

《論 文》

Model United Nations as a means to build practical, transferable skills

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Abstract

Model United Nations (MUN) is a simulated forum in which young people role-play the decision-making protocols of selected committees and assemblies of the United Nations. Over the last 60 years, MUN has become an extremely popular extra-curricular activity in American high schools and universities, and is now increasingly well-known globally. The United Nations Foundation (2013) states that in excess of 400,000 students now participate in such conferences around the world, and major universities such as Harvard now bring conferences to international locations to satisfy the burgeoning demand. In Japan, domestic conferences such as the All Japan Model United Nations, the Japanese University English Model United Nations, and the Kansai High School United Nations are held annually in Japanese, English, or a mixture of both languages, and attract hundreds of participants from Japan and abroad. Typically, Model UN participation is presented to native-speakers as an active opportunity to build skills in diplomacy, leadership, and consensus building. For many foreign-language learners, participation also represents a chance to build language proficiency in a simulated environment that offers more realistic opportunities for communication than is possible in a typical foreign language classroom. However, despite the clear popularity of Model UN, research has so far been minimal in any context. This paper will describe the process of preparing a class of female, Japanese, university students for participation in an English-language Model UN. Through interpretation of qualitative data obtained through interviews and a questionnaire, it is hoped the paper will contribute to a greater understanding of whether second language speakers felt they made significant gains in English and other 'life-skills', such as leadership and global awareness, with which Model UN is typically recommended to young people.

Introduction

Model United Nations (MUN) is a well-established, worldwide educational program that is said to offer a wide range of practical and academic learning opportunities in the areas of leadership, diplomacy, negotiation, and consensus building (Muldoon, 1996). Claims have been made for more effective content-learning (McIntosh, 2001) and parallel foreign-language learning success have been shown in certain settings (Yashima & Zenuck-Nishide, 2008). Worldwide, it is claimed that over 400,000 students participate in MUN conferences every year (Obendorf & Randerson, 2012) and English-speaking Model United Nations are growing in popularity in Japanese curriculums and extra-curricular clubs at high school and university, with increasing numbers of young Japanese people traveling overseas to participate in competitive conferences abroad. Through a simulation of the activities of the General Assembly and associated committees, MUN allows students to conduct research into real global problems; learn something of the intricacies of global diplomacy; construct practical, realistic

solutions to the problems under discussion and finally negotiate their proposals to a successful (or unsuccessful) conclusion in collaboration and competition with the delegates of other nations. At MUN events, and in preparation classes, students have the opportunity to practice and demonstrate skills in research, negotiation, public speaking, debating, leadership and academic writing. As a concurrent learning goal, foreign language students can use the opportunity to build and demonstrate their ability in English in pursuit of realistic and challenging goals, in which language skills are a tool to success rather than the focus of academic study.

The Model UN in Summary

The basis of an MUN meeting can be summarised simplistically. Conferences may be large, with hundreds of delegates participating, but an MUN simulation can be replicated in a classroom easily enough with groups as small as eight. A key point to remember is that there is no regulating body for MUN and no hard and fast rules for a simulation. Teachers usually wish to replicate the UN committees or the General Assembly as closely as possible but a lot of flexibility to account for educational goals is typical. Essentially, a Model UN involves the following stages:

- One or more global issues are selected for debate
- Countries are allocated to participants to represent as delegates
- Delegates research the issue and their country
- Delegates submit a Position Paper showing understanding of the issue and their country's stance
- At the conference delegates are assigned to groups where they produce a document to resolve aspects of the issue (known as a Working Paper)
- Groups submit their Working Paper which, if accepted, becomes known as a Draft Resolution
- Delegates justify the Draft Resolution to the assembled countries (known as Member States)
- Delegates of other Member States discuss and amend the Draft Resolution to better reflect their national interest
- Delegates vote on the Draft Resolution
- The Draft Resolution is adopted, becoming an official Resolution, or fails

Example in a small class

As an example, a teacher with a small class of twenty students has chosen the theme of Territorial Ownership Issues in the South China Sea. Since the class is small, she has decided to look only at the Spratly Island issue and has assigned ten countries to delegations working in pairs. The countries she has assigned are Brunei, China (PRC), Japan, Malaysia, Philippines,

Taiwan (ROC) and Vietnam as possible claimants to the territory, and the USA and Russia as influential Security Council members. She has decided to also add Japan as a powerful regional player with vested interest in the outcome.

