learning through learners' learning activities and processes. As relevant to this observation, in this paper, four important points (Meta-linguistic ability, Language learning styles, Language learning strategies, and Interlanguage) related to the improvement of learners' own language abilities or skills from the perspective of foreign language learning were raised and discussed. On the other hand, it would be important to consider the classroom management by teachers and the teaching approach of teachers to learners when AL was introduced. In relation to this point, the role of the teachers in the teaching and learning process based on AL methods in online classes was also classified, referring to several methods or technique found in business training courses or programs available on the website.

As shown in previous studies, AL seems to be the key to the success or failure of learning activities and learning processes. It is important to recognize that there are undeniable reasons for AL, and that the learning effects obtained from AL are noteworthy in that they provide an opportunity to change, improve, and enhance the learners' learning itself. Nowadays, AL has become an essential form of learning activity. Behind the emphasis on the importance of AL is the 21st century challenge of developing human resources to create a sustainable society. Specifically, it means the development of Zest for Life (Physical and intellectual ability) with a good balance of Knowledge, Virtue, and Body in addition to solid academic skills such as knowledge, skills, thinking, judgment, expression, learning, and human nature (Tagami, 2020). At the same time, this is a qualitative shift in university education, which aims to incorporate teaching and learning methods that encourage learners' active participation in learning, unlike the one-way lecture-style education provided by teachers in the past (Furuta, 2023). Active participation in learning is a concept that leads to the development of general-purpose abilities, including cognitive, ethical and social abilities, culture, knowledge, and experiential abilities. The methods to develop these multiple abilities involves incorporating discovery learning, problem-solving learning, experiential learning, and research learning, while also utilizing group discussions, debates, and group work as classroom activities conducted by learners (Imahori, 2021), which are believed to produce effective AL. With a firm understanding of the individual and overall perceptions related to AL, this paper carefully examined and implemented synchronous interactive online classes that introduced AL with Japanese intermediate grammar, which was essential for language knowledge and language activities, as the learning content.

2. Potential for AL in online (synchronous interactive) classes

Online classes are literally a class format in which the teacher and learners participate in real time online. Synchronous interactive online classes (Oura, 2023) are called Online Live Class at Sripatum University (SPU). Although it is real-time, this format can be described as a pseudo face-to-face class, unlike face-to-face classes in the classroom. Although online classes cannot be completely identical to face-to-face classes in the classroom, considering the introduction of AL in online classes is significant in terms of exploring possibilities other than direct face-to-face classes. However, it should be fully recognized that, unlike face-to-face teaching in the classroom, there are several aspects of online classes that make classroom activities more difficult for both teachers and learners. In order to expect the best results from AL among learners in online classes, it is important to clarify and share the manners (speak politely, communicating in a way that respects the other listeners, and so on) and rules (turning the camera and microphone on and off when speaking or not speaking, how to use the chat function, reaction signs, and so on) for participating in online classes. Sharing includes easing learners' nervousness or tension in online classes, actively engaging them in learning activities, and making them aware of reciprocal learning among learners (Sugita, 2021). In this sense, teachers should be well aware of the advantages and disadvantages of online classes, and be able to clearly explain to learners how to participate in online classes.

3. AL in online classes for intermediate Japanese grammar

In seven online classes (90 minutes per class) in total for JBC222 Japanese 3 and JBC311 Japanese 4 courses, AL was implemented using grammar questions from the past Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N3 Level (10 multiple-choice questions with 4 answer choices for each question). It was used the practice questions from Category archives: JLPT N3 Grammar Test, which was posted on the website named JTest4you! for the past JLPT exam questions (Japanesetest4you.com, 2024). In the regular distance learning courses being offered in the first semester of the academic year 2023 (August-December, 2023), JBC222 Japanese 3 course corresponded to weeks 8 to 10 (three online classes), and JBC311 Japanese 4 course corresponded to weeks 11 to 14 (four online classes) of JBC Integrated Courses 1 in the curriculum of the Department of Japanese for Business Communication (JBC), respectively. Most of the students in these courses were students with the status of residence of Technical intern trainees (Ginou Jisshuusei in Japanese) and Specified skilled workers (Tokutei Ginou in Japanese) who were working in Japan. Overall, the majority of students had reached a beginner's (or basic) level of Japanese, and therefore, in these Japanese 3 and Japanese 4 courses, they were at the stage

of learning N3 level of the JLPT, which was equivalent to the intermediate level. The learning of the N3 level was tailored to the needs of the students.

