

Defining Active Learning : From the Perspective of Japanese High School Teachers of English

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in Japan in using active learning approaches in classrooms at all levels of education, from primary school to university. A number of books have been published in Japan advocating the use of an active learning approach and illustrating how to apply it to classrooms across all levels of education and a range of subjects. Consequently, a plethora of definitions of active learning have also developed. In the academic literature, active learning is a multi-dimensional concept comprised of six themes: active, interactive, cognitively engaging, emotionally involving, individualized, and independent learning. Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) documents primarily emphasise the first three (主体的・対話的で深い学び). The definitions of active learning provided by sixty-five Japanese high school teachers of English also mostly focused upon the active and interactive dimensions of active learning, and its cognitive dimensions to a lesser extent. The main implications are that teacher trainers need to not only illustrate how to introduce active learning into the high school classroom but also provide more substantial definitions of active learning.

Introduction

Active learning has become a popular approach for teaching in Japan, from primary school through to university. The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger study on active learning in Japan, the results of which have been published in three papers. In the first paper, teachers' familiarity with active learning and active

learning activities was reported (Croker & Kamegai, 2017); a second paper describes attitudes towards active learning and training needs (Croker & Kamegai, 2018). This present paper explores teachers' definitions of active learning. Given that many Japanese high school teachers of English have already attended workshops organized by MEXT, local boards of education and universities, among others, we were interested to know how they define active learning.

We felt that knowing this would help teacher trainers prepare for and deliver more effective active learning training programs.

To contrast these teachers' definitions of active learning, we also analyzed academic definitions of active learning, and the definitions used in the recent MEXT document, the 2016 Central Education Council document entitled “幼稚園、小学校、中学校、高等学校及び特別支援学校の学習指導要領等の改善及び必要な方策等について”. These two sets of definitions represent the environment in which Japanese high school teachers of English have developed their own definitions of active learning.

To frame this study, three research questions were used:

1. How is active learning defined academically?
2. How is active learning defined in MEXT documents?
3. How do Japanese high school teachers of English define active learning?

Methodology

Data gathered from Japanese high school teachers of English:

Data for the larger study were gathered using a 51-item online questionnaire written in Japanese. The questionnaire was put online using google forms in August 2017. The link was sent out to Japanese high school teachers of English working in one central Japanese prefecture by email. One of the authors, who had taught in the prefectural high school system for more than twenty years, knew these teachers. These teachers were requested to find other high school teachers to participate in the study. The data from 65 participants who completed the questionnaire were analyzed for this present paper. The data are from one open-response item in that questionnaire, “「アクティブ・ラーニング」をどのように定義していますか” (“How would you define the term ‘active learning’?”). Respondents wrote their answers in Japanese, which were coded in Japanese using thematic analysis, and particular quotes were then translated into

English for inclusion in this present publication.

Participant Biodata :

As explained in Croker & Kamegai (2017), of the 65 respondents, 36 were female and 29 were male. Respondents were mostly in their 30s and 40s. All of the respondents were Japanese high school teachers of English; 62 were working full-time and three part-time. On average, they had been teaching English at the high school level for about 15 years. About one-third of respondents each taught first-, second-, and third-year high school students. See Table 1 for a summary of these data.

Table 1 : Basic Biodata of Participants

Topic	Results
gender	female=36 male=29
age	20s=11 30s=23 40s=21 50s=10
employment status	full-time=62 part-time= 3
years teaching English at high school	average=15.17 median=14.50
main grade taught	first=18 second=21 third=24 no answer= 2

Note : This table also appears in Croker & Kamegai (2017, 2018).

Results

Research Question 1 : How is active learning defined academically?

In the literature on active learning, there are a plethora of definitions for the approach. Most authors agree on the core features of active learning; some authors also add or emphasise specific features of active learning, reflecting particular philosophical backgrounds, educational fields, or personal teaching contexts. In that sense, active learning can be seen as a broad umbrella term, representing a central feature of many educational approaches including learner-centered approaches, cooperative learning, collaborative learning, discovery learning, problem-based learning, experiential learning, and inquiry-based learning. This present paper takes a largely inclusive approach, focusing upon the features of active learning that are most commonly included in its definitions, particularly those associated with secondary school learning and language learning.

