

Learning to Make a Difference at the Model United Nations

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Japanese language students have few opportunities to use English in authentic settings and, for many, the view of English as an academic subject to be studied rather than as a language to be spoken is limiting and damaging. A Model United Nations (MUN) event is a simulation of a challenging authentic environment that can provide meaningful learning contexts that go beyond the logistic and metaphysical constraints of the classroom. This paper illustrates how preparing for and participating in an MUN provides strong motivation to communicate and allows students to improve language and critical thinking skills while achieving a challenging, realistic objective. More importantly, the experience opens a door to a world where it can be seen how proficiency in English really makes a difference. Practical advice explains how to incorporate an MUN into a curriculum.

日本の英語学習者は、英語を役に立つ生きた言語として使う機会が少ない。彼らの多くは、英語を生きた言語というよりも、学校の教科の一つとして認識していることが多い。こういったとらえ方には、英語学習において限界があり、妨げにもなり得る。模擬国連は、教室における物理的な壁と、頭の中で出来上がってしまっている英語に対するイメージの壁から抜け出すことのできる、多くのすばらしい方法が集まった生きた言語環境へのシュミレーションである。この論文では、学生が、準備の過程を経ながら、模擬国連という、やりがいのある、重要な役割に実際に取り組むことで、学習意欲のモチベーションを高め、英語の上達とともに、分析し考えることのできる能力を得る事が出来るということを実証する。さらに重要なのは、この経験によって、英語への新しい考え方をもち、また英語の力によって、世界をも変える事ができるのだという事に学習者達が気付いてくれる事である。模擬国連をカリキュラムに組み入れる方法についても、説明する。

THE KANSAI High School Model United Nations (KHSMUN) is a 3-day English-language event that invites several hundred delegates to come together to devise solutions to current global issues in a simulation of the activities of the United Nations General Assembly. It is dedicated to fostering foreign language development and greater global understanding and has grown in scale on a yearly basis since 1990. This paper will illustrate how an MUN event may be organized on a large or small scale. The author hopes to depict the potential for language and critical-thinking gains and, through discussion of student feedback, how students derive greater motivation from the learning environment. An analysis of an excerpt from a classroom debate will illustrate the high level of student autonomy and vocalization in classes.

The Model United Nations for EFL Students: Lessons From an ESL Context

Many language teachers who work in countries where English is neither widely spoken nor especially valued are envious of those teachers in contexts where the target language is extensively used in the community. English language students studying in these two learning environments, known as Foreign Language and Second Language, typically show far greater progress in the overseas (ESL) context (Gunderson, 2009, p. 121). For ESL students, the motivation to acquire communication skills is immediate and the means to do so more accessible in classrooms where the target language may be the lingua franca and daily life consists of multiple opportunities to reinforce learned structures. Language teachers in the EFL world may be frustrated by the fact that many good students view English primarily as an academic subject in which short-term memorization is a convenient route to achievement in tests, a view of learning which does not necessarily transfer to the kind of fluency acquired in ESL settings.

Many teachers have looked to ESL-derived methodology for inspiration in breaking this test-oriented motivation for language learning. The KHSMUN was created as one such attempt to open students' eyes to a world in which English functions as a communication tool rather than as an academic discipline.

Description of the Kansai High School Model United Nations

Students participating at the KHSMUN are senior high school students from high schools around Japan. At Kyoto Gaidai Nishi High School (KGNHS), the founder and sponsor, around 60-80 students prepare for and participate in the event each year as the culminating project in a 3-year content-based curriculum. Students are typically 17 or 18 years old and are streamed into

classes ranging from low intermediate to advanced levels. The classes are around 70% female. Students have about 10 weeks to prepare and take either five or ten MUN classes weekly, depending on their enrollment stream. MUN students take on roles of delegates from United Nations member countries, research topical world problems, prepare potential solutions to the problems, formulate an action plan, debate and amend the plan with their peers, and finally vote on the amended plan. Curricular assumptions are that using English to negotiate tangible solutions to real-world problems provides a more meaningful learning context than test-orientated study. Furthermore, this motivating environment allows opportunities for parallel learning objectives deriving from the lesson content and problem-solving tasks. The following methodologies have most strongly influenced the MUN curriculum at KGNHS.

