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EFL Student Learning from a Model United Nations Simulation

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Introduction

> I found myself completely absorbed by the issues at hand. Hearing the
> opinions of so many different delegates was fascinating. I never thought I
> would find myself so interested in political debate. It definitely opened
> my eyes to a whole new area of politics, debate, working with strangers,
> and cooperating with people from different backgrounds having different
> opinions. If I get the chance, I definitely would do it again.
> (Delegate of Peru, in the 2010 Japanese University English Model United
> Nations, part of a Model United Nations course)

Model United Nations (MUN) simulations offer active learning and active thinking opportunities to students. This contributes to deep learning by giving them concrete experience and active experimentation (Kolb, 1994). MUN simulations are experiential learning which Boud et al. (1993) describe as a holistic process that has experience as its foundation and stimulus, and within the sociocultural context students actively are involved constructing their experiences. Rather than memorizing information from the teacher as in the transmission model of learning, Biggs (2003, p.89) advocates "deep" learning whereby students create meaning through student-centered learning. The scaffolds of active learning need to be strong however if students are to "achieve deep learning as they construct and create meaning of the world around them" (Hack, 2008, p. 396).

In MUN simulations, students learn through authentic tasks and situations currently faced by the UN. Hazelton (1984, p. 98) states students "learn valuable lessons about political bargaining, the difficulty in reaching a decision, the need for coalition building, persuading others to follow one's interests and fending off hostile interests, and the need

for pragmatism." Kille (2002), McIntosh (2001) and Schaap (2005) consider MUNs to be negotiation simulations that lend themselves to examining conflict/cooperation and power/representation.

MUN simulations have been at the forefront of experiential learning since 1927, when Harvard University had simulations with the League of Nations and then the UN when it was founded. The United Nations Association of the United States of America (UNAUSA) on their website estimates that over 400,000 students participate in MUN simulations worldwide. Zenuk-Nishide (2009) points out that in Japan, MUN conferences are organized by clubs and student societies, whereas many universities in the United States and Europe have integrated MUN simulations into their curriculum, providing structured courses and awarding credit for participating in conferences or running simulations in class. In Japan, MUNs are primarily done in the L1, making it next to impossible for non-native speakers to participate. In other countries in the world MUNs are done in English. Very few Japanese students participate in MUNs in English abroad.

In MUN classes, depending on the number of students, various UN bodies can be simulated or teams of students can join conferences around the world. The number of students taking part in an in-class MUN can be as few as 15, simulating the Security Council. Whatever the size of the class, students take the role of ambassadors and with an agenda topic to prepare. The number of students who will represent a country depends on the size of the MUN and how many bodies are being simulated. For example if there are eight sessions in an MUN then 16 students could represent the same country on different or even the same agendas. In most MUNs, no more than two students represent a country in one committee.

Due to the lack of opportunities for Japanese EFL learners to do MUN simulations in English, a group of university faculty who had MUN experience decided to design and create their own annual conference. The conference was designed to create an imagined international community to enable their students, to debate current affairs using important transferable skills as presenting, debating and negotiating in their L2. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008, p. 569) state "EFL learners who show an international interest, envision an international community that they can be part of using English, which could result in an enhancement of motivation and L2 willingness to

communicate." The "international community" concept is based on Norton's (2001) study, on what immigrant learners see beyond the walls. While participating in classroom activities, the learners are simultaneously participating in imagined communities of practice outside the learning context (Wenger, 1999; Dornyei, 2005).

The first Japan University English Model United Nations (JUEMUN) conference was held in 2010 with 65 delegates from five Japanese universities. There was one agenda with five subtopics related to the rights of the child. Before the conference delegates were divided into working groups with a chair chosen by the advisors from the universities. Each university had delegates in every committee.   Before the conference, committee leaders contacted delegates on their committee and collected their clauses to make a working paper. Each committee had a faculty advisor.   Students who had participated in past MUNs from other universities were the chairs.   The MUN ran for two days from 9-5 and some committees continued working late into the evening to finish their draft resolutions. Debriefing for the whole group was done as part of the closing ceremony. Faculty roles at the MUN were to edit and copy documents for the secretary and to give advice when asked by their committee.   Faculty met with their students to reflect after each day.

