Facilitating Active Learning through Action Research

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One of the puzzles for American instructors teaching ESL to Japanese university students is the continual search for new ways to encourage "passive learners" to become "active learners" in the classroom. Students hesitate to ask questions or volunteer answers and may not participate actively in ways expected by the American university environment. To reach the goal of quickly engaging students in active learning, a project was designed to help students acquire language skills and confidence in an American academic environment as they created a program for community television. Principles of action research were used to evaluate and redesign the project, and to improve teaching.

Action Research

Action research in education is defined by Carl Glickman (1993), as a study conducted by colleagues to improve instruction. Action research starts with identifying a problem or dilemma in a classroom or with particular students. Once the problem is identified educators examine their teaching methods and materials for effectiveness in addressing the issue. For example, language teachers often observe that Japanese students are able to understand more English than they will orally produce. In the typical American university class, with the lecture-question format, many Japanese students will often remain respectfully silent. They may not volunteer answers or ask questions, and may pause for long periods before giving an answer when called upon. This silence is sometimes taken for lack of skill or confidence.

In this study, the teachers created a television performance project the previous year to facilitate language learning. At the end of the project, the teachers concluded that the project was successful for language learning and promoting active learning; however, they had not collected adequate data to evaluate this assumption. For this reason, a similar television performance project was conducted the following year. The goal of this project was to use principles of action research to encourage active learning, and to improve language skills and instruction techniques.

Action research problems can be divided into three parts (Rigsby, 2005): (a) the teacher's first question or puzzle (TFQ); (b) the action research version of the question (ARV); (c) the hypothesis or strategy version of the question (H/SV). In this case:

1. The TFQ was, What are best practices for teaching passive learners?

2. The ARV asked, What can teachers do to make students become more engaged earlier in the semester and therefore more active learners?

3. Finally, the H/SV asked, What will students achieve if given the opportunity to create and perform a program on TV?

The research method of triangulation was used so that answers to the problem were considered from different perspectives using varied tools to gather data. With the hypothesis/strategy version of the question at the center of the triangle, data was cross-
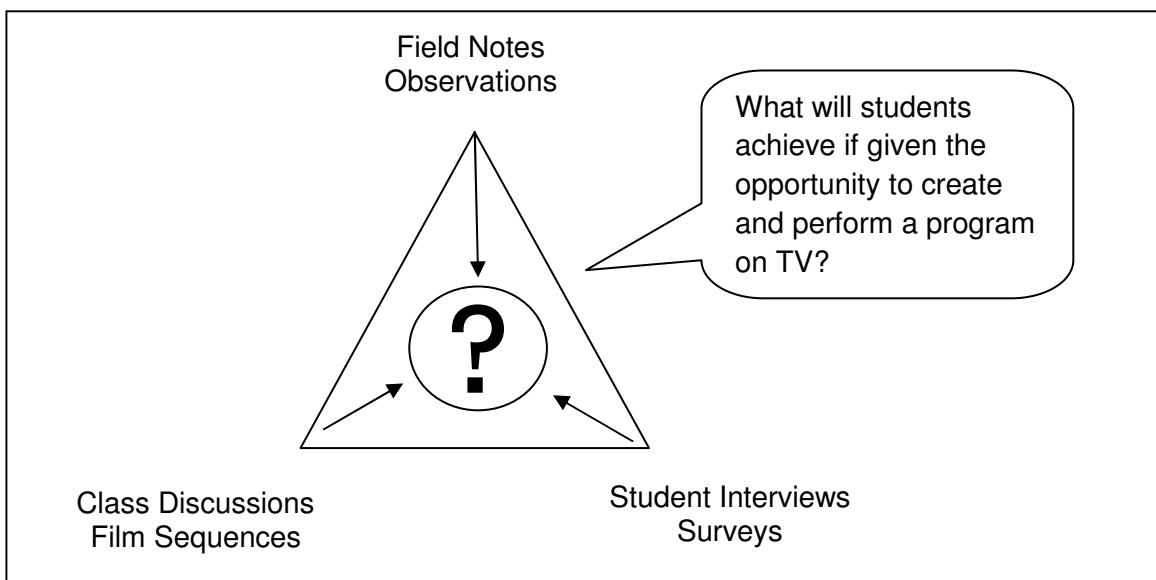
Figure 1. Triangulation Diagram

referenced by observing and writing field notes; by administering structured interviews and surveys to the students; by facilitating class discussions; and viewing filmed practice and discussion sequences.