Preparation

The teacher gives a quiz to assess the students' awareness of the issues and then gives some background in PowerPoint lectures. She focuses on resolution of the territory issue and then asks them to prepare their own PowerPoint in which they will present their understanding of the issue in relation to their own country. She then helps them to learn the meeting protocol for the committee sessions in terms of how they should address each other and run the meetings effectively. She sets a Position Paper, and allocates sufficient class time and homework to help the delegations prepare themselves effectively in terms of content knowledge.

Committee Stage

The teacher has decided to split the group into two Committees representing five nations. Each will work on a Working Paper of 10–12 clauses to resolve ownership of the territory. The teacher carefully selects the Committee members to encourage different opinions. Each group prepares their plan and presents the Working Paper to the teacher who checks it, makes suggestions and finally accepts it as a Draft Resolution. Copies are made of the two Draft Resolutions and distributed to each delegation.

Second Committee Stage

Delegations assemble in their committees and discuss the Draft Resolution submitted by the other committee. They prepare Amendments and submit them to the other committee. The sponsoring committee reads the submitted Amendments and decides if they are acceptable (Friendly) or not (Unfriendly). Before returning them. Delegations are encouraged to actively negotiate a Friendly result in side meetings. The Draft Resolutions are then rewritten to reflect the Friendly Amendments. Unfriendly Amendments may be rewritten to make them more acceptable or discarded.

General Assembly

Delegations sit as the General Assembly and adhere to a pre-decided meeting protocol. The first Draft Resolution is selected at random. The default setting of this stage is the Formal Debate where each country makes a speech on the issue. A delegation makes an official Motion to temporarily leave Formal Debate to introduce the Draft Resolution in Informal Debate for a given time. The Draft Resolution is read line by line and other Member States ask questions and submit more Amendments to the clauses. Again, Amendments are accepted or rejected by the

Draft Resolution sponsors. The debate follows strict time limits and delegates return to Formal Debate for more speeches when reminded to do so by the teacher, who is the Chair for the meetings. Further Motions are made regularly to return to Committee to discuss clauses and Amendments; to suspend the meeting for free negotiation; or to return to discussing the remaining clauses of the Draft Resolution. When all debate has been exhausted and the speeches are concluded, the Chair moves the Assembly to voting.

Voting

Delegations vote on unfriendly Amendments. Finally, delegations vote on the Draft Resolution including all successful Amendments. The Resolution passes and delegates applaud. The debate process is then repeated for the next Draft Resolution.

Model United Nations to Build Skills

One of the primary justification for Model United Nations, and other simulations, arises in the constructivist notion that learners build an understanding of the world, and the language needed to understand it, through experiences. We form mental models of society, and our place in it, through participation and the ordering of our experiences (Mahoney, 2004) . A constructivist view of pedagogy suggests that learning will be more effective when it stems from active agency on the part of the learners. In Model UN, students are exposed to problems and asked to resolve them in a logical and feasible manner from the point of view of a chosen nation. They are asked to empathise with the people of that country, and to role-play their adopted point of view. Given the roles of delegates they are placed in an elaborate simulation, in a formal setting, with representatives of other nations. MUN advocates argue that this direct experience allows them to participate in the resolution of a difficult problem far more effectively and realistically than can be achieved through dispassionate examination.

Teachers experienced in Model UN are typically drawn to the potential for relevant content learning and the opportunity to build the kinds of skills that successful participation requires - leadership, consensus-building, diplomacy, public speaking - the types of attributes normally demonstrated by actual diplomats in the real world. Asal and Blake (2006) write of political simulations:

“Experiential learning allows students to apply and test what they learn in their textbooks, and often helps to increase students’ understanding of the subtleties of theories or concepts and draw in students who can be alienated by traditional teaching approaches. By putting students in role-play situations where they need to make defensible decisions and often have to convince others to work with them, simulations also provide students with the opportunity to develop their communication, negotiation, and critical thinking skills, and in

many cases, improve teamwork skills” (Asal & Blake, 2006, p.2)

Datta (2013) writes:

Model UN experience helps a student of business in multiple ways. It improves their research, written and oral communication, negotiation, persuasion and problem-solving skills. Interacting with and persuading others to come to a resolution on conflicting issues requires leadership qualities and team building skills that are helpful in any business or other career setting. (Datta, 2013)

Datta is referencing surveys of business students, which support the notion of the benefits of experiential learning, but it should be underlined that research on Model United Nations is not extensive and many of the claims for skill building rely on common sense notions that skills practiced in class should be transferable into real-life interactions, something which is not extensively demonstrated in the literature.

