

# A Practical Approach to Teaching a Model United Nations Course to EFL Students

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## Abstract

The EFL classroom can provide an opportunity for learners to develop an awareness of the world. One potential approach is a Model United Nations (MUN) based EAP program (Higgins & Tanaka, 1999). At a MUN, a diverse body of students comes together with the intention of drafting Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) focused resolutions. To deal with anxiety issues experienced by participants of previous MUN events, a preparatory class was established. Mixed-ability learners are tasked with conducting action research on issues of relevance to their assigned country and collaborating on a resolution paper. This paper will introduce some of the techniques involved in teaching the skills required to act as delegates at a MUN. These include guided language input, negotiation role-plays (Adamson, 2013), feedback from peers and instructors, and video-based self-evaluation. By developing these skills, students are expected to increase their motivation to participate in future MUN events, and ultimately in the global community.

模擬国連 (MUN) をベースとした EAP プログラムを利用することで、学習者が世界の代表としての役割をよりよく理解できるようになる可能性がある (Higgins & Tanaka, 1999)。以前、特定の持続可能な開発目標 (SDGs) に向けた決議案の作成の為、多様な学生を集う事により、不安が高かった為、基本的な原則を紹介する授業を設けている。混合能力の学習者には、割り当てられた国に関連する問題について研究を行い、決議案を共同で作成することが課せられています。本論文では、MUN で代表者として行動するために必要な能力を教える手法を紹介します。これらには、ガイド付き言語入力、交渉ロールプレイ (Adamson, 2013)、仲間や講師からの評価、ビデオによる自己評価などがあります。これらの能力を身につける事で、学生は将来の模擬国連大会、ひいては国際社会への参加意欲を高める事が期待されている。

**Keywords:** Japan University English Model United Nations, EFL, Language Acquisition

## I Introduction

Students worldwide live in an increasingly globalized environment, and to prepare them for the future, there is a need to foster global citizenship. Oxford (2020) suggests a “Language of Peace Approach” and describes how such methodology can help students develop empathy and understanding, improving their own wellbeing and that of the planet. Three of the categories she mentions are particularly salient to Model United Nations (MUN) activities: intercultural peace, international peace and ecological peace. The first focuses on understanding and compassion for others, the second on international cooperation, and the third on the environment. These are some of the topics students must deal with as well when preparing and joining a MUN.

Bringing attention to global issues in language learning is not new to Japan, and instructors have been introducing such curriculum to high school and university students in Japan for decades (see Adamson 2013; Cates 2004; Harrison 1999; Peaty 2004; Yamashiro 1996; Zenuk-Nishide 1991). Higgins and Tanaka (1999) discuss empowering learners by giving them authentic materials and real-world issues to consider. More recently, with buzzwords such as “active learning” and “project-based/task-based learning,” activities such as Model United Nations have taken on more significance, as the entire MUN process sets clear goals that must be accomplished through communicative teamwork. Researchers such as Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu (2004) and more recently Menezes and Juan-Garau (2015) have shown how students increase their willingness to communicate (WTC) when given content-based learning activities.

MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) noted that communicative goals are the key in the conceptual model of WTC, and this holds true for foreign or second language learners. In his lecture, Dörnyei (Cambridge University Press ELT, 2018) lists what he considers essential for a safe speaking environment: adequate time and place, immersive activities, student-selected topics, positive peer interaction, and appropriate feedback. In general, all of these are possible in a MUN, albeit some activities operate in a time-constricted fashion, and beginners may feel pressure and not speak out as much.

## II MUN and JUEMUN

Two years after the United Nations began in 1945, the first Model United Nations (MUN) conference was held at Swarthmore College. Since then, the number of MUN conferences has expanded dramatically and now is in the hundreds (List of Model United Nations Conferences, n.d.). Students from universities and high schools worldwide have been participating in Model United Nations. However, the number of Japanese participating in these international events has been relatively limited. In 2010, the two Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) conference co-chairs, Steve Brown and Donna Tatsuki, decided to include an English-based MUN, which led to the founding of the Japan University English Model United Nations (known as JUEMUN). That first conference had 51 participants from five universities, and the movement eventually reached over 300 participants in 2016 (JUEMUN, 2020). More recently, numbers have been restricted to around 200 in order to deliver a more manageable size conference.

### 1. Diversity in the Organization

The organizers of JUEMUN, to foster an English-only atmosphere, aim to gather approximately 40% international students. The experience of including these students is significant, as the participants' diversity approximates the feeling of a real UN organization. They come from dozens of countries, and only a few are native English speakers, so that forces everyone to stay in the target language. In addition, unlike the actual UN itself, the gender makeup of JUEMUN skews toward females, and well over half of the participants are women.

