

The Impact of Game-Based Learning on Student Engagement in a Japanese World Language Class

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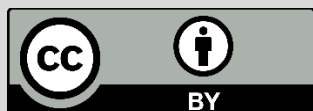
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Abstract

This exploratory study investigated the impact of game-based learning on engagement in a second-year high school Japanese world language class that primarily used a Communicative Language Teaching approach in the target language. By investigating the question, “What impact does game-based learning have on student engagement in a communicative language teaching classroom?” this study aimed to examine student engagement in a high school Japanese world language class. Games were implemented across multiple classes and students completed exit passes that included self-assessment statements regarding engagement and answered two questions based on their enjoyment of the games. Analysis of the data showed that game-based learning had an overall positive effect on student engagement in a Communicative Language Teaching setting. Analysis of the qualitative data identified four aspects of the games that contributed to student enjoyment: interpersonal communication, physical movement, opportunities to use the content, and competition.

Introduction

World language education pedagogy has progressed in the last two decades with some schools shifting away from using textbooks to opting for a more student-centered approach. Even with modern approaches to teaching language, student engagement remains a challenge across languages and cultures. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris’s (2004) model conceptualizes engagement as behavioral, emotional, and cognitive participation in learning. Utilizing games for learning is one possible strategy for addressing lack of engagement. Games have the potential to entertain and engage, which make them attractive for use in education. While some games are simpler than others, many of them serve to make rote tasks more enjoyable and can be modified to suit a wide range of school subjects.

My (Donovan's) interest in educational games for language education stemmed from my work as an assistant language teacher in Japan where games were used more often than I had experienced as a student in a Western educational setting. I saw the impact of games almost immediately after I began work in Japan. Students were receptive to the game format and I found the games to be effective in engaging even the students who did not enjoy learning English. During this time, I had the opportunity to team-teach with some of the younger Japanese teachers of English and I observed them employing simple games that engaged students. Some of them used games and others did not. Classes that utilized games showed an increase in student participation.

Back in an American educational setting, I learned more about Comprehensible Input (CI) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in my teacher preparation courses and got to see it all in action at my placement school. I wondered if games could help increase engagement in classes that used CI and CLT as they do with other approaches and if game utilization could be a way to hook students into lessons and get them more engaged. This exploratory study investigates how short, in-class games influence behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in a second-year Japanese course that uses a CLT/CI approach.

Context

This exploratory study took place at a Hawaii high school with an ethnically diverse population of 2,538 students including Filipino, Native Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Samoan, Black, Micronesian, Tongan, White, Hispanic, and Portuguese. The majority of the school was Filipino with 15% identified as multilingual learners.

The study was conducted in a second-year Japanese language course with one of the authors (Donovan) serving as the primary instructor. Ten students of varying degrees of fluency in the Japanese language participated in the study, with none being heritage speakers. The students had differing degrees of interest in Japan and the Japanese language. The participants in the study were in a Japanese language class using a CLT approach that focused on using CI rather than explicit grammar instruction. The target language, Japanese, was used in context and for communication purposes rather than solely for study. For example, presentations were done for the purpose of conveying information rather than practicing language skills.

With the shift to CLT, the focus was getting the meaning across rather than grammatical accuracy. This shift from grammar drills to meaningful communication is central to CLT as described by Savignon (2002). The goal of CLT is communication, so if a student answers with only their name rather than a full sentence, it would still be acceptable. The focus of this CLT self-introduction exercise would be to learn names rather than practice a sentence. Under the old method, grammatical accuracy would have been prioritized and learning the name would have been a secondary objective.

Students in this exploratory study were exposed to periodic game playing in their first and second year Japanese classes as part of class. Typically, the games they played during class were designed to review material before a quiz or exam. None of the games presented in this study had been played in class before.

Literature Review

Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching is an approach to teaching language that was developed in the 1970s that focuses on the communication skills of the target language (Dos Santos, 2020). Sandra Savignon's work in this area helped shape CLT by emphasizing the ability to negotiate meaning and use the language appropriately in context, rather than simply mastering grammatical forms (Savignon, 2002). Luis Miguel Dos Santos (2020) cited the strengths and weaknesses of the approach: its student focused approach is a strength because it can make use of authentic resources from the wider world such as from the students' communities as well as real-world situations and applications of the language which can help learners connect the language to outside the classroom (Dos Santos, 2020). Another strength of CLT is that it has the possibility of increasing student interest in the target language more than grammar focused instruction (Dos Santos, 2020).