Methodologies Pertaining to Model United Nations for EFL Learners

Content-Based Instruction

Originally, the guiding methodology was Content-Based Instruction (CBI). In CBI programs, learning is approached top-down with little or no direct language instruction. Students are expected to take account of how language is used in input materials while pursuing parallel, content-orientated goals (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Stryker & Leaver, 1997). There is an obvious appeal for teachers if subject knowledge can be imparted at the same time, and without deficit, as skills in a foreign language. Moreover, there is strong academic support for CBI (see Adamson, 2010, for a review) but much of the research has been conducted in ESL settings and the transferability of findings is questionable. In more recent years, teachers at KGNHS have expressed concerns about the suitability of such a strong form of CBI being used in an EFL setting with young students. Some

of the major concerns have been the suitability of the language the students are being exposed to at this stage in their language study, the balance between time devoted to language and content goals, and the cognitive load placed on students who have limited vocabulary and little schematic knowledge of the issues. These issues are discussed further in the section “Other Considerations When Planning an MUN.”

Content/Language Integrated Learning

Content/Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a near relative of CBI that has evolved in the EFL settings of Europe rather than in the bilingual or immigrant communities of North America. It has been too loosely defined in literature (Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006), but essentially allows for more direct language instruction and form focus, often in short “pop-up grammar” stages. It is eclectic and may draw on other popular methodologies from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Recently, the program at KGNHS has moved in this direction with more extensively scaffolded materials and a greater focus on language needs.

Constructivism

A great deal of the preparation work in the course arises from the constructivist notion that learners build an understanding of the world, and potentially the language required to delineate it, through experience and the creation of mental models. A constructivist view of pedagogy argues that effective learning stems from active agency and that notions of self and society are created through the ordering of experiences (Mahoney, 2004). In the KGNHS program, students are exposed to problems and given support and instruction to help them resolve the issues in a considered, logical manner. By taking on the roles of delegates, students are encouraged to empathize with the citizens of their

chosen nation. In this way, their ability to critically analyze an issue and formulate a solution is enhanced through direct experience. Much of the work pertaining to problem resolution takes place necessarily in Japanese, which may be criticized by some who insist on English-only classrooms, but some recent research has claimed advantages to L1 discussion in the L2 classroom, particularly in terms of understanding and retention (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain, 2006).

Preparing for an MUN

Preparation for an MUN is a challenge for teachers and students alike. Teachers face the difficulties of integrating language-learning objectives into accessible, up-to-date learning materials in which the source documents are complex and potentially overwhelming. Furthermore, depending on the scale of the meeting, the logistics of building an MUN into the curriculum may require institutional support and a certain amount of funding and facilities, though this need not be extensive for a small event. These small hurdles may explain why the majority of MUNs tend to be represented at the club level rather than in curricular classes (Zenuk-Nishide, 2009).

From the perspective of the students, the challenges are a markedly greater cognitive load than usual. They are asked to use their developing English skills to deal with issues of which they have little schematic knowledge. Moreover, they are still expected to learn English and perform well in tests measuring language, content, and negotiation skills. Overall, an MUN is not without challenges but teachers may expect the reward of watching energized and motivated students exceed themselves (McIntosh, 2001; Zenuk-Nishide & Hurst Tatsuki, 2009). Students, through their own testimony, report strong gains in short- and long-term motivation, problem-solving skills and content knowledge. These gains will be discussed in a later section in more depth.

