Developing Intercultural Connections and Language Competence with Board Games

D. S. Bowyer
Nagoya Gakuin University

Students on foreign exchange (FE) programs often fail to make progress in either their creation of intercultural relationships with domestic students or their foreign language (LX) abilities, despite these being the two most common FE student goals (Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Willis Allen, 2010). This article discusses the results of a pilot board game club project created with a Japanese university's new self-access learning center to provide FE and domestic students more frequent opportunities to interact with and learn from each other. Five people involved in the club, two FE students, one domestic student, and two learning center staff members, took part in a written or face-to-face interview at the end of the first year of the program. Results indicated that the participants believed the club was successful in its two main goals of increased interaction and LX development. However, a more robust future quantitative study is necessary.

外国文化交流(FE)プログラムの学生たちは、最も一般的な学習目標であるにもかかわらず、外国語(LX)の能力向上及び母語話者学生との異文化理解のための関係性構築のいずれをも達成できないことが多い(Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Willis Allen, 2010)。本論はFEの学生たちと母語話者たちで交流し、学び合う機会をより多く与えるために設置された、大学の自律学習センターで行われたボードゲーム・クラブでの予備調査結果について考察する。プログラムの初年度末に二人のFE学生、一人の母語話者学生、及び二人のスタッフがアンケートに回答し、インタビューを受けた。結果から、参加者たちは対象言語能力の向上と異文化理解促進というふたつの目標の達成に、クラブ活動が効果的であると考えていることが分かった。しかしながら、本論の信頼性を確認するために、より多くの量的研究を今後も行っていく必要がある。

I n 2005, during my second year as a university student in the United Kingdom, I volunteered as a fresher parent for Japanese foreign exchange (FE) students. Fresher parents help FE students adjust to university life and provide support. However, we rarely met each other after the welcome party. The language barrier, cultural barrier, schedule barrier meant that we quickly forgot about each other. This resulted in the FE student population existing almost as a separate university, interacting only rarely with the English-speaking domestic students.

In my six years and two universities as a lecturer in Japan, I have noticed similar issues. According to current data the two universities have 162 and 32 FE students. However, based on my anecdotal experiences, most FE-Japanese student interactions are during staff-arranged, relatively formal events such as parties or student-led language classes. According to Kim and Ebesu Hubbard (2007) these kinds of events do little to dispel the image of FE students as "other" and may make the problem worse (p. 233). Consequently, both FE and domestic students do not always experience the rich intercultural and language (LX) experiences that one might expect. The term LX is used here over the more common L2 because LX incorporates the idea that the language being learned might be one of several languages that a learner knows or is learning (Dewaele, 2018). Ingram (2005) has stated that these kinds of integrative problems are common in study abroad programs.

To provide more opportunities for relaxed and informal interactions, I created an international board games club at the university. This qualitative pilot study presents an overview of staff and student perspectives, with a focus on intercultural friendships, language learning, and club administration.

Literature Review

Research on FE student integration is currently somewhat sparse. However, some key studies have been conducted which examine the issues behind successful integration into the wider university culture.

Kudo and Simkin's 2003 study attempted to define the key factors underlying the formation and maintenance of intercultural friendships between FE students and

host country nationals at an Australian university. Based on interview results with the FE students, the following four key factors were identified: 1) contact frequency, 2) similarity, 3) self-disclosure, and 4) receptivity of host nationals. Frequency of contact includes proximity and shared networks. Similarity includes age and individual similarity. Self-disclosure consists of LX skills and openness. Receptivity refers to cross-cultural orientation and empathy. An increase in any of these factors was associated with better intercultural friendships. Kudo and Simkin emphasized the importance of increasing opportunities for interaction though international dormitories and mixed classes. However, they noted that classes provide poor opportunities for interaction due to their formal nature and short interaction time. Furthermore, they stated that it is important to encourage students to focus on each other as individuals rather than as cultural representatives, as the latter creates a cultural barrier.

In 2010 Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune published the results of a study examining the friendship networks of 84 FE students, based on answers to a questionnaire. These students came from varied backgrounds and were studying a range of subjects at the same university in Hawai'i. Results indicated that FE students who maintained strong friendship networks with domestic students were more satisfied, more content, and less homesick. They concluded that social support systems should be put in place to aid FE students in navigating their new environment, and that intercultural training may be beneficial. They also emphasized the importance of plentiful opportunities for international and domestic student interaction.

