

Gamifying the EFL Classroom :

A case study in Japan using the “Classcraft” LMS

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Abstract

Two of the critical issues foreign language teachers face in Japanese universities are in finding ways to encourage English use in the classroom and in helping students to sense that they are improving. This paper is a small case-study and showcases a core English language course called Freshman English, the syllabus of which I modified using principles of gamification with the intention of increasing student engagement and motivation to use English in the classroom. Originally, the Freshman English course was designed as a required English as a Foreign Language integrated-skills university course for around 20 first year university students. The course followed a multiliteracies curriculum (New London Group, 1996), used English as the medium of instruction and went through a series of topical units each ending with a project aligned with one of the course’s goals. This paper will outline the positives and negatives with my implementation of an entirely gamified syllabus and assessment methodology using the LMS “Classcraft.”

Introduction and Background

What class was I teaching?

As a foreign language teacher, I am always looking at ways to improve my classes. This can include teaching techniques, amendments to materials, ICT usage, assessment methodologies, classroom/learner management strategies, and numerous others. One intensive language course I taught called “Freshman English” was one that I wanted to improve, and in particular, I wanted to increase student engagement and motivation to speak and use English in the classroom.

The year-long Freshman English course for first-year university students focused primarily on speaking/listening skills but set out to accomplish much more than that. The course followed a multiliteracies framework (New London Group, 1996) and aimed to equip students with not only language skills, but the psycho-social skills to use language in ways that would allow them

to envision the entire learning process and take control of it. For instance, one of the principles of multiliteracies education is for teachers to foster “self-analysis” in students. Put simply, this means to help students to view themselves as active participants in the learning process. For example, this would include giving students examples of how to measure their progress, encouraging them to reflect on that progress (or lack thereof), and finally considering ways of becoming a more effective learner.

Additionally, unlike many language programs at the university level which meet only once or twice per week, the Freshman English course was held four times per week for 90-minute lessons each. Being able to meet so frequently gave the students and the teacher plenty of opportunities for developing the students’ second language, building rapport and trust with one another. This, coupled with the relatively small class size of 17 students, made it a fertile ground for trial and error – for testing something new – in the learning and teaching process.

What is Gamification?

In generic terms, gamification refers to the process of adding game-like elements to something or to “make a game out of” something that, in its original form, is not identifiable as a game. Even after gamifying something, it may still not look like a game such as “chess” (classic game), “Risk” (strategy board game), or “hide and seek” (children’s game). In its simplest form, “gamification” could be as simple as adding a competitive point or reward system to an activity such as a grammar drill or classroom activity with the goal of evoking a behaviorist-style motivator for performing an otherwise “boring” or “dull” activity. However, gamification, just like other approaches to teaching and learning, can have many more layers than this and go far beyond changing a single activity. The idea inherent in gamification – to make a non-game activity into a game-like one – can be applied to an entire lesson, an entire syllabus, or even an entire curriculum. For further reading on gamification in educational contexts, Kapp (2012) presents dozens of other similar case studies.

Whether or not gamification (or at least aspects of it) could be efficacious for learning/teaching on the curricular level is beyond the scope of this paper, but herein I would like to detail how gamification of one entire year-long course went.

Why did I decide to gamify the class?

At the time I taught the Freshman English class in question, I had already taught the course twice before following the standard curriculum. Therefore, if the experiment of gamifying the course turned out to be a failure, it would not have been difficult to revert to what I had already

done in previous years. At the same time, I felt a need to try to increase students’ motivation to participate actively in the classroom as well as provide a visible, aesthetically attractive method by which students could measure their progress and get constant feedback. Furthermore, because the class met comparatively frequently (4 time per week), it was a particularly good opportunity to expose students to the idea of a gamified course and get extended feedback from them (see Results section).

Implementation

Classcraft

To gamify the course, I decided to use an LMS (Learner Management System) called “Classcraft” and make it a major part of how students interacted, how they were assessed, and how they would access course materials/handouts. The Classcraft app at the time of its use in the course (2016 academic year) had both an Internet browser version as well as a handheld app that students downloaded on the first day of the class. All references to Classcraft in this paper are referring to the version that existed at that time.

