

# アクティブラーニングを比較文化の講義に取り入れるためにアクションリサーチを使用する

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## Using Action Research to Implement Active Learning in a Comparative Culture Lecture Class

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### Abstract

There is an increasing amount of research to show that when students learn actively they not only understand material more deeply, but they are also more likely to enjoy the lesson. For these reasons active learning has been encouraged at schools and universities in recent years. While it can be relatively easy to introduce active learning in small classes, it can be challenging in large lecture classes to not only incorporate active learning, but also to maintain classroom management. This paper will describe an action research project conducted over three years into a number of ways in which active learning was incorporated in a comparative culture class of over eighty students at a Japanese university. The activities involved small groupwork, group presentations and whole class activities. Action research was based on the teacher's observations and reflective journal, each stage of reflection informed the cycles of intervention.

積極的に学ぼうとする学生は、教材の内容をより深く理解するだけでなく、授業を楽しんでいる傾向が強くなることを示す研究結果が次々と発表されている。こうした状況を背景に、近年アクティブラーニングが、学校や大学で推奨されている。アクティブラーニングは、小人数のクラスには比較的簡単に取り入れることができるが、大人数を相手にする講義になると、アクティブラーニングの導入だけでなく、クラスをスムーズに運営すること自体も難しくなる可能性がある。本稿では、日本の大学で80名を超す比較文化の講義に様々な方法でアクティブラーニングを取り入れた際に実施された、3年間に及ぶアクションリサーチプロジェクトを紹介する。クラスでは、少人数でのグループワーク、グルー

プレゼンテーション、クラス全体でのアクティビティ等が行われ、講師による学生の観察および講師自身の授業に対する内省に基づいて、講義に変更が加えられていった。

キーワード：アクティブラーニング、アクションリサーチ

Key Words: Active Learning, Action Research

## **Introduction**

Traditionally the majority of classes in universities have been conducted in large lecture halls, sometimes with hundreds of students. Although this is a cost-effective way for universities to provide classes for students, and a time-effective way for professors to share their knowledge, there is increasing evidence that this is not the most effective way for students to learn (Freeman, et al., 2014). There is more and more research to show that learning actively is more enjoyable for students and enables them to understand the material more thoroughly (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Active Learning moves students away from a passive lecture style class to one in which students are active participants in a collective learning endeavor (Hammer & Giordano, 2012). Some of the active learning activities listed by Center for Research on Learning and Technology (CRLT, 2016) are:

1. Asking students during a lesson to stop and think about the information
2. Writing quick papers
3. Peer assessment
4. Group evaluations
5. Role playing
6. Jigsaw discussion
7. Self-assessment

While many of these activities are regularly used in small classes, they are difficult to incorporate in large lecture classes, whilst maintaining classroom management. Another problem that can occur with large classes is managing assessment. It can be very difficult and time consuming to grade a large number of students' written assignments and presentations, which is why many teachers resort to multiple choice tests in large lecture classes. On the other hand, Winstone and Millward (2012) recommend seeing large classes as an opportunity to promote active learning in a student-centered environment. They see large classes as an opportunity to increase collaboration between students. It can be much easier to form a variety of groups in large classes and students can have the opportunity to interact with various students. Through carefully designed groupwork and peer assessment it is possible to incorporate active learning in large lecture classes without creating an excessive amount of work for the teacher.

## **Literature Review**

For over thirty years the large lecture style of teaching used in most universities has been criticized

(Quinlan & Fogel, 2014). Hayes (1997) cited a number of problems encountered when teaching large classes. These include the discomfort of being in large lecture halls, keeping discipline in the classroom, giving students individual attention, evaluation of large amounts of work, and most importantly inability to assess learning effectiveness. Various universities (UC Berkeley Center for Teaching & Learning, n.d.; University of Texas, n.d.; CRLT, 2016) offer advice for lecturers on how to tackle these problems, including advice on encouraging group-work in lecture halls with fixed desks, as well as advice on keeping students engaged. Many of the recommendations have focused on active learning and how to incorporate active learning in the classroom (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). In research into universities that incorporated active learning it was found that it increased levels of engagement as well as critical thinking skills (Yazedjian & Boyle Kolkhorst, 2007).