Willis Allen (2010) conducted a study with six American L1 English speakers on a six-week study abroad program in France to uncover the links between FE student motivations and learning. She found that students were on the program for one of two reasons: 1) to improve LX ability, or 2) to travel and learn about a foreign culture. Learners who joined with the intention of increasing their LX proficiency displayed improved motivation after the program ended, whereas the cultural group did not. Willis Allen saw this as a sign that educators should be active in molding study abroad programs to fit learners and should not be afraid to intervene in FE programs that are not functioning effectively.

Garcia-Amaya (2017) used the Daily Linguistic Questionnaire to follow the lives of 43 students on a six-week FE program in Spain. Participants were L1 speakers of English from the same university in the United States, on the program to study Spanish. Although students generally used their LX far more than their L1 for the first three weeks, this pattern reversed in the second half of the program. This change correlated with an increase in L1 spoken with other FE students and a decrease in LX exchanges

with host families. Garcia-Amaya believed that this may have been due to students reverting to using L1 for communication and/or a lack of intercultural competence leading to decreased interaction with host families. Accordingly, he recommended that FE programs enforce minimum LX speaking limits on students and attempt to match them with appropriate hosts.

Several studies have been published regarding the use of board games as a vector for LX development in the foreign language classroom. In an early piece of research, Smith (2006) explored pupil-pupil talk when playing board games in a bilingual classroom, where English is the LX. She found that playing board games provided learners with ample opportunities to experiment with the LX and to scaffold each other's learning. Paris and Yussof (2012) experimented with the use of simple grammar-based board games and found that they were more effective than typical grammar-focused activities in promoting learners' understanding of grammatical rules. In a 2013 study, Luk looked at the effects of differentiated participant roles in EFL students' board game sessions. Through observing learners' interactions while playing various games, Luk showed that these games provided an environment for learners to use their LX authentically. The games also provided a platform for learners to use their L1 productively to engage in meta-talk and learn new LX. Poole et al. (2019) conducted a study with English speakers learning Chinese, using a board game designed to promote math and Chinese development. Results showed that the board game was an effective medium for LX usage and development because learners could use their LX communicatively and engage in peer learning.

A gap in the research currently exists regarding the potential uses of board games in more authentic settings for aiding L1-LX speaker interaction and friendship formation, and the benefits that this might have on students' LX development. To explore the effects of the club on FE and Japanese students and to assess learning, the following research questions (RQs) were devised:

RQ1. Did the board game club lead to increased interaction between FE students and Japanese students?

RQ2. Did the board game club provide opportunities for FE and Japanese participants to improve their LX competence?

Methods

Club Inception and Administration

The university has a total FE population of 32 out of a total student population of around 6000. When I began this project, there were no clubs at the university aimed at

increasing interaction between FE students and Japanese students. However, a self-access learning center (Gardner & Miller, 1999) was established in September 2018, called the iLounge. Through discussion with the iLounge staff during April of 2019, I reserved a dedicated space with tables and chairs. A small fund was established for purchasing games.

Two FE student board game enthusiasts, here given the pseudonyms Steven and Chris, became the club founders. They were responsible for marketing the club to other exchange students, leading the initial club meetings, and creating posters for advertising the club. These posters were presented at the end of English classes by myself and several other teachers, who also explained some of the potential benefits of joining, such as free English practice and the possibility of making international friends. A digital poster was distributed on the university intranet. I also offered bonus homework points to students who attended the club, up to a total of 10% of their final grade.

For clubs to be officially listed by the university, they must have a Japanese student as the club captain. A student from the commerce department, referred to here as Shoya, acted as the captain, sharing organizational duties with Steven and Chris. They decided to hold the club for 90 minutes twice a week on Wednesday and Friday afternoons. Shoya took on sole administrative responsibility after Steven and Chris returned to their home countries in July. A variety of games were purchased according to the requests of the club members. These included: Pandemic, Monopoly, Carcassone, Settlers of Catan, and playing cards. Sometimes participants brought their own games, with the particular game to be played being decided by the members on the day.

Participants and Data Collection

In the 2019/2020 academic year, the club had three regular members in the first semester and eight in the second. These students attended at least one of the two sessions most weeks. There were roughly 15 students who participated irregularly, according to Shoya. At the end of the year four staff members and 23 students connected to the project were asked to participate in an interview. I contacted the staff members by email, while Shoya contacted the students via personal messaging service. Two staff members and three students consented to an interview. The students were Shoya, Steven, and Chris, the three senior members of the club. A breakdown is provided in Table 1:

Table 1
Breakdown of Participants

Name	Occupation	Role	Nationality
Shoya	Student	Club captain	Japanese
Steven	Exchange student	Organizer	American
Chris	Exchange student	Organizer	American
Boris	iLounge staff	Helper	American
Ernest	iLounge staff	Helper	American

Boris and Ernest were full-time staff in the iLounge who aided in the day-to-day organization of the club. As the club was held within the iLounge, they were able to observe most board game events, allowing them to provide an objective account.