At the same time, the authors' university began to offer a MUN class.   In the 15 week (90 minute period) MUN class, one of the projects required third year students to participate in a domestic inter-university 2-day MUN conference at the end of the 9th week. The class was designed and taught by one of the authors who had been involved with the teaching of MUN simulations for 20 years (Appendix A).

If someone walked in to any of the MUN classes they would see one of two scenes: 1) students sitting formally around a table, with one speaker at a time being given permission to speak through the chairperson (the teacher or a student) by raising a placard, and 2) students in groups of different sizes having discussions—possibly moving from group to group or using computers co-creating a document.

Each class is designed to promote deep holistic learning, requiring students to collaborate and interact in order to effectively play a role in the MUN simulation. Kirschner et al. (l996) state structured scaffolded learning experiences lead to specific outcomes while at the same time empowering the students. The philosophy from the first class is to empower students to have autonomy to run their own meeting. Students are

addressed as delegates as soon as they collectively decide their country assignment from a list of possible counties from the inter-university MUN. At the beginning of every class students (delegates) sit around a table in alphabetical order according to the country they represent, with country placards in front of them. The teacher (chair) calls the class or (MUN) meeting to order by pounding a gavel. Roll call is taken by the chair and students as delegates raise their placards to indicate they are present. The teacher then goes over the goals for the session that were determined at the end of the last class; and is open to student comments or questions.

The teacher acting as chair, scaffolds student's learning by explicitly teaching students the flow of the meeting; rules of procedure; formulaic phrases used in the meeting; information students need to find and resources available; how to write position papers; resolutions and amendments; and be an effective negotiator. Pronunciation and intonation are corrected on country names; formulaic phrases for motions; and content vocabulary related to the agenda.

Delegates take control of the meeting by raising their placard if they wanted to make a motion (proposal given about what the group should do next);or get permission to speak sot that they could ask questions, give information or caucus (have discussions away from the table) or ask questions about the procedures. Everything is timed including the length of speeches and discussions.

McIntosh (2001) notes that a common problem with the MUN-in-the classroom or at a conference is the lack of assessment and debriefing. In an analysis of nineteen MUN class syllabi in American universities, Haack (2008) found only eleven courses had a reflective component. Seven were in the form of a written paper and only four had a debriefing.

Kolb (l984) believes that reflection is a key element in learning. His cycle of learning begins with concrete experience followed by reflective observation; being able to reflect on and observe one's experiences. Conscious reflection starts with a focus on experience and experience being the substance of reflection. Reflection is a way for us to recapture our experience in order to make sense of it, to learn from it, and to develop new understanding and appreciation. Wade (1997, p. 95) reminds us there are many words used to represent the reflective process; "debrief, process, consider, ponder, weigh, evaluate, and analyze."   While each of these terms may vary slightly in meaning, they all include some core component of reflective thinking. Reflection, a deliberate

thinking process applied to an experience can lead to cognitive growth and it can inform our future actions.

Evidence supporting student learning in MUNs reported in Hazelton (l984), Chasek (2005) and Haack (2008) has been mostly anecdotal. However in a quantitative study, Yashima and Nishide (2008) found an increase in the development of international posture, amount of communication and language proficiency in the L2 of Japanese high school students who participated in MUN simulations as one of their content-based units of study.   Zenuk-Nishide and Acar (2011) quantitatively produced results that indicate students who took the MUN class mentioned above and participated in the 2-day simulation had a statistically significant increase in self-efficacy in discussion and negotiation skills.

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively investigate Japanese university students learning after participating in the 2-day inter-university MUN simulation that was a project in a MUN class.

Method

Participants

Fourteen third year Japanese students took an elective MUN class in a Japanese public university's International Culture and Communication Course. All of the students had studied English for nine years or more.   Students in this course were chosen from departments of International Relations, English, Spanish, Russian and Chinese based on their English proficiency and interest in communication, translation, interpretation and using English in their future. It was important to link classroom practice to an imagined international community through introducing global study content in the course. None of the students had done UN Studies courses and few had limited exposure to international relations courses. The program was offered in the fall for 15 weeks and is an elective open to only students in the course.   The course is taught by a tenured faculty member who has over 20 years MUN teaching experience.   One of the students had done MUN in Japanese and was a member of a MUN university club. Students had taken the following courses: English Speech Making, Debate and an Intensive Listening classes focusing on world news.