The emphasis on using real world situations and cultures can also be a weakness because lessons may go into topics that instructors do not have the language proficiency or knowledge to approach effectively (Dos Santos, 2020). Language lessons taught with a CLT approach often use real world materials and topics which can lead to a wide range of questions, from cultural to linguistic, making it difficult to be prepared for every possible situation or question that a student may have (Dos Santos, 2020). As CLT highlights meaningful interaction and the negotiation of meaning as significant parts of language learning (Savignon, 2002), activities like games are particularly compatible with this approach.

Comprehensible Input

Comprehensible input (CI) is a key part of CLT and has its roots in Stephen Krashen's 1982 Input Hypothesis which states that learners should be exposed to language that is at one level higher than their current language level to advance in that language (Krashen, 1982). The Input Hypothesis is focused on language acquisition and is related to the idea that we acquire language and the structures that go with it by using language for meaning first (Krashen, 1982). To understand language that is at a level higher than the students' current understanding, learners use context, the environment, and other knowledge to aid in comprehension (Krashen, 1982). Over time, as students are continuously exposed to CI, some of that input should be internalized and the student should be able to output some of the target language (Krashen, 1982).

Recent communicative game-based projects in World Language Education have shown that integrating games into communicative lessons can enhance learners' speaking confidence and willingness to communicate (Malgazghdarova et al., 2024). Games that simulate real life scenarios report improved listening and speaking skills in learners (Espiritu & Buaraphan, 2024).

Game-based Learning

Tekinbaş & Zimmerman (2003) describe a game as a system that engages players in artificial conflict with defined rules and a quantifiable outcome. Game-based learning (GBL) usage has been studied for use in a wide variety of subjects (Boctor, 2013) and can be defined as a setting that allows game content and gameplay to support the development of knowledge

and skills, while the challenges built into the game give learners a sense of accomplishment (Qian & Clark, 2016). Games allow students to fail without heavy consequences (Boctor, 2013). Recent studies focusing on undergraduates also show that GBL enhances behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Thi, 2025). Additionally, foreign language research on game platforms such as *Kahoot!* reports significant gains in engagement (Anane, 2024).

In a review by Shu and Liu (2019), the researchers sought to answer the questions of what influences engagement in GBL and how GBL engagement affects learning. It was found that when comparing students who had a game-based education and those who did not, the students who had the game-based education were found to be more engaged with their class work (Shu & Liu, 2019).

Studies examining GBL's effect on student engagement have shown a positive effect and an increase motivation in language classes (Wati et al., 2023). In a study that looked at the effectiveness of playing educational games, creating educational games, and traditional instruction in an English as a foreign language class, it was found that the group playing the games showed the highest motivation to learn (Chen & Liu, 2023).

It is also important to distinguish GBL from gamification. Al-Azawi et al. (2016) argue that the two are related, but markedly different. In GBL, the game itself is the learning activity, and the students engage with the content through game playing, problem solving, and interaction with each other. Gamification is not an activity; it adds elements like points and badges to a lesson or task, but the lesson is not a game (Anane, 2024). Gamification is turning the learning process as a whole into a game, while GBL is using a game as part of the learning process (Al-Azawi et al., 2016). In this study, the classroom activities were examples of GBL because the games were the instructional vehicles that allowed students to practice the language, interact with peers, and engage with the target language rather than simply receiving game-like rewards or incentives. This distinction matters because the present study examines how structured gameplay can support engagement in a CLT classroom, not how game mechanics can be layered onto traditional instruction.

