Exploring EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Active and Passive Learning in Japanese Universities

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Abstract

This paper analyses some of the EFL teachers' perceptions and beliefs regarding active and passive learning in their EFL classrooms in Japanese universities. The study is based on paired discussions among the participant teachers. It uses inductive qualitative approach to analyze the data and uses NVivo 12 software to identify the main themes. The analysis shows what these teachers consider as active or passive learning. It demonstrates how they describe and provide the factors, which they believe, are behind creating one or the other style. The findings suggest that these EFL teachers link active approach to successful learning and passive approach to unsuccessful learning. They consider factors such students' level, teachers' level, and classroom size to be among the main factors that lead to classroom environment being active or passive.

Keywords: Learning styles, Active learning, Passive learning, Qualitative analysis, Paired discussion.

1 Introduction

Teaching and learning styles are foundational to the process of language education. Recently, many teachers are leaning toward the use of an active learning style, which involves students doing tasks and thinking about what they are doing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) as opposed to passive learning of the sort found in traditional classes where teachers deliver lectures for the majority of the class time (Wingfield & Black, 2005). EFL teachers use various pedagogical approaches to deliver learning material and improve their students' language abilities. However, these approaches differ from situation to situation, and in many cases, teachers need to adopt and change their strategies in situ based on the learners' behavior. This paper analyses what some EFL teachers in Japanese universities say about active and passive learning and how they link it to other factors such as learners, teachers, and classroom size. These language

teachers report engaging their students in communicative activities and employing many practices to involve students, including pair and group discussions, games, and the use of humor to promote language use for genuine purposes to achieve the ultimate goal of acquiring the target language. However, in the context of Japanese university classes, some students demonstrate difficulties and even resistance when participating in such activities. This study will undertake an analysis of how teachers describe their beliefs in relation to such issues (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), while providing an account for their teaching methods and the difficulties they face as EFL teachers in Japanese universities.

2 Literature review

2.1 Teacher's perceptions of their world

Many pedagogical practices are aimed at engaging learners in classroom activities, but when teacher' plans do not go as smoothly as expected, their original plans and goals go through *in situ* changes (Van Lier, 1994). Knowledge of teachers' beliefs and perceptions about their actions is essential to understanding what is going on in these classes. By documenting teachers' voices, researchers are able to understand their concerns and perceptions regarding effective teaching (Lazaraton & Ishihara, 2005; Numrich, 1996). Teachers' reflections on their practices in L2 classrooms can establish concrete practices that can be used by other educators in similar situations (Geyer, 2008). Making teachers aware of the way they use interaction in classrooms is the first step to proposing changes that may lead to improving teaching and learning situations (Aline & Hosoda, 2006).

2.2 Teachers' perceptions of EFL teaching in Japan

In Japan many studies have been conducted to display EFL teachers' views on specific issues related to their teaching. For example, in some of these studies teachers have voiced their concern over the classroom size in Japanese universities. They argue that the large class sizes (40 plus students) create a teacher-centered style (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004), which is very difficult to manage (Sakui, 2007) and prevents them from teaching communicatively (Gorsuch, 2001). Some teachers assert that they prefer a student-centered approach and they therefore focus more on fluency rather than accuracy (Matsuura et al., 2001). Such EFL teachers prefer active classrooms, where there is interaction with and among students over passive classrooms where the interaction is one-way communication from teacher to students (Sasaki, 1996).

This paper aims to add to this line of research by narrowing the focus to teachers' perceptions of active and passive learning in EFL classrooms in Japanese universities and the factors leading to one or the other style.

2.3 Teaching and Learning styles

Using effective and suitable teaching styles is key to successful language teaching. Teachers often use a mix of approaches in order to arrive at the one that suits their learners' needs and almost all teachers have their own individual styles (Reid, 1987). However, in some cases learners find these styles difficult or different from what they are used to (Eliason, 1995), which might lead to learning failure (Peacock, 2001) and a mismatch between teaching styles of instructors and the learning styles of students may occur (Oxford & Ehrman, 1993). With many teachers shifting to learner-centered instruction, they are starting to pay more attention to learning methods (Tudor, 1996).

Research questions

This chapter is based on an analysis of a collection of teachers' discussions about their teaching styles and the situation of EFL in Japan. The study addressed the following questions as a basis for the analysis.

1. How does this group of EFL teachers describe active and passive learning?
2. What are some of the factors that these teachers consider to lead to active or passive learning?

