Title: Gamifying Motivation in the Japanese English Classroom

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Abstract

This paper explores gamification as a methodology that can increase student motivation in Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms. English teachers in Japan often notice a lack of motivation for students in Japan to engage in communicative English classrooms. Factors behind student motivation in Japan are examined. A summary of previously studied strategies to improve student engagement and motivation is given. An explanation of gamification, the application of game design in non-gaming situations (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011), is provided. The utility of gamification as a motivational strategy is discussed along with examples relevant to educational situations. The paper provides examples and suggestions of how to implement gamification techniques in a Japanese EFL classroom.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, gamification, student motivation, methodology

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English language teachers in Japanese classrooms often complain of the lack of motivation of Japanese English Learners (ELs) in their classrooms. Sleeping, chatting to other classmates in Japanese, refusing to accept instruction in English, playing with their phones, playing with their tablets, avoiding answering questions, and not willing to raise hands to volunteer an answer are all behaviors that start appearing in junior high and intensify in university. Although there are a number of differing factors, many point to Japan's teacher centered and exam oriented classroom culture as the main culprits of student demotivation. It is no surprise, since the examination prominence really starts to kick in at the junior high level and continues to pick up speed in high school; students are fully spent after clearing the all important university entrance exam. Reticencence and off task behaviors fueled by demotivation are a major hurdle in any classroom. In a communicative language class setting, this is magnified into a severe impediment of the desired class discourse. How do teachers get students to learn the target language, if there is a reluctance to communicate in it? How can the attitude of engagement as a burden be changed to a reward? Student reticence and motivation are common topics of study in English as a foriegn language (EFL), especially in Japan. Therefore, it is important that teachers become willing to explore new methodologies that address these issues. Which leads to the next question, "What methodologies best suite this situation?" It would have to be in line with what motivates Japanese students and resonates with their culture. Japan is a country known for having a strong video game culture, and video games are quite popular among students. Gamification, "the

application of game design in non-gaming situations" (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011), is a methodology that may provide useful answers to these questions.

Background Problem

Many studies have examined the factors that contribute to the lack of student motivation and English production in the Japanese ELF classroom. However, motivation itself is not the only factor that affects classroom discourse. According to Maftoon and Ziafar (2013), “Some effective factors that influence classroom interactions within Japanese EFL classrooms are learners’ attitudes, anxiety, culture, motivation, learning styles, EFL teachers, and willingness to communicate” (p. 79). Specific studies have been conducted on student reticence measured as “learner silence” and “willingness to communicate” in Japanese university classrooms (Harumi, 2011; Nakane, 2005; Munezane, 2013; Yashima, 2002). A major aspect seems to be the students’ preconceptions of their role in the classroom. They have spent years in a teacher-centered learning environment. Kikuchi (2009) conducted a qualitative study to determine what factors demotivate Japanese high school students. Some of the factors reported by the students included the following: “individual teacher behavior in the classroom”, “the grammar-translation method used in instruction”, “tests and university entrance examinations.” All of these factors reinforce the student’s preconceptions about the classroom environment. The default attitude provides fertile ground for the seeds of demotivation. It is easy to blame the students, but the educational system and ineffective teaching techniques had a role in their cultivation.

Some have examined various pedagogical approaches to increase Japanese students’ in-class English communications, such as examining the effectiveness of

cooperative learning techniques or testing various strategies for oral communication (Ning, 2013; Nakatani 2010). These techniques require a certain level of motivation to work. Putting a group of unmotivated students together for a group will likely not achieve the desired level of production. Of course there have been studies examining effective strategies in raising student motivation. (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Guilloteaux, 2013; Guilloteaux & Dornyei 2008). Dörnyei and Csizér (1998) list “ten commandments for motivating language learners”:

1) Set a personal example with your own behaviour.

2) Create a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom.

3) Present the tasks properly.

4) Develop a good relationship with the learners

5) Increase the learners’ linguistic self-confidence.

6) Make the language classes interesting.

7) Promote learner autonomy.

8) Personalize the learning process.

9) Increase the learners’ goal-orientedness.

10) Familiarize learners with the target language culture (p. 215-218).

A teacher could combine the various techniques to a certain degree of success. However, it could be difficult to track all of these ideas individually. It might be more practical to adopt a methodology that encompasses a broad range of these factors.