Student Engagement

In line with widely cited ideas about school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), this study considers behavioral, emotional, and cognitive facets of students' involvement in class. Behavioral engagement is based on participation, such as how involved a student is with an activity or if they are doing their work (Fredricks et al., 2004). According to Fredricks et al. (2004), there are three ways to define behavioral engagement: learners behave positively, following school rules and norms; learners are persistent, use questioning, and pay attention and learners are involved in school-related extracurricular activities, such as sports (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Students' emotional and physiological reactions to classes, school, and the educational environment define emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Consistent with Fredricks et al. (2004), emotional engagement refers to students' affective reactions to school, such as interest, boredom, happiness, or anxiety, and their sense of belonging in the school context. Additionally, emotional engagement encompasses how much a student feels belonging and identifies with their school (Fredricks et al., 2004). Emotional engagement has also been known to have an indirect effect on academic achievement (Pietarinen et al., 2014). Teacher-student and student-student relationships are a part of emotional engagement and can lead to an

increase in engaged behavior (Pietarinen et al., 2014). Students who are both emotionally and cognitively engaged in school have been shown to spend more time studying and deal with the rigors of school better (Pietarinen et al., 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Finally, cognitive engagement is based on mental investment and is tied to how much effort the student is willing to put into understanding what is being taught or their motivation level in learning something (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement involves students' psychological investment and effort in learning—how much they are willing to exert themselves to understand complex ideas or master difficult skills (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Student engagement in class has been found to affect student learning; behavioral, cognitive, and, to an extent, emotional engagement has been correlated with academic achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Students pay more attention and are more likely to learn material if they are engaged in a class (Allen et al., 2014). Student enjoyment of the classroom environment is another factor that has been tied to student engagement (Allen et al., 2014). Because it is changeable and able to be influenced by the teacher, environment, or instruction, there are different methods that can be used to increase engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004) including GBL.

Most GBL research looks at engagement by emphasizing either behavioral participation or motivation. Building on (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2012), this study attempts to address that gap by exploring different types of engagement in a CLT classroom, including on-task behavior, active participation, interest, and motivation.

Implementation

This exploratory study was conducted over seven classes spanning three weeks. Prior to the baseline class, I (Donovan) had served as a co-teacher for three months and the primary instructor for two months. Aside from the initial class illustrating the baseline condition, a different game was implemented in each of the six class sessions. Each class began with greetings and a warm-up activity, then proceeded to the introduction of a game, followed by playing the game, and finally completing the exit pass. Six games (described in the next section) were used in six classes of the study: Red Light Green Light, Card Relay Race, *Shiritori*, Sensei Says, Telephone (*Dengon Game*), and Row Game.

At the end of each class, students completed a double-sided exit pass (Figure 1), where one side was used for the warm-up activity (completed upon arrival) and the other side was used by students to self-assess their engagement and respond to questions regarding the game at the close of class. The side used to assess engagement contained four self-assessment statements that were each paired with a Likert scale that students used to mark their level of agreement or disagreement. The four self-assessment statements were: *I was on task*, *I actively participated*, *I was interested in class*, and *I was motivated to do well in class*. The statements were selected because they represent behaviors linked to student engagement, namely, on-task behavior, active participation, interest in class/subject, and motivation to do well (Fredricks et al., 2004). These statements also connect to commonly cited issues of engagement in the literature, with on-task behavior and active participation reflecting behavioral aspects, interest reflecting emotional aspects, and motivation reflecting cognitive aspects of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). The Likert scale included the following options: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*.

With no game played and using the double-sided exit pass exhibited in Figure 1, the baseline class yielded an overall on-task score of 4.56, an active participation score of 4.56, a class interest score of 4.56, a motivation score of 4.33, and an overall engagement score of 4.50. In each successive class, students played a different game.

Following review of the data from the second class, a need for more qualitative data regarding student perception of the games became apparent. While data from the second class provided information on how students perceived their engagement in class, it lacked insight into students' perceptions of the game. For that reason, starting from the third class onwards, students also responded to two questions in regards to the game: *Did you enjoy the game?* and *What aspect/part of the game did you like?* The first question was to gauge students' feelings about the game and the second question aimed to provide insight into factors influencing the perceived effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the games. These questions did not have any prewritten options; students provided their responses in the blank area for writing below the four self-assessment statements and Likert scales. In the final class of the study, students were asked the question, *Do you think games are useful for learning?* to gauge their opinion of games as a learning tool after having experienced them over the course of the study.

名前 (なまえ) _____ 月 _____ 日 Pd. _____ <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 10px;">Bellwork</div>
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Please mark how you think you did today.					
	Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Neutral 3	Agree 4	Strongly Agree 5
I was on task.					
I actively participated.					
I was interested in class.					
I was motivated to do well in class.					
Extra					

Figure 1
Double-Sided Exit Pass Used in the Study

Game Descriptions

Red Light Green Light

This game was introduced in the second class of the study to help students practice Japanese listening and speaking skills. Students worked in assigned pairs, which allowed for mutual support. Examples of game questions were first reviewed in the classroom before students moved outside to begin the game.