Since action research is often qualitative and uses natural language rather than numbers, some data collected was anecdotal from teacher observation journals. In addition, communication is an important part of action research (Dick & Swepson, 1997); therefore, the teachers had ongoing discussions about student reflections and their own observations.

The Project

In this project, students created a presentation of a Japanese game or tradition to film for the local community television station. In preparation, a variety of assignments were developed to help students write the program content, practice for the performance and then reflect on their experiences. In order to facilitate student engagement a variety of experiences, including the use of technology, were offered and utilized (Zorfass & Copel, 1995). The project was completed with two groups of 14 intermediate level students in Reading/Writing and Listening/Speaking classes who had come to the U.S. for a ten-month study abroad experience to study intensive English and sheltered content courses. The students had TOEFL scores ranging from 360 to 450. The majority of the students were Japanese, but there was also one Chinese and one Saudi Arabian student in the group. This project started the first week of class and teachers had only 3 weeks to get the students ready for television. Doing a project of this magnitude at the beginning of the program proves challenging, so principles of action research were implemented to help guide the teachers through the process and improve their teaching methods.

Figure 2 shows lists of assignments designed to prepare students for the television program and tools used to collect data and evaluate the project.

Reading/Writing Assignments
- Written reflection of television studio tour
- Photo storyboard of demonstration
- Written reflection of practice sessions
- Written reflection of filming practice
- Written reflection on elementary school performance
- Written reflection on television studio filming performance
- Microsoft Publisher Newsletter
- SurveyMonkey project evaluation survey

Listening/Speaking Assignments
- Opinion language lesson to discuss topic choices
- Speaking practice in groups
- Conversations and interviews with teacher and tutor
- Recording in Audacity for self-evaluation
- Dress rehearsal performance for elementary school
- Filmed group practices for peer review
- Discussions of reflections
- Photostory 3: Digital storytelling of project process

Tools and Data Collection
- Photo-journals with reflective writing
- Discussions of written reflections
- Recorded spoken reflections
- SurveyMonkey online survey of the project
- Small group discussions of survey results
- Filmed small-group discussions
- Large group discussion of survey results
- Filmed large-group discussions
- Written assessments of group discussion and individual discussion participation
- Filmed student-professor interviews
- Professor observation journals

Figure 2. Assignments and Data Collection Tools

Results

We now return to the research question, "What will students achieve if given the opportunity to create and perform a program on TV?"

Motivation

When educators equip students with the tools to become self-motivated, real engagement in learning takes place (Wasserstein, 1995). Students have the desire to achieve personal goals and not merely attain an outside reward. This desire was clear as students became more involved in the project. Students' written reflections discussed concerns about clear communication skills rather than a focus on grades. The student-stated goal was to create a product that they could be proud to share with the community. This product and performance focus promoted interest and in having a product focus their work connected to a meaningful end result (Zorfass & Copel, 1995).

Student commitment and engagement became quite evident on filming day. The night before filming at the television studio, the students received news of the earthquake and resulting tsunami in Sendai, Japan. That morning students were in tears and most had not slept. How could they be asked to celebrate family traditions on television when they had not heard word from home yet? Teachers were prepared to change plans and told the students it was their choice whether to film or not. The 28 students were given time to discuss it as a group and come to a decision without the teachers present. The students decided to complete the project as scheduled. They were able to temporarily set their worries aside and film the TV show. They showed perseverance and the ability to rise to the occasion in the face of adversity; characteristics typically valued by Japanese society.

> *The night before filming at the television studio, the students received news of the earthquake.*

"On Friday, finally that important day was coming. Unfortunately, before that day, we heard shocking news, an accident happened in Japan. It was a big earthquake. However, we decided to record on the TV that day. All of us had strong hearts. Some girls wore beautiful yukatas. Of course, I also wore it by myself. I also helped wearing yukata for two of my classmates. I felt I was a kimono fitter. When we arrived at CCTV, I worked at part of having cue cards with my group mates. I really nervous because the work as very significant for the casts on TV. We felt that we would not be forgiven by classmates if we made a mistake such as dropping the cards on the floor. And more we were careful not to make a sound by sliding the papers. After that, our group's turn came to film. At that time, I did not feel strain…… Our performance was better than the previous ones." (Keiko Koyama)