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Data and participants

The data in this study are derived from four peer discussions among EFL teachers in Japanese universities. The data are based on these four pairs of teachers discussing their teaching styles, challenges facing them, and their recommendations for achieving teaching goals. Each discussion lasted 20 to 40 minutes (see Table 1 below for more information on the participants).

Table 1

Participants' information

Pairs	Teacher code	Nationality	Gender	Experience (Years)
	T1	Japan	M	10+
Pair 1	T2	Russia	F	10+
	T3	U.S.A.	M	15+
Pair 2	T4	Brazil	F	10+
	T5	Australia	M	10+
Pair 3	T6	U.S.A.	M	10+
	T7	U.S.A.	M	6+
Pair 4	T8	U.S.A.	F	15+

Participants' nationalities, gender, and experience

During the discussions the following questions were used to guide the teachers' conversation;

1. Do you face difficulties getting your students to participate in classroom activities?
2. Do you think that EFL students in Japan are active or passive learners?

These questions constituted initial prompts, but the teachers built on them and in many cases moved naturally to new topics that were not related to the questions. The discussions were video-recorded and then transcribed for content using conventional orthography. The researcher was present during the recording but generally did not take part in the discussion. Another researcher independently verified the transcription and where discrepancies occurred an agreement was reached through discussion.

3.2 Methods

The study adopted an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014; Silverman, 2013) in which the data were transcribed, and via thorough reading, a thematic mind map was created using NVivo 12. After this, the data were then divided into smaller units based on the topics the participants discussed. The data reduction was applied to select what was relevant to the research questions (Cho & Lee, 2014).

Two main themes with seven subthemes were considered as relevant to the study and were chosen from the list of themes that emerged from this process. These codes and themes are segments of data with short names that summarize and account for pieces of data (Charmaz, 2006). The data were thematically analyzed using NVivo 12 for Mac to inductively code and identify the main themes that participants discussed. The use of the NVivo software enabled a rigorous analysis and ensured that all the important points are included in the analysis. After identifying the themes, they were divided into three main categories based on their similarities. However, the use of NVivo alone is not enough for a deep qualitative analysis, and for that reason the researcher elaborated on the NVivo findings with manual coding, as well as by going back to the data and adding more details to the themes and sending them to another researcher who checked them independently. Finally, the data were qualitatively analyzed for manifest and latent content (Cho & Lee, 2014; Silverman, 2013).

As mentioned above, this study uses paired discussion as a means of collecting data. The rational for using this method over focus groups or interviews, which are both popular among qualitative researchers, is that paired discussion better suits this type of study for several reasons. First, in paired discussion, both participants have plenty of time to share their views, unlike in a focus group where some participants tend to keep their contributions minimal. Paired discussions also provide the participants with the opportunity to build on each other's stories and lead the interaction, unlike interviews where the interviewer is the moderator. I chose paired discussion as a means for data collection because it allowed me to collect in depth data from the participants in a setting where they could speak freely and have sufficient time to do so.

Figure includes a summary of the stages of the study:

Figure 1

Analysis stages
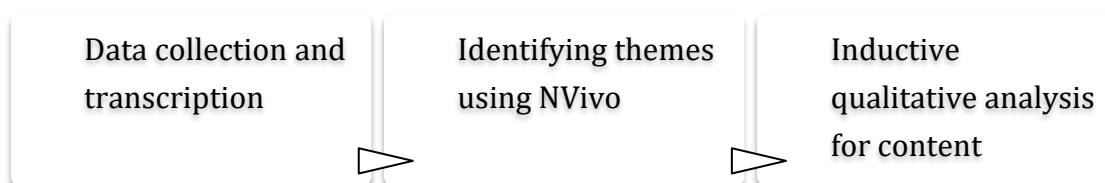
The following table includes the main themes and sub-themes. The analytic focus was on themes related to teachers' perceptions of active and passive learning.

Table 2

Themes that emerged from the teacher discussions

Main themes	Subthemes
Active learning	Active learners Active teachers Systematic factors
Passive learning	Passive learners Passive teachers Systematic factors Cultural factors

4 Thematic Analysis

This section will present an analysis of the themes that emerged from the teachers' discussions. Using a qualitative content method, the themes related to active and passive learning will be analyzed.

4.1 Active learning

Firstly, the participants discussed active learning on many occasions throughout the data. This section will analyze what they say about it and how they define it. The analysis is divided into several sub-categories within active learning.