Data collection centered around two main qualitative types: 1) an open-ended written interview, and 2) an open-ended face-to-face interview. As Dörnyei (2007) has explained, qualitative data can be highly useful when exploring a new research area. Based on my initial expectations that changes to LX and the formation of intercultural relationships would be the main effects of the board game club, I created two sets of open-ended interview questions, one each for staff and students (Appendix A, Appendix B). Questions 1-4 and 12-13 in the staff interview were intended to elicit their overall feelings toward the project and find areas of import that I might have missed. Questions 5-7 centered around learner L1 and LX language use for both Japanese and FE learners, while Questions 8-11 were focused on FE student and Japanese student interaction and relationships. For the student interview, Questions 1-4 elicited background information. Questions 9 and 10 focused on language use, while the remainder were concerned with students' social experiences in relation to the club. Questions 1 and 3 were aimed at exchange students, so were not used with Japanese students. Participants were given the choice to have an in-person interview, an online interview, or to write their answers and email them to me. Shoya chose an in-person interview, while the other participants preferred to submit written answers. The 28-minute recorded interview was conducted in both English and Japanese, with questions being asked in order. Follow-up questions were asked where appropriate. It was then transcribed in preparation for coding. The in-person and written interviews were all conducted in January 2020 during the final week of the semester. I coded the data based on the RQs to find salient categories that could illuminate the effects of the board game club, and to identify areas for further research.

Results and Discussion

The coding process led to three points of interest that were useful in answering the research questions: increased interaction, language usage, and language learning. Increased interaction relates to RQ1, language learning to RQ2, and language usage to both. A common theme from participants' answers was that the club acted as a hub for FE students and Japanese students to meet with each other on a regular basis. During these meetings, they used a combination of English and Japanese, with the members and game(s) being played influencing language usage. According to the interviewees, this led to an increase in LX vocabulary knowledge and improved pragmatic competence, along with increased comfort regarding the idea of making mistakes. A discussion of these results is presented below.

Increased interaction

The issue of whether the club led to more interaction between FE and Japanese students was a key part of the study, as it is important for both relationship formation and language development. When asked whether he made friends through the club (Q.8), Chris responded with the following:

Chris: Yes! *Shoya*, who was a club member and I sometimes would hang out with him outside of club.

Chris mentioned Shoya as being a friend that he made through the club and interacted with outside it. This relationship was likely due to the existence of the club, as Shoya and Chris's departments are on separate campuses. Shoya also indicated that he made new friends through the club. However, when asked where they interacted, he responded that they only met in the club. This account differs slightly from Chris, who named Shoya as someone he spent time with outside the club. It is possible that because Shoya continued to lead the club for six months after Chris went home, he forgot about the details of their relationship. Steven also mentioned Shoya as being a friend that he made (Q.6), although he mentioned other participants too:

Steven: Although the majority of the time it was the three of us and Sota, occasionally one of the teachers would join in, which was always humorous.

Some of the Japanese teaching staff had overheard Chris and Steven talking about the club in their classes and decided to join. This was a surprising development, as I had envisioned the club as a place for improving interaction between students. That it also led to increased interaction between students and staff was a welcome bonus. However, these occasions must have been relatively rare as Boris and Ernest did not mention them.

Steven's comment alludes to the fact that during the first semester few people joined the club other than him, Chris, and Shoya. The second semester was more successful in terms of the number of participants, with typically six or more people joining each session. Ernest stated the following (Q.8):

Ernest: About 6-8 members per session/week [*sic. deleted*] I saw some students on a weekly basis, or more. Some students only once or twice.

As Ernest noted, some students attended weekly while others joined less frequently. Ernest also stated the following (Q.3):

Ernest: As more students came to / joined the club, they started inviting more friends, and the club grew enough to meet in the community link or other places. It was not quite enough to greatly expand the club, but it was enough to get other students in the iLounge to notice.

Although the club did not expand enormously during the year, it became large enough to consistently have six or more participants twice a week and, according to Ernest, become a topic of conversation among other students. Consequently, exchange students and Japanese students were meeting and interacting more frequently than they likely would have had the board game club not existed, and new relationships were being formed. In a separate conversation with Shoya, he indicated that participants joined from several departments. This means that interaction between Japanese students from different departments was increased due to the club. Based on the interviews, it appears that this led to them forming new relationships with people that they otherwise might never have met.

