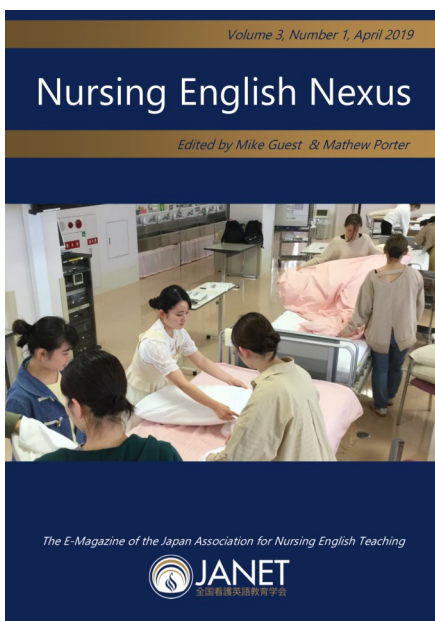


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Using Games to Promote Confidence in English Communication Among Japanese Nursing Students

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Abstract: *Tohoku University has been progressively implementing various initiatives towards the goal of becoming a more globalized university. There is a growing emphasis on raising students' global perspective, cultural competency, and English proficiency level. In this article, we describe two pilot programs conducted in 2017 by the School of Nursing to expose students to everyday English through games, cooking, and movie nights. Students were recruited for pilot 1 (eight 2-hour sessions) and pilot 2 (four 1.5-hour sessions) through the smartphone app LINE, and participated in an average of four and two sessions, respectively. Pre- and post-pilot questionnaires were administered to the students to measure the change in self-perceived English ability. Among the 16 students who participated, self-reported speaking ability increased by 40.5% on average, self-reported listening ability increased by 25.0%, and self-reported confidence in English communication increased by 58.3%. The most commonly reported difference between the pilot program and traditional English classes was the opportunity to communicate and express oneself in English (50.0%). Here, we demonstrate that something as simple as playing games, even for just a few sessions, can create an opportunity for English communication and impact students' self-perceived English abilities.*

Keywords: English communication, adult learning, games, Japanese nursing students.

In the last decade, there has been an increasing emphasis by the Government of Japan on maintaining its competitive edge by developing a workforce with a global perspective, global awareness, and language competency (Yonezawa, 2014). This extends to the healthcare workforce, for which the government has developed a strategic plan to cultivate future global health leaders (International Health Policy Human Resources Development Working Group, 2016). Initiatives such as the Global 30 Project, which was started in 2009 and evolved into the Top Global University program in 2014, have also aimed to globalize Japanese universities and to improve their global rankings (Yonezawa, 2014; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], n.d.). Tohoku University, which was selected as a type A university under this initiative, is currently undergoing reforms to transform itself into a more globalized university, with one of the objectives to raise students' English proficiency level (Tohoku University, 2018a).

To achieve this goal, the School of Nursing at

Tohoku University has developed a strategic plan and has progressively rolled out different initiatives. These initiatives include incorporating an English test during the entrance exam from February 2018, creating a web portal of English resources for nursing students which was launched in August 2018, and providing English exposure to students in both credit courses and non-class activities. Currently, compulsory courses include weekly English classes in their first and second year, and Academic English Writing and Global Health courses during their third and fourth year. In addition, students have a limited list of optional courses taught in English to select from, if desired. Students also have the option to participate in various study abroad programs, but these can be expensive for some students (Tohoku University, 2016; Tohoku University, 2018b). There are some free and informal English activities offered by Tohoku University (Tohoku University, 2018b). However, most of these programs and activities are offered on other campuses, which may discourage nursing students from attending unless they are highly

motivated.

To address this, in 2017 we designed and trialed two pilot programs to provide nursing students with English exposure in a fun and relaxing environment. The objective of this article is to share our approach and findings from these two pilots.

Methods

Target Group

This program, called "Games Night in English," was designed and piloted in June-July (pilot 1) and November-December (pilot 2), 2017. The target group for this program was undergraduate nursing students at Tohoku University. First- to fourth-year students were recruited through the smartphone app LINE via a student representative. Pilot 1 consisted of eight 2-hour sessions, with sessions held twice a week, while pilot 2 consisted of four 1.5-hour sessions, with sessions held once a week. Both pilot programs lasted 4 weeks.

Program Objectives

The objectives of these pilot programs were 1) to examine the effectiveness of using games and other group activities in improving students' self-reported English ability and confidence, and 2) to inform future development of appropriate and effective programs for students in the School of Nursing at Tohoku University.