4.1.1 Active learners

In this part the participants talked about what they consider active learners. One essential aspect of being active for some of these teachers is when learners show the willingness to go beyond tasks and keep talking in English. They believe that students who are able to continue talking in English within their groups after the task is completed are active learners since they have the ability to engage in natural conversation. The following segment from one of the teachers illustrates this point;

> T7: Some of them will go on, "what will you do next weekend?", they will build on it. They will go to the next thing: "Okay what're you gonna do next month?" or What are you gonna do after this class?" They'll build on it.

In this example the teacher explains what he sees as active learners. The example describes students who are able to keep the talk going by expanding it beyond two adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007). Other teachers similarly describe types of learners

who are active. They argue that learners who have experience studying overseas or those with a high level of English proficiency are more active than others. The following comment from T3 shows this:

> T3: I feel like students who have studied abroad or like you said are maybe in the advanced classes or have chosen those elective classes they participate much more, and they become more active. Where if they've experienced classes abroad they come with a whole new perspective that there is another way to be active in class. So, I think my students are quite different when they have those experiences.

According to this teacher, the study abroad experience provides learners with an opportunity to be part of an active learning environment, which might be not available in their universities. This demonstrated how this teacher believes that being active can be acquired and the environment plays an important role in it. These arguments are supported by research that suggests studying overseas improves Japanese EFL learners' motivation (Sasaki, 2011).

One of the teachers (T4) argues that familiarity between students plays a role in making them active learners. She believes that if students know each other well they are more active and better engaged in the learning activities. "When the chemistry is really good, they are very friendly, and they don't mind showing their skills" She went on to explain that the classes with students from the same faculty are more active than mixed faculty classes. This idea aligns with prior research findings that show Japanese EFL learners are more talkative when they are used to their classmates (Yuen, 1996).

4.1.2 Active teachers

The participants also discussed the role of teachers in creating an active environment. They suggest that teachers are responsible for engaging students in learning activities and that their practices can facilitate students' participation. T3 argues that classes which consist of mainly lectures, can lead students to be passive and that when teachers group students and let them discuss topics, it can create an active environment; "I would lecture here, but also I try to get them into groups and very active learning pace thing starts right away" (T3). The teachers therefore emphasize the idea of creating an active environment classes for students to enable them to move from teacher-centered classes toward cooperative learning (Hwang et al., 2005).

4.1.3 Systematic factors

The participants also acknowledged some of the systematic factors they consider play a significant role in leading to active learning. Among these factors are class type and class size. They argue that classes which consist of activities beside lectures are more active than those with lectures only. They also mention that small size classes are more active than large size classes (Konstantopoulos, 2011). For example, T6 says "the ACE classes are better than most of the forty-student classes when it comes to response time and discussing in English" The "ACE classes" refers to certain freshman classes that include fewer students and who have the highest level of English proficiency in the focal institution. According to this teacher, who teaches both ACE classes and regular ones, ACE students are more active and he believes that this is because of their level as well as the class size.

4.2 Passive learning

Likewise, passive learning was another theme that teachers discussed at length. Their discussion covered the notion from several angles. The first thing was when they discussed what they consider as passive learners and, as expected, it was the exact opposite of what they see as active learners, as will be shown in the next section.

4.2.1 Passive learners

This section reports on the participants' definitions of passive learners. T7 describes passive students as those who feel uncomfortable when they are asked to come up with or think of something new to say: "When you tell them to come up with something like, eh like I have to think of something to think of something to say?" and building on his thought, T8 provides a description of what she thinks of as a passive behavior;

> T8: I think that's a good example of passive passivity. Some classes are active and some of them are passive. Like when they finish a task instead of waiting for me   to give them the next thing to do to just use the time just come up with anything. So they can practice English and I make actually a big thing about that and tell them that's how you learn is by coming with something to say, sustaining the conversation that's where they are in groups. It depends on the student but there are some students who can't do that, and that I think of as passive. They're kind of not willing to take charge of the interaction. It's not they can't do it, it's they lack the willingness to do it.

This teacher claims that language is learned through expansion of topics and by keeping the interaction going. She considers the students who do not take the initiative to

expand the conversation as passive learners. T7 supports this argument by giving an example of how passive learners fail to expand the interaction: "If I give them a topic I say, okay talk about your weekend, they will say okay I did this on the weekend, and then *ijoh des* (finished)."

This teacher is subtly criticizing the passive behavior of those students who only interact to talk about the topics that the teacher has assigned. Such students do not follow up or expand these topics. As many teachers notice, the expansion of interaction and the willingness to keep the conversation going is an important element of being active in classrooms. On the other hand, they mention cutting the interaction short by not expanding leads to a passive classroom environment.