4. Content of online classes focusing on grammar learning through AL

As a realization of AL, grammar learning activities were designed with learners' Independence, Interactivity, and Deep learning in mind. In conventional grammar classes, the objective was for learners to acquire knowledge of grammar items, and classroom activities consisted of the teacher lecturing on grammar items, the learners doing exercises, and then the teacher providing explanations. In other words, it was a passive learning method in which learners listened to knowledge-transfer-type lectures given by teachers. In online classes for grammar learning that incorporate AL for learners, rather than a passive learning method, it is important to consider the role of the teacher as a way to develop Active, Interactive, and In-depth learning. It is required that the teacher's role is to coordinate the management and progress of class activities in which all learners can participate, and is to facilitate and actively promote each learning activity in online class. Instead of the traditional teacher-learner relationship, a relationship that leads to learner's Active, Interactive, and Deep learning should be established. In other words, it is important to reconsider the multifaceted role of the teachers in the classroom and to examine in detail what aspects of the teacher's approach to the learner and the learner's approach to the teacher can be observed. In view of these several points, the following seven approaches (CAMI & Co., 2024; HRBrain, Inc., 2024; Kyoiku-Shuppan Co., Ltd., 2016) were incorporated in online classes. There were, of course, other approaches, however, seven approaches were discussed here. Namely,

1) Teaching (to teach new and necessary linguistic knowledge and information on grammar items)
2) Coaching (to make the learner aware of the learning process through grammar exercises)
3) Counseling (to dialogue with the learner in order to guide the learner to the correct answer to a question, based on the learner's specific process of solving the question)
4) Mentoring (to make the learner aware of important grammatical points regarding the learning method and to make the learner reconsider his/her own method and process of answering questions)
5) Consulting (to give grammar instruction that combines 1) teaching and 2) coaching while confirming the learner's already acquired grammar knowledge)
6) Training (to establish usable grammar skills to increase the correct answer rate)

7) Empowerment (to delegate some of the teacher's teaching activities to the learner)

By using and combining the seven approaches above as appropriate, the online class activities were based on the following sequence: 1) reviewing JLPT N3-level vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and expressions used in the grammar questions; 2) reading aloud the sentences and choices of the grammar questions, and indirectly suggested grammar-related issues prior to Think-pair-share (Hoshino et al., 2022) in group work; 3) Group work for mutual dialogue and discussion (Learning through discussion) (Kondo et al., 2018) on the answers and correct answers to each question should be conducted to encourage interaction among learners in cooperative learning (Tomono, 2016); and 4) teaching and explaining the grammar from the learners' perspective based on the results of cooperative learning among learners.

5. Learners' responses to AL in online Japanese grammar classes

Although this was not the result of a questionnaire survey directly to the learners, based on the learners' reactions in class and the results of surveys in the literature (Sugiyama, 2017), it appeared that the following points were to be the advantages of AL.

1) I could share my points that I did not understand with my fellow learners, and explaining them to my peers helped me to understand them.
2) I could gain different ideas and knowledge by discussing with my peers.
3) I could organize my own knowledge by being able to ask questions to my peers about things I thought I did not understand, and by teaching my peers who did not understand.
4) By listening to the answers of my peers, I was able to learn grammar items that I did not know or had forgotten, in addition to the answers I had thought of.
5) I could teach each other what I did not understand among my peers.
6) I could know about other peers' ideas and mistakes.
7) I could share the parts of the grammar that I did not understand with my peers.
8) I could understand how my peers answered grammar question.
9) By explaining to my peers, I was able to learn it accurately.
10) I could ask questions to my peers immediately.
11) We were able to participate in the class while thinking by ourselves.
12) I could improve my ability to explain to my peers by telling them the reasons for my answers, and I could improve my own understanding and comprehension.

Of course, not only the above advantages, but also negative evaluations have been noted,

such as the fact that the more time and effort spent on the activity, the possibility of synchronization with the majority group when a large number of wrong answers were accounted for, and some learners might become passive or inactive in group work. However, an overall overview of the learners' responses showed that it was important to note that the learners were able to gain cognitive and non-cognitive benefits through the learner-to-learner learning activities, as knowledge that could be applied increased, breadth and depth in thinking about answering the questions were gained, areas and levels of brain activity was expanded, an enjoyable learning environment was created, motivation to learn increased, and a sense of security in learning was gained (Kuze, 2023).

6. The benefits of AL from the perspective of foreign language learning theory

When considering the utility and effectiveness of AL from the perspective of foreign language learning theory, it can be said that it lies in the cognitive or inside of the head activities of each individual learner. Four points are mentioned below.

1) Meta-linguistic ability

Metalanguage is the language used to think about, explain, and describe language, and Meta-linguistic competence means the ability to be aware of, observe, and use language as an object. This is the ability to be consciously aware of language, specifically, awareness of phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and performance. Along with awareness, it also includes the ability to analyze language objectively. This meta-linguistic ability is also considered to be effective in foreign language learning. It improves the learner's ability to monitor his or her own language production and use, and to adjust and control the process of language production and use based on the results of monitoring (Akita et al., 2019).