The two universities that host the conference are foreign language universities in Western Japan, which makes finding international students to participate easier than at most universities. Some of them are based in Japan temporarily, and others are pursuing four-year degrees, but all have some experience with Japan. This cultural familiarity helps to build rapport amongst the remaining 60% of the delegates who are Japanese. A few delegates even fly to Japan just for the event, though in most cases, they travel from neighboring countries such as the Philippines, Taiwan and Indonesia.

### 2. English Level

The English levels vary widely amongst both the international and Japanese participants.

Ideally, a TOEFL IBT level of 70–80, approximately equivalent to an EIKEN pre-1or CEFR B2+ or above would be ideal, but many participants are of a slightly lower proficiency. These students often struggle with the English background guides and the fast-paced negotiations of some of the more fluent participants. However, despite having weaker language skills, most are able to make up for it with hard work and enthusiasm. For some of these students, successfully participating in such an event leads to future enthusiasm for English study and international travel.

Outside of the two host universities, there are between 10 and 20 institutions that send teams of delegates each year. Many of these have ongoing programs related to global issues or politics, and because of this, they can combine their regular curriculum with the JUEMUN preparation and experience. Those universities which do not have such programs often rely on active instructors involved in English clubs or study abroad programs to recruit and prepare the delegates.

### **3. Timeline and Format**

In a typical cycle, the conference theme is announced in June at the end of the previous year's MUN, and the following January a call goes out for participants. By knowing the theme a year in advance, instructors can prepare background reading suggestions or lectures to lay a foundation. However, there remains the challenge of knowing exactly which students will be participating. In universities with a more extensive history of JUEMUN participation, it is common for students to join twice or even three times, thereby maintaining institutional knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm, making recruiting new members easier. Once the delegates are confirmed, countries and topics are assigned, and students can begin to prepare for their specific assignments. The entire conference usually lasts a full three days. Delegates arrive on a Friday morning for orientation and soon get into MUN mode. Evenings include working dinners and some time for socializing, but students generally return to their hotel rooms and continue to work on MUN proposals.

The overall cost of local transportation, meals, and accommodation is substantial, but as the conference sites themselves are provided by universities, students' overall cost is not overly burdensome. In past years a fee of 25,000 yen per person has been maintained, and in many cases, this is covered in part or entirely by grants from each students' home university. Accommodation is often three or four students to a room, which helps add to the cama-

radierie of the event and gives students a chance to get to know peers from other parts of the country or world.

The themes the delegates have tackled since 2016 have included Quality of Life, Women's Empowerment, Hunger, and Employment. These themes are taken from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Agenda (or SDGs), and while many MUN delegates may not have had direct experience with such issues, by researching country demographics and socio-economic indicators, they are able to increase empathy towards people of other cultures, and many even take on another persona. In 2016 there were four separate "meetings", each with a different SDG, which made conference cohesion a real challenge. Since then, the decision was made to focus on a single agenda, broken down into three meetings and committees.

#### **4. Challenges and Solutions**

Aside from the logistics, student delegates are faced with several significant challenges. Other than English levels, critical deficits are a lack of research and presentation experience. From observing international students prepare, it is apparent that most Japanese participants have had far less experience with establishing and arguing a specific position, which leads to silence if they are not given enough support and practice. Other challenges can include a lack of JUEMUN alumni with enough free time to help faculty and delegates prepare sessions and give pointers, as well as juggling Friday classes or part-time work on the weekend of the conference.

Over the past decade, the organizers have amassed a substantial collection of materials designed to support the delegates' inquiry into the issues and countries they represent. For many students, especially first-year students, such research is highly demanding. By organizing study groups in a lunch break or in actual classes, students can assist each other and provide guidance.

### **III Method of Instruction**

In order to address the aforementioned struggles experienced by students participating in MUN events, a preparatory class was established at Kobe Gakuin University by an instructor who also served as a JUEMUN faculty advisor. The class syllabus specified that students would be guided through the MUN process ahead of their participation in JUEMUN in the

latter part of the course.

Classes were held in the spring of 2020. However, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a number of changes were made to both JUEMUN and the preparatory class. The latter switched to an online format for the shortened thirteen-week semester, with live lessons taking place on the video call platform Zoom, and materials uploaded to the Microsoft Teams service, reflecting patterns in global education in 2020. In many learning environments, disappointment and frustration were common themes, as students struggled with the sudden shift in lesson format (Krishnapatria, 2020; Nobuoka et al, 2020; Yamamoto et al, 2020). However, efforts were made to ensure that alterations to the method of instruction would interfere as little as possible with the aims of the course. JUEMUN also moved online, with the conference broken down into a number of events over a five-week period, mainly at weekends, culminating in a whole-day Zoom session in June, 2020. Some regular elements were dropped, such as the usual requirement for student delegates to write a position paper, a demanding task which forms a major part of the preparation for JUEMUN. Such changes were reflected in the class, enabling its sixteen learners to maximize their opportunities for preparation.