Procedure

An on-line questionnaire was emailed to students that were in the MUN class immediately after the 2-day JUEMUN conference. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) open coding was used for the quantitative analysis of the students' comments to the questions:

- What did you learn?
- What were your challenges?
- How did you improve?

During open coding, students' reflective responses were grouped, identified and named into conceptual categories. These descriptive, multi-dimensional categories formed a preliminary framework for analysis.

Results & Discussion

MUN participants in the university class who did a 2-day JUEMUN simulation responded to three open questions; many wrote multiple responses.

"What did you learn?"

The question "What did you learn?" from 72 responses, yielded seven categories as shown in Appendix B. For the first category, "The importance of communication skills," students wrote "Collaboration," and "Cooperating with what I have and not what with I don't have." The second concerns a "Stronger motivation with a desire to be more proficient, and a desire to study harder to communicate well." Students indicated that they "Want to think more logically," this is necessary for critical thinking; and they wanted to learn more, "I have to learn English more."

The third category is "Awareness of the value of knowledge, identity and multiple perspectives." Students became more aware of other countries, "Each country has similarities and differences," and the issues facing children, "Children in this world face terrible issues." They also became aware of their difficulties, "I learned I have a lack of knowledge." Students became aware of looking at an issue from many perspectives, "It is important to think about things from different points of view."

The fourth category is "The enjoyment of speaking English." Students commented,

"It is fun to speak English for two whole days." Fifth is "The importance of communicating and the willingness to communicate." Students felt "It is important to use English, even if my skills are not so good." They also had a desire to take more leadership after being inspired by other participants. When students try to communicate for negotiation and collective knowledge creation, like in MUN, they strongly feel that they need to acquire accuracy and fluency in the L2 to make their voices more comprehensible (Yashima, 2009). This leads to a more intense desire to communicate. The sixth category is that they "Learned that their opportunities to speak English have expanded," by making friends and talking about their experience when they are interviewing for jobs.

The seventh category is "Learned to be more willing to take the initiative." Students remarked that they became a leader and spoke up.

"Perceived Challenges"

Appendix C shows the qualitative analysis of the perceived challenges for students doing an MUN. There were 72 responses. The first category shows that discussion and negotiation skills are difficult for students and need to be used more in our classes. Comments included "Listening," and "Coping with all the opinions." In the second category students found speaking in front of a large group daunting. The third category, background knowledge and willingness to do the simulation were a challenge. Students found "It was a struggle giving my countries position which was different than my own."

Rasmussen and Oakley (1992) remind us that diplomats are not free agents and must follow instructions from home governments designed to meet national interests. This particular student was representing a country that condoned human rights violations. Researching positions, reading to synthesize, analyze and evaluate information requires higher level thinking skills and students need time to process information.

If the class was for two semesters instead of one, learning could be less taxing and deeper for students. Also fewer sub-topics would lessen the cognitive load on students. The fourth category concerns the learner's proficiency levels in speaking. Many found it "Hard to stay in English," and they felt bad when they could see that others were struggling. If students in the course took the elective in fourth year when they had taken

more interactive classes, their spoken discourse would be better. Courses students take in their first and second year are mostly taught in the L1 and they do not have opportunities to communicate using English academically. More academic courses taught in the L2 would be an advantage to the students in all of their skills. These challenges provided information to take back to our teaching practice.