Language Usage

A key issue in this study was that of what languages were in use by the students, as this could affect both the amount of interaction between FE and Japanese students and LX development. Addressing this, Boris (Q.5) stated that participants used both English and Japanese. The students' answers elaborated on this issue, with Chris stating the following (Q.9):

Chris: English and Japanese. Sometimes we would decide to only use one of the languages for the day. English day to challenge the Japanese students and Japanese day to challenge us exchange students.

Shoya provided a similar answer to Chris, with more details regarding how students moved between English and Japanese. The following passage describes a part of the interview between myself and Shoya regarding language use:

Int: What languages do you usually use in the club?

Shoya: Ahh Japanese and [a] little English.

Int: Japanese, little English?

Shoya: Japanese and little English.

Int: When do you use English?

Shoya: Uhh difficult Japanese [...] change English.

Int: Ah so the main language is Japanese?

Shoya: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

According to Shoya Japanese was the main language used by club members. When international students were unable to comprehend, the group used English to resolve the problem. However, Chris's answer indicates that not all sessions were conducted in Japanese, with English sometimes being used to provide more learning opportunities for the Japanese students. Furthermore, Boris's assertion that he saw people using both languages suggests that English was also a component of students' communication. This is likely to have been dependent on the composition of the group, which could be different on any given day. For example, a group composed primarily of Japanese students with a low level of English might use mainly Japanese, whereas a group consisting of mainly FE students might be more likely to use English. The games themselves were also likely a factor, as some were Japanese versions, while others were English. Consequently, patterns of language use varied considerably between sessions.

Language Learning

As discussed in the previous section, students used both English and Japanese during their board game club interactions. From this, one might expect that LX development occurred. This is reflected in the two following quotes taken from Boris and Ernest's (Q.7) answers to a question regarding students' LX competence:

Boris: Well, I think the international students got better because they are here to learn Japanese, and this was a great opportunity to practice it in a casual setting.

Ernest: I think that it increased both Japanese and non-Japanese students' use of casual English/Japanese and jargon for each language (vocab related to specific games). Attending the BG club also made each person become more comfortable speaking to new people and not being afraid of making mistakes in a foreign language.

Boris and Ernest stated that they felt FE students improved their LX usage through interaction in the relatively casual settings provided by the club. Ernest also stated that he felt that Japanese students improved in their casual English competence, as students were using casual language to communicate with each other. He also mentioned that he believed that students were learning jargon related to the board games. Similar sentiments were expressed by the students, exemplified by these excerpts from Shoya's interview (Q.10):

Shoya: コミュニケーションパターンがだんだん分かってきて。

(I became better at understanding the patterns of communication)

Shoya: うまくなっているかわからないけど、答えを事前に準備している。(I don't know if I'm improving, but I'm ready to answer before the question comes)

Shoya said that he had learned both LX jargon and communication patterns. Chris and Steven had similar feelings to Shoya, as shown by Chris's quote (Q.10) below:

Chris: We did learn a decent amount of board game jargon in Japanese, as well as a decent handful of vocab from referring to game pieces.

Based on the interviews, there seems to be a consensus that the students participating regularly in the club learned LX vocabulary and grammatical patterns relevant to the board games. Shoya's belief that he came to better understand the flow of LX interaction is particularly interesting, as he is showing that he improved his interactional competence through interacting with other students in the club. The importance of this cannot be understated. As teachers, we can provide an environment that aids learners in vocabulary and grammatical production. We can also, through the teaching of communication strategies and use of conversation activities, aid learners in their interactional competence (Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999). However, the board game club provided opportunities for authentic interaction and learning that are difficult to recreate in the classroom.

Conclusion

The board game club was developed as a pilot program to investigate if regular club activities can provide FE students and domestic students with better opportunities to create international relationships and improve their LX competence. Based on the results, the club was successful in these areas. The staff and students were in broad agreement that the club provided ample opportunities for them to meet with more people and use their LX. There were some unexpected benefits, such as staff joining some of the games and the club gaining momentum as students talked about their experiences with their friends. This highlights the fact that the club is part of the much broader university ecosystem and that to be successful over the long-term, integration with the FE syllabus will be important. As a researcher and an educator, I am excited to see what will happen with the new program when it begins. It is also my hope that those reading this article will gain the knowledge and practical understanding required to build greater FE student integration into their own institutions.

As this was a small-scale pilot project there were several limitations. The number of participants was limited to the five people who kindly volunteered to share their experiences. Moreover, although Steven and Chris's data were unique in that they provided insight into the views of the founding members, they were only present for the first three months. This left Shoya as the only long-term student data point. A future study should attempt to recruit more long-term participants. Secondly, a comparison of the campus lives of students who do and do not participate in the club would provide context regarding how beneficial the club really is and highlight any issues relating to integration with the FE program. Finally, the club was initiated too late in the year to be part of the April clubs recruiting campaign. As such, it was limited in its audience. The next iteration of the club should begin in April to take advantage of the greater marketing opportunities.