Credit for the class was given to students based on three areas. One of these was participation in JUEMUN, worth 45% of their overall score. Feedback accounted for a further 20%. Classwork, which covered the remaining 35% of the overall score, was based on a policy speech and the writing of working papers. In addition to these requirements, the class also involved students in debating the text of working papers with other delegates and negotiating draft amendments. These content-based learning activities fit the description given by Menezes and Juan-Garau (2015) as likely to lead to a greater WTC. Content is linked to the language of peace, thereby requiring learners to consider global issues (Oxford, 2020).

One initiative that was brought in to bridge the gap between the preparatory class and JUEMUN was the use of language support guides. JUEMUN participants are provided with some extensive lists of useful phrases for writing draft resolutions, such as preambular clauses which can be used. However, in the class at Kobe Gakuin University, the ability to use English was quite mixed, with students ranging from CEFR level A2 to B2. Therefore, they were provided with far more simplistic language guides than the ones used at JUEMUN. These include a list of useful prompts to enable student delegates to form appropriate phrases while debating. Language was arranged in a functional way, with the aim of prompt-

ing discussion and easing communication among participants in role-play activities (Adamson, 2013). Table 1 shows an example.

**Table 1. Sample Language Guide Used in Preparatory Lessons for JUEMUN at Kobe Gakuin University**

<b>PHRASES FOR STATING YOUR OPINIONS/SUGGESTIONS</b>	
<b>ASKING FOR COMMENTS/ OPINIONS.</b> What do you think about that? What do we all think? Do you agree...?	<b>STRONG AGREEMENT</b> You are absolutely right. Absolutely I totally agree
<b>GIVING A NEUTRAL OPINION</b> I think... Why don't we...? It seems to me that... In my opinion... We should....	<b>NEUTRAL WAY</b> I think you are right. That's right I agree.
<b>GIVING A TENTATIVE OPINION</b> It might be the case that... Perhaps we should... Is it possible to/that...?	<b>TENTATIVE OR PARTIAL AGREEMENT</b> To a certain degree (extent), I agree. I partially agree, but Yes, but...
<b>GIVING A STRONG OPINION</b> I'm sure that.. There is no doubt that...	<b>MAKING POSITIVE SUGGESTIONS</b> How about if we... Can't /Couldn't we just...? What about if we...

Research by Fujimura (forthcoming) shows that some unfamiliar skills required for MUN participation should be approached initially in the speaker's L1. Once these learners are familiar with the concepts and procedures involved, the language guides serve as a form of scaffolding which help learners to progress to being able to demonstrate the same skills in a foreign language.

## Discussion

The online nature of both preparatory classes and JUEMUN itself meant that interaction could be recorded, providing data ready to be analyzed for research. To this end, all participants gave informed consent. Two short transcripts will follow which demonstrate the nature of class interaction. The first comes from a discussion activity which involved committees of

student delegates in drafting a resolution within Zoom breakout rooms, where they were able to discuss with each other while collaboratively writing working papers shared via the Google Documents platform. While discussing the document, they made improvements and were able to consider subtle differences between words. For example, in this excerpt, student delegates decide to replace the word “urge” with “recommend.”

**Student A:** we change urges to recommends

**Student B:** mm-hmm... I don't know the degrees of the strength... the word

This shows that learners in this class and those participating in MUN events may have the opportunity to consider nuanced differences between synonyms. It cannot be said that a word has been completely learned when a learner can merely translate and offer synonyms for it (Prince, 1996). In this particular discussion, learners demonstrate basic knowledge of the words “recommend” and “urge” and are able to consider distinctions between them.

Students received feedback on their performance in classes from peers and instructors. This second excerpt shows that in small groups, student delegates are able to offer their suggested clauses. Committee leaders and instructors, who have experience of participation in previous years' JUEMUN events, are well-placed to give feedback on their ideas, and this particular example shows how a coaching-style approach to feedback encourages the novice delegate to fine-tune her ideas.

**Student A:** we could change this... change or add some words in this sentences in this clause. do you think we can add or edit this clauses

**Student B:** um maybe we can

It is the nature of MUN events that experienced delegates often find themselves collaborating with others who lack experience. This leads to a system of peer mentoring, and the above dialogue demonstrates that learners are provided with the opportunity to guide each other through the process of resolution clause amendment, which not only benefits the less experienced mentee, who is provided with a learning opportunity, but also the mentor, who is able to develop their agency as a result of such transactions (Kuwabara et al, 2020). Students also had many opportunities to work with peers, a process that has been seen as beneficial in im-



proving writing competence (Hu, 2005).