Active learning first appeared in the 1980’s in university education in the US and

was theorized in the 1990's (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Active learning developed in the latter half of the twentieth century as part of the broad shift from teacher-centered, transmission-style, lecture-based approaches where students were viewed as empty receptacles ready to passively receive knowledge towards more student-centered, constructivist, participatory approaches where learners are assumed to actively construct their own knowledge and understanding.

In a practical way, one common approach to defining active learning is according to the tasks and activities that learners undertake in the classroom. In this case, active learning is often contrasted with passive learning. For example, in the 'cone of active learning' (Figure 1), passive learning tasks refer to tasks where learners are simply reading, listening to a lecture, and watching audio-visual materials or a demonstration. By contrast, active learning tasks refer to activities where learners are discussing, writing, practicing doing something, or teaching something to other learners, and also refers to cognitive processes (Mizokami, 2014).

Such a practical approach is a useful way to begin defining active learning, particularly to busy classroom teachers who might want to understand the practical applications of active learning. However, many authors go beyond this practical approach and also seek to provide a more conceptual framework to define active learning. Almost all such authors affirm that active learning is not composed of one single dimension; that is, that it cannot simply be reduced to learners only being 'active.' Rather, active

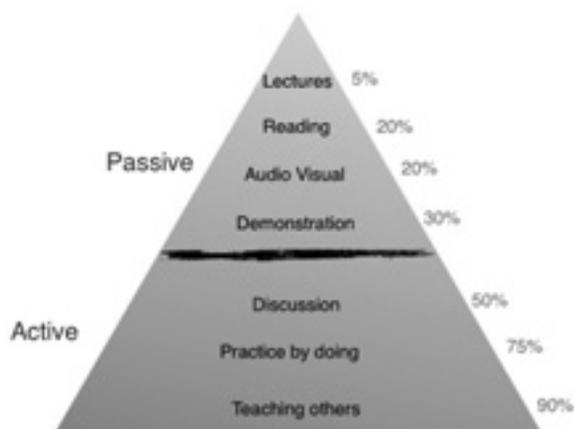


Figure 1 : The cone of active learning

Source : <https://www.coracleonline.com/article/differences-between-active-and-passive-learning>

learning is seen as a multi-dimensional concept, and it is this more comprehensive definition that is presented in this paper. Based upon Sunaga (2010), contemporary definitions of active learning are synthesized into six dimensions: active, interactive, cognitively engaging, emotionally involving, individualized, and independent. The following sections summarize each of these six dimensions in turn.

1. *Active*: 主体的, 能動的

The universally accepted, tautological meaning of active learning is that learning is ‘active,’ or 主体的. The obvious problem is how to more concretely define this word. As a starting point, authors contrast active learning approaches with more traditional, teacher-centered, transmission-style, one-way lecture-based approaches. Active learning approaches are in essence defined as being more learner-centered. Rather than adopting a one-way transmission-style approach, learners are given opportunities to construct their own knowledge through more actively participating in class. This can be seen as the central definition of ‘active’ in active learning. However, researchers have gone beyond this simple definition of ‘active’ to more fully conceptualize the concept of ‘active learning.’

2. *Interactive and cooperative*: 対話的, 協同学習 and 協働学習

Interacting with other students provides many opportunities to be active. Students can share and discuss ideas, and even teach other students. Interacting occurs through a variety of activities in the language classroom, principally centered around pair work and group work. Providing opportunities for students to cooperate and collaborate with other students also helps make the classroom more active and helps deepen students’ learning.

3. *Cognitively engaging*: 思考的な関与

This dimension refers principally to the cognitive behavior of learners. In the active learning classroom, learners are cognitively engaged with the learning process, dynamically and creatively interacting with the ideas and concepts being learned. It is through this cognitive engagement that learners develop understanding and knowledge, including higher academic skills such as reflecting on what is already known, analysing and synthesising information, and evaluating the learning process and outcomes. The de-

gree that students are actively engaged in the learning process determines the degree that the class or task is active.

4. *Emotionally involving*: 精神的な関与

Involvement refers to the degree that students are emotionally involved in the learning process. It recognizes that the heart sometimes leads the mind; that is, that harnessing learners' inherent interest in their own lives and the world around them is essential to the success of the active learning process. Involvement gives color to the learning process, bringing the whole gamut of the creative interests and curiosities of learners into the active learning classroom, inviting learners to find and create their own connections to the topics being explored. In classrooms where these emotional connections are recognized and fostered, learners are more motivated and the learning process is more active.