The ARCS model (Keller 2000), was also considered when analyzing how to engage students and instill confidence. The ARCS model requires four conditions be present for motivation to occur. Those conditions are: *attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction*. When the project was introduced and students realized they would be making a television program, they became quite attentive. Creating a program about various aspects of Japanese culture was perceived as relevant because the class would be sharing their culture and knowledge with an American audience. A safe learning environment helped instill confidence in the students. Ample opportunities to practice and receive constructive criticism and feedback were built into the project. The chance to perform several times was provided before the actual filming for television. Practice sessions were videotaped in class and those films were reviewed for feedback by both the students and the teachers. In addition, students performed for peers and for elementary school students. The successive cycles of performance model of repeated practice and performance sessions allowed students to perfect their skills (Lynch & Maclean, 2001), and to gain confidence and be at ease when they made the recording in the television studio. The final condition of Keller's model is satisfaction. Students gained satisfaction knowing they were sharing important aspects of Japanese culture with the community. They felt a sense of accomplishment when they saw the interest of the elementary school students and when they saw themselves on TV. Because the students took many photos of the experience, a photo bank was included

on the class websites and students were asked to include a photo with each written assignment. Additionally a series of photos was used for the digital storytelling assignment. Students were pleased to create homework assignments that revolved around their experiences and documented their personal memories. Student satisfaction was observed by teachers at the end of the project in evaluations. Comments from student interviews reflected achievement of the four conditions Keller believes are necessary for motivation.

> "Yes, we could know our culture deeply and we speak English, so we get many skills in this project. I felt confident because we achieve our aim and carry out or task for some weeks."

> "It was very important for me to share my culture."

> "We practiced our filming many times. We can feel comfortable and confident and could grow up through this project."

> "It was a good experience for me."

Small Group Discussion and Assessments

To collect feedback on the project and to practice listening and speaking skills during week 4, students were divided into small groups to discuss the project evaluation survey responses. After 20 minutes, the discussion was stopped and the students were given two assessments. One focused on the group and one focused on the individual. Each questionnaire had 5 questions with four response choices to determine if the students felt they had been active participants in the discussions. When responding to the questionnaire which focused on the group, the majority of the students responded that all group members were active participants in the discussion and the group encouraged everyone to participate. The group assessment started with the question, "How active was your group?" 27 out of 28 students answered that all group members participated equally. Question #2 asked, "Did your group encourage quiet, shy members to participate?" The majority of the students indicated that there were no quiet or shy members in the group. The next question asked, "How many ideas did your group discuss?" Over half the students answered "10-15". Question #4 asked, "How many questions did your group ask each other?" and most students responded "between 5 and 10." The final question on this assessment asked the students if the group was able to finish the discussion in the time limit. The majority said they had enough time, but 20% decided they needed more than 5 additional minutes to complete the discussion.

In addition to student evaluation of the group discussion, individual participation was also assessed. When asked to evaluate individual participation the majority answered that they had participated satisfactorily and had taken some notes during the discussion. The first question asked, "How active were you?" The overall majority, 17/27, answered they were satisfied with their participation. Question #2 asked, "Did you encourage quiet, shy members to participate?" All but 3 students responded there were no quiet, shy group members. The third question asked, "How many ideas did you suggest?" Most said they suggested "between three and five." No one responded that they had not contributed any ideas. "How many questions did you ask?" was the fourth question. The majority had asked "between three and eight questions with only two students responding they had asked no questions at all. The last question

asked, "Did you take any notes during the discussion?" Responses to this question varied with over half the students responding that they had taken some notes.

The results of these questionnaires indicate that the students believed themselves to be active participants in the discussions. Their perception of the group dynamic matched their individual participation. During the discussion, teachers noted that most groups were extremely animated and were genuinely interested in the survey responses. Students discussed the responses and also added ideas that had not shown up on the surveys. This made it clear to teachers that the students were still engaged in thinking about the project. Students were still interested in adding ideas and perspectives.

> *The more reticent students did not hesitate to give ideas when the teacher called them by name.*

Large Group Discussion

Student engagement was also demonstrated during the large-group video-taped discussion as students participated in asking questions and in giving comments on the project. It can be challenging to conduct a class discussion with Japanese students because they are unaccustomed to this academic format. However, during this large-group discussion, students shared more comments and opinions than they usually did on other topics. More students volunteered answers to the open questions. The more reticent students did not hesitate to give ideas when the teacher called them by name. There were no lengthy hesitant pauses before students gave answers and no students responded, "I don't know," to the questions. The students were willing to give their opinions and offer suggestions.