Program Design

Our program consisted of a mix of different activities, predominantly commercially available English board games, as well as movie and cooking nights, guided by the interests of the participants. The cooking night allowed the students to follow English instructions on the recipes while chatting with each other. The movie night provided students the opportunity to practice their listening skills while reading English subtitles. The games night included games that either focused on vocabulary and expression enhancement, such as *Telestration*, *Blurt*, *Game of*

Things, and *Double Ditto*, or on communication, such as *Jenga* with conversation prompt cards and *Life Stories*. In *Telestration*, players sketch a word and the next player guesses the word based on the drawing. *Blurt* is a game where a player reads a phrase such as "a dried grape," and then another player would guess "raisin." *Game of Things* is played by drawing a card with a topic such as "things you wish grew on trees" and then every player has to write down their answer and guess who wrote which responses. In *Double Ditto*, a card such as "Disney princesses" is read and then players need to come up with two answers and match them with other players' answers. *Jenga* is a game with a tower of stacked wooden blocks, in which the players take turns to remove a block without the stack tumbling over. In our version, in addition to removing a block during their turn, the player also answers a question from a prompt card. *Life Stories* is a board game where each player has to answer questions like, "Tell me about an incident where you couldn't stop laughing."

Prior to the pilots, we carefully tailored the materials and screened out game cards that were too difficult, inappropriate, or negative to ensure acceptability of the activities with the students. We also ordered the sequence of the games as the sessions progressed, from lower to higher skill level, as well as from less personal tasks, such as guessing words, to more personal tasks such as talking about their childhood or favorite vacation.

Program Evaluation

Pre- and post-pilot self-administered questionnaire. Students' baseline self-perceived English ability was measured through a pre-pilot questionnaire on a Likert scale of 0 (no ability) to 10 (full ability) with 5 being a neutral response. The self-perceived English ability assessment questions were identical for the pre- and post-pilot questionnaires and for pilot 1 and 2. The post-pilot questionnaire contained additional questions to

assess students' experiences such as their overall enjoyment, their enjoyment level of different activities, how this program differed from other English classes, and their preferences if this program was to be rolled out again.

Focus group discussion. After pilot 1, we conducted a focus group discussion to understand students' preferences to adapt our program for pilot 2. We used a focus group guide that consisted of 14 questions to guide the discussion and asked the students to share their thoughts on the Games Night in English, what worked well, and their ideas for further improvement. We also asked about the desired session length and frequency.

Results

All participants (n=16) from pilot 1 (n=8) and pilot 2 (n=8) were female. Of the 16 participants in both pilots, 50% (n=8) were fourth-year students, followed by first-year (n=3, 18.8%) and third-year (n=3, 18.8%), and second-year (n=2, 12.5%) students. The average number of sessions attended was 4.5 (SD=2.07, range = 2 – 8 sessions) for pilot 1 and 2.1 sessions (SD=1.25, range = 1 – 4 sessions) for pilot 2.

Based on the students' enjoyment scores (0=did not enjoy at all, 5=enjoyed very much), the top sessions were the movie night (mean score = 5) and the cooking night (mean score = 4.9; Table 1). The top games were *Jenga* with conversation prompt cards (mean score = 4.7), *Telestration* (mean score = 4.6), *Life Stories* (mean score = 4.5) and *Blurt* (mean score = 4.4). The lowest-scoring game was *Double Ditto* (mean score = 3.7).

Students were asked about their self-perceived English ability (0=lowest score, 10=highest score) before and after the Games Night in English (Table 2). The average score for self-reported speaking ability increased from 3.7 to 5.2, representing a 40.5% increase. The average score for self-reported listening ability increased from 5.2 to 6.5, representing a 25.0%

increase. The average score for self-reported confidence in English communication increased from 3.6 to 5.7, representing a 58.3% increase. Interest in improving English ability remained high and increased very slightly from 9.0 to 9.1, representing a 1.1% increase.

During the focus group discussion following pilot 1, due to students' other commitments such as part-time jobs and club activities, the overall consensus among the students was to have fewer sessions, adjust the session length to 1.5 hours, and change to 1 session per week. Despite the high enjoyment for the movie night, students expressed a desire to exclude this from future programs. Participant A explained, "I can watch movies and read books by myself at home, so I would like to have the chance to have real practice speaking English."