The name “Classcraft” is somewhat of a nod towards the most popular MMORPG to date (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) called “World of Warcraft” originally released for PC and Mac in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment. A worldwide gaming phenomenon, it reached a peak of 12 million subscribers in the year 2010 – a first for the MMORPG genre -- with the largest player counts before then numbering less than 1 million. Other than the name, the app also takes the western fantasy theme (knights, dragons, wizards, etc.) to heart, and all of the images are reminiscent of that genre.

Like its namesake “World of Warcraft”, Classcraft ‘players’ (students) need to create a character (an avatar) after being invited to the ‘game’ (course) by the teacher. One of three characters can be selected: warrior, healer, and mage. The distinctions between them are: 1) statistics, and 2) powers and each will be described here in turn:

Statistics

Each character has a set number of “HP” and “AP” (Health Points and Ability Points). Health Points are lost whenever a student breaks a class rule such as “being late,” “using too much Japanese,” “not submitting homework,” and so on. If Health Points ever reach zero, a student’s character would perish, and the student would have to roll a “resurrection die” that would require the student to prepare a short presentation for the next class, to clean the board at the

end of class, or some other small task in order for their character to come back to life. Warriors have the highest HP, with Healers in the middle and Mages the lowest. To compensate for this, I made the Mage's powers generally stronger or more interesting.

Action Points are expended whenever a student wants to use one of their characters' powers, explained in the next section. Action points would refresh a little bit each day (including weekends), so it could take up to about 1 week or a bit more for a student's AP to completely refresh to full and have access to their full range of powers.

Powers

Each character has a unique set of powers that they started the class with. The students could unlock more significant powers the better they performed in the class. Warriors could use powers that would protect their classmates from losing HP and allow them to take on extra "quests" (homework assignments) as make-up work. Healers could use powers that would refresh the HP of group members as well as give them 'blessings' (e.g. a hint on a quiz). Mages had powers that would allow them to safely delay group assignment submission deadlines, leave the classroom for a few minutes (e.g. if they forgot something), change the topic of a discussion, etc.

The players were encouraged to use their powers to benefit their group as well as themselves because not only could the powers be useful for overcoming the challenges of the classroom and providing students' with a level of agency over the class dynamic, but they would also have a small number of points added to their grade when using them. The total amount of possible points acquired in this way was not more than about 5% of a student's overall grade, and therefore something akin to 'bonus points' in traditional classes.

The powers are completely modifiable in the app by the teacher, and I tried to make them meaningful to the class, but also not so powerful as to distract from the class learning or outcomes. In other words, it might be possible for a Mage character to use a power to skip an assignment or a healer to get a hint for their team on a quiz, but it would not have been possible to "pass the class" by using a character's powers alone. The powers were intended to be a 'fun' addition to the class and not a 'cheat code.'

How did I use it in the class?

Students were formed into teams with at least one warrior, one healer, and one mage so that every student had access to all of the "powers" either themselves or through negotiating with the other students in their group (i. e. 'could you please heal me before my character dies?' or

'do you want to use the power to do a quest this week and get extra points?'). Occasionally, I rotated the groups as well so that students could interact with others in the class.

I spent two class periods teaching the students how to use the app, what their powers did, what the statistics meant, how they could check their character's 'score' (grade), how to increase their score, and so on. Because the students' grades were tied directly to the avatar's 'score', the students could check their progress towards completing the course at any time by opening the app.

The app had a place where images, text, and links could be shared with the students. This served a dual function of getting the students to use their devices, while also giving them experience with using the Classcraft app. This was important because it was the central hub of the course. Unfortunately, files could not be shared with the app, so I needed to use other services to provide digital content.

I used it for classroom management to encourage and discourage certain behaviors or activities. For instance, if a student was tardy to class, I could push a button in the app and that student's avatar would take damage, bringing them closer to "death," and a forced roll of the punishment die. Of course, one of their teammates could opt to use a power to protect them or heal them, assuming one of them had the requisite number of action points. On the other hand, if a student answered a question in English or completed all the activities for the day in English only, they would get bonus points at the end of the class applied to their avatar's score (their "grade"). A complete list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors along with their rewards (score) and punishments (minus HP) was provided to the students on the first day of the class.