Oral Interviews

To evaluate the television project, teachers conducted one-on-one oral interviews with each student. Students took the interview questions home and wrote out their answers. This gave them the opportunity to think carefully about answers so they could give meaningful feedback. Students also practiced giving the answers to the tutors and spoke clearly and confidently while glancing at their notes during interviews with teachers. Each student came well-prepared to answer the interview questions and seemed unaffected by the small camera and tiny tripod on the table filming their responses. This small assignment evolved into an unexpected opportunity for language practice and confidence building as the students were eager to share their opinions in personal interactions.

As assignments were developed, student engagement was promoted through the use of technology that was new to students. One question in the oral interview discussed the technology used for the assignments. Students were able to choose more than one response to the interview question. Seventeen out of 28 students said technology made the project more interesting and 14 out of 28 said technology improved student preparation for the project. None of the students indicated that technology made the project more difficult or didn't help in preparation.

Trial and Error

Action research alternates between action and critical reflection (Dick and Swepson 1997). The opportunity for criti-

Filming Dilemmas

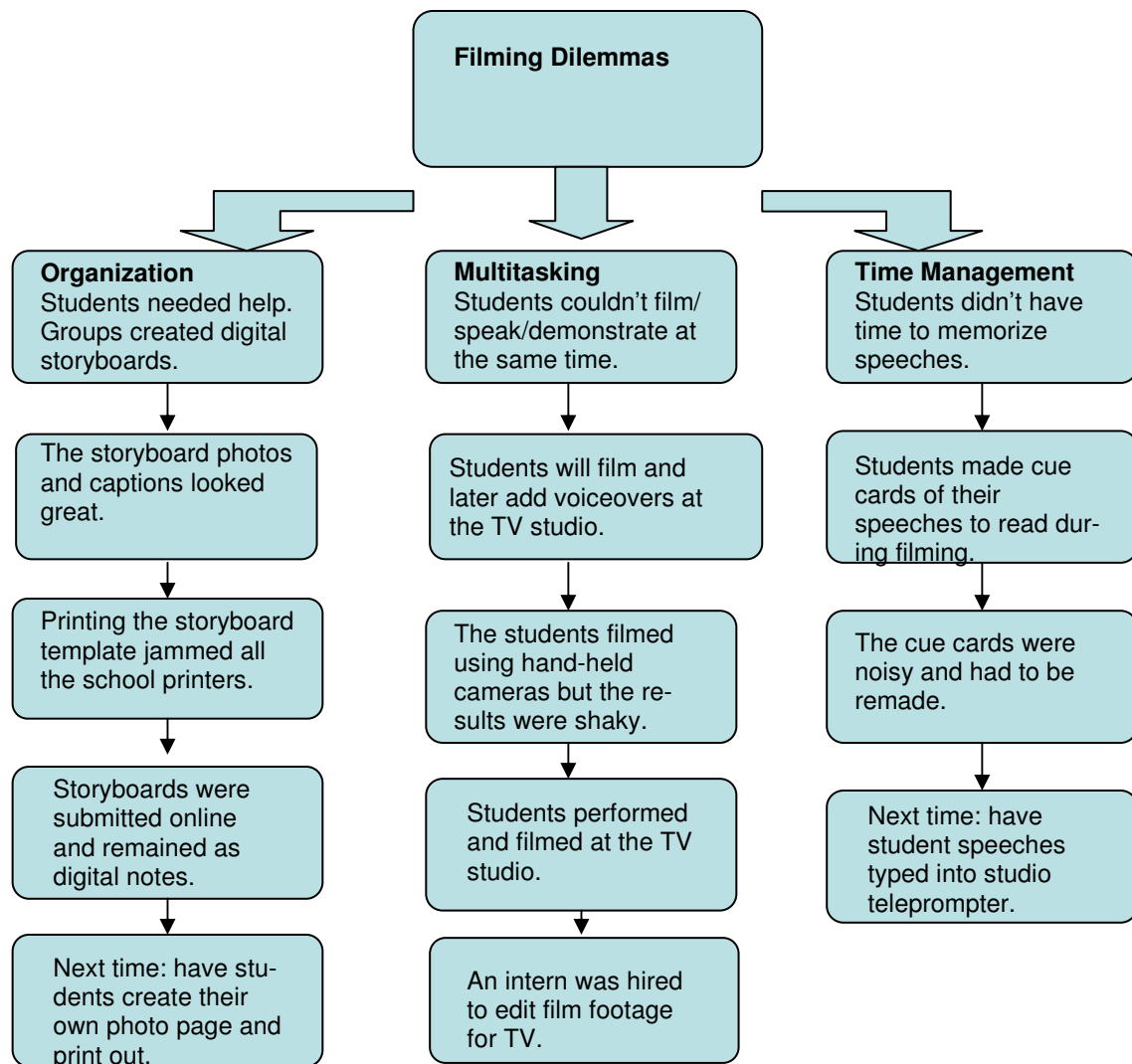| **Organization** Students needed help. Groups created digital storyboards.	**Multitasking** Students couldn't film/ speak/demonstrate at the same time.	**Time Management** Students didn't have time to memorize speeches.
The storyboard photos and captions looked great.	Students will film and later add voiceovers at the TV studio.	Students made cue cards of their speeches to read during filming.
Printing the storyboard template jammed all the school printers.	The students filmed using hand-held cameras but the results were shaky.	The cue cards were noisy and had to be remade.
Storyboards were submitted online and remained as digital notes.	Students performed and filmed at the TV studio.	Next time: have student speeches typed into studio teleprompter.
Next time: have students create their own photo page and print out.	An intern was hired to edit film footage for TV.	

