Exploring Japanese high school English teacher perspectives on active learning

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Abstract

Periodically, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revises the courses of study for each level of education - primary, junior high school, and high school. From 2022, the revised course of study for high schools will take effect. One of its significant features is the adoption of an active learning approach. This present study investigates how Japanese high school teachers of English feel about active learning and what training they would like to receive. A 51-item online questionnaire was answered by 65 teachers from one prefecture in central Japan. Almost all of these teachers had positive attitudes towards an active learning approach, felt that they would be able to implement that approach in their classrooms, and wanted to learn more about active learning. Two problems were the lack of computers, screens and projectors in classrooms, and teachers not being sure how to assess active learning tasks and activities.

Introduction

This study seeks to understand Japanese high school teachers of English’ attitudes towards active learning, and what training they would like to receive to better prepare them to bring active learning into their classrooms. The following research questions are explored:
**Research Questions:**
1. Attitudes towards active learning:
   How do these teachers feel about doing active learning in their classrooms?

2. Training for active learning:
   What active learning training would Japanese high school teachers of English like to receive?

**Methodology**

A 51-item questionnaire was developed which included 45 closed-response items, three fill-in items, and three open-response items, in Japanese. Using google forms, the questionnaire was put online in August 2017 and the link sent out by email to Japanese high school teachers of English working in one central Japanese prefecture. These teachers were known by one of the authors, who had worked in the prefectural high school system for over twenty years. These teachers were asked to invite other high school teachers to also complete the questionnaire.

Altogether, 68 people finished answering the questionnaire. As three respondents were not teaching English at a Japanese high school in 2017, their data were excluded; the quantitative analyses were conducted using the remaining 65 respondents’ data. The closed-response and fill-in items were summarized using descriptive statistics, and the open-response items analyzed using thematic analysis.

The questionnaire explored teachers’ perspectives on active learning from a number of different angles, so the results have been presented in three papers. In the first paper, teachers’ familiarity with active learning and teaching active learning was reported (Croker & Kamegai, 2017). In this present paper, attitudes towards active learning and training needs are described; another paper explores teachers’ definitions of active learning (Kamegai & Croker, 2018).

**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.

Results

Research Question 1. Attitudes towards active learning

How do Japanese high school teachers feel about doing AL in their classrooms?

The teachers who answered the questionnaire were asked to respond to 24 statements about preparing for and doing active learning in their classrooms, on a four-point scale (1 = I strongly don’t think so; 2 = I don’t think so; 3 = I think so; 4 = I strongly think so). The teachers’ responses are explained in this section, with the question number and average given; the higher the average, the more strongly that teachers agreed with the idea, with a maximum of 4.00. For example, D1: 2.88 means question D1, and the average out of four for this statement was 2.88. See Table 2 for the data and averages for all of these questions.

Attitudes:

Overall, the teachers had quite positive attitudes towards active learning. All but one of the teachers wanted to try active learning activities in their classes (D2:
Moreover, almost all of the teachers believed that active learning was an effective way for students to learn English (D4: 3.37). However, only about two-thirds of teachers believed that active learning would be an effective way to prepare students for university entrance exams (D5: 3.04); nine did not think so and almost a quarter felt that they did not know.

**Class Preparation:**

Teachers not only had positive attitudes towards active learning; many were also confident that they could prepare active learning-based classes, as almost two-thirds of teachers felt that they already knew how to make active learning-based lesson plans (D6: 2.67).

Over three-quarters of the teachers felt that they were already able to adapt activities in textbooks to be more active (D7: 2.98), and a similar proportion also believed that they can prepare their own active learning class activities (D8: 2.95).

**Organizing Students:**

Active learning is based around pair work and group work, with the students learning in pairs and small groups. Almost all of the teachers felt that they knew how to organize students to work in pairs (D9: 3.18) and small groups of three or four students (D10: 3.14). However, about one-third of teachers felt that they did not know how to organize students into larger groups of five or six students (D11: 2.79).

**The Classroom:**

Many of the teachers felt that it would be easy to move or rearrange the desks to do active learning tasks if necessary (D21: 3.02). Moreover, many books about active learning for Japanese high school teachers suggest that teachers should make PowerPoint presentations instead of writing information on the blackboard, so as to present information more effectively, use less paper, and save time. However, only about two-thirds of teachers wanted to show PowerPoint presentations in their classes (D22: 2.95), and one in ten did not know if they wanted to do that yet or not. One reason that some teachers did not want to use PowerPoint presentations might have been that they could not show them in their classrooms.
because there was no projector or screen; only about one-quarter of teachers had both (D23: 2.08).