The participants seemed generally happy with the program design; Participant B pointed out, "It is good that by using games everyone gets a turn, so there is the opportunity for everyone to speak, especially since Japanese people are shy." Another participant, Participant C, concurred that "In our English classes during the first year, it's mostly reading books out loud, solving questions, and listening to CDs. There is no opportunity to talk." Participant D agreed, saying "This (Games Night in English) is good because we can generate 'output'." When asked about their view on adding medical English to "Games Night in English," they all said it was too early for that, and that they preferred a step-by-step approach. One student, Participant E, expressed her concern as follows: "We don't even have basic English yet, so it's too fast to move to medical English. It's better to build our basic skills first." When asked about how they felt before they signed up for this program, while they attended, and after completion, Participant F revealed, "When I first saw the message on LINE, I thought this looked fun, but I didn't really know what it was. The first time I attended, I felt like I had zero skill, but as I became more relaxed, it got

Table 1. Students' Enjoyment for the Different Sessions in the Games Night in English Pilots, School of Nursing, Tohoku University, 2017

Sessions	Pilot	Mean score ^{1,2} (SD)	Maximum score	Minimum score
Vocabulary and expression enhancement				
<i>Telestration</i>	Pilot 1 & 2	4.6 (0.73)	5	3
<i>Blurt</i>	Pilot 1 & 2	4.4 (0.55)	5	4
<i>Game of things</i>	Pilot 1 only	4.3 (0.50)	5	4
<i>Double Ditto</i>	Pilot 1 only	3.7 (0.95)	5	3
<i>Movie night with English subtitle</i>	Pilot 1 only	5.0 (0.00)	5	5
Communication/ conversation opportunities				
<i>Jenga + conversation prompt cards</i>	Pilot 1 & 2	4.7 (0.48)	5	4
<i>Life stories</i>	Pilot 1 only	4.5 (0.58)	5	4
<i>Cooking night</i>	Pilot 1 & 2	4.9 (0.33)	5	4

¹Sample size ranged from 4 to 10 students for each session depending on the attendance rate and whether the session was trialed in pilot 1, pilot 2, or both.

²Score ranged from 0 (didn't enjoy at all) to 5 (enjoyed very much).

Table 2. Self-Perceived English Ability Before and After the Games Night in English Pilots, School of Nursing, Tohoku University, 2017

Indicators of self-perceived English ability		Pre-English Games Night (N=16)	Post-English Games Night (N=16)	Mean difference	% of Mean difference
		Mean score (SD)	Mean score (SD)		
i)	Speaking ability ¹	3.7 (1.78)	5.2 (0.91)	1.5	40.5%
ii)	Listening ability ²	5.2 (1.87)	6.5 (1.32)	1.3	25.0%
iii)	Confidence in English communication ³	3.6 (1.67)	5.7 (1.70)	2.1	58.3%
iv)	Interest in improving English ⁴	9.0 (1.16)	9.1 (1.54)	0.1	1.1%
v)	Number of vocabulary increased ⁵	-	7.1 (1.00)	-	-
vi)	Number of expressions increased ⁵	-	7.1 (1.18)	-	-

¹Score ranged from 0 (cannot express anything I want to say) to 10 (can express everything I want to say).

²Score ranged from 0 (understand nothing) to 10 (understand everything).

³Score ranged from 0 (not confident at all) to 10 (completely confident).

⁴Score ranged from 0 (not interested at all) to 10 (completely interested).

⁵Score ranged from 0 (did not increase at all) to 10 (increased a lot).

better." Finally, when asked about the best recruitment methods for pilot 2, students said that it would be best to continue recruiting through LINE via a student representative. Participant G clarified this, saying "It is nice that

the information is sent out informally through a student. It makes it less intimidating."

In the post-pilot questionnaire following pilot 2, we asked the eight participating students about the most critical difference between the Games

Night in English and traditional English classes. The responses were the opportunity to communicate and express oneself in English (n=4, 50.0%), to learn English while enjoying chatting (n=2, 25.0%), and to learn English while having fun (n=2, 25.0%).

Discussion

In the School of Nursing at Tohoku University, one major goal in recent years has been to globalize the school and raise the English level among nursing students. In this article, we describe one of our initiatives to use different commercially available English board games and other group activities as a way for students to practice daily English in a relaxing setting. We showed that even with a brief intervention using this approach, it was possible to increase student's self-perceived English speaking ability, listening ability, and confidence in English communication.