4.2.2 Passive teachers

As we saw in the active learning section, the teachers also discuss the role of teachers in creating passive learning environment. In the following comment one of the teachers provides what he describes as students' account of their typical classroom experience; "They tell me other Japanese classes are mainly ninety minutes of the professor talking. So I guess trying to create a classroom where there is a clear divide between Japanese classes and foreign language classes" (T6). The teacher emphasizes the importance of creating a different type of classroom and making sure that it is clear to students that those classrooms are different from the passive classrooms they are used to. This is similar to the findings of research that argue Japanese EFL learners are used to the teacher-centered approach and they prefer them while EFL teachers prefer the student-centered approach (Matsuura et al., 2001) and that is where a mismatch between teaching and learning styles occur (Oxford & Ehrman, 1993).

T4 was the only participant who discussed how teachers' language proficiency levels might affect the type of classroom. She argues that teachers who are not fluent English speakers might avoid interactional activities because, according to her, this is face-threatening for teachers. By avoiding interactional activities the teachers create passive classrooms: "It depends a lot on the level of the teacher because maybe if their weak point is speaking, they are not gonna involve themselves in such activities, because they don't wanna be embarrassed in front of their students." This shows the need for enhancement of teacher training in areas such as communicative language teaching to develop their skills and teaching methods (Steele & Zhang, 2016).

Another important point that was raised by one of the teachers (T2) is that foreign teachers need to be familiar with the characteristics of Japanese EFL learners because not knowing them can lead to misunderstandings, such as not knowing the level of students, and being passive does not mean necessarily they have a low level of

language proficiency: "For me it took me some time to understand that they actually do understand me and that their level of knowledge of language is much higher than I would expect being used to the active and engaged students from for example, the UK." Knowing the level of students is essential for creating the syllabus and for teaching. For these reasons, it is vital that foreign teachers familiarize themselves with the characteristics of EFL learners in Japan because they are usually different from foreign teachers' expectations of university students as those who engage lively in discussions and debates (Hammond, 2007).

4.2.3 Systematic factors

One of the systematic factors that teachers consider lead to passive learning is the class size, as they argue that large-sized classes tend to be passive. This observation is supported by research findings not only in language classrooms but also in other classroom types such as science classes (Morgado, 2010). Other teachers blame the education system for the passive learning: "They are used to twelve years of sitting quietly and taking notes" (T6) and "They are passive because they tend to do some lectures" (T2).

4.2.4 Cultural factors

Some of the teachers provide cultural reasons and factors that they believe are behind Japanese EFL learners being mostly passive learners. T2 argues that Japanese culture, which emphasizes the politeness, plays a role in students not being active in asking questions as they might consider it impolite, "So probably they wouldn't be that active in asking the questions because of the local concept of politeness." T3 also supports this idea by claiming that Japanese culture plays a role in students not opening up in the classroom and not engaging in discussions without being forced to do so by the teacher. The claim that Japanese culture plays a role in students being passive in the classroom is not backed up by the literature and contrasts with real life situations, as usually witnessed in the lively markets, youth clubs, and students' interaction outside of the classroom. However, one can argue that the school policy might be part of the reason for students being quite in most of the classroom time (Hammond, 2007). As Cheng (2000) eloquently puts it, "Cultural attributes should not be considered as an easier diagnosis for all problems arising in ESL/EFL practices" (p. 435). In the same paper Cheng goes on to explain that the passivity in class can be caused by many factors, such as students' proficiency and rapport between the students and the teacher. Both of those teachers are non-Japanese and this shows their perceptions of Japanese culture, which raises the importance of teachers' awareness of the learners' culture and this is another place

where teacher training programs could offer more information and resources to better prepare teachers for the situation in classrooms (Dooly, 2007).

4.3 Discussion

This study has covered a range of topics that the focal group of EFL teachers in a Japanese university discussed regarding their teaching styles. It demonstrated what they believe about active and passive learning. The majority of the teachers agreed that active learners are those who are willing to participate in classroom activities. They also argued that EFL learners with overseas learning experience are more active than their counterparts (Sasaki, 2011). They considered teachers who use activities and do not depend on lectures for most of the class time as active teachers. The participants discussed some of the systematic factors that lead to active learning environment. Among these factors is class size, and they argue that small class sizes usually give rise to active classes (cf. Konstantopoulos, 2011).