5. *Individualized learning*: 個人的学習

Given the inherent diversity of learners and their cognitive processes, motivations and curiosities, an active learning class seeks to individualize the learning process so that each and every student can be engaged and involved in their own unique way. This is not always easy to achieve, particularly in academic contexts such as high schools which are expected to prepare students for unified examinations that allow for little individuality. What this means is that the learning outcomes may be similar but the paths to attaining them can be different, as each learner finds her or his own path. It is essential to incorporate the subjective volition and expectations of learners into the active learning process. Making learning more individualized matches the learning process to each learner, which increases each learner's internal motivation to participate.

6. *Independent Learning*: 自主的学習

Making the learning process individualized facilitates each learner's active engagement and involvement with the learning process. It also represents the first step towards a more profound learning experience—the learner having a sense of independence during the learning process. So often in high school classrooms, learners are put in an entirely dependent position throughout the learning process, as they are given little control over what to learn, how to learn it, when to learn it, who to learn it with, and

how to evaluate or assess what has been learned. By giving learners some degree of active control over these aspects of the learning process, learners can be given a space to develop a sense of ownership over their own learning, which facilitates them acquiring some sense of responsibility over the process and outcomes of the learning process. Some authors go further and state that active learning is a form of autonomous learning, but not all authors do so.

Summary :

In summary, in the literature, six dimensions were identified that make up active learning: active, interactive, cognitively engaging, emotionally involving, individualized, and independent. How should these six dimensions be combined together? One way is to see each of these dimensions as a continuum. At one end is the presence of that dimension, and at the other is its absence. For example, a particular learning process might be very cognitively engaging, in another moderately so, and a third one not engaging at all, and each case falls on a particular point on that continuum. An ideal active learning task would be highly active, interactive, engaging, involving, individualized and independent. Such tasks may occur more towards the end of a class, unit or course; to prepare learners for them, preparatory tasks will probably be less active, interactive, engaging, involving, individualized and independent. The degree that an individual task is active is reflected in the degree that each of the six dimensions is present.

Research Question 2: How is active learning defined in MEXT documents?

This section explores the definition of active learning that MEXT provides, based upon the 2016 Central Education Council document entitled “幼稚園、小学校、中学校、高等学校及び特別支援学校の学習指導要領等の改善及び必要な方策等について”. This document states that active learning will be introduced at all levels of the Japanese education system. The document defines active learning in Japanese as 主体的・対話的で深い学び; that is, active, interactive, deep learning. In simple terms, students should actively and cooperatively discover and solve problems to develop their ability to think, judge, and express themselves, and also to reflect. It is important not simply to remember information but to develop the knowledge, skills, disposition, and abilities that they will use in the future for the rest of their lives.

Let's explore how MEXT defines each of these three key phrases in turn. The term 主体的 (active) is defined as “学ぶことに興味や関心を持ち、自己のキャリア形成の方向性と関連付けながら、見通しを持って粘り強く取り組み、自己の学習活動を振り返って次につなげる「主体的な学び」が実現できているか。子供自身が興味を持って積極的に取り組むとともに、学習活動を自ら振り返り意味付けたり、身に付いた資質・能力を自覚したり、共有したりすることが重要である” (pp. 49~50). Second, the term 対話的 (interactive) is defined as “子供同士の協働、教職員や地域の人との対話、先哲の考え方を手掛かりに考えること等を通じ、自己の考えを広げ深める「対話的な学び」が実現できているか。身に付けた知識や技能を定着させるとともに、物事の多面的で深い理解に至るためには、多様な表現を通じて、教職員と子供や、子供同士が対話し、それによって思考を広げ深めていくことが求められる” (p. 50). Finally, the term 深い学び (deep learning) is defined as “習得・活用・探究という学びの過程の中で、各教科等の特質に応じた「見方・考え方」を働かせながら、知識を相互に関連付けてより深く理解したり、情報を精査して考えを形成したり、問題を見いだして解決策を考えたり、思いや考えを基に創造したりすることに向かう「深い学び」が実現できているか。子供たちが、各教科等の学びの過程の中で、身に付けた資質・能力の三つの柱を活用・発揮しながら物事を捉え思考することを通じて、資質・能力がさらに伸ばされたり、新たな資質・能力が育まれたりしていくことが重要である。教員はこの中で、教える場面と、子供たちに思考・判断・表現させる場面を効果的に設計し関連させながら指導していくことが求められる” (p. 50).