Using Games as a Tool to Improve English Communication among Adult Learners

Using games for language learning is not new and has been shown to be effective in English education for younger students (Dewi et al., 2017; Mahmoud and Tanni, 2012). Although there are advocates for using games to promote language learning among adults (Zhu, 2012), and fun and enjoyment can be crucial in adult learning (Lucardie, 2014), games are often less valued and scarcely used among adult learners. In Japan, throughout English education in school, there is often a greater emphasis on knowledge-focused teaching than on communication-focused teaching. This means students are often more focused on generating a sentence with perfect grammar than on expressing their ideas and opinions. This often results in delayed communication or an unwillingness to communicate. Creating a safe environment with humor and laughter, and minimizing fear and anxiety, have been suggested to encourage deep adult learning (Penman and Ellis, 2009; Biggs and Tang, 2011). Therefore, we

believe this makes games and other fun group activities like cooking and movies useful tools to create this ideal learning environment. Zhu also argued that games are easily accepted by students, can help students practice all the different language skills, and can create a relaxing and enjoyable setting where they may be less afraid of making mistakes (Zhu, 2012).

For the reasons stated above, we believe our approach could be particularly relevant for our students, who are mostly from the Tohoku region, where students are generally perceived to be more reserved and have less exposure to foreigners and English compared to students from the Kanto and Kansai regions. At least one other university in the Tohoku region has also utilized a combination of games and activities in 'English cafés' to shift the focus from correcting grammatical mistakes to encourage the timely transmission of ideas (Chang, 2017). Similar to our findings, the author observed that participants developed greater confidence in English communication, maintained eye contact, and appeared more comfortable while communicating (Chang, 2017). It is important to note that games utilized in our program are not specifically intended for language teaching, but are commercially available family board games that can be enjoyed by all age groups. Beyond creating an opportunity for communication, we believe these games also offer students a platform to learn about the Western culture, as well as common expressions used among native English speakers.

Using a Participatory Approach to Develop and Tailor Programs for Students

In these pilots, we took a participatory approach by involving students in the recruitment process and the development and tailoring of the program. We believe this may have also contributed to the effectiveness of the Games Night in English pilots. We believe careful tailoring

of our program and involving students in the decision-making process were particularly important for our target group, especially considering the unique characteristics of students from the Tohoku region.

After pilot 1, we adapted pilot 2 and incorporated many program characteristics from pilot 1 based on students' preferences. We also used their enjoyment level for each game/activity to design pilot 2. Pilot 2 consisted of *Blurt*, *Telestration*, *Jenga* + conversation cards, and cooking night. We hypothesize that their favorite and least favorite games and activities may have been related to their fears and anxiety. *Double Ditto*, their lowest ranked game on the enjoyment scale, required quick thinking to write two answers in a short timeframe. We believe this was difficult for some students who may feel pressured and discouraged if they were the last to complete the task, holding up the game. We therefore believe to accommodate students who are still building confidence around their language skill, it may be necessary to remove the "timing" component, which has the potential to backfire and discourage students.

A Positive Feedback Loop in Building Confidence

We were surprised by our students' self-reported English improvement, especially the large increase in their confidence in English communication, despite the few sessions they attended. This could be due to a few reasons. Firstly, as students explained during the focus group, in this program they have the opportunity to use English and can freely express their ideas. This is in contrast to formal English classes offered in the university, which are largely focused on reading and writing. Secondly, we believe the fun nature of the games and activities reduced students' level of anxiety and established an optimal environment for learning and sharing ideas with less fear of being judged (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Finally, in accordance with

Bem's self-perception theory, it is believed that we form opinions about ourselves in the same way as we form opinions about others (Bem, 1967). Therefore, we hypothesize that when students observe that they could be understood when they communicated in English, their confidence increases, which in turn encourages them to communicate more, creating a positive feedback loop.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, this study used self-reported data instead of an objective, standardized assessment to measure students' English ability. Each student may rate themselves differently. Therefore, we cannot eliminate the possibility of response bias. Secondly, this study had a small sample size with specific characteristics (self-selected, highly motivated female nursing students). Therefore, our data may not be generalizable to the rest of the School of Nursing students, which reduces the value of statistical testing. Thirdly, it is possible the personal characteristics and attitude of the facilitator may also affect students' sense of ease, motivation, and willingness to communicate. It is difficult to estimate how much this may have affected the level of improvement seen. Finally, although we saw an increase in self-perceived English ability immediately following the pilot program, we do not have any data to determine the longer-term impact of this program.

Conclusions

In our study, we demonstrated that something as simple as playing games, even for just a few sessions, can have a big impact on students' self-perceived English abilities. Based on the positive findings from both pilots, we have transitioned this program into a permanent 'Monthly Global Night' since 2018. This is based on the same concept of promoting conversational English in a fun and relaxing setting, but is now open to all students in the School of Nursing at Tohoku

University.

We believe the outcome we saw was in part due to the approach we took. We encourage other nursing English educators to explore different avenues to provide opportunities for students to use the language skills they learned in formal English classes, continually monitor and adjust the program to the students' needs and preferences, and actively involve students in the process of developing and evaluating programs.

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