Figure 3: Filming Dilemmas Flowchart

cal reflection was built into assignments and students changed their behaviors and practiced more after viewing or listening to their own performances. As the project progressed, the teachers could also look back and reflect critically on the assignments and the activities used. Immediate changes were made when needed. For example, initially the television studio had planned on the students using the hand-held video cameras to film their own presentations. However, observation of the groups quickly made the teachers realize that student filming could only be used for review and practice. In order to produce a high quality recording they would need to film in the TV studio with the larger cameras and skilled camera operators.

Following the tenets of action research, teachers made changes throughout the project after reviewing their notes, analyzing student feedback and discussing options. This flexibility continually refined the project and improved the quality of language

learning and the performances. Figure 3 shows some of the dilemmas, changes and counter-changes that were made.

Unexpected Authentic Language Use

Some additional factors that resulted in language practice in this project were un-anticipated. When students became very involved in giving advice on what to do next year they would forget they were giving opinions, or using modals and persuasive vocabulary words to inform and serve as cultural guides to Japanese traditions. The project was designed with frequent evaluation tools in both oral and written form and the implementation contributed to building integrated language skills. Feedback and evaluation was readily given by students who also accepted filming during evaluations. The feedback process itself became an authentic communication experience. Teachers concluded the use of evaluation tools should be a practice for future projects to provide more authentic language opportunities.

Teachers expect students to express their individual ideas and engage in direct dialogue with the teacher.

"I think it was very good project because I could learn about importance of group work and know how to use some technologies. It was a very good experience for me because I could learn a lot of things and I have confidence about speaking in public" (Misaki Yamaguchi, Oral Interview).

"Next year they should make traditional Japanese food for a topic. Because I listened to American people and they want to know about Japanese food. So, I think to introduce Japanese food is a good idea" (Anonymous, Survey Comment).

Conclusion

As a result of action research findings, the following conclusions were noted in changing teacher expectations, creating a safe learning environment and improving teaching techniques to promote active learning in Japanese students.

The teachers in this study did not expect the Japanese students to immediately conform to western-style interactions in class. "As Howe (1993) says, whether students are "passive" or "active" in class depends more on their teachers' expectations rather than on culturally based learning styles. Many researchers have reported on the positive effects of teachers changing their beliefs and expectations" (Tomlinson 2005). Teachers changed their expectations and allowed for more preparation and practice, expecting students would then be active learners. However, the television project still required high expectations of the students. Expectations of teachers did not change regarding *what* students could achieve, but rather on *how* students could achieve the expected outcomes. The teachers also did not believe performing on television was an impossible task for the students. It was conjectured the students would perform well given careful preparation time, a framework for the project and the project tools they needed to complete the work. It was also expected that students would be able to master the required language skills needed to perform cultural demonstrations on television and do so in a short amount of time. Students were expected to participate actively and the teachers concluded the students met these expectations.