Cornell University (Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.) has a number of recommendations to make large lecture classes more effective. Firstly, make students feel as if they are valued individually in the class. This is a goal of many lecturers, but the reality of keeping track of all students in large classes, may be unrealistic. One way is for the lecturer to call on a few students by name in each class. Another way is to encourage students to get to know each other, introducing a level of personalization into the class. This is most commonly done by assigning groups and group projects. Secondly, it is recommended that a supportive and inclusive classroom atmosphere be created. This can be done by setting ground rules and following these by encouraging an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable sharing their opinions. Thirdly, engaging students in the class and study material is essential. This can be done through the use of visual and video materials, as well as breaking the lecture into smaller meaningful sections. Research shows that students can only maintain interest in one topic for approximately 15 to 20 minutes (Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.). By dividing a typical 90-minute class into five sections students can maintain interest in each section. Finally, it is recommended that classes should incorporate active learning. The definition of active learning is still somewhat unclear, but for the purpose of this paper Bonwell and Eison's (1991) definition will be used.

Students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most important to be actively involved, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks, as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. (Bonwell & Eison, 1991)

Bonwell and Eison (1991) offer an even broader definition in which it is stated that "active learning be defined as anything that involves students doing things and thinking about what they are doing". In most cases incorporating higher order thinking skills necessitates group-work of some sort, which leads to the issue of classroom management. Cornell University (Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.) recommends setting up groups using spreadsheets and posting them online prior to the class. In addition, when students are working in groups, lecturers are advised to signal the end of an activity clearly with a noise or by turning off the lights momentarily. This can help the lecturer to avoid a sense

of loss of control, which is often a deterrent to lecturers using active learning in classes. Managing large class sizes was the most common problem brought up by participants in professional development workshops designed to help teachers incorporate active learning in large classes (Mangram, Haddix, Ochanji, & Masingila, 2015). In particular it was difficult to know if students were on task when in-class activities were assigned, and very hard to elicit individual feedback as students at the back of the lecture hall cannot be heard by all students. The physical classroom layout can also often be a barrier to active learning (Yazedjian & Boyle Kolkhorst, 2007).

Having said this, there are a variety of concrete ways in which active learning can be incorporated in large classes. One of them is by encouraging short written reflections. Adrian (2010) measured the effect of small interventions to make large lecture classes more active. She collected very short written reflections on the lectures and posted them online. Even though this does not seem to be promoting active learning on a very large scale, results showed that there were gains in learning compared to when these interventions were not used. In addition, student perceptions of reflecting online about the lecture content were very positive. This indicates that active learning, even when used a small amount, can improve learning outcomes and student motivation.

## **Methodology**

This paper will describe an action research project, conducted over four years, into ways in which active learning was incorporated in a comparative culture class of over eighty students at a Japanese university. It will incorporate the researcher's observations and reflections on changes that took place over the three-year study. Action research was chosen as a method to research this problem as it is an effective way to evaluate classroom methods over a long period of time. In addition, the iterative nature of the action research methodology allows the researcher to continually make changes and adjustments to the class and curriculum in order to improve the learning outcomes for students (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

This project was carried out in a comparative culture class with over 80 students enrolled each year. The course was analyzed over three years and improved through Action Research. McNiff and Whitehead (2011) state that Action Research is a method for practitioners to investigate and examine their work to find out if there are problems, and how they could be fixed. It aims to be a disciplined systematic process in which a problem is identified and observed, the practitioner reflects on their actions then conducts an intervention to try to resolve the problem. Results are reflected on, and further interventions to modify and improve the situation are implemented.