Japan-based teachers involved in MUN typically make reference to the potential for multiple learning objectives that go beyond those experienced by those communicating in their native language. Japanese participants in English-language MUNs have usually learned English as a second or foreign language and both participant and teacher are likely to have learning goals that relate to language proficiency, in addition to, or even superseding the life-skills mentioned above. In Japan then, and other international locations, MUN has become a component of communicative language teaching. This is hardly surprising in a country where opportunities for realistic communication in English are hard to come by. Moreover, a lot of methodology on Content-Based Instruction and Content-Language Integrated Learning fit comfortably with the process of preparing delegates for a conference, particularly pedagogy which deals with the challenges of introducing difficult materials in another language (Peacock, 1997; see Gilmore, 2007 for an extensive review), and the need for schema activation and effective supports and scaffolds (Musumeci, 1996; Corin 1997). Ultimately, the potential for more realistic L2 interaction at a conference, often with delegates of other nationalities, is seen as a powerful motivating force to propel and encourage students through a period of intensive preparation.

It is tempting to assume that useful skills that have been practiced in an English-speaking environment are transferable into the environment of the second language. This is an important issue as claims are made that skills learned at MUN are workplace applicable. However, whether learning how to be a good negotiator in English, in an international setting, in a simulation, necessarily makes you a better negotiator when returned to ones native language and societal norms is an intriguing question on which little research data exists.

Model United Nations to build language skills

In terms of demonstrable language gains, research has been similarly limited. Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide (2008) state that the creation of an imaginary international community can offer comparable benefits to overseas study in terms of international self-awareness and English language gains, but more research is clearly required before anyone can claim that MUN preparation is superior to other forms of content-driven EFL/ESL, at least in terms of how much English is actually learned by participants in the experience. MUN advocates, including the author, are more likely to point to a quorum of skills that students practice and potentially improve, and that motivation and a sense of achievement are formidable drivers of language building. Nonetheless, a greater body of research is clearly called for.

Justification for the Study

Model United Nations has been insufficiently studied to date and there are few accounts of how well Japanese can acquit themselves when placed in a challenging negotiation context in which they need to use their second language. Given that there are few authentic voices describing the experience of Japanese participants in an domestic setting, in which English language is a clear teaching goal, it seemed valuable to record the experiences of participants and compare commonalities of experience so a greater understanding of the learning experience would become apparent. For this reason, and given the small number of participants, it was decided that a qualitative approach drawing on interviews would be appropriate.

Context

Five female, third year students enrolled in the sociology department of a Japanese Women's University volunteered to prepare for and attend the Japanese Universities English Model United Nations (JUEMUN) as part of their chosen seminar (ZEMI) course in International Politics. On average the students were of intermediate level, although there was some variety in both the English-language proficiency and confidence of the participants. All had expressed a desire to complete their ZEMI studies in English and had shown sufficient proficiency to convince the instructor they could participate to some extent in the conference. The students attended the event with a larger group of 13 third year, male and female students from their sister university (where the writer is also an instructor). These latter students have all completed a credited year at an overseas university, are conversationally fluent in English, and have a level of literacy high enough to enroll on degree courses overseas. Both groups were prepared using similar materials and topics although the seminar group had more contact time with the instructor through extra tutorial sessions. Although this report does not comment extensively on the performance of the advanced group, their superior language skills and experience of university in an English speaking country was seen as a useful point of

comparison with the seminar students who have only Japan-based university experience.

Japanese University English Model United Nations

JUEMUN was established in 2010 and is a Kansai-based, three day conference that attracted 276 participants in 2015, including journalists and support staff, drawn from 30 different countries. The theme of the conference was Fostering a Culture of Peace and the directors had separated delegates into five Meeting Rooms. The issues for each room were (1) Women's Equality and Empowerment, (2) Protecting Indigenous Groups and their Cultures, (3) Responding to Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation, (4) Protecting Children in Armed Conflict. The delegates in each room were subdivided into Committees of approximately 12 delegates who were tasked with preparing a Draft Resolution on aspects of the issue. As an example, the Committee considering the issue of Protecting Children in Armed Conflict prepared Draft Resolutions on each of the following topics:

- 1 . Killing and Maiming of Children in War
- 2 . Recruitment of Child Soldiers
- 3 . Sexual Violence against Children
- 4 . Denial of Humanitarian Access
- 5 . Abduction of Children

JUEMUN is a challenging event and potentially stressful. Students at this conference represent a country as a lone delegate, rather than as a delegation, and are immediately placed in a committee group with strangers that may include a mixture of native English speakers, multi-lingual overseas students, returnee Japanese students, international school graduates as well as domestic students drawn from more typical educational backgrounds. Some of the delegates are experienced, particularly those who apply from overseas, and some are highly competitive and occasionally aggressive in debate, although JUEMUN organisers are keen to stress consensus and teamwork and do not give prizes for Best Delegate and so on, as many events do. At the conference, delegates are required to make speeches on the issue to the assembly, contribute opinions in the Committee stage, help to write a Draft Resolution, negotiate Amendments, and present clauses to the floor. They are asked to know the issue extremely well, be confident and creative in their solutions and demonstrate the ability to negotiate a point of view.