**The Students:**

The knowledge and abilities of the teacher to plan and organize learning tasks is one dimension of AL; another, particularly for a learning-centered approach like active learning, is the students themselves, and their attitudes and expected behaviors. Two-thirds of teachers felt that their students would understand why they were doing active learning activities in class, but one-third did not (D12: 2.65). This suggests the need for teachers to initially explain to their students the purpose and process of active learning.

Once students have understood the purpose and process of active learning, almost all of the teachers believe that their students could actually do active learning activities (D13: 3.04), and two-thirds of the teachers also felt optimistic that most of their students would like to do them (D14: 3.00), although about one in four did not know for sure. Almost all of the teachers thought that most of their students would enjoy doing active learning activities (D15: 3.10), could participate in them (D16: 3.15), and would get used to doing them (D17: 3.18). So, these teachers believe that students will respond positively to active learning tasks and activities. However, almost all teachers also acknowledged that there will be some students who would not want to do active learning activities (D18: 3.01) or participate seriously in them (D19: 3.00). Many of the teachers were also concerned that because of emotional or attitudinal issues some of their students would not be able to do active learning activities (D20: 3.03).

**Assessment:**

Assessment of student learning is given a very important place in the Japanese high school system, and much class time is taken up preparing for, taking, and checking tests. In most schools, major tests are scheduled twice a semester in the longer spring and fall semesters (mid-term and term-end) and once in the shorter winter term (term-end only). The results of these tests often form a significant proportion of students’ term grades. Even for language classes, these tests may be written tests, reflecting the traditional grammar- and vocabulary-based, rote-learning, transmission style of teaching, although many high school teachers now
give speaking tests to assess students’ productive skills. Almost all high school teachers only assess learning outcomes (i.e. how much students learn) not learning processes (i.e. how students learn).

However, an active learning approach is very different to more traditional classroom approaches. Firstly, it emphasises not just learning outcomes but also learning processes. Moreover, active learning is less about individual learning processes and more about pair or group learning, so to assess learning processes teachers must move beyond testing individual learning to also include pair or group learning. However, the teachers in this survey did not feel confident that they knew how to assess learning from active learning activities; fewer than half did, and eleven did not know, possibly as they had not yet had to do so (D24: 2.44).

Table 2: Attitudes towards active learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: (the average does not include ‘I don’t know’)</th>
<th>1 I don’t know</th>
<th>2 I strongly don’t think so</th>
<th>3 I don’t think so</th>
<th>4 I think so</th>
<th>5 I strongly think so</th>
<th>average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Knowledge</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1. I understand the basic principles of active learning.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2. I want to try active learning activities in my classes.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3. I think I will enjoy doing active learning activities in my classes.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4. I think that active learning is an effective way for my students to learn English.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Class Preparation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D6. I know how to make active learning-based lesson plans.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D7. I can adapt activities in textbook(s) to be more active learning.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D8. I can prepare my own active learning class activities.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Organizing Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D9. I know how to organize students to work in pairs.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D10. I know how to organize students to work in small groups (of 3 or 4 students).</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D11. I know how to organize students to work in larger groups (of 5 or 6 students or more).</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D12. I think that my students will understand why we are doing active learning class activities.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D13. I think that most of my students can do active learning activities.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D14. I think that most of my students want to do active learning activities.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D15. I think that most of my students will enjoy doing active learning activities.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D16. I think that most of my students can participate in active learning activities.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, the teachers who participated in this survey had quite positive attitudes towards active learning tasks and activities in their classrooms; the main obstacles or challenges from their perspective were not the students but rather the teachers’ lack of knowledge about how to prepare active learning classes and how to assess learning from active learning activities. The next section explores what training these teachers would like to receive to prepare them to more fully adopt an active learning approach in their classrooms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D17.</th>
<th>I think that most of my students will get used to doing active learning activities.</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>40</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>3.18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D18.</td>
<td>I think that some of my students will not want to do active learning activities.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D19.</td>
<td>I think that some students will not want to participate seriously in active learning activities.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D20.</td>
<td>I think that some of my students will not be able to do active learning activities (emotional/attitudinal issues).</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D21.</td>
<td>It is easy to move and rearrange the desks (if necessary) to do active learning activities.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D22.</td>
<td>I want to show PowerPoint presentations in my classroom.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D23.</td>
<td>I can show PowerPoint presentations in my classroom (e.g. there is a projector and screen).</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D24.</td>
<td>I know how to assess learning from active learning activities.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Question 4. Training for active learning:
What active learning training would Japanese high school teachers of English like to receive?