In this case I identified a problem that students were not learning actively in a large class, and were not engaged in deeper learning skills, such as critical thinking and reflection. Engaging in deeper learning skills is necessary in almost all classes, but essential in a comparative cultures class, which is more about students understanding their own culture and relating it to other cultures, than learning facts about cultures. A series of interventions were carried out over the three-year period. These interventions

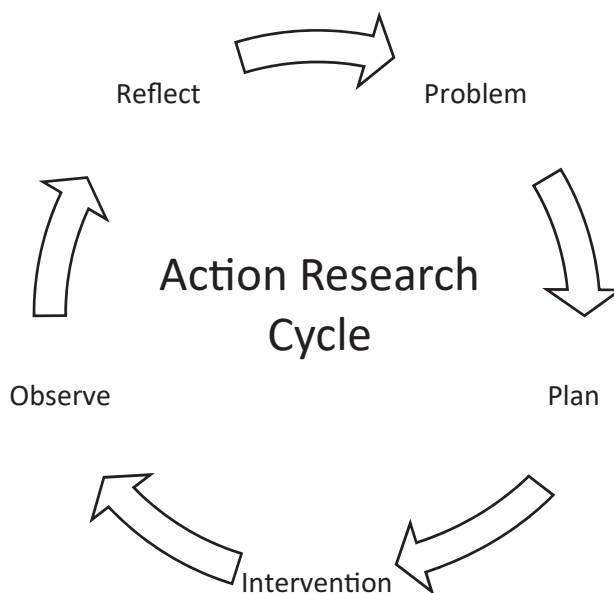


Figure 1: Action Research Cycle

were based on recommendations by the Center for Teaching Innovation (n.d.) and CRLT (2016), on ways to make large classes more effective and incorporate active learning. During each year I kept notes on the class and examined the end of semester student evaluations. These notes and evaluations formed the basis for my reflection and modification of the course. I sought to gradually understand why students were not engaging with the class and to improve the learning outcome for all students.

## Action Research Project

### Description of the Problem

In the spring of 2015, I was asked to take over a class called 'Introduction to Comparative Culture'. This course had been taught for a number of years by a lecturer, who was retiring. It was an elective class open to any student in the department of literature between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year. In the past the size of the class had varied between 16 and 24 students. I designed a course with a variety of reading and discussion activities based on materials collected online and simplified for foreign language learners by myself.

On the first day of class I prepared 40 copies of the materials. As I entered the corridor where my class would be held it was in some sort of chaos, with students all hanging around outside the classroom. On entering the room, I discovered the problem – there were about twice the number of students as could physically fit into the classroom. There followed a period of about 30 minutes of me trying to get allocated to a new classroom, and getting more photocopies made. I was moved to a very

large lecture hall - far too large for the number of students. By the time the class began I had not made a good first impression on students, and was not in the best frame of mind to teach the class. The semester continued with me realizing that the materials I had prepared were unsuitable for the number of students. Some of the students were not participating well, with a core group of keen students sitting at the front of the class, and a group sitting towards the back not participating in the class in any meaningful way. I realized that readings set for homework were not read by many of the students, who tried to rely on their friends or else read the article during discussion time. I did my best to keep students motivated by starting a point system for anyone who volunteered a question or comment. Unfortunately, by the end of the semester only the core group of keen students had received any points. My assessment, as stated in the syllabus, was writing essays on the topics of the course. Not only did I not have time to properly prepare students to write these essays, it took an incredible amount of time to grade them.

During the semester we had a 'faculty development week' in which classes were observed by other lecturers. These 'Introduction to Comparative Culture' classes were observed by a number of lecturers. One of them was very experienced at teaching large classes and told me that I should not incorporate discussions or essay writing in my classes. He said that pair work and small group activities don't work with such large classes, and advised me to make a seating chart and have students listen silently to my lecture. I was not prepared to give up on my belief that students learn through interacting with each other, not just listening to the teacher, so I decided to start an Action Research project. I wanted to reflect on my own teaching and to try to improve the students' learning outcomes. As an added bonus I hoped that the students' (as well as my own) enjoyment of the classes would improve. Action research was very suitable for this project as I did not anticipate solving all the problems at one time. Through the cyclical process in Action Research I could gradually try to find solutions. In addition, it gave me the opportunity to reflect on activities as I was teaching.