Gamification Background and Educational Context

Deterding, Dixon, Khaled and Nacke (2011) proposed that “Gamification” be defined as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (p. 10). In order to understand how gamification works, it is necessary to understand what “game

design elements" are and how they can be applied to "non-game contexts." While creating their definition of gamification, Detering et al. created five levels of game design elements with descriptions and examples. The following table is reacration from their paper (slightly modified for clarity):

Table 1. Levels of Game Design Elements (Detering et al., 2011, p. 12)

Level	Description	Example
1. *Game interface design patterns*	Common, successful interaction design components and solutions for a known problem in a context	badge, leaderboard, level…
2.*Game design patterns and mechanic*s	Commonly recurring parts of the design of a game that concern gameplay	time constraint, limited resources…
3. *Game design principles and heuristics*	Evaluative guidelines to approach a design problem or analyze a given design solution	enduring play, clear goals…
4. *Game models*	Conceptual models of the components of games or game experience	challenge, fantasy, curiosity
5. *Game design methods*	Game design-specific practices and processes	Playtesting, playcentric design, value conscious game design

The next step would be to provide specific examples for each of the design levels in a non-gaming context. Sailer, Hense, Mayr, & Mandl (2017) make the argument that a "generic" look at the motivational effects of gamification lack meaning without an appropriate context. In this paper, our relevant non-gaming context is EFL

education. Some teachers are surprised to learn that gamification does not actually involve playing video games in the classroom. Even teachers with a limited knowledge of gamification, may find that they utilize gamification concepts and techniques in their own practice (Malmberg, 2018). Examining the examples of the first level, *Game interface design patterns*, the classroom equivalent would be a teacher giving students star stickers for completing a task or rewarding a behavior. In the second level, *Game design patterns and mechanics*, we see time constraints. An example of a classroom time constraint activity could be a timed brainstorming in competing teams or groups. Level three, *Game design principles and heuristics*, does not require much of a stretch to imagine in a classroom setting. A teacher could exhibit this level by providing an explanation of the class goals or outlining scoring criteria. Level four, *Game models*, might be demonstrated by using a variety of learning activities with material that students find interesting. Level five, *Game design methods*, could be applied in the form of accepting student feedback about the course and adjusting the difficulty based on their ability or modifying content tailored to their interests.

Gamification, Motivation and Relation to EFL Education

After understanding what gamification is, and what it would look like in an educational context, teachers should reexamine the basic question of “why?” There is a sense that it may lead to improved student motivation. In a logical progression, teachers should next evaluate this question in more detail. Here they should do a comparison of the pros and cons of gamification in the same or similar contexts.

There have been studies that have explored using gamification in order to raise student motivation. However, they seem to caution the amount of effort that

goes into incorporating it into the course design (Domínguez, et al., 2013). There were also warnings of a possibility that constant feedback from gamification elements such as badges, leaderboards and player point comparisons may cause a loss of novelty of the reward system. There is a concern that overuse of gamification may lead students to lose interest and become demotivated (Domínguez, et al., 2013; Lombardi, 2015, Malmberg 2017). There is also a concern about gamification being too rooted in Behaviorism, an older educational theory that rewards positive behavior and discourages negative behavior. However, educators can apply new knowledge of the desired motivational benefits of gamification, which may outweigh the more negative effects (Malmberg 2017). For example, English learners might be sensitive or embarrassed over mistakes. Yet many EFL teachers would say that understanding these mistakes are an important part of the learning process. Gamification anticipates this experience as an phenomena known as a “graceful failure.” In games, players will sometimes not be prepared for a challenge. They might lack the experience, strategy or key equipment to overcome a boss or puzzle. The graceful failure allows them to learn from their mistakes and encourages them to try again when they are properly prepared for the challenge (Domínguez, et al., 2013). These are just a few examples of the positive and negatives associated with gamification. This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list or full analysis. As stated before, the benefits and disadvantages should be examined on a case by case basis. Moving along, it is time to proceed to the next question, “Is gamification useful in my context?” In the case of this paper, the Japanese EFL classroom.

Implementing Gamification in a Japanese EFL Classroom

As addressed in the *Background Problem* section, Japanese students can often be unmotivated and unwilling to speak in the classroom for a variety of reasons. Lombardi (2015) conducted a study using gamification in an attempt to address the previously mentioned issues in a Japanese university setting. “Fukudai Hero”, was the name of the course first run for a semester as a pilot course for second year university engineering students. The next semester, the course was run in second pilot for first year teacher education and regional studies students. Students made a “hero” avatar that they would advance using an experience point system. These points would then translate into a portion of the final grade. The students were encouraged to complete high point value mandatory “Weekly Mission” (WM) assignments. On an A+ to F grading scale, students would only manage enough points to receive a B doing these mandatory assignments. The additional points could be earned via “Extra Missions” (EM). There were a variety of EM missions, and the same EM could be done multiple times by the same student. The EM could also be completed at any time and give a boost to students that needed to improve their current grades. All of the students started at a score of zero and would earn points by completing these missions. Points were tracked by stamping a “Character Sheet” with the student’s avatar. This provided a gamified visual representation of the progress and immediate feedback for task completion. One of the aims of the course was to provide a more positive form of feedback by having a progressive scoring system rather than a more traditional subtractive style of grading.