Robert Norris (2004), who has taught in Japan for over 30 years, states that Americans who teach Japanese university students view behaviors that conflict with their own cultural expectations. In American classrooms, teachers expect students to express their individual ideas and engage in direct dialogue with the teacher; however, Japanese culture prepares students in a very different way. Group consensus and formalized speech-making are characteristics of the Japanese style of communication and it is these skills that Japanese ESL students bring to the classroom. By taking into account the cultural traits and creating assignments that draw on these traits, teachers can help the students succeed. The project design used small groups and these groups prepared formal presentations on traditional Japanese culture. This created an atmosphere from the start of the semester that allowed students to utilize their own cultural strengths while adapting to an American system of learning. Successive cycles of practice and performance were emphasized to match the Japanese cultural traits that focus on repetition in perfecting formal public performances. The teachers found their teaching improved when they focused on ways to incorporate these cultural assets.

Leveraging technology is another viable method for engaging students from the digital generation. Technology was used to quicken the production of final products and easily professionalize the appearance of student work in the project. In this case, teachers also utilized technology to add variety to the repetition of practice sessions and to slow down the process. Varying technology tools facilitated the separation of language learning exercises and project components into manageable parts and provided opportunities to recycle language. Using technology

to review performances allowed students critical reflection time to consider areas for improvement.

> "At first, I thought our group was doing very well, but today we took a film, and we watched our film. I feel a little shocked. We thought we were good enough for a TV show, but the truth is we need more practice. We need to practice our pronunciation and our speed, and also we need to practice our demonstration. I think we should try to remember a little of our speech, so we can speak fluently when the next cue card is not ready. We need more practice. Practice makes perfect" (Lingjun Fang, Written Reflection).

> "My speech needs improvement. I have to speak more slowly, loudly and clearly. I think this is a chance to introduce Japanese tradition. So, I will try my best on this project"
> (Yoshie Kikuchi, Written Reflection).

A safe learning environment affects student engagement.

A safe learning environment affects student engagement because the students feel free to take risks without fear of failure (Bowen, 2003). Because the assignments involved repeated practice sessions, the students felt better prepared for activities and this helped to build confidence in English skills. The repetition resulted in more active participation throughout the project.

Based on over twenty-five years of experience in teaching classes of Japanese students, the writers have found the following classroom management techniques work well to create a classroom environment to facilitate engagement and active participation in the classroom. Observation notes made dur-

ing this project supported this belief.

- Ask for volunteers to answer questions, read aloud, etc.
- If no volunteers, call on students by name to answer questions.
- Divide students into small groups and circulate around the room so they can ask questions in their small groups.
- Promote a comfortable atmosphere in the class where students are free to experiment with language and others don't laugh at their mistakes.
- Smile frequently.
- Conference with students individually to build rapport and create accountability.
- Show concern and respect for all students.
- Encourage with positive comments.
- Encourage classes to become a group and allow opportunities for each student to be appreciated by his/her classmates.
- Use humor to set everyone at ease and make learning enjoyable.
- Compliment questions when they are insightful or shared concerns.
- Compliment comments that show critical thinking skills.
- Share a little information about yourself to establish rapport and learn about your students.
- Be able to learn from your students.
- Consider and respect student opinions.

The problem with these techniques is that they can take a long time to develop in classes. For this project teachers wanted to accelerate the process of group cohesiveness, to lower that affective filter and create the environment that would promote active learning and do it all in the first few weeks of class due to the early deadline of the television performance. According to the SurveyMonkey questionnaire (see Figure 2), 90% of the students said that the television project was useful for developing English skills and 90% also said the project should be completed again next year. The repetition, cultural values, technology and need for top quality in performance and English skills contributed to promote active learning.

Through student interactions, and patterns discovered in teaching observation journals, teachers noted several teaching techniques to continue implementing and developing in future class assignments and projects.

- Daily small group work (less lecture time)
- A product and performance focus
- A tight timeline for practice and language mastery
- Variety built into the practice
- The use of technology in practice
- Personalization of the experience with photos and film
- Specialized peer feedback
- Positive and constructive instructor feedback
- A familiar cultural topic
- Consideration of cultural values as strengths to incorporate into project

Action Research involves continual critical reflection and it can be very time-consuming. However, it is also a useful technique for focusing on the improvement of teaching. Active observation, careful consideration of notes, frequent communication and revisions were important components in this project. The most important part of this action research project was collaboration be-

cause the assignments crossed skill areas and the project was too large for one teacher to conduct alone. Critical reflection of both the teachers and students in a formalized way proved to be another factor in improving teaching and in promoting active language learning.

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