### **First Intervention**

Based on recommendations from various American universities (UC Berkley Center for Teaching & Learning, n.d.; University of Texas, n.d.) I decided to incorporate a number of new aspects into my class. Most of these involved active learning. First of all, I decided to put students in groups. Due to the inflexible nature of the lecture hall with fixed seating, I decided to allow students to work in groups of three or four students sitting close to each other. In this way students were in effect choosing their own groups. I always checked that everyone was in a group and that all groups had three or four members, but I did not tell students how to form groups. I used these groups for group presentations and discussions. I started a system, which I called 'mini presentations'. These involved students making presentations to their small group of three or four people. Each student presented to their group for two minutes using a prompt given by the teacher based on the previous week's theme. As there were too many students for me to grade in an effective manner, I decided to use peer assessment. I felt they

needed to be graded in order to encourage student participation and effort. On the assessment paper (Appendix 1) there was a very simple grading rubric at the top of the paper asking for the length of speaking time, loudness of voice and eye contact. The bottom part of the paper was for students to make notes for their presentation. This was given to the students in the previous lesson and collected by the teacher at the end of the class. The notes were graded by the teacher. The grading of these notes was very quick and despite having over 80 students, it usually took between one hour and 90 minutes to grade them. The meaning of peer evaluation was explained to students at the beginning of the course and students were clearly encouraged to be fair and honest in their grading. In addition, the grading rubric was kept very clear and simple, so that it could be used easily by students. Unfortunately, despite peer grading criteria being clearly explained to students, grade inflation quickly became a problem with students giving their friends a high grade, just because they were friends. Li (2001) found that some students gave peers lower grades and themselves higher grades to try to bias the assessment, this problem was lessened in this case by not including self-assessment, but there is still a possibility that friends colluded to push their own grades up. Li (2001) recommended teachers checking consistency to avoid grade inflation. I did check for consistency across the class, I also looked at peer assessment sheets as they were handed in to try to stop this, but with over 80 students it could not be eliminated entirely.

In addition, I changed the style of the class; I chose a textbook with listening and speaking activities. The topics in the textbook were aimed at Japanese students, which made it much easier for the students to understand. About half of the classes used the textbook, the other half were based on PowerPoint presentations made by myself. The PowerPoint presentations were very graphic incorporating a lot of pictures as well as short videos from the internet. This conformed with Cornell University's (Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.) recommendations to improve large classes by creating engaging material with visual material as well as dividing the class into shorter segments. Within each lecture, whether it was using the textbook or PowerPoint, students were given short discussion topics asking them to reflect on what had just been presented. Unfortunately, some of the students were still not participating in the discussions in a meaningful way, although there was a core group who engaged with the material and were highly motivated.

### **Reflections on the First Intervention**

Reflecting on the second year I was far more satisfied than the first year. Students were reflecting on the previous lesson by preparing the mini presentations. I was satisfied that students were participating in the mini presentations and that they were using English. In addition, although there may have been some grade inflation, students were very focused on their friends' presentations in order to grade them. This was a very positive outcome as assessing peers is a way to notice your own strengths and weaknesses. As the peer assessment was not as fair as I hoped, this was something I still wanted to improve on in the following year. I was still not satisfied with the small group discussions, I felt that not

all of the students were discussing actively and other students were using discussion time to just chat with their friends.

One aspect that I was very concerned about was the students' perception of fairness of peer grading. In research into whether there is a difference between teacher and peer assessment it was found that there is a difference, but that this difference was not significant and did not affect final grades (Ryan, 2007). I was not sure that students understood this. In the third year I decided to focus on improving the fairness of the peer assessment, whilst preserving the basic style of the mini presentations, which seemed to be effective. I also wanted to improve the discussion activities, so that students were focused on the task. In addition, I wanted to increase the amount of critical thinking and research carried out by students. To do this I felt that a longer-term project would be necessary.