The previous example provides a low tech way of incorporating gamification. There are several premade comercial gamification classroom tools that make use of technology to encourage student engagement. Some of these online tools have free versions with various features unlockable with a full purchase or subscription fee. *ClassDojo* and *Classcraft* are web based class management tools that incorporate gamification into their platforms. With *ClassDojo* students can personalize avatars, be awarded real time feedback points and redeem points for in class privileges set by the teacher. It is available in Japanese, but is aimed towards Kindergarten to sixth grade students (ages 5 to 12). Appropriate for older age groups, *Classcraft* takes the gamification aspect a step further by allowing students to create roleplaying game (rpg) style avatars that level up abilities. These avatars can be used in class rpg video game quiz battles among other aspects of the platform. However, not all languages are supported by *Classcraft*. Currently, Japanese is not one of the supported languages. The complexity might prove too much of an impediment for low level ELs. Besides class management, there are several web based game quiz tools such as *Kahoot!* or *Quizlet* that offer quick ways to incorporate gamified activities to the language lesson.

Although technology can provide easy solutions to incorporate gamification elements, gamification does not have to involve technology. A gamified course could be tech free. Furthermore, technology integration might not even be feasible at some schools. Japan may pioneer advanced technology, but it falls behind other countries in its implementation in society. In a global digital age, paper still remains king in Japan. For example, a preference for copied memos over email for in office correspondence, the use of fax machines and a preference for payment with paper

money are still prevalent. Although more and more schools in Japan are becoming wired, the overall integration of technology in the classroom is behind. Other problems include a lack of teacher training in technology, a slow internet connection, students lacking technology fluency, and shortage or lack of devices. Students may not have device or internet access at home. There is an attitude that children may simply use the device for play or see inappropriate content if given access as well (Da Víla Huerto & Hasegawa 2015; Obe, 2020). Lombardi (2015), utilized a paper based scoring technique that seemed to be an effective way to incorporate gamification in a low tech manner.

Another solution to technology access issues, would be to work with what the students themselves have on hand. Smartphones ownership among Japanese students is rather high. In 2009, the education ministry released guidelines with a blanket ban of smartphones in elementary and junior high schools with restricted use at high schools. Yet, these restrictions seem to be loosening as a concern for emergency communication to parents (Jiji, 2019). There appears to be a cultural shift in terms of allowing phones in schools. According to one survey, “53.5% of Japanese junior high students and 91.5% of high school students own a smartphone.” Furthermore, 49.9% of the parents responded that the first year of high school was an appropriate age to own a smartphone and 35% thought it was appropriate for junior high school or elementary aged students to own one (Nippon Communications Foundation, 2019). Most of the tech based solutions mentioned before offer functionality via apps or smartphone website interfaces. An added advantage is that a student may have more of a familiarity with their own device. Hulse (2018), saw that the devices are part of everyday life for most Japanese

university students. The study found that they are willing and enjoy using smartphones to study English. Also, it would be advisable to implement some rules for appropriate classroom use.

Recommendations

As Lombardi (2015) suggests, one methodology is not inherently better than another. Gamification should not be used as a cure-all or magic bullet. A teacher should understand the context of their situation. The following questions are important when considering using gamification in a course's design: *Is gamification right for my class? Will it help improve my own practice? Am I comfortable implementing it in my practice*? Ultimately, gamification should be seen as another tool in the EFL teacher or course designer's box. Just as it would be improper to use a screwdriver to hammer a nail, it may not be appropriate for all classrooms and contexts.

Yet, in the context of the Japanese EFL classroom *gamification* still shows great promise. There is a chance for a shift in the old teaching paradigms with the current state of change in Japanese classrooms. EFL instructors should take advantage of the rising availability of technology in Japanese classrooms. Particularly the way in which technology can aid in implementing the "ten commandments for motivating language learners" (Dörnyei and Csizér 1998). Gamification can provide a framework to see that these motivation guidelines are met by allowing student agency with the sudden appearance of new classroom tech. Even without technology, it may prove to be a way to build motivation into the foundation of the course.

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