I also used the LMS for assessment. That is, when students submitted homework, completed a project, or received points for classroom-related activities, their avatar's score would increase. The avatar's score could never decrease (unless I had made an error), and students were aware of this. In contrast to a "normal" percentage-based course where all students start with 100% and slowly watch their overall score grind downwards (if they do not perform well) or stay the same (if they are doing well), the Classcraft LMS – like a game – started students at 0 points. In order to pass the course with a "C", a student would need to acquire at least 6000 points through a combination of all point-awarding activities in the course. Higher letter grades were assigned to higher point thresholds, with 9,000 or more needed for an "S," or the highest score. I set the maximum number of points possible in the course through all assessments around 10,000 to allow room for some failure.

Results

Towards the mid-term of the course, I interviewed 16 out of 17 students in the class who agreed to meet and have their correspondence used for research purposes. The goal of the interviews was to see what the experience of using Classcraft and a gamified syllabus was like for them. Specifically, I asked them the open-ended question: “what do you think of Classcraft?” I categorized the students’ comments based on several common themes: 1) General dispositions, 2) Gamified grading system, 3) Other features.

General dispositions

In general, students liked the gamified elements of the course and the usage of Classcraft. One participant, representative of almost all of the comments in this section, said, “It is fun. Many character, example Mage hero. It is very fun.” Another said, “it is very useful for us because we can compete together, so I have to more improve.” One student did say merely, “it’s okay,” and explained that he didn’t want to “worry about it,” and just wanted to focus on learning English.

Gamified grading system

All but one of the students interviewed thought the grading system was unique, interesting, or otherwise motivating for them. Positive stances included quotes such as:

1. “when I raise my hand, I will get some points, so I want to raise my hand and participate in class.”
2. “if I study hard, I can get the points for character, and it’s easy to understand how much effort I did”
3. “I like Classcraft because it’s clearly. I can see my points each time”
4. “I like new way of points, because I can go little bit by little bit”

Other features

A few of the students mentioned other features of Classcraft such as the aesthetic features of the characters. While not a part of our course at all, Classcraft users who have a character with high points can access new “digital wardrobe” items for themselves. Once an avatar’s appearance is changed, other students in the class can see them if they open the app: “It’s good for me because we can change clothes.”

Analysis and Conclusion

In general, students held a positive appraisal of the Classcraft-based course they took. Especially, they highlighted the point system’s transparency and liked how they could track their progress. Further, many of the students mentioned that the structure of reward/punishments demonstrating that at least for those students, they were extrinsically motivated to perform to a higher standard in the English class than they otherwise might have been.

Some of the comments above may need some elucidation. The first is the mention of the word “compete” when one of the students referred to the avatars’ scores. As students’ avatars gained points, their names were ranked among their peers from highest to lowest. This competitive element, it could be argued, can serve as a motivator. At the same time, however, it can be very demotivating if a student is at or near the bottom of the list (in fact, the one student who did not like the points system was herself on the low end of the class). To mitigate demotivation, I made it possible to see the scores of only the other students in their groups, which were around 3 or 4 people. Secondly, the fourth comment about the points system above. This participant is probably referring to the fact that almost every small thing in the course is worth a certain number of points for completion, and so instead of a student’s grade depending on only a few large-scale assessments, the very act of learning, participating, and using the target language in class was assessed in real-time.

It is unclear whether this sort of gamified syllabus would result in any long-term changes in students’ motivation to use English in other classes that are not gamified or if it would encourage them to learn English more outside of class. My experience as a researcher and teacher since teaching this course in 2016 leads me to believe that the motivation and desire to learn and use English actively by using Classcraft is merely ephemeral, and not something that would translate to any long-term changes in disposition. However, more research needs to be done on this front to determine whether or not any long-term effects remain, and to what degree any changes in disposition can be attributed to the use of or exposure to gamification.

In conclusion, apps like Classcraft that bring gamification pre-packaged into the classroom can be one useful tool in a teacher’s arsenal of extrinsic motivators. I suspect that it is particularly useful in contexts with younger learners or highly unmotivated or unruly students that need constantly reminded of what “the rules” are. However, depending on how involved the teacher is with promoting and using the app, to that same degree the students should become engaged regardless of their age or starting dispositions.

References

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