The game began with all students standing in pairs in a horizontal line a distance away from the teacher. A question was asked by the teacher and if both members of a pair answered correctly, they advanced a step. Once a pair correctly answered enough questions to make it past the teacher, they assisted the teacher in creating and asking simple questions to the remaining pairs. Students often asked questions similar to those being asked by the teacher. The questions were asked in Japanese with gestures and hints in the target language being used to make them comprehensible. For short and simple questions, the fastest pair to raise their hands could answer; for longer, more complex questions, all pairs had an opportunity to provide a response. The game continued until all students reached the goal. When the game concluded, students returned to the classroom and completed an exit pass.

The game itself did not fit the ideal form of CLT, but provided practice for skills needed for communication. The game provided speaking and listening practice so that students would become more accustomed to speaking and listening in conversations. The questions asked were more conversational in nature and represented topics that might come up in everyday conversation.

Card Relay Race

In Card Relay Race, students worked together in teams to answer questions written in Japanese on 27 numbered cards. The questions used grammar and vocabulary that the students had previously encountered. The game helped students practice reading skills while reinforcing the vocabulary and grammar they had learned.

The game consisted of a total of 27 questions, six questions required writing words in Japanese characters and 21 were riddle-like questions that made use of the students' knowledge of subjects such as Japanese culture, culture in Hawaii, food, and events. Students were required to use the target language for the purpose of deciphering riddles. These were not all questions related to grammar or language practice itself which brings the activity more in line with modern language teaching methodology of using the language for a purpose other than just practice. If hints were given during the game, they were done so in a CI manner, meaning context clues and gestures were used to make hints in the target language comprehensible.

Specific roles were assigned to encourage participation by all students within each group. The roles included card taker, writer, and two supports. The writer was responsible for writing the answer to the question on a small whiteboard provided to all groups. The card taker returned the answered question cards, tracked points, and retrieved new cards. The two supporters had flexible roles and were tasked with seeking additional information or hints from the teacher. After each correctly answered question, students rotated roles within their group.

To begin the game, question cards were spread out on a table in the front of the classroom. The designated card takers from each group moved to the front of the classroom, picked up a card, and then returned to their group. The members worked collaboratively to answer the

question and then the writer wrote the answer on a whiteboard. They then called the teacher over for an answer check. If it was correct, roles were rotated, and the new card taker returned the answered card, took a new one, and wrote the answered question number on the board in the front of the classroom.

Each group could only answer each question once and every correct answer earned them one point. There was a time limit of 25 minutes, and students were encouraged to answer as many questions as possible. After the game concluded, students completed an exit pass to assess their engagement during the class.

Shiritori

The class was divided into two teams for *Shiritori*, with two to four minutes allotted for each round. The objective of the game was to write as many Japanese characters as possible on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom. Like the English alphabet's ABCs, Japanese characters have a sequential order and the students followed this order when writing during the game. Each team was given a starting character, and students sequentially wrote the character that followed the previous one. For example, if the starting character was "A," student 1 wrote "B," returned to their team, and switched out with student 2, who then went to the board and wrote "C." Only one student from each team could be writing on the board at any given time. After each round ended, each team's points were tallied, and the winner was announced. Students then completed their exit passes.

Similar to Red Light Green Light, students practiced skills needed for CLT including character reading. The teacher also provided CI for the time checks during the game for students to keep track of the time remaining in rounds. The results were counted up in the target language to give students input to learn and practice numbers. The target language used was supported with gestures to ensure students understood the numbers involved.

Sensei Says

Sensei Says is similar to Simon Says where players only act if the game leader precedes the command with "Simon says." The game was used to help students practice directional words in Japanese. The practice phase began with the teacher demonstrating an action while saying the corresponding Japanese term. Students stood up and mimicked the action while repeating the term. For example, when the teacher said "left" and stepped to the left, the students also stepped left and repeated the word "left."

After the practice phase, students played the game, moving according to directions given by the teacher. The speed and sequence length of the directions increased until only one student remained, who was declared the winner. After the game concluded, the students completed an exit pass.