The Action Research

I was interested to see how well the students would prepare for the conference and how well they would acquit themselves in the simulation. Since the students were all members of the graduation seminar class, which is focused on research with a view to writing a graduation thesis, I wondered what they would learn in terms of content and research skills. I was also

interested in whether they would feel they had benefitted from the program in terms of leadership and negotiation skills. I wanted to know how the experience affected their motivation to learn English and use the skills we had practiced in classes and at the conference. Finally, I wondered whether the participants felt it had been a positive experience from the perspective of learning a language. The areas of investigation have been summarised below as questions:

- 1 . How do students of this level perceive their own participation in a Model UN?
- 2 . What are the implications of teaching a Model UN course in terms of research skills?
- 3 . Do students from this context feel they can accrue attendant life-skills in leadership and negotiation from participation in a Model UN?
- 4 . Do learners feel the experience of Model UN participation helped their language skills?
- 5 . How can the course be improved in future?

Data Collection

Data was collected mainly through observation and individual interviews with the participants in debriefing sessions of approximately 30 minutes after the conference. Learners also completed a questionnaire and wrote a reflection on their experience. Data was mainly collected in English, though students were free to speak Japanese at times during the interviews as they wished.

Teaching the Course

The topics and countries were assigned to participants through JUEMUN. Since each student had been assigned a different issue to consider, it was considered too challenging and time consuming to cover all the issues during the eight weeks allocated to preparation. Therefore, it was decided to set the neutral topic of workplace equality to learn the MUN system and practice the skill set required for successful participation, leaving research of the actual JUEMUN issues to the students and tutorial sessions outside class time. For assessment, students were set a PowerPoint presentation on the issue they had been allocated and a two page Position Paper for which they were given a model to follow. Class time was spent teaching the following aspects of preparation (the list is not linear and several areas were visited multiple times):

- What is an MUN?
- How to research your country and issue
- How to write a Position Paper
- How an MUN meeting works
- Conducting a needs analysis into a problem
- Formulating solutions to issues
- Negotiation, consensus building and getting what you want

- Making speeches, asking and answering questions
- Writing Draft Resolution clauses and Amendments

Data Analysis

Student Participation

All of the participants gave a very positive assessment of their participation in the event in the reflections and debriefing. In interviews, however, the students reported varying levels of participation during the key 'free-discussion' Committee stages where they wrote the Draft Resolution. A lack of English language skills was a common theme. All of the participants concurred that the students with stronger English skills and confidence set the dynamic for the group and organised the participation of others. One said in an interview, "students who speak English write the Resolution". Some of the participants expressed frustration. One member, a strong-minded and intelligent woman who had researched the issue and her country far more extensively than others in the group of five, talked of how the members who could speak very fluently spoke together, and those who spoke less well participated to support them. She felt her idea was not considered sufficiently by the group who told her was "it was not relevant, and I couldn't explain". She was keen however, like all of the participants, to stress the friendliness of the other group members and explained how she was influenced positively by them to improve her ability to communicate. Another wrote in the reflection paper that although she "couldn't tell what I thinking with felicity, all people always brought their ear to my awkward words and thought together with me." Another wrote "while I was speaking, other delegates smiled at me and nod, and after my speech, they said to me 'I got your idea'. Then the pressure I was feeling became lighter". In light of these comments, it seemed pertinent that the questionnaire item pertaining to 'understanding of my strengths and weaknesses in English' was scored 'strongly agree' by all.

All but one of the students spoke of stress and nerves. One commented (many times) that she wanted to escape before the meeting. According to their self-assessment, their anxiety mainly arose from an uncertainty about how the event would unfold, and from a lack of confidence in their English ability and the extent of their preparation. All said they were able to relax as they got to know the other participants. "At first I thought I had to speak English all day long...after all day finished, I'm just satisfied. And tired, very tired!"