### **Second Intervention**

Based on problems I had observed in the second year, in the following year I decided to assign groups, so that students would not be sitting with their friends. I hoped that this would discourage students from chatting about unrelated topics and discourage grade inflation. I assigned students to different groups each week using a numbering system. I arrived at class before any students. Luckily the class was after lunch so that I could set the classroom up during lunchtime. Certain desks were assigned with large numbers from 1 to 20 to signal the group number. As the students entered the room they took a small number randomly out of a bag. This small number corresponded to the group number. The students were then asked to sit in their assigned group. In this way students were not only assigned random groups, but they changed their seating position and group members each week. In addition, I tried to explain the rationale behind peer assessment more clearly to students. I talked about how giving your friend a high grade just because you were friends was not fair for other students who had prepared carefully. I appealed to the students that they would hate it if a teacher gave a high grade just to their favorite students. As one of the main goals of peer assessment is the learning that takes place by considering what makes a good presentation, I also explained how much they could learn through grading other students.

UC Berkeley Center for Teaching & Learning (n.d.) recommends making classes more interactive between teachers and students. In order to increase interaction between the teacher and students, I tried to change the way I elicited student feedback. After each short discussion I would give the microphone to a group and get feedback from about four groups for each discussion, which I wrote up on the board. This allowed for more interaction between me and the students, and the students seemed genuinely interested in ideas from other groups. I also hoped that this would improve participation by introducing some sort of accountability for their discussions, even though they were not graded.

Finally, I incorporated two presentation projects. In the first semester students were asked to produce a poster comparing one aspect of culture in two countries. In the second semester students were required to produce a group PowerPoint presentation. The posters were displayed around the



classroom in the final lesson and students were given a worksheet to look at a number of posters and write reflections on them. The posters were then collected by the teacher and graded on a simple rubric of content and visual quality. In the second semester, students worked in groups of five to create a five-minute presentation on an aspect of culture from one country that we had not studied. All the topics were checked by the teacher for suitability before the students started researching.

### **Reflections on Second Intervention**

Reflecting on the third year I was far more satisfied with the mini presentations and peer assessments. The students were far more engaged in the presentations and the average grade for peer assessments had come down by about 5% indicating that students might be being a little fairer. One problem that happened was that on a couple of occasions students complained to me that they did not like their group members. I did not worry about this problem too much as the groups changed each week. It was noted that students devised various ingenious ways to try to stay in the same group as their friends showing that they obviously wanted to sit with their friends rather than in random groups. In addition, a small number of students spoke to me of anxiety issues with the large class and in particular not being able to choose where to sit or who to sit with. I dealt with these students on an individual level, but I was concerned that the grouping system had added to their anxiety.

Another problem that I noted was that although students were preparing for the mini presentations, many students were writing short essays rather than making effective presentation notes. This made it very difficult for students to make eye contact during their presentations, as reading their essay aloud necessitated looking at the paper constantly. I reflected that I had not given students clear guidance on how to make presentation notes.

I was still not satisfied with the student discussions. Some students were certainly using critical thinking skills and were involved in deeper learning, but many students were still very passive. This was probably because they did not have confidence to speak in English.

The posters were on the whole excellent and displayed a level of research and critical thinking that had not been evident in the classroom mini presentations. Unfortunately displaying 80 posters was difficult and I did not feel that students read the posters carefully. The PowerPoint presentations were a success. Students worked well in groups and it was possible to grade all the presentations in one class. Five minutes was short for a group presentation, but it did force students to practice carefully to finish within the time.

### **Third Intervention**

In the fourth year I was still not satisfied with the grouping system. Putting students in groups each week was very time consuming for the teacher and also seemed to be a little unpopular with the students as shown by them creating clever ways to be in the same group as their friends. In the fourth year I decided on a compromise. I assigned random groups at the beginning of the semester, but

students then stayed in those groups for the whole semester. I hoped that in this way the groups would become more settled, but students would not just chat to their friends as they were a little unfamiliar with the group members. It also enabled me to assign students with poor eyesight to sit near to the front of the class, which had been a concern when students were randomly assigned groups. Students with anxiety issues seemed to form friendships with their assigned groups over the semester. Most students seemed happy with this arrangement and the average peer assessment grade did not go up, indicating that the students were probably not inflating grades. There are a number of reasons that may have affected the successful implementation of peer assessment. Firstly, there were a total of eleven peer assessed presentations, which made each presentation a small percentage of the final grade, reducing the motivation to inflate grades. Secondly, the grading criteria of the peer assessment was clear and simple (see appendix 1) enabling all students to complete it quickly and easily. Finally, peer assessment was enthusiastically encouraged, and monitored by the teacher every week.