Sensei Says made use of the target language to communicate directions to students with the focus on the meaning rather than grammar. The practice phase was done using CI methods of using gestures to make the vocabulary comprehensible. The game created a low-stakes environment to learn and practice vocabulary.

Telephone (Dengon Game)

Telephone (*Dengon Game*) was a cooperative team-based game so that students could review sentences that would appear on their final test for the quarter. It provided a competitive environment for students to review and practice their listening and speaking skills. This game

encouraged students to practice skills important for communication. Sentences in the game were taught using CI methods so that students could comprehend the material rather than just repeat it. Even if unfamiliar vocabulary was sometimes used, the teacher used gestures and objects around the classroom to convey the meaning of the sentences used.

Students were divided into three teams and arranged into lines going from the front of the classroom to the back. They were only allowed to speak to the teammate directly behind them. The objective was to verbally pass a message from the first student to the last student in line. Once the message was received, the last student in line then ran to the teacher to relay the message. The team that was the fastest and most accurate would earn three points, with the second-place team receiving two points and the last team getting one point. After all teams delivered the message, the sentence was repeated aloud for all to hear and practice saying. After the winning team was declared, the students then filled out an exit pass.

Row Game

The Row Game was used in the final class of the study. This flexible game required no prior preparation and was suitable for reviewing a variety of language points. To play the Row Game, students were first seated in rows and then instructed to stand up. Students needed to answer questions asked by the teacher. Students who answered correctly then chose either “row” or “column.” If they chose “row,” the students who were standing in the same row, as the student who answered, sat down. However, if any students were already sitting down, they had to stand back up. The “column” option followed the same rules but applied to students standing in front or in back of the student who answered correctly. The game continued until only a few students remained standing, at which point they were asked questions individually and then sat down.

The Row Game was used to review sentences and questions in preparation for the final test of the quarter. Pictures were also used to support the questions and students were asked questions based on images displayed on the television. They had to create answers using the items in the pictures or items related to them. Some pictures also included text to help students identify the items and practice reading skills. Additionally, students could also choose the option, “only me” which allowed only the student who answered to sit down. Once the game concluded, the students were given their final test for the quarter and completed an exit pass.

Comprehensible input methods were used to support asking questions during the game. The questions were supported by visuals as well as gestures when being asked to make it comprehensible. Rather than focusing on grammatical accuracy of answers, the teacher focused on whether or not the meaning was successfully conveyed.

Findings & Discussion

The results derived from the analysis of student exit passes covered student self-assessments of on-task behavior, active participation, interest in class, and student motivation. Prior research has not clarified whether GBL maintains its engagement benefits in CLT world language settings, nor which game elements matter most. Students’ responses to the two questions regarding the games used in each class throughout the study provided data on what aspects of the games may have influenced engagement effectiveness. Analysis of the responses to the second question revealed four themes that may have influenced the games’ effects on student engagement; interpersonal communication, physical movement, opportunities to use

the content, and competition. These data offer initial evidence that engagement is affected by games and begin to specify which features of the games (team-based interpersonal interaction, movement, content use, competition) are associated with higher engagement scores. Data was tracked day to day to monitor the change over time and the change between different games.

The data from the study indicated that the level of student engagement in the majority of classes that utilized games was greater than the baseline class. The pattern of higher on-task behavior, participation, interest, and motivation in most game-based classes suggests broad gains across multiple dimensions of engagement, which have been linked to improved academic outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004). The overall engagement score derived from the analysis of the four self-assessment statements was higher than the baseline class in all but the last class. The scores for the on-task self-assessment statement were higher than the score from the baseline class in four out of six classes and equal to the baseline in one out of six classes. The scores for the active participation statement were equal to the baseline in two out of six classes and higher than the baseline in three out of six classes. The scores for the class interest statement were higher than the baseline in three out of six classes and equal to the baseline in two out of six classes. Finally, the motivation scores were higher than the baseline in all six of six classes.

On-Task Behavior

At the end of each class, students indicated their level of agreement with the statement “I was on task” by marking one of five options on a Likert scale. The number of strongly agree responses consistently equaled or exceeded that of the baseline class throughout the study. To quantify this data, each response was given a value ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, and the mean for each class was calculated to provide an on-task score.