At the end of the course, students provided evaluation through an online questionnaire. Although the sample is small ( $n=16$ ), the results provided some useful insights for instructors. First, they show that students perceived that they were able to benefit from the classes in a number of ways. Some students felt that they had been able to improve in their speaking ability, while others were satisfied with written contributions which they had made, such as making amendments to draft resolutions. When asked to comment on what had proved to be the most difficult aspect, 11 of the 14 participants chose the final events of JUEMUN, which had involved all participants in debating. The reasons for this included a lack of ability in English and the difficulty of expressing an idea which would be relevant to the discussion. Despite this, comments on participation in JUEMUN were largely positive. Learners claimed to be glad to have had the opportunity to take part in the event. In addition, students suggested that in the future the course could benefit from more opportunities to practice negotiation in English ( $n=8$ ) and a greater understanding of the UN ( $n=8$ ) and Model United Nations events in general ( $n=9$ ). Table 2 sets out some key findings from the questionnaire.

**Table 2. Selected Responses to End of Course Questionnaire**

What was difficult in the class (multiple answers allowed)?						
Response	Regional bloc meeting	Committee meeting	Amendments	Formal meetings	Working paper	Policy speech
n	7	8	3	3	2	1
Which of these would have helped the class to improve (multiple answers allowed)?						
Response	Further English negotiation practice	Studying of draft resolutions	Consideration of own opinion	Study of the United Nations	Study of representative country	Understanding of MUN procedures
n	8	7	7	6	9	9

Based on these observations, a number of changes have been planned for future implementations of the class. It is believed that these insights can inform the teaching of Model United Nations in general, with particular emphasis on novice students. In the 2020 class, much of the information about Model United Nations events was provided orally. As a result, some learning goals were not achieved. In the future, a single printed document will be provided, containing comprehensive, relevant information. Given that eight participants had felt

a lack of knowledge about the UN in general and nine suggested that they would like to have had more knowledge of MUN events, this action is likely to better inform students and provide them with a reference guide to aid their participation. According to Folse (2012), retention can be improved by increasing the number of retrievals. Therefore, it is recommended that some attention is given to key MUN-related content in class as well as outside to ensure that participants go into JUEMUN with some knowledge of procedures.

A further plan is to allow students to take part in the class without a requirement to become JUEMUN delegates. One alternative method of evaluation under consideration is to allow students to attend JUEMUN as non-participant observers. This would allow them to appreciate the general goings-on of a MUN conference without the anxiety problems which arise with students concerned about their own proficiency. They may later opt to take part in future events with the benefit of this experience. Non-participant observers would be required to complete an alternative assignment, such as writing a report about JUEMUN. This may be one form of graded anxiety desensitization, in other words gradually getting learners accustomed to an unfamiliar environment in order to reduce anxiety levels (Doyon, 2000).

A final development likely to take place in the future is to allow the students more time to practice negotiations. At Kobe Gakuin University, a semester typically lasts for fifteen weeks as opposed to the thirteen which were held in 2020. Therefore, it is likely that more time will occur naturally in future courses. In addition, time saved on lecturing about the UN and MUN in general by moving the content to a reading activity which can be partly achieved through homework would allow students more time in class to work on negotiation skills, a concern for eight participants. It is thought that the suggestions provided here would be applicable to the classes whether they take place online or face-to-face in future years.

#### **IV Conclusion**

In the five years that Kobe Gakuin University students have been involved in JUEMUN, students have consistently shown high levels of satisfaction and have indicated that they were able to improve their English language competency. However, due to the cognitive and linguistic demands placed upon student participants, it is clear that a system of support, from peers as well as from mentors and instructors, is needed to help all but the most experienced. The establishment of a class to prepare delegates appears to be one way to get over many of the hurdles in the way of learners, and the suggestions offered in this paper are thought

to offer an indication of some steps which can be incorporated in order to deal with many of these problems. In particular, the authors recommend providing procedural information in multiple formats in order to deal with the complexity of a MUN for the novice learner. In addition, a focus on language to help the non-native English speaker to express ideas, which they may never have previously had the opportunity to consider, is also strongly advocated. This should be balanced with content-focused activities in order to develop WTC. MUN lends itself to global issues, such as peace, which are likely to form this content. By taking these suggestions, it is thought that student delegates will be better prepared for their MUN experience and would be more able to cope with the demands made by such an intense and ultimately rewarding program.

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