Bio Data

D. S. Bowyer is currently a lecturer at Nagoya Gakuin University. He holds an MA in TESOL from Nagoya University of Foreign Studies and is also a PhD candidate. His principal research interests include Complexity Theory, interactional competence, and the applications of neuroscience to language teaching. <scottybowyer1@gmail.com>

References

Dewaele, J.-M. (2018). Why the dichotomy "L1 versus LX user" is better than "native versus non-native speaker." *Applied Linguistics, 39*(2), 236–240. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw055

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

Garcia-Amaya, L. (2017). Detailing L1 and L2 use in study-abroad research: Data from the daily linguistic questionnaire. *System, 71*, 60–72.

Gardner, D., & Miller, L. (1999). *Establishing self-access: From theory to practice*. Cambridge University Press.

Hendrickson, B., Rosen, D., & Aune, R. K. (2011). An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35,* 281–295.

Ingram, M. (2005). Recasting the foreign language requirement through study abroad: A cultural immersion program in Avignon. *Foreign Language Annals, 38*(2), 211–222. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2005.tb02486.x

Kim, M. S., & Hubbard, A. S. E. (2007). Intercultural communication in the global village: How to understand "the other." *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 36*(3), 223–235. https://doi.org/10.1080/17475750701737165

Kudo, K., & Simkin, K. A. (2003). Intercultural friendship formation: The case of Japanese students at an Australian university. *Journal of Intercultural Studies, 24*(2), 91–114.

Luk, J. C. M. (2013). Forms of participation and semiotic mediation in board games for second language learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 8*(4), 352–368. https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2013.829279

Bowyer: Developing Intercultural Connections and Language Competence with Board Games

Mynard, J. (2019). Self-access learning and advising: Promoting language learner autonomy beyond the classroom. In H. Reinders, S. Ryan, & S. Nakamura (Eds.), *Innovation in language teaching and learning: The case of Japan* (pp. 185–209). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12567-7_10

Paris, T. N. S., & Yussof, R. L. (2012). Enhancing grammar using board game. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 68,* 213–221. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.12.221

Poole, F., Clarke-Midura, J., Sun, C., & Lam, K. (2019). Exploring the pedagogical affordances of a collaborative board game in a dual language immersion classroom. *Foreign Language Annals, 52*(4), 753–775. https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12425

Sato, K., & Kleinsasser, R. C. (1999). Communicative language teaching (CLT): Practical understandings. *The Modern Language Journal, 83*(4), 494–517.

Smith, H. (2006). Playing to learn: A qualitative analysis of bilingual pupil-pupil talk during board game play. *Language and Education, 20*(5), 415–437. https://doi.org/10.2167/le639.0

Willis Allen, H. W. (2010). Language-learning motivation during short-term study abroad: An activity theory perspective. *Foreign Language Annals, 43*(1), 27–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2010.01058.x

Appendix A

Staff Questions

1. Please talk a little bit about your relationship to the BG club.
2. What are your general impressions of the BG club?
3. Were there any synergies you noticed between iLounge and the BG club?
4. Did you notice any negative effects of the BG club?
5. What languages did you see students using?
6. Did you see a lot of code-switching between languages?
7. Do you think that students increased their second language proficiency?
8. Roughly how many people attended the club that you saw? Did you see some more regularly than others?
9. Did students appear to enjoy themselves? Did you see any negative emotions?
10. Do you think that participants made any new personal connections?
11. Did you notice any cross-cultural relationships forming?

12. What are your recommendations for improving the club?
13. I've almost certainly missed a few important points. If there's anything you noticed or would like to talk about, please share your thoughts below.

Appendix B

Student Questions

1. What is/was the duration of your exchange program?
2. Do you intend to use an L2 in the future? For example, for work?
3. What did you gain from your experiences on this exchange program?
4. Please tell me about your social life in Japan.
5. Why did you join the BG club? How did you find out about it?
6. Please tell me a little about your role and experiences in the club.
7. How often did you join?
8. Did you make any new friends through the club?
9. What languages did you typically use in BG club?
10. Did you learn any new language in the club? For example?
11. Do you ever meet BG club members outside the club?
12. Do you think that joining the club benefitted you in any way?
13. Apart from BG club, did you have any other opportunities to get to know other exchange students and Japanese students?
14. Do you think that you will maintain long-term contact with any of the friends that you made here?