Student Gains Through an MUN

What can teachers expect from an MUN? The literature on MUNs is not extensive but it underlines how motivation leads to progress in language learning (Hazleton, 1984; McIntosh, 2001; Zenuk-Nishide & Hurst Tatsuki, 2009). Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) showed quantitative language gains and a greater sense of international posture among learners, comparing favourably with the kind of gains experienced by students who had participated in homestays in the USA. Echoing constructivist theorists, McIntosh (2001) reported better retention of content material in his International Relations classes and felt that his students showed greater critical understanding of the subject and an enhanced ability to negotiate:

There is energy in a class simulation that can't be matched in even the best lectures. Lectures and discussions are also improved when students and professors link their experiences to the concepts and data of international relations. For all the importance of reading and hearing about IR, nothing matches the experience of doing it. Short of granting our students power over real countries, simulations like the Model United Nations are among the best ways to teach the theory and the practice of international relations. (p. 275)

MUN events exist in various forms throughout the world but are most commonly held in either the L1 of the host country or in English. In most cases, there is little or no language support for low-level learners and so the events tend to attract either native-level or highly advanced speakers (Zenuk-Nishide & Hurst Tatsuki, 2009). This is discouraging to teachers who may feel that an MUN is only for those who can “handle” the language required in the debates. However, there are very few unbreakable rules about hosting an MUN and teachers ought to let the level, abilities, and interests of their students dictate the

manner of the event, not the other way round. A perfectly satisfying classroom MUN simulation can be held by 15 students (McIntosh, 2001). Nonetheless, as much of the student feedback in debriefings mentions the experience of communicating with strangers in English, it is likely that at least some of the reported motivation gains arise from the novelty and greater sense of challenge in an interclass or interschool event. Broadly speaking, a greater sense of occasion is likely to instill motivation to perform well. For the KHSMUN, held in a conference center, the delegates wear business attire and the event includes an opening ceremony with addresses from diplomats, a delegates' party and a closing ceremony with certificates of achievement. This creates excitement and helps the teachers motivate the students in the crucial preparation classes.

How to Prepare Students for an MUN

First Steps

The following paragraphs describe the KHSMUN, which is a simulation of the General Assembly that has been adapted for EFL students. Other MUNs may follow slightly different formats that may have greater complexity.

The KHSMUN begins with the setting of a theme and a number of topics to debate. The theme in 2012 was The Rights of The Child and four issues were scheduled for debate:

1. rescuing child soldiers,
2. the rehabilitation of child soldiers,
3. defining acceptable conditions for child work, and
4. education as a means to escape poverty.

Depending on course pathway, students spent approximately 50 or 100 class hours preparing. It is not essential to allocate such extensive class time to preparation and other schools spend far less, but to cover the necessary content, meeting pro-

ocols, and debate practice, it is advisable that teachers consider the amount of available class time and then decide the complexity of the simulation and topics. Simpler topics may present less cognitive load and allow the teacher to focus on skills rather than content. There is no reason why the forum cannot discuss a worldwide smoking ban, for example, or the latest retirement from AKB48.

Learning About the Country and Region: Regional Blocs

Once the topic has been set, the students choose countries and conduct some background research before making an assessed country presentation that has relevance to the theme. Countries are organized by teachers into regional or economic blocs and meeting time is allocated during preparation, and at the event, for blocs to cooperate on issues that affect their region. Assigned bloc leaders are required to run meetings and coordinate delegates and an Internet bulletin board system (BBS) is set up by KGNHS to allow further negotiation and networking between the schools. At the 2012 KHSMUN, the regional blocs were

1. Asia,
2. Africa and the Middle East,
3. Latin America and the Caribbean, and
4. Europe and Others (an economic bloc of wealthy countries).

The Draft Resolution: An Action Plan to Solve a Problem

The primary objective of each bloc is to come up with an action plan to resolve one of the four issues. This document, called a Draft Resolution (DR), will be debated, amended, and finally voted on at the end of each debate session. Each bloc is given

the responsibility of writing one DR. The bloc's objective is to get the resolution passed with a minimum of objectionable amendments. The objective of the other countries may be to support it, if it is good and in the interests of their country; to amend it for improvements or to safeguard national interests; or to oppose it for whatever reasons—including naked self-interest. A clear understanding of this document is crucial to an effective MUN. At the KHSMUN, the students meet on the first day of the event to write their DR, though they have already previously collaborated on the BBS and at the rehearsal. To scaffold these discussions for lower level speakers, the Day 1 meetings have a clear agenda and a set language for each session. An abbreviated example of a DR can be seen in Appendix A.