The mean on-task score exceeded that of the baseline class in the majority of classes where a game was played, however, a slight decrease was observed during the fifth class. The baseline class’s mean on-task score was 4.56, compared to the lowest score of 4.44 for the fifth class. Sensei Says was played during that class to practice directional words. The shorter duration of this class allowed for only one round of the game. This coupled with the individual nature of the game may have contributed to the decreased on-task behavior among some students. Overall, however, the number of student responses marked as strongly agree or agree with the on-task statement remained consistently at or above the baseline class.

Active Participation

The second self-assessment statement was, “I actively participated.” The mean score for this statement in the baseline class was 4.56. The mean active participation score for three of six classes was higher than baseline and two of six classes were equal to the baseline. The final class, however, recorded a mean score of 4.33. As shown in figure 3, two of the six game-based classes had fewer strongly agree responses than the baseline. Despite this, however, the overall mean scores for active engagement across all classes except the final one remained at least at the level of the baseline.

The game for the final class was the Row Game which was an individual-based game. Students were scheduled to take their quarter final test on this day, so the game was designed to be short and flexible, allowing time for review before the test. The individual nature of the game may have made it less engaging when compared to the team-based games. Furthermore,

while most students answered questions, some did not have the opportunity to respond due to time constraints or because they were already seated. These factors could explain the lower participation score on this day. In contrast, the scores from the other days were equal to or higher than the baseline.

Interest in Class

The third self-assessment statement was, “I was interested in class,” and it yielded similar results to the previous two statements. Three out of six game-based classes recorded mean scores higher than the baseline class mean of 4.56. Two out of six game-based classes recorded mean scores equal to the baseline. However, the third class, which utilized the Card Relay Race game had a slightly lower interest mean score of 4.5. The presence of visiting students from Japan participating in this class may have influenced the score for that class. Despite this singular instance of a lower overall interest mean score, the classes that utilized games consistently had a higher number of strongly agree responses compared to the baseline class.

Motivation to Do Well

The final self-assessment statement that students responded to was, “I was motivated to do well in class.” Among all of the self-assessment statements, this item had the lowest baseline mean score at 4.33. The six classes that utilized a game all recorded higher mean scores than the baseline class for this statement. However, when examining the frequency of strongly agree responses, there were two classes equal to the baseline. These sessions did record a higher frequency of agree responses than the baseline class, suggesting a positive effect on motivation overall, which the mean scores support.

Student Engagement

An overall engagement score was derived from the four self-assessment statements. The mean scores for each statement were summed and divided by four to derive the overall engagement score. A comparison of these scores demonstrates that, overall, games were beneficial for student engagement in class. Five out of six classes that utilized games recorded higher overall engagement scores when compared to the baseline. The consistently higher engagement score across multiple classes that utilized different games suggests that, overall, GBL had a positive effect on student engagement. This aligns with recent empirical studies demonstrating that GBL significantly boosts multiple engagement dimensions across disciplines and age groups (Espiritu & Buaraphan, 2024).

Certain games had greater influence and were more positively received by students than others within the study. The final class in the study, however, yielded a score of 4.47 which was .03 lower than the baseline class score of 4.5. A potential explanation for this lower score is that this session coincided with the quarter final test. Because of this, the game was individual-based, short, and focused heavily on review. Students’ worries about the final or the impending end of the quarter may have also influenced their views of the self-assessment statements. Overall, the data suggests that games helped improve or maintain student engagement in class.

The literature supports the notion that GBL can positively affect engagement in educational settings (Wati et al., 2023). The findings of the present study appear to support this, as the overall engagement scores were higher for five out of six classes that utilized a game

when compared to the baseline class. Only the final class had a lower score, which was unexpected and may be attributed to factors discussed above. Consequently, the findings also suggest that game choice is important as demonstrated by the decrease in the overall engagement score during that final class.

Elements that Contributed to Game-Based Learning's Effect on Student Engagement

Starting with the third class, students were also asked two questions regarding the games utilized in class: "Did you enjoy the game?" and "What aspect/part of the game did you enjoy?" Analysis of student responses to those questions identified factors that may have influenced the games' effectiveness. Responses to the first question revealed that most students reported enjoyment of the games. Analysis of the second question brought to light four themes that may explain the games' effects: interpersonal communication, physical movement, opportunities to use the content, and competition.