One purpose of this survey is to provide information to help teacher trainers prepare for teacher training workshops on active learning. The final section of the questionnaire asked teachers to respond to 12 statements about what they would like to learn to help them institute active learning tasks and activities in their classrooms, using the same four-point scale (1 = I strongly don’t think so; 2 = I don’t think so; 3 = I think so; 4 = I strongly think so) as the previous section. This section of the paper explains teachers’ training preferences, referring back when relevant to the results presented in the previous section, and Table 3 presents the data and averages.

Overall, almost all of the 65 respondents really want to learn how to do active learning tasks and activities in their classrooms (E3: 3.34), which indicates that the respondents are curious to know how to introduce active learning into their classrooms.

As about one-third of teachers felt that they did not know how to make active learning-based lesson plans (D6), almost all of the teachers wanted to learn how to do so (E1: 3.30), and how to effectively prepare for active learning classes (E5: 3.35). Being able to plan successful active learning lessons is seen as key to implementing an active learning approach.

Furthermore, as such an approach may be quite different to the one that many teachers have used previously, almost all of the teachers wanted to learn how to explain active learning to their students (E7: 3.18), so that their students would come to understand the purpose, principles and process of active learning. The teachers also wanted to learn how to start doing active learning tasks and activities in their classrooms (E2: 3.30), so that they could smoothly introduce an active learning approach into their classrooms and help students ‘buy into’ an active learning approach to studying English.

The revised high school English textbooks to be introduced for the new 2022 high school course of study are expected to include many active learning tasks and activities. Even so, almost all of the teachers in our survey wanted to learn how to adapt activities in textbooks to be more active (E4: 3.37), even though many teachers already felt able to do so (D7). Materials are often key to successful
classes, and the teachers could perceive that being able to adapt approved textbooks to match the proficiency levels and interests of students would help them to provide more effective classes.

Quickly re-arranging the classroom and efficiently putting students into pairs and small groups is also key to the success of active learning. Almost all of the teachers wanted to learn how to successfully organize the classroom for active learning activities (E10: 3.23). Teachers may be concerned about time; that is, being able to cover all of the material they are expected to if they change from using a more teacher-centered, lecture format to a more student-centered, interactive and communicative approach that integrates learning the four skills with vocabulary and grammar acquisition. Efficient organization and time management are crucial.

Notably, most but not all of the teachers wanted to receive training about how to prepare PowerPoint slides and other media (E6: 3.12), suggesting that they would be willing to use PowerPoint if they could, even though over two-thirds of these teachers’ classrooms did not have projectors or screens (D23). Teachers might see using PowerPoint and other media as a time-efficient way to present language input and control classroom activities. However, they might also be concerned that preparing PowerPoint and other media will be time consuming and require skills that they do not presently possess. So, including such training might be useful and greatly appreciated.

Although most of the teachers believed that their students could do, would like to do, and would enjoy doing active learning tasks and activities (D13~D17), they also recognize that some of their students will not want to (D18~D19) to do some active learning tasks and activities, or even be able to because of emotional or attitudinal issues (D20). With more traditional teacher-fronted classes, students who choose not to participate by ignoring the teacher or sleeping do not necessarily disrupt the class. However, with a more student-centered, interactive and communicative active learning approach, students will be expected to participate actively. Passive non-participation would represent an obstacle to the success of active learning tasks and activities. Reflecting this, almost all of the teachers would like to learn how to motivate their students to enthusiastically participate in active learning tasks and activities (E8: 3.35), and to deal with any problems that arise (E9: 3.37).
In the previous section, the problem that teachers most strongly identified was assessing learning from active learning tasks and activities (D24); only about one-third of teachers felt that they knew how to do that. Active learning’s emphasis on pair work and group work, shared learning, and process as well as product would represent a major shift for Japanese high school teachers. As a result, almost every respondent wanted to learn how to assess learning from active learning activities. In fact, assessment was what teachers most wanted to be trained how to do (E11: 3.48). Given that changes are also being considered for the university entrance center exams, it is understandable that Japanese high school teachers feel particularly concerned about assessment.

Finally, as teachers would be trying many new tasks and activities, they wanted to learn how to get feedback from their students about the active learning classroom activities (E12: 3.32). This would provide timely feedback to teachers about the success or otherwise of particular tasks and activities, and provide a mechanism for students to communicate to teachers their feelings and their ideas about how to match an active learning approach to their learning styles and preferences.