Student Research

Only one of the students was able to research the assigned topic to the instructor's satisfaction and without extensive assistance. All of the position papers required various degrees of editing for grammatical errors, as was expected, but it was not foreseen that the quality of research would be so low. In fact, all but one participant needed considerable

assistance in terms of locating information and compiling an acceptable position paper. Most of the papers had more input from the teacher than was originally intended and three needed significant rewriting to reach the required standard by JUEMUN. As the conference became imminent, several of the students requested meetings and used the teacher as their primary research source to gather information. Of these participants, all felt they had not prepared sufficiently or began early enough. One remarked “I had not information”, and another said she lacked knowledge and “special words” equally. Another said “I thought that I want to study more hardly about the issue of international relations before participating in JUEMUN”. Two suggested that the topic was overly challenging for them. One said she lacked interest in the topic at first, although she developed interest through the experience. Of the five, only one was complimented by the instructor for a good standard of work. This performance contrasted strongly with the more advanced group with overseas experience who were mostly able to produce research ranging from acceptable to excellent with minimal redrafts or input. Of the thirteen students with overseas experience, only two produced papers with a less than acceptable standard of research in the initial draft (according to JUEMUN directions), and all were more confident in locating information from multiple sources, referencing, and formatting the document as directed.

Leadership and negotiation

According to the questionnaire, only one of the students felt they were able to demonstrate leadership in this setting in terms, with four disagreeing and one answering ‘I don’t know’. In interviews, none of the students felt they had demonstrated leadership although two said they would like to try and take more leadership next time. One said “during the regional debate, the delegate of Ethiopia controlled meeting very well. I totally relied on her so I don’t think my leadership”. Two of the students commented that Japanese students who spoke English very well were able to show leadership in the group, and most felt that strong English skills were the key to taking on leadership roles. In terms of negotiation, students gave stronger responses on the questionnaire. Four agreed that they had improved their ability and confidence to negotiate generally, and in English in particular. In interviews, no-one reported that they felt satisfied by their ability to negotiate in English, but all but one reported trying to communicate and experiencing a feeling of achievement.

English skills

Most of the comments regarding English improvement pertain to motivation to speaking and improvement of skills, although one student felt her vocabulary had progressed. All ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ on the questionnaire that their motivation to improve their communication skills had increased as a result. Several students reported that they were impressed with

Japanese students who could communicate in English and wished to emulate them. All were also able to show clear insight into their own strengths and weaknesses. “I felt I had to study the technical term and listening skill, also I felt I need to master the communication ability”, said one. “I felt it is important to communicate positively”, said another. One student said that she felt much more confident about speaking English in class after the experience, particularly that she was no longer nervous to give a presentation. Another said her main motivation is to work overseas and that she was encouraged by her experience. She also understands better what is required to achieve her goal.

Implications for course design

It seemed clear from the responses of the participants that they had a positive experience from the preparation and conference. However, there are question marks over whether the kind of participation they experienced at JUEMUN was optimal for students with this level of English. Although they all reported a high degree of satisfaction, it was clear that they struggled to communicate on an even footing with participants with a higher level of language ability. This bears out the researcher’s own observations that English-skills are often used as a low-level weapon in negotiations such as these, and while this is a useful lesson in itself, it is concerning that intelligent ideas are being silenced on the basis of less confident communicative ability. Although the principle of MUN participation seems sound, a more sheltered conference, with greater language support, might build skills more efficiently for less fluent participants.

More concerning on a course-level, and perhaps for the institution is the students’ lack of competency with research. In Japan, for many students, the ZEMI program is their first real experience of research-led learning. For all but one of the students, awareness of what was expected came far too late and this made preparation extremely stressful for all concerned. Strategies to make the students more aware of the requirements need to be implemented in the course. More importantly, work needs to be done, preferably starting in earlier grades, to build skills in research. This data comes from very small sample and little can be said authoritatively on such a basis but, even allowing for stronger English skills, the greater application and ability of students with overseas experience was strongly suggested when the two groups were compared.

In terms of leadership, it is strongly suggested that leadership skills and language are fundamentally linked at Model United Nations events in ways that skew the kinds of interactions that might be seen in a first language environment. Whether strategies can be taught to overcome this for students with weaker language skills requires further consideration and research.

In terms of English, it is extremely encouraging that students report greater motivation to improve and pursue more opportunities for similar interactions in the real world. It is

concerning, however, that few of the students can clearly identify specific language skills they have improved over the course of study. More care needs to be taken to identify key language-learning targets and highlight them for the students.

Conclusion

In Japan, more needs to be done to develop strong language skills so that young people have the mental tools to make their ideas understood and take leadership in challenging international environments. Simulations like Model United Nations have excellent potential to improve learners' abilities in these areas this but further support from institutions is needed so that all students, not only those who are already at an advanced level, have the opportunity to take full advantage of the fantastic learning opportunity that MUN represents.

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