2) Language learning styles

Learning styles have been studied in the context of learner-centered educational theory, which analyzes learning from within the learner. Defined by Kolb and Dunn and others in the early 1970s, it has come to be recognized as one of the factors that determine individual differences in learning outcomes of language learning (Park, 2007). In relation to AL, it can be said that the findings of research on learning styles should be used in that they place the subject of learning in the learner (Okada, 2012). The details of the research studies on learning styles, of which there are believed to be 71 different types (Aoki, 2005), will not be discussed here, however, what is important to note is that the study of learning styles also has aspects that are advantageous to foreign language learning. That

is, by taking into account the learner's preferred learning methods and learning environment, looking at individual differences in learning styles can provide an opportunity for learners to review their own learning methods, and for teachers to facilitate an opportunity to review their AL classroom activities. This opportunity for review means a review of teaching styles. Learners' learning preferences are largely related to their cognitive style, which is broadly defined. If learning activities through AL by cooperative learning can flexibly extend one's own learning style, it is presumed that the learner's own learning activities will be broadened and deepened as well. Classroom activities that are tailored to individual differences can be a means of making AL more effective for learners. In fact, learning styles are also closely related to the learning strategies described in 3) in the next section (Majima, 2005). Research focusing on learners' individual learning behavior can be seen to correspond in a broad sense to learners' autonomous learning, and it is believed that it will provide valuable suggestions for considering learning in AL.

3) Language learning strategies

Language learning strategies are defined, according to Oxford (1990), as Specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more independent, more effective, and more responsive to new situations. Language learning strategies were classified into six categories (Oxford, 2003; Kumakiri, 2024). There are three types of direct strategies: Memory strategies (to memorize better and more efficiently), Cognitive strategies (to better understand the target language), and Compensation strategies (used to compensate for missing knowledge when understanding or speaking a foreign language). On the other hand, three indirect strategies include Metacognitive strategies (learners think for themselves about how they want their learning to be, plan their learning, set goals, and self-evaluate), Affective strategies (to reduce their anxiety, encourage themselves, and get a good grasp of their feelings), Social strategies (asking questions, cooperating with others, empathy for others). These six direct and indirect language learning strategies are closely related to the learning activities found in AL. Important points suggested by the language learning strategies can be pointed out as the Shift from Teacher-centered to Learner-centered and Autonomous learner, which assumes that the learner is a proactive learner. In particular, in relation to metacognitive strategies, together with 1) Meta-linguistic ability, they can be described as strategies for regulating the language (or foreign language) learning process through positioning, sequencing, planning, and evaluating learning, which means that learners can control their own cognitive actions.

4) Interlanguage

Interlanguage is a concept proposed by Selinker in 1972, based on the idea that foreign language learners have a separate language system that is different from their native language (first language) and the target language (second or foreign language). Specifically, an interlanguage is a language system in the process of development that is created by the learner on his or her own, in the process of continuing to learn a foreign language, the learner makes a hypothesis about the language rules of the second language by utilizing the input of the target language, knowledge of the first language, and so on, the learner repeatedly reconstructs his or her own language system by testing the correctness or incorrectness of the hypothesis through output based on the hypothesis, and then this process is considered to be the process of gradually approaching the linguistic system of the second language.

Considering the individual learning situation of each learner in the process of learning and acquiring a foreign language grammar, and in combination with 1) Meta-linguistic competence, 2) Language learning styles, and 3) Language learning strategies, the teacher's individual attention to the learner and mutual learning among learners are considered to be effective in the formation process, establishment, and performance of the language system in the target language (second language). As seen in the explanation regarding 4) Interlanguage, it can be pointed out that learners' foreign language learning is inseparable from the AL components (proactive, interactive, and deep learning).

7. The concept of Teaching and Learning in AL

Grammar learning in a foreign language is not a rote learning method where the teacher teaches the correct answers, the students memorize the correct answers, take an exam, and then become Excellent students if they get a good score (Song, 2021). Of course, the results of learning are important, however, in AL, it is more important to focus on the learning process leading up to the results. In conventional grammar classes, the teacher gives a one-way linguistic explanation while presenting correct answers, and learners listen to the teacher's explanation and check their own answers. In this method, however, the learners might think that they understand the lesson by listening to the explanation and memorizing the correct answers. By focusing not on what is learned, but on how it is learned, AL raises awareness of the learning process, stimulates learners' own independent learning and interactive learning through mutual or collaborative learning among learners, and promotes in-depth learning by utilizing a multifaceted approach to use and apply knowledge. This deep learning also provides an opportunity for the learners to become more active in their own internal activities (Li, 2018). In short, it is important

to improve the quality of learning. It is believed that AL activates learners' own cognitive activities and leads to better learning outcomes. At the same time, AL will only be effective if teachers fully understand the various roles they must play, and if they play an appropriate and important role in classroom activities. Finally, the practice report in this paper is expected to lead to the pursuit of AL-type learning activities that can achieve learning goals while examining the quality of learning of learners.

Additional statement:

It should be added that this paper was a partially revised version of the content of a report on the practice of teaching incorporating Active learning (SPU Community of Practice: Teaching & Learning) submitted to Teaching & Learning Support and Development Center, Sripatum University in July 2024, and an oral presentation at the IACRS Opening Conference Thailand 2024 held in August 2024.

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