However, the 2016 document also notes that there is a danger in being too detailed and prescriptive in the implementation of active learning, as it is important for teachers to individualize their teaching to the individual needs and learning style of each student and their learning context.

In summary, in contrast to the six dimensions outlined in the literature, MEXT mainly defines active learning in terms of three dimensions, active, interactive, and deep learning. If we compare the definitions of these three dimensions in the literature and those of MEXT, we can see that there is considerable overlap between the two. The first two dimensions, being 'active' and being 'interactive', are in both the literature and the MEXT document, and are conceptualized in similar ways. Moreover, the term 'deep learning' that MEXT uses is similar to the term 'cognitively engaging' found in the literature. The remaining three dimensions are evident in the MEXT document, but are not strongly emphasised.

Research Question 3: How do Japanese high school teachers of English define active learning?

In this section, we explain how the 65 teachers who responded to our questionnaire answered the question, “How do you define active learning?” The question was written in Japanese, as ‘「アクティブ・ラーニング」をどのように定義していますか’, and the teachers also wrote their answers in Japanese. Perhaps given the nature of the online questionnaire, most teachers wrote relatively short answers, on average 23 characters long. Some simply wrote a term, such as 主体性 (activeness), 協同学習 (collaborative learning), or 深い学び (deep learning). Others wrote slightly longer responses which still expressed one basic idea, such as 生徒が主体的に学ぶ (students learn actively) or 受け身ではない学び方 (not passive learning). Still others wrote longer responses that included more than one dimension, such as 主体的, 協同的に授業を展開する (providing active and collaborative classes) or 生徒が主体的に活動, または思考する授業 (classes in which students behave and think actively). Finally, some teachers wrote much longer responses, explaining their ideas in more detail, such as 生徒が主体となってアイデアを出し合い, 課題に対して議論などを行い学び合うもの (learning in which students become active, give ideas, discuss issues and so on).

To analyse these data, the two authors first read through the data together, noting the different terms that teachers had written. Based upon these terms, we created categories and labelled them using the same words that the teachers themselves had used, such as 生徒が主体的に学ぶ (students actively learn) and 生徒が主体的に思考する (students actively think). We then read through each teachers’ definition of active learning, allocating it to the category that most closely matched its meaning. This was very straightforward to do when the teachers used an exact term and wrote only one idea, such as 生徒が主体的に学ぶ (students actively learn). In cases where teachers wrote two ideas, such as 主体的, 協同的に授業を展開する (providing active and cooperative classes), we put these responses into two separate categories.

After creating all of the categories, we then took similar categories and grouped them together into the six larger themes that had emerged in our analysis of the literature of active learning, to facilitate easy comparison between these definitions and those written by the 65 teachers. Ultimately, 26 of these categories fitted into the six themes; the remaining data were analyzed separately.

The term most commonly used by the teachers is **active** (主体的, 能動的), and this is also our first theme. Note that teachers used both 主体的 and 能動的 to refer to the

concept of ‘active.’ There are six categories in this theme, which incorporates many different ideas. The first category is ‘students actively participate’ (生徒が主体的に学習活動に取り組む授業) (13 responses), the second category is ‘students actively learn’ (生徒が主体的に学ぶ) (13 responses); the third is ‘students actively think’ (生徒が主体的に思考する) (5 responses), and the fourth is ‘students actively express themselves’ (主体的に発信する) (3 responses).

Another way of defining ‘active’ is by contrasting it with its opposite meaning, ‘not passive’ (受け身ではない学び方, 受動的ではなく能動的に学習, 講義形式ではなく生徒の主体的な活動による学び) (3 responses) and not simply lectures (教員による講義一辺倒でない授業) (1 response), and this is our fifth category. The final category in the active theme simply refers to the amount of activity in the class (生徒の活動量を確保する). Note that two teachers repeated the exact terms that MEXT used (主体的, 対話的で深い学び: see below), one of which is 対話的. This first theme matches both the literature’s and MEXT’s definitions, and over half of the teachers directly or indirectly included ‘active’ in their definitions of active learning.