Developing Critical Thinking and Negotiation Skills

In class, before collaboratively drafting a realistic solution to a complex issue, students learn to engage with the topic from the perspective of a needs analysis. Some simplified background information is presented to them, in English, through lectures, readings, and role-plays. They are expected to conduct further individual research at home and occasionally by using smartphones in class. This information is then translated, if necessary, and compiled in an assessed country portfolio. Students learn how to consider causes and effects of problems in the long- and short-term, the interconnectivity of issues, and the long- and short-term causes and effects of any actions they sponsor. Typically, the first response is to send money to the affected countries. Later in the program, through direct instruction and better understanding of the process of international intervention, more sophisticated solutions begin to emerge. At an early stage, for example, a student recommended easing the plight of poor women in sub-Saharan Africa by giving direct aid to young women. Later the same student was able to write a confident speech about low-interest bank loans to allow women

to start businesses. In another group, a student researched a program that offers a female sheep to girls allowed to graduate elementary school, though her country team had reservations about this, feeling it might contribute to a “reward” culture. Not all solutions are as sophisticated. One boy felt the best way to rescue child soldiers would be to surround them until they had run out of bullets. Nonetheless, with a well-chosen theme, there is a growing sense of ownership of topic and country in MUN classes as well as a clear sense of purpose, enthusiasm, pathos, and fun. This positive classroom experience is strongly underlined by research (McIntosh, 2001; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008; Zenuk-Nishide & Hurst Tatsuki, 2009).

By this stage, the delegation teams should be able to display reasonably extensive knowledge of the topic areas, have prepared four speeches outlining solutions to the issues, and be ready to contribute their ideas to the formulation of the DR. Since blocs are multischool, all suggestions for the DR must be posted on the BBS for consideration in advance of bloc meetings on Day 1. Teachers may consider alternatives to this, including drafting the resolutions themselves to simplify the process.

While students are learning about the issue and considering their responses, they also begin the process of learning how to justify and question ideas in debate practice. In debates, protocol must be strictly adhered to by all delegates. A confident Chairperson is selected to oversee discussion with the assistance of Secretaries and all stages are strictly timed.

An MUN meeting runs as follows:

1. The Chair opens the meeting and reads the roll call.
2. The Chair asks which countries wish to make a speech and secretaries add their names to the speakers list using magnetically attached country names. This is the order for speeches.
3. The Chair opens formal debate in which countries make speeches on the issue.
4. After several speeches, a delegate from the bloc that drafted the DR asks to be allowed to introduce it to the floor. The debate can now begin in earnest.
5. The Chair returns to formal debate.
6. Delegates may then continue with speeches or make a motion to enter one of three other stages. These stages are repeated multiple times at their discretion:
 - » Informal debate in which they ask questions or make points about the DR;
 - » Caucusing in which they suspend the meeting to network and discuss the DR informally (this may take place in Japanese); and
 - » Amendments through which they attempt to alter the DR using an OHP to explain the proposed change to the floor. If they are unable to secure the agreement of the sponsoring bloc, the amendment is dubbed “unfriendly” and must be voted on at the end of the session.
7. The closure and completion of the speakers’ list.
8. The closure of debate.
9. Voting on unfriendly amendments.
10. Voting on the DR with successful amendments.
11. End of the meeting.

Learning the protocol and required set expressions takes time but, once learned, they can be used to debate any topic. A pictorial representation of an MUN can be seen in Figure 1.