To solve the problem of poor presentation notes I provided a model of presentation notes at the beginning of the semester. After the first presentation I wrote comments for each student on how to improve their presentation notes. This was time-consuming for me but it was only carried out once in the semester. Quinlan and Fogel (2014) state that feedback is essential in signalling a gap between current and desired performance, so it was hoped that by providing at least one individual feedback would help students to improve their notes. In subsequent weeks I showed the class an example of a student's notecard that I thought was praiseworthy for some reason. I did not want to spend a large amount of time teaching students to make presentation notes as this was a content class rather than a skill-based class. Showing models seemed to be effective and the quality of the notes from most students did improve. There were still a few students, who obviously did not prepare before class, but these were very small numbers.

I continued with the same poster presentations, but divided the class into two groups to put their posters on the wall. After 45 minutes the posters were switched. This seemed to work a little better than the previous year, but there were still logistical problems with displaying such a large number of posters. I did not change the PowerPoint presentation project.

## **Discussion**

This action research was by and large a success. Observation showed that by the end of the four years students were participating actively in the class by preparing mini presentations and sharing their ideas with other students during discussions. Analysis of the notecards showed students to be engaging in deeper learning as well as using English communicatively. In addition, most students participated in the peer assessment conscientiously; students listened to their group members carefully and tried to grade them fairly. This is a relatively unusual form of assessment in Japan and for many students it might be the first time for them to encounter peer assessment. In addition, the presentations showed students to be researching new material to present to other students and using deeper thinking skills.

Another aspect that is very positive from this action research is that the majority of students seemed to be happy and interested in the class. As large lecture classes are notoriously prone to students sleeping and not engaging with the material (Quinlan & Fogel, 2014), I was very happy that students were actively participating in the class. Putting students in random groups each week was hard work for the teacher and required a lot of organization as well as arriving at the classroom fifteen to twenty minutes early. It was obvious from the students' behavior that students prefer being in the same group as their friends, however my impression was that the students tended to stay on task in these random groups more than if they were in groups with their friends. The compromise of putting students in random groups at the beginning of the semester seemed to work best although students still tried to beat the system in order to be in a group with their friends. It is difficult to know if the gains in discussion