Enjoyable Experience

According to student responses, the games used in the classes during the study were generally enjoyable. In five out of the six classes that utilized games, students responded to a question regarding their enjoyment of the game. Out of a total of 48 responses, 45 (93.75%) were positive, indicating that the games were enjoyable.

This finding supports the conclusion that GBL helped create an enjoyable experience for students, potentially influencing the games' effect on engagement which is in line with the literature. For students taking a language course, engagement has been linked to the enjoyability of their practice environment (Allen et al., 2014; Shu & Liu, 2019). Responses to the question regarding game enjoyment were overwhelmingly positive, which corresponds to the increased student engagement scores for five out of the six classes.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication was the factor most frequently cited by students as an enjoyable aspect of the games. Students frequently mentioned teamwork and interactions with their classmates as aspects they enjoyed. Team-based games were used in the second, third, fourth, and sixth classes; these classes demonstrated higher overall engagement scores when compared to the fifth and seventh classes where individual-based games were played. The interpersonal communication inherent in the team-based games may have contributed to making those games more engaging to students. Overall, the data suggests that the interpersonal aspects of GBL were favored by students and may have contributed to the games' effect on student engagement in class.

Games have been noted as having the potential to be tools that can increase communication between students (Adipat et al., 2021; Boctor 2013). The findings of this study support this literature, as many students submitted responses that fell under the interpersonal communication theme. The prevalence of this theme throughout the qualitative data suggests that the games were successful in providing a space and setting for students to interact with one another.

Physical Movement

The second most frequent theme cited by students in their responses was physical movement. All of the games integrated some form of physical movement, which likely contributed to keeping students engaged. The high frequency of responses citing physical

movement as a source of enjoyment suggests that this factor contributed to games' appeal, thereby influencing student engagement. In the literature review, it was noted that games require an entertaining gameplay loop to be engaging (Adipat et al., 2021). This present study suggests that physical movement is one component that helps create an entertaining activity.

Opportunities to use the Content

Students also noted that they enjoyed being able to apply the content they were learning. Since students were not graded on their performance, the games provided motivation and opportunity to use the language in a low-stakes environment. The relevance of the games as a medium to use content likely contributed to the effect they had on student engagement.

Competition

Lastly, students cited competition as a source of enjoyment. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that competition can positively influence student engagement as found in the literature review. Students' evident enjoyment of winning and competing suggests that this element contributed to keeping students engaged.

Game-Based Learning Complementing Communicative Language Teaching

The findings of this exploratory study suggest that GBL can complement CLT by creating conditions that support the kinds of interaction and practice emphasized in CLT. In this study, games provided structured opportunities for students to use the target language to achieve goals, solve problems, and collaborate with peers, versus simply completing drills that focused on content as opposed to context. The increases in students' reported on-task behavior, participation, interest, and motivation across these GBL lessons indicate that these activities can be more engaging for learners who might otherwise remain passive during CLT tasks.

Specific game features highlighted by students including interpersonal communication, physical movement, opportunities to use content, and competition, align with CLT principles. For example, interpersonal communication and teamwork are similar to CLT's emphasis on interaction and negotiation of meaning. Another example is physical movement and competition, which appeared to lower barriers and draw in students who were less inclined to participate in more traditional activities. The games used in the study did not replace CLT, but were connected to its implementation, offering low-stakes, enjoyable formats through which students could practice Japanese in line with learning goals.

Recommendations

This exploratory study begins to address the lack of classroom-based teacher research on GBL in CLT Japanese courses by identifying game characteristics linked with engagement. Because the data came from a single, small class over a short period, broader and more generalizable studies are key. Preliminary findings in this study showed that games can have a positive impact on student engagement in a Japanese world language class utilizing the CLT approach. The study identified aspects of the games that students found particularly enjoyable that may have increased engagement. Building upon these results, potential avenues for future research could include the use of lengthier games, leveraging the interpersonal aspect of games, using games for CI, compiling best practices for game selection, and the consideration of online games.

Lengthier Games

Future research into GBL in a CLT classroom would benefit from examining the impact of using lengthier educational games. Increasing the length of the games would allow the researcher more data to gauge the impact on student engagement or learning. This study used shorter games that could be used alongside other activities. It could be beneficial for future studies to examine longer games as the main focus of a class rather than a supporting part of a lesson and to investigate how they might affect student engagement in CLT based classes. Given that GBL utilizing short games was shown to positively affect student engagement, future research could investigate the influence of longer games on engagement.

Leveraging Interpersonal Aspects of Games

Interpersonal communication emerged as the most prominent theme in students' qualitative responses regarding enjoyable aspects of the games. Therefore, it could be valuable to explore how the use of games can be used to promote interpersonal interaction and build an environment conducive to risk-taking within a CLT based classroom. Incorporating games could help create a less risk-averse environment, encouraging students to engage more freely in the target language. The interpersonal interaction within the games was cited by students as an enjoyable component, therefore it could be leveraged to help create a welcoming environment.

Games for Comprehensible Input

This study focused on the impact of GBL on student engagement, finding it to be overall beneficial with high levels of student enjoyment. As CI is an important component of the CLT approach, it is worthwhile to further explore the use of games as a vehicle for CI. Providing CI to students in an enjoyable manner may positively affect its efficacy. Therefore, future research examining how games could be effectively utilized in the classroom to provide CI and drive communication between students could prove beneficial to learning. A deeper investigation into games in relation to the CLT approach could offer valuable insights into both educational strategies.

Best Practices for Game Selection

The analysis of student qualitative responses revealed four themes regarding the enjoyment of games. These themes were identified as desirable aspects of the games. It was also found that team-based games were more effective than individual-based games at generating engagement. This was possibly due to the increased interpersonal interaction inherent in team-based games, suggesting that not all games are equally valuable. Therefore, future research into the best practices for selecting games for use in a CLT context is warranted. Games have a variety of structural and design elements, such as interesting graphics, sound effects, rules encouraging teamwork or competition, or a focus on verbal or non-verbal communication. Investigating which elements of a game provide the greatest benefit for engagement could provide information that would help educators choose games suited for their needs.

Online Games

This study used short, in-person games within a CLT context and found GBL to be beneficial to student engagement. Therefore, a logical next step is to explore the use of online games or platforms to assist in learning with the CLT approach. In the current age, where remote learning is increasingly common, online games potentially offer a way to sustain student engagement and provide CI. Online games could also be utilized as supplementary learning resources for courses that are predominantly in-person. Further research investigating online games as a medium for CI and a tool for the CLT approach could yield valuable insight into modern technology-based language learning options for classrooms.

Conclusion

Despite interest in GBL in a variety of classrooms across disciplines, there has been limited empirical work on its role in CLT-based world language classes, especially Japanese. This study showed that GBL can have a positive impact on student engagement in a CLT-based Japanese world language class and further identified four game features. The study revealed important factors to consider when implementing games to ensure effectiveness. Students valued the interpersonal aspects of games the most and team-based games were found to be more engaging than individual-based games. Based on this, teachers seeking to improve engagement should choose games that are team-based and require that students work collaboratively rather than individual-based games. The other themes that were found to contribute to the games' effectiveness were physical movement, opportunities to use the content, and competition. When selecting games, it may be beneficial to look for games that include these components or modify existing ones to include them. Doing so could increase the effect on student engagement.

The final class in the study saw a drop in engagement, possibly due to game choice and the close proximity of the final test of the quarter. This emphasizes the importance of game implementation; timing or situational factors can affect a game's effectiveness on student engagement. Similarly, the only class with a lower interest score than the baseline was a class where visiting Japanese students were present. The findings in this study can inform game selection to ensure games positively impact student engagement within classes that use a CLT approach.

The exit passes provided valuable data regarding students' self-assessed engagement and their reception of the games utilized. These quick self-assessments helped provide feedback that could be used to plan further lessons and also to guide activity or game selection. Even outside a formal study, the practice of using exit passes can be useful in guiding teaching practice.

While this study remained exploratory and descriptive in its analysis, the findings yielded evidence supporting the use of GBL to improve student engagement in a world language class. The aspects of the games cited by students as enjoyable can serve as things to consider when selecting games to ensure effectiveness. When the goal is to enhance student engagement through GBL, teachers should employ team-based games that foster interpersonal communication over individual-based games.

This study represented an effort to integrate a strategy from older instructional methods for language with more current instructional pedagogy to enhance instruction and ultimately improve student engagement. While language instruction has shifted away from purely explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction toward teaching for communication in context, deficiencies in student engagement still exist. The findings