The second theme is **interactive** (対話的), and we created seven categories. Teachers wrote about interaction in a number of different ways. The largest category focused upon students sharing their own ideas and opinions through discussions (アイデアを出し合い, 自分の意見や考えを交流, 共有する, 議論する) (7 responses), thus developing the ability to communicate with each other (お互いにやりとりする力を育成する) (1 response). A small but important category was students teaching each other (生徒同士で教えあって) (1 response). In another small category, two teachers included students working in groups as part of the definition of active learning (グループ) (2 responses). Finally, in the fourth category, teachers simply directly used the term 対話 (interaction) (3 responses). In two of these responses, the teachers repeated the exact terms that MEXT used (主体的, 対話的で深い学び: see below), one of which is 対話的.

Related to the idea of interactive (対話的) are the terms 協同 (cooperation) and 協働 (collaboration), and less academic terms such as 協力する (to cooperate) and 共有する (to share), which we also included in the theme of interactive. These terms were mentioned by seven teachers. In the largest category, teachers directly used the term 協同 (cooperation) to define active learning (4 responses), such as 協同学習 (cooperative learning) and 協同的に学び (to learn cooperatively). In the next category, some teachers simply describe the process of cooperating with other students (他の生徒と協力して学

ぶ; 周りと共用する) (2 responses). In the final category, one teacher used the term 協働的に学ぶ (to learn collaboratively) (1 response). Cooperative learning and collaborative learning extend beyond the simple notion of interaction to suggest particular, perhaps more formalized ways that students interact with each other, but we grouped them together with interaction to fit within the framework of active learning apparent in the literature. Overall, the idea of interaction, and the related notions of cooperation and collaboration, were referred to by almost half of the teachers in their definitions of active learning.

The third theme is that the active learning process should be **cognitively engaging** (思考的な関与). This was not a common theme, and is composed of four categories. The first category in this theme is engaging the mind. One teacher noted that it was not sufficient simply to be active; it is also necessary to engage the mind (単なる活発な活動ではなく, 脳が活発に動く学習) (1 response), whereas another wrote that it was important for students to use both mind and heart to learn a great deal (生徒の頭と心が動き, 生徒自身が多くを学んでいる状態) (1 response). The second category focuses upon learning processes, as some teachers noted that discussions and sharing ideas are central to active learning (e.g. アイディアを出し合い, 課題に対して議論などを行い学び合うもの) (2 responses). The third category in this theme emphasises learning outcomes. One teacher defined active learning as actively extending students' ability to think (主体的に考える力を伸ばす学習) (1 response), and another teacher defined the active learning process as one where existing knowledge and new knowledge are combined together to create new ideas (学習者が既知の知識と新たな知識を組み合わせる) (1 response).

On the other hand, many teachers used the term deep (深い) as a way of referring to being cognitively engaged, and this is the fourth category. Three teachers described active learning as deepening students' learning and thinking (学びと考えを深める). Two teachers repeated the exact terms that MEXT used (主体的, 対話的で深い学び: see below), one of which was 深い; another teacher defined active learning only as deep learning (深い学び). Altogether, the theme of being cognitively engaged in the learning process was not a common one.

The fourth theme from the literature is that the learning process should be **emotionally involving** (精神的な関与). Few teachers included this theme in their definition of active learning, and only two categories emerged. One teacher noted that in active learning, students feel that they want to solve problems (生徒がその問いを解きたいと感

じる活動), and as noted above, another teacher wrote that it was important for students to use both mind and heart (生徒の頭と心が動く) (1 response). Even though motivating students is central to every teacher's daily life and often their biggest challenge, the emotional and motivational dimensions of active learning were the least written about by the teachers.

The fifth theme is **individualized learning** (個人的学習), when the learning process is individualized so that each and every student can be engaged and involved in her or his own unique way. Very few teachers included this theme in their definition of active learning, and only two categories emerged. The first category is defining active learning as being based upon individual differences (個々の差異に対応) (1 response); the second is defining active learning as the process of constructing one's own ideas (自分なりの意見を構築する過程) (1 response).