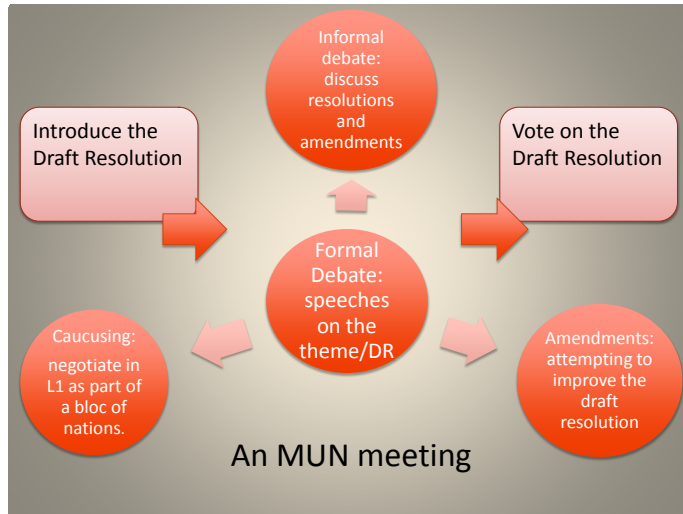


Figure 1. An MUN Meeting

In debate, students begin to understand the importance of evidence; the need for compromise and the difficulties of negotiation, not least the power of persuasion; the power of alliances; and the frustration that stronger communicators sometimes win the day. As McIntosh (2001) wrote, they also start to “realize that informal negotiations are running parallel to the formal statements. Like any real multinational conference, much of the most important work happens in the hallway” (p. 273). This sentiment was echoed by the U.S. Consul General, Patrick Linehan, in his 2012 address to the delegates. Lessons like these are at the heart of the experience, taking language students beyond the classroom, inferring more genuine understanding of the need for global communication, and illustrating the way in which international negotiation is conducted.

Learner Gains Made During Preparation for and Participation in the KHSMUN

Many of the gains made through participation at an MUN come through increased motivation. Teachers in this program report a high degree of on-task participation and student responses in feedback are invariably highly positive in debriefing discussions and questionnaires. Student feedback from a questionnaire relating to the 2012 event can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Student Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Self-assessment	Percent positive responses
Increased motivation to study in class	96%
A feeling that language gains were made	84%
Increased knowledge of the world	100%
Increased problem solving ability	92%
Better negotiation skills in English	71%
Better negotiation skills in Japanese	76%
Improvements in other skills	67%

Note. Sample of 30 students

Many of the comments in the feedback relate to an increased understanding of the need for information and better English skills. “My English was not good enough to explain my idea” is a common feeling. Such comments were not necessarily counted as negative if other responses suggested positive motivation and

indeed, much of the feedback is couched in terms of comments such as “I need to study English more.” This may be seen as indicative of increased self-awareness and positive motivation to make progress. Nonetheless, some of the more negative remarks relate to frustration at being unable, or too shy, to communicate. “I couldn’t do that” is one rather poignant remark. Many comments report a sense of achievement. One student in a position of responsibility had doubted his ability to carry out his leadership role in English but noticed an increase in confidence when he found that he could. The same student also wrote eloquently of an increased understanding of the difficulties of achieving compromise when his DR failed. He has since applied for university courses in the field of international relations.

Classroom tests during the MUN preparation are typically of the group-assessment type and are measured differently from the individual testing done in other parts of the program, making direct comparisons problematic. Anecdotally, teachers feel that the students have a markedly higher level of compliance with homework and class tests.

MUN practice is fun and classes are lively. Table 2 shows analysis from a practice debate transcript after learners had mastered the meeting protocols. The students were discussing ideas they had written pertaining to the rehabilitation of child soldiers. Prior to the debate the teacher collated these ideas into a DR. Students had several minutes to read and understand the proposals before the debate. The teacher did not speak. Even after removing the recasts and set speech (addressing the Chair or thanking the delegates for their answers), the students asked 14 questions on a difficult topic within 14 minutes. Impressively, they were able to answer 12 questions by drawing on notes and knowledge of the topic. Such figures indicate a high level of student autonomy and a degree of student discourse that will hopefully impress any teacher committed to communicative lessons. Once the students have mastered the debate process, there is no barrier to using it again in class.