"Improvements"

Appendix D illustrates what students felt improved by doing an MUN simulation. There were 75 responses. The first category comprised comments that students "Improved their knowledge." Students said they "Know more about the United Nations," and "International affairs." They have more knowledge about their country's positions and laws on children they simulated than citizens of the country. The second category indicated they improved their confidence. "I do not hesitate to take the leadership role," and "I am confident in debating." The third related to a perceived improvement of communicative skills, while the fourth category showed that students found English had become a more natural part of their lives. "I can think in English," indicates that the learners have a level of automaticity in their speech. According to the fifth, students felt their "Willingness for intercultural/interpersonal communication improved." They said, "I can work effectively with people I have just met," and "I can cooperate with others." According to Murphey and Arao (2001), near peer modeling helps learner beliefs and attitudes become more positive. The sixth category indicated positive changes in affect; they became more willing to communicate and had less anxiety when they spoke English, "I could try to speak English."

Conclusion

The results demonstrate changes in learners as a result of participating in the MUN. This could be seen in their content knowledge; attitude and behavior; and communicative competency. Delegates in this MUN simulation expressed the opinions of their country using the background knowledge gained from their research trying very hard to reach agreements that truly represented their country's interests. This supports Yashima's (2007, 2009) findings that taking part in the MUN helps learners to have a

strong intense desire to communicate what they have learned from their research in speeches and negotiation.

Preston (2000) notes that through simulations like MUN, concepts become a part of the students' own experience and are thereby more likely to challenge their thoughts and beliefs than abstract notions delivered in a lecture. In addition, the L2 became more realistic and personalized for EFL learners. Winham (1991, p. 415) states "Experiences with negotiation simulations suggest there are some aspects of negotiation that students are not likely to understand fully until they have lived through them." Participation in a MUN simulation was truly experiential for the students and there is evidence that there were many kinds of learning happening as knowledge was constructed in a social context, where the learners were responsible for their own learning. In closing, let us give student delegates the final say: "At the beginning of the first day, I was thinking that two days would be too long, but at the end of the second day I wanted to talk more with my committee members and to stay longer." (Delegate of Mozambique after a 2-day MUN simulation)

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Appendix A. Outline of the Model United Nations Curriculum.

Aims

To familiarize students with the institutional framework of the UN, its advantages and shortcomings and the process used to make decisions through experiential learning. Develop and assess a plan of action (diplomatic) strategy to represent a country in an inter-university MUN conference and in-class simulation.

To scaffold explicit teaching giving students autonomy to run the MUN in class. To enable students to:

    A.   understand the topics on the agenda of the JUEMUN.

    B.   research and understand a specific country and its policies regarding the agenda.

    C.   research regional issues related to the agenda.

    D.   understand the structure rules and regulations of the UN body being simulated.

    E.   gain presentation and professional skills that are transferable (writing of position papers, speeches, resolutions and amendments; speech making, negotiation skills and speaking diplomatically).

    F.   build and use vocabulary related to the UN and issue Under discussion.

    G.   reflect on their learning.

Learning Outcomes:

At the end of the course students will be able to:

    A.   understand the UN body, agenda country and region they are simulating; knowing about past resolutions and outcomes of actions that have since been implemented.

    B.   apply presentation, negotiation, writing, and social skills to a MUN simulation to achieve the goals of a personal plan of action.

    C.   develop and assess a plan of action (diplomatic strategy) to represent their country in informal working groups and in formal sessions of the whole group.

    D.   evaluate potential for conflict and cooperation in the UN body they are simulating hypothesize about expected outcomes and evaluate experienced outcomes of the MUN simulation.

Course Outline

Week 1   Introduction to the UN; MUN country assignment; how to research; agenda background. Begin simulation roll call; set time limit on speeches; open the speakers' list.

Week 2   Formal debate country and committee background speeches followed by informal debate (moderated caucus)

Week 3   Formal and informal debate on country positions to the items on the agenda. How to write position papers

Week 4   How to write resolutions; caucus in regional blocs and negotiate.

Week 5   Formal and informal debate focusing on ideas working paper clauses

Week 6   Submit a draft resolution based of compiled working paper Clauses and do formal and informal debate; amendment writing and introduction to the floor

Week 7   Formal and informal debate; close speakers' list and debate; vote on the draft resolution and adjourn the meeting.