On the other hand, the participants argued that learners who do not have the willingness to participate and do not expand the talk are passive learners. They also describe what they consider to be passive teachers, saying that teachers who lecture for the whole class time lead to a passive approach. In addition, they put forward some factors that create a passive environment in classroom. Classes with large number of students are considered to be more passive (Morgado, 2010).

This study has provided rich data in which EFL teachers in a Japanese university expressed their voices and discussed their ideas with their peers. One of the study's limitations is that none of the participants are novice teachers. It is important that future research investigate novice teachers' perceptions as well, to see the difference between novice teachers and experienced teachers' perceptions of EFL classrooms in Japanese universities.

Overall, the participants discussed their views and beliefs regarding the EFL situation at their institution. The following figure summarizes the study's findings. It shows the main themes that teachers discussed and it links those themes to their relevant categories. It shows also how teachers regard the themes as factors that can lead to successful or unsuccessful learning.

Figure 2

Summary of the main findings
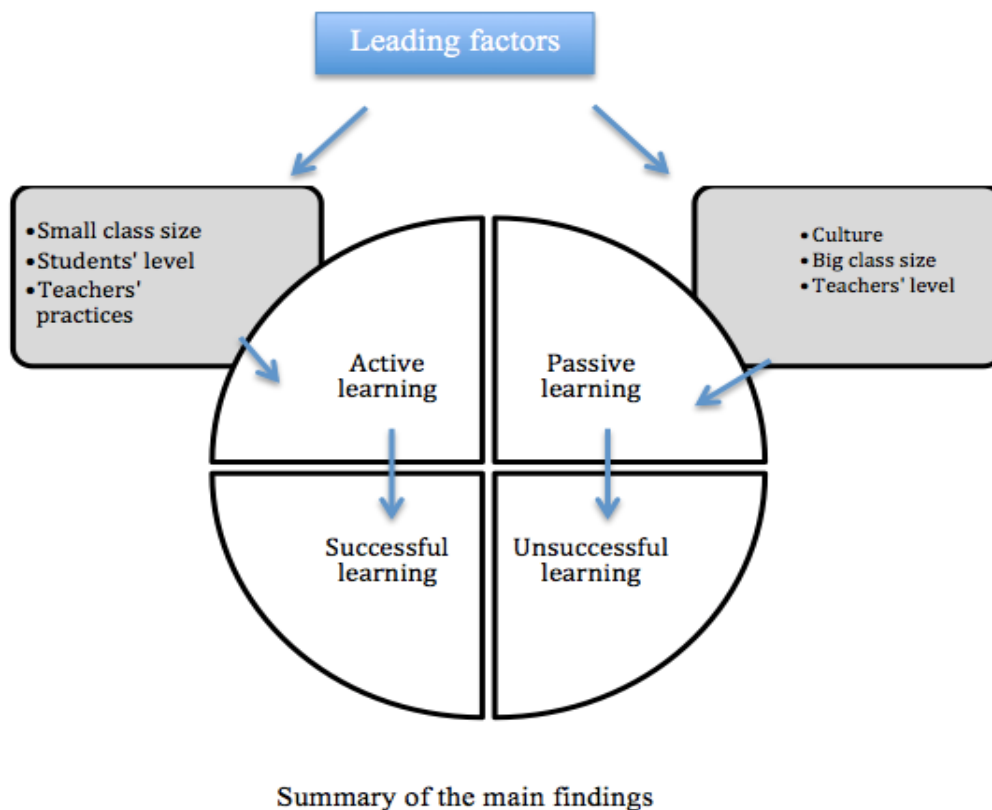
5 Conclusion

The figure above summarizes the main ideas that the participant teachers discussed. It also links these ideas to the main themes of this study. The results show how these teachers argue that there are some factors which can lead to an active learning environment. These factors include small class size, and the teachers' level. The analysis also demonstrated that the teachers link active learning to successful learning. On the other hand, they have provided a list of factors, such as culture and bigger class sizes, that can lead to passive learning. They think of passive learning as the opposite to active learning and because of that they have different outcomes. The teachers believe that passive learning can lead to unsuccessful learning. The analysis of the participants' discussions has shown that they provided some factors which according to them lead to passive or active learning. Such findings might be useful to other teachers or educational institutions, which are aiming to apply active learning styles. For example, having smaller classes and building rapport between students might be helpful in

making the students communicate with each other easily and effectively, which can have a positive effect on the overall learning environment. In addition, the institutions should introduce workshops for teachers on how to include interactional activities in their classes. This will equip new teachers with ideas and techniques to achieve the active learning goals.

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