**Table 2. Analysis of a Practice Debate
(Total Sample 14.02 Minutes)**

Discourse type	Count
Total student speaking time	11.36 minutes
Total speaking time minus speech relating to set protocol	10.06 minutes
Number of questions asked (not including requests for repeats)	14
Number of answers given (not including repeats)	12

Note: Informal debate title “Rehabilitation of Child Soldiers” (15 participants)

Other Considerations When Planning an MUN Cognitive Overload

MUN classes lie in the field of content-based language teaching. One challenge in this field is that learners can become overwhelmed by the demands of studying difficult content in a second language. Corin (1997) showed learners progressing faster with language learning with L1 schema to transfer to L2 content. Stryker and Leaver (1997) wrote, “If the students are not ready, in terms of both the linguistic and cognitive schemata, they may be overwhelmed by the quantity of new information and may, ultimately, flounder” (p. 292). Teachers can, and should, overcome this lack of schematic knowledge by scaffolding input materials as much as possible and allowing their students a certain amount of collaborative work in Japanese. The use of smartphones in class has been very helpful in this regard and the students respond very positively to being

allowed to research in this way. Teachers should be also be active in prioritizing vocabulary which satisfies learner needs over low-frequency items that are mainly required to understand content. Low-priority language is better glossed and vocabulary tests should not reflect the most difficult items in the input but rather the most valuable. I have experimented with Vocabprofile (Cobb, 2006) when screening the vocabulary in input materials to best match students' vocabulary needs (Adamson, 2010), but teachers' instincts are also generally reliable in this regard.

Another concern is findings by Musumeci (1996) who showed how lessons become teacher-centered when the content is extensive and language-learning goals are overlooked, even when teachers are in favor of interactive language teaching. Again, scaffolding should be a priority but teacher awareness and clear planning is the key. Realistic targets for content should be prepared in advance and sufficient time allocated for language learning. More self-conscious planning of this kind has improved the program in recent years. The school currently releases prepared materials in pdf format on the KHSMUN webpage, which may be helpful to anyone considering an event or class project.

Logistics

To run an effective MUN, it is necessary to consider the following:

- number of participants, available staff, funds;
- highest and lowest English level, age, learner needs;
- contexts in which L1 and L2 will be used;
- language and content-learning outcomes; and
- theme of the meeting.

Careful consideration should be given here to selecting a topic which is interesting, suits the learning and institutional require-

ments, and allows all countries to participate. KHSMUN now rotates the themes of Water, Food Supply, and The Rights of the Child to reduce material development.

It is also recommended to prepare:

- placards with country names and national flags;
- country names with attached magnets for the speakers' list;
- OHP, transparencies, and pens for amendments;
- facilities to print the DR;
- paper to carry messages between delegates during debate (if possible); and
- microphones (if necessary).

Conclusion

In discussions of education in Japan, much rhetoric is dedicated to the nature of the global society and the need for Japanese young people to look beyond their borders and acquire English as an essential communication tool in a media-driven, borderless world. The reality in most language classes falls far short of such lofty posturing. For most high school or university students, a global society requiring English proficiency is remote and the majority study English with more concern for their GPA than any pressing regard for internationalism. This may be understandable, but given the more rapid progress of students in ESL environments, it is incumbent on EFL teachers to do as much as they can to create environments where the rhetoric about globalism may become tangible. A Model United Nations is not an alternative to a solid language-focused program, but as a feature of a balanced curriculum, it has the potential to give students some experience of an elusive world where people do need English to get things done and speaking a foreign language genuinely does make a difference.

Bio Data

Calum Adamson currently works at Kansai University and part-time at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies. At KUFU, he uses the MUN simulation with university students in the International Relations program. His current research project concerns encouraging extensive reading at high school with Moodle Reader. He also plays the bagpipes rather a lot. <adamson_calum@yahoo.com>

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Appendix

A Draft Resolution

- Resolution: GA/A/1
- Agenda: The Rights of the Child
- Topic 1: Child Soldiers
- Issue 1: Rescuing Child Soldiers
- Author: Africa and the Middle East Bloc

The General Assembly

Strongly affirming that children should not be enlisted, voluntarily or otherwise, by armies or armed groups and should not participate in combat under any circumstances;

Recognizing that effective disarmament and demobilization must be organized quickly and efficiently after combat with separate plans for children;

Requests that educational program be made for children and adults in developing countries that show guns are dangerous and are not part of normal life; and

Demands that governments that have child soldiers give out official demobilization papers within 3 years.

Note. Students are only responsible for writing the (numbered) operative clauses above. A good DR would normally contain 10-12 succinct operative clauses.