Table 3: Learning about active learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I want to learn how to ...</th>
<th>I don’t know</th>
<th>1 I strongly don’t think so</th>
<th>2 I don’t think so</th>
<th>3 I think so</th>
<th>4 I strongly think so</th>
<th>average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E3. do active learning-based classes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E1. make active learning-based lesson plans</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5. prepare for active learning classes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E7. explain active learning to my students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E2. begin to do active learning-based activities in the first class after the summer holidays</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of planning a workshop introducing an active learning approach, based upon the responses of this sample of Japanese high school teachers, the priorities could be:

- planning active learning lessons
- preparing active learning tasks and activities
- adapting textbooks to do active learning tasks and activities
- smoothly beginning active learning at the beginning of the school year or semester
- effectively organizing the classroom and students to do active learning tasks and activities
- motivating students to actively participate in active learning tasks and activities
- dealing with problems that arise during these tasks and activities
- assessing shared learning processes and outcomes
- obtaining feedback from students about tasks and activities
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Covering all of these topics in a short workshop would be impossible. Rather, a series of workshops would more effectively introduce these issues, with follow-up workshops to help develop teachers’ competence and respond to issues that teachers face. Creating teacher learning communities and adopting an action research approach might also facilitate the successful adoption of an active learning approach in Japanese high school English classrooms.

Discussion

Summary of findings:
Research Question 1. Attitudes towards active learning
How do Japanese high school teachers feel about doing AL in their classrooms?

Overall, the teachers had quite positive attitudes towards active learning. Almost all of the teachers wanted to try an active learning approach in their classrooms and expected to enjoy doing so. They also believed that such an approach would be an effective way for students to learn English, although not necessarily so for university entrance exam preparation.

Teachers not only had positive attitudes towards active learning; many were also confident that they could prepare active learning-based classes and activities, and adapt textbook tasks. They were also confident that they could arrange the classroom for pair- and group-based activities. Students were also expected to welcome the introduction of an active learning approach, and be able to adapt to active learning tasks and activities.

There were two areas of concern. Firstly, the lack of projectors and screens limited many teachers’ capacity to use PowerPoint or media to present information and manage their classes. Secondly, teachers did not feel confident that they knew how to assess learning from active learning activities.

Research Question 2. Training for active learning:
What active learning training would Japanese high school teachers of English like to receive?

Teachers were enthusiastic to learn about all dimensions of active learning, particularly:
planning active learning lessons, and preparing active learning tasks and activities
adapting textbooks to do active learning tasks and activities
smoothly beginning active learning at the beginning of the school year or semester
organizing the classroom and students to do active learning tasks and activities
motivating students to actively participate in active learning tasks and activities
dealing with problems that arise during these tasks and activities
assessing shared learning processes and outcomes
obtaining feedback from students about tasks and activities

Discussion of the findings:
Almost all of the teachers had positive attitudes towards an active learning approach, and felt that they would be able to implement that approach in their classrooms. Finally, teachers wanted to learn more about active learning. There were only two problems: the lack of screens and projectors in classrooms, and teachers not being sure yet how to assess activities learning tasks and activities.

These findings are very significant. That these teachers have positive attitudes towards active learning is noteworthy. Imagine if teachers did not have positive attitudes, or even worse, had negative ones. This would be a major obstacle that MEXT and teacher trainers would have to address first before developing teachers’ understanding of active learning. If teachers did not want to do active learning activities in their classrooms, then the comfort - and inertia - of existing teaching practices would mean that teachers would not even attempt to do active learning activities, or make only the illusion of an effort. Happily, at this point, teachers appear ready to embrace active learning.

Returning to the issues that confront active learning, the lack of screens and projectors in classrooms will require schools to invest in appropriate equipment. Fortunately, such technology is readily available and becoming cheaper. Teachers might also need to be equipped with computers and trained how to use them to effectively present information and organize tasks and activities. Although these are barriers to implementing active learning, they are certainly not insurmountable.
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Training teachers to assess active learning tasks and activities should be a priority. Also, the perception that an active learning approach might not be the most appropriate way to prepare third-year students for university entrance examinations should be addressed. This is not to say that the problem lies entirely with active learning. Rather, the problem partly rests with the entrance examinations. These examinations mostly test detailed knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and the ability to understand reading passages rather than students’ capacity to communicate in English or do real-world tasks like giving presentations or undertaking small-scale research projects. Nonetheless, it is probably teachers’ doubts and reservations about the efficacy of active learning to prepare students for university entrance exams which may be the most important obstacle to the rapid adoption of an active learning approach by Japanese high school teachers.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that Japanese high school English teachers hold positive attitudes about active learning and believe that they can implement it in their classrooms. They also have a relatively clear picture of their training needs. We hope that this study will contribute to the successful introduction of active learning in Japanese high school classrooms, helping both teachers and teacher trainers to more effectively prepare for 2022 and beyond.

Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to the high school teachers who volunteered to complete the anonymous questionnaire.

References