Week 9   Reflection focusing on goals for the inter-university MUN

Week 10   Inter-university MUN Debriefing

Week 11   MUN Simulation 2 (In-Class Crisis Preparation)

Week 12   MUN   simulation 2 preparation

Week 13   MUN simulation 2

Week 14   MUN simulation 2

Week 15   Reflection

Teacher Prepared Materials

    Country List

    Placards

    Agenda Topic and subtopics

    MUN flow chart

    Rules of procedure explanation and sound bites

    How to write position papers, resolutions and amendments

    Background to the main topic

    Subtopic short summaries and references

Student Materials

    Dictionary

    File Folder

    Computer (minimum one per working committee)

Assessment

    Inclass interactive participation

    Portfolio

    Committee agenda paper

    Country paper

    Speeches

    Position paper to synthesize country position on the issues on the agenda

    Working paper clauses

    Country plan of action

    Reflective essay on the MUN experience

Appendix B: Qualitative Analysis (open-coding) of student comments: Learning through Participation in an MUN

Category Sub-categories	Examples of student comments
Importance of communicative skills	To listen and grasp what others are saying. Speaking is a basic requirement of English. To speak out boldly. Make a speech. Negotiate with many delegates. Collaboration. Cooperate with what I have and not with what I don't have. Saying my opinion logically. Taking leadership. People put ideas together to solve the problem.
Stronger motivation • Desire to be more proficient • Desire to study harder to communicate well.	I want to think more logically. I have to learn English more. I thought if I can speak well, I could talk with more people. I could have taken more leadership after seeing others; this inspired me.
Awareness • Value of knowledge • Identity • Multiple perspectives	Important to have a lot of knowledge. Each country has similarities and differences. Children in the world face terrible issues. I learned I have a lack of knowledge. I learned I have a difficulty in expressing my opinions. Work with people who have differing English abilities. It is important to really feel you are representing your country. It is difficult to express the countries opinion. Important to think about things from different points of view.
Learned to enjoy speaking English	It is fun to communicate with other students. It is fun to speak English for two whole days.
Learned the importance of communicating or having willingness to communicate	Important to try to use English, even if my skills are not so good. To express my thinking is difficult. I should try to do my best.
Learned opportunities to speak English have expanded	I have made friends who impressed me. I would like to talk about MUN in my job hunting.
Learned to be more willing to initiate	To speak up in front of everyone and be responsible for many things at the same time I became a leader.

Appendix C: Qualitative Analysis (open-coding) of Student Comments:
The Challenges of Participating in an MUN

Category	Examples of student comments
Discussion/ Negotiation skills	To reach a consensus. Coping with all the opinions. Combining all of the ideas in a short time. Time. To keep everyone in the group participating. We had to do things on our own without teachers. I struggled giving my countries position which was different from my own opinion. Asking questions to others. Listening. To encourage others to say their opinions. Telling our own ideas. Persuading others. Giving my opinion. Being flexible.
Speech making skills	Speech making in front of a large group.
Difficulty of learning pre-conference	Collecting information and reading to understand. Preparation. The rules of procedure and what I should do sometimes.
Difficulty of speaking English	Hard to keep using English when I knew people could not understand. To stay in English. Not everyone could speak English well.

Appendix D: Qualitative Analysis (open-coding) of Student Comments: Improvements through Participating in an MUN

Category Sub-categories	Examples of student comments
Improved their knowledge.	I know more about my country. I know more about international affairs. I know more about the United Nations.
Improved their confidence	I am confident in debating. I do not hesitate to take the leadership role. I am confident about making a speech in public. I can say my opinion in public. I can lead and empower people. I could take leadership.
Improved their communicative skills	My listening skills have improved. My negotiation skills. I summarize so others can understand. I can discuss. I can discuss academic topics. My pronunciation is better. All my skills have improved. I can read more smoothly. I could explain to others. I could ask a question when I did not know something. I could give my opinions stronger. How to criticize. I became more persuasive. My vocabulary increased. I could debate in English.
To use English has become a natural part of their life	I can think in English. I did not think in Japanese before I spoke.
Willingness for interpersonal/intercultural communication using English	I can work effectively with people I just met. I could cooperate with others. I could work with people who have different ideas. I considered the opinions of others and reflected.
Positive changes in affect about communicating in English • Willingness to communicate in English • Reduced Anxiety	I could try to speak English. I could make my self-understood.