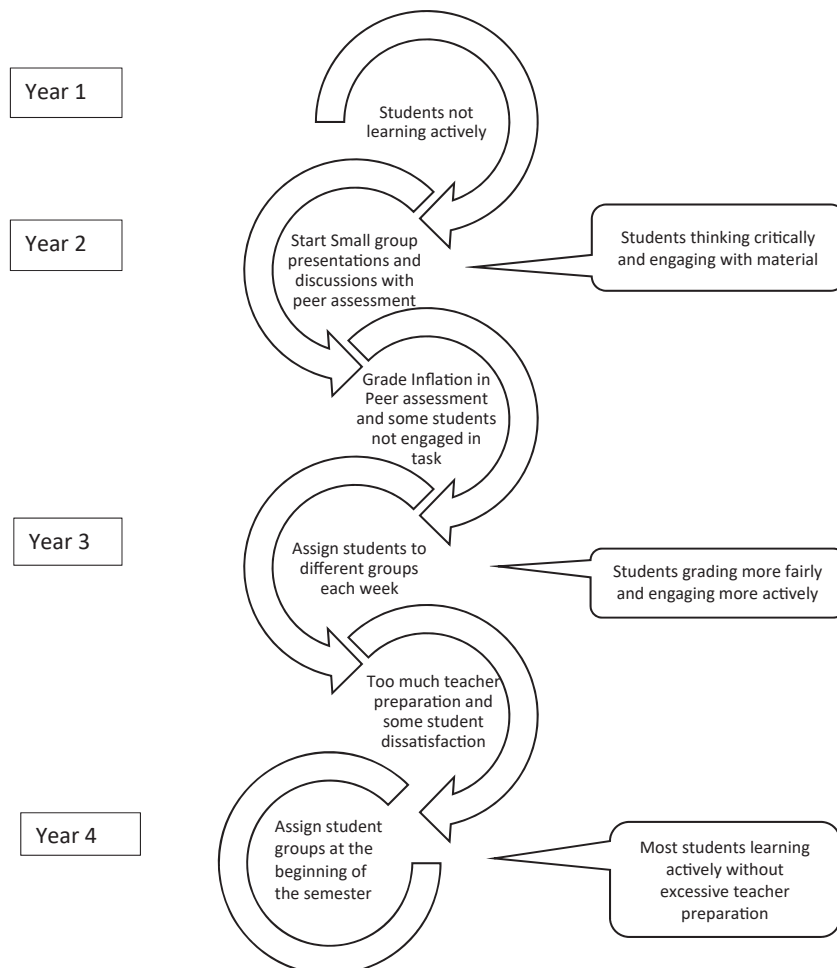


Figure 2: Implementing Active Learning

quality made up for the reduced motivation by being separated from their friends.

The presentations appeared to offer students an opportunity to research one topic more deeply and share their findings with other students. I would like to find ways to make the groups discussions more interactive, and particularly elicit ideas from the students to share with the whole class.

Based on my reflective notes and observations I think that the assessment was relatively fair and the students seem satisfied with the course evidenced by evaluations and the fact that I was still getting very large numbers of students for an elective class.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, contrary to the comments I had received at the start of teaching this course, I think that it is possible to incorporate active learning in a large lecture class. When students are given a clear task, such as the mini presentations, they were very engaged. The mini presentations were probably the most successful part of this project. I observed an increase in student participation and enjoyment of the class during these presentations. Students were actively listening to their group members laughing and smiling. At the end of the two-minute presentation I often noticed that students switched into Japanese and started asking questions about the mini presentation. Ideally, I would like this discussion to take place in English, but as it is a comparative culture class rather than a straightforward English class, I was very happy that students were interested and engaged in the topic.

In order to assess these presentations in a large class, peer assessment is necessary. Although peer assessment is not common in Japan, students were able to assess their classmates fairly and seemed to improve over time. Peer evaluation and participation was greatly improved through carefully forming the groups. Students did not engage as actively when they were in groups with their friends as when the groups were assigned by the teacher, but they did not like changing groups every week. It is probably fair to say that a compromise of staying in an assigned group for the whole semester, was the best solution. Students seemed to form effective groups if allowed to work with the same members over the whole semester, but changing groups every week for large classes is possibly too disruptive and causes unnecessary work for the teacher. When teachers form groups for large classes it would be possible to use a seating chart, although picking numbers out of a hat was fun and the students thought it was fair. Students enjoyed researching and preparing longer group poster and PowerPoint presentations. Although it was difficult to grade these, it was still a worthwhile activity. Group discussions were much better at the end of the action research than the beginning, but not as good as I would hope for. I would like to investigate ways in which students could discuss more deeply in English.

Areas for further study would be to compare teacher assessment with student assessment of mini presentations to judge the fairness of grading. I would also like to investigate ways in which technology could be used to increase student participation and interaction between teachers and students. As a method to encourage active learning and sharing of opinions in a large class I would judge these interventions to have been successful. This course design would be recommended to other teachers.

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## Appendix 1

**Mini Presentation 6:** Prepare a 2-minute presentation. What do you think is the best way to overcome culture shock?

<b>Time:</b>	Less than 1 minute	1	<b>Voice</b>	very quiet	1	<b>Eye contact</b>	None	1
	1 minute – 1: 30 seconds	2		quiet	2		Little	2
	1:30 – 1:45 seconds	3		normal	3		Usually	3
	1:45 – 1:59 seconds	4		easy to hear	4		Mostly	4
	2 min	5		loud	5		All the time	5

Total /15

Notecard /5 = total score /20