

Ways to Apply Active Learning in the College ESL Classroom

by Mark J. Alves, Ph.D.

The Old, The New, and Experiments in Teaching...

It is uncontroversial to say that active learning has long been an integral part of TESOL/TEFL training and overall pedagogy. The term “Active Learning” is embedded in ESL/EFL teacher training and is a regular part of their classrooms, though that specific term is not often used by TESOL/TEFL instructors. We tend to directly discuss pair work, peer review, and frequent in-class reading/writing activities, which are already examples of Active Learning, and research shows these can be effective (cf. Prince 2004). The basic idea is that by immediately applying what students have been exposed to, deeper learning occurs, not only due to the practice itself but also the other factors connected with it, such as the desire to show competence in front of peers (healthy competition). Furthermore, it is entirely in line with student-centered learning and the issue of different learning modes. The natural question at this point is what methods exist for applying this approach.

As part of a teaching workshop for faculty at Montgomery College, a community college where I teach, I did an analysis of active learning in my teaching repertoire, in particular in my ESL writing classes. The lists below show the results of my exploration of a few dozen active learning techniques in Julia Thompon’s recent online article “40 Active Learning Strategies for Active Students.” I was interested in (a) techniques I already frequently apply, (b) those which I apply but could modify, and (c) techniques that I have not tried but intend to. The main categories are divided according to when, how, and why they are used. However, there is significant overlap and some redundancy as these aspects often feed into or rely on each other. Finally, these techniques are not strictly for ESL classrooms; I have used many of these while teaching content courses.

I hope the readers will consider these ideas and reflect on which methods they employ, which they could modify and advance, and which entirely new approaches they could add to their assortment of teaching techniques.

Techniques for Teaching with Active Learning

A. Small-group activities

- **Student Pair Work:** Students engage in pair-work activities for several minutes, after which they are expected to share their prepared responses with the entire class (see “C. Modeling...” and “D. Student Responses/Presentations” below).

- **Other General Student Activities:** The possible course activities may include the following:
 - Introduce: Preview a newly introduced course topic (e.g., prediction of issue, relate to previous experience/knowledge, etc.).
 - Review: Review a previously covered topic.
 - Apply: Apply ideas from a covered topic (See “B. Questions” below).
 - Practice: Practice with (a) brainstorming or (b) problem-solving activity (again, from small groups to large groups).
 - Create: Have students provide samples of errors for others to solve.

TIP: Introduce a task (e.g., editing an excerpt for errors in sentence boundaries), give students 5 minutes (or more as needed), and then review the topic with the entire class. This can take as little as 15 minutes, which can readily fit into any course.

B. Questions requiring students to apply and reflect on course content

- Exercises to apply covered information (e.g., pop-quizzes (graded or ungraded), problem-solving activities, etc.)
- Student summaries of covered information (e.g., end of class short verbal summary, end of class written summary, at-home written summary, etc.)
- Reflective questions requiring student reflection and/or evaluation of/opinion on covered information

C. Modeling to help students present

- The instructor models (a) how to do a learning activity or (b) how to give answers
- A student is asked to model (a) how to do a learning activity or (b) how to give answers

D. Student responses/presentations

- Presentations to review and/or apply covered information
 - (a) in-class informal short answers (preceded by small group discussions)
 - (b) formal Power Point presentations on course topics
 - (c) oral presentation of issue

E. Surveys created by instructors or students to review concepts

- Instructor-generated: Students complete surveys/questionnaires created by the **instructor** about class topics followed by (a) in-class discussion or (b) short written reports of results
- Student-generated: Students complete surveys/questionnaires created by other **students** about class topics followed by (a) in-class discussion or (b) short written reports of results

TIP: Surveys can be done with (a) slips of paper in class, (b) a show of hands in class, or (c) surveys completed online.

Samples of Active Learning in ESL Reading/Writing Activities

Having explored a variety of Active Learning techniques that can be applied broadly in a variety of types of classes, we can now look at examples of Active Learning activities specifically related to ESL reading/writing classrooms. Peer review and basic pair-work are assumed to be standard in many classrooms. However, in addition to those, below are techniques I have tried while teaching and have found productive.

- **Editing grammar/format/collocations**
 - a. After covering a target language structure (e.g., singular/plural nouns, sentence-connecting, etc.), students complete instructor-generated editing samples and then compare their attempts to edit, with discussion of the reasons for the editing.
 - b. Students create and share their own samples of language errors of the target language structure.
- **Creating thesis statements/responses to questions**
 - a. Students compare with classmates thesis statements that they generate based on questions provided by instructors.
 - b. Students write questions on the current course topic/theme and have classmates generate thesis statements, which they then compare, rate, and make suggestions for.
- **Analyzing texts**
 - a. Students review writings and work with questions provided by the instructor about the reading. Students are then held accountable for providing answers in front of the class.
 - b. Students create quiz questions that require their classmates to connect multiple details of a reading in their response. With instructor guidance, these questions then become part of an ungraded writing quiz-like activity.

Final Thoughts

I provided a list of Active Learning techniques and indicated that there are some I would like to improve. If I were to choose some aspects of the first list of Active Learning techniques that I have not used often but would like to re-test and more effectively utilize, I would consider (a) using modelling more often, (b) student reflections, and (c) student-generated questions. I could increase my awareness of modeling of responses while teaching and hopefully enhance skills development and the learning goals. As for reflections, it often seems there is insufficient time, yet when I have done it, it was

productive for both students and my own assessment of student learning, so it is worth building in an occasional 5 minutes at the end of a learning session. Finally, while I frequently have students work with each other to answer questions or solve problems I generate, I should at least try to put students in situations, after having been given enough exposure, to generate their own problems for their classmates to solve.

Active Learning is not just a buzz-word: it is a technique with long-standing presence in education. It increasingly makes students accountable for their learning, as they should be, and with the right techniques, students can deepen their learning and learn a variety of other skills for academic and professional environments, something that listening to lectures alone cannot accomplish.

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References

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