For almost all of the teachers, individualized learning was by and large conflated with the sixth theme, **independent learning** (自主的学習). The simplest way teachers referred to this dimension was using exactly that term (2 responses), or similar, less direct terms, such as 自ら考える and 自ら学ぶ学習 (6 responses), and this was the first category. The second category emphasises the learning process itself, see learning as a process of thinking, searching, and discussing independently (自ら考えたり, 調べたり, 議論したりしながら問題を解決していく学び方) (1 response) or students discovering and solving problems (生徒が問題を見つけてそれを解決する) (1 response). The phrase 'by yourself' (自分で) was often used to emphasise that students should study independently without relying on the teacher, by setting their own goals (自分で目標を設定) (1 response) and deciding how to learn by themselves (教員に言われるのではなく自分で学んでいく) (1 response), and this was the third category. Finally, one teacher noted that the outcome of active learning was to develop self-awareness (自ら気付き) (1 response), and this was the fourth and final category. Overall, independent learning was not a large theme in the teachers' definitions of active learning.

Some of the data, and the categories that were constructed from them, did not fit easily into the six themes that were developed from the literature on active learning, and these data are considered here. Firstly, some teachers wrote about the roles of students and teachers in active learning. Two teachers defined active learning as student-centered (生徒中心) (2 responses), whereas another saw students as the main actors in the class (生徒が主役になれる授業; 教師の側ではなく, 生徒が主体的に活動すること) (1 re-

sponse). Yet another teacher defined active learning as the teacher's role changing to being more of a facilitator (教師ファシリテーター) (1 response). Secondly, some teachers mapped other teaching approaches on to active learning, such as participatory learning (参加型学習) (1 response) and problem-based learning (PBL) (課題解決型) (1 response).

Finally, as the respondents were English language teachers, some teachers emphasised the linguistic dimensions of active learning, including students speaking in English with each other (英語コミュニケーションすること) (1 response), output (アウトプットの授業) (1 response), and to balancing the four skills (4技能をバランスよく学習すること) (1 response).

Discussion

In summary, most teachers' definitions of active learning focused upon the first two themes, active and interactive, and half of the 26 categories that matched the definitions from the literature were in these two themes. Some teachers also included notions of active learning being cognitively engaging, perhaps in contrast to the perceived lack of cognitive engagement in more traditional classes. Overall, teachers held a relatively similar understanding of active learning as the 2016 MEXT document.

Most teachers did not consider the emotional or motivational dimensions of active learning in their definitions. The fifth theme, individualized learning was only mentioned by two teachers, whereas the final theme, independent learning, was mentioned by 13 of the teachers. There is a gap between the definitions that appear in the literature and the notions of active learning held by this set of 65 high school teachers. The main implications are that teacher trainers need to not only illustrate how to introduce active learning into the high school classroom but also provide more substantial definitions of active learning, possibly through providing appropriate readings. As the new course of study is due to begin in 2022, teachers still have much time to develop a more complete understanding of active learning, which will be further deepened as they spend more class time implementing a variety of active learning tasks.

There are three main limitations to the study. The first is that the academic definition of active learning was not based upon a broad sample of books but rather a summary. The second is that convenience and snowball sampling strategies were used to select teachers, which limits the generalizability of these results. Finally, teachers' defi-

nitions of active learning were relatively short. To address these shortcomings, firstly, a more thorough literature review could be undertaken, to develop a more robust academic definition of active learning. Secondly, a more representative sample of teachers could be selected, to increase the generalizability of the findings. Finally, other ways of gathering data could be employed, such as follow-up interviews or focus groups with selected groups of teachers, to help create a more complete understanding of how teachers define active learning. This will further help teacher trainers prepare Japanese high school teachers of English for the 2022 implementation of active learning throughout Japan.

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「アクティブ・ラーニングの定義への一考察」

～日本の高等学校英語教員の視点から～

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近年、日本の、特に初等中等教育においてアクティブ・ラーニングへの関心がますます高まっている。それに伴い、アクティブ・ラーニングの定義についても学術的な定義、文部科学省が示した定義などさまざまある。本稿は、日本の高等学校英語教員65人を対象に行ったアクティブ・ラーニングについての調査・研究（Croker & Kamegai, 2017, 2018）の一部であり、日本の高等学校英語教員の視点によるアクティブ・ラーニングの定義付けについて考察したものである。次期学習指導要領において「主体的・対話的で深い学び」として導入されるアクティブ・ラーニングであるが、高等学校英語教員にとっては、どのように授業にアクティブ・ラーニングを導入するのかわけではなく、どのような学習活動をさせ、それをどのように評価するのかなど、より実質的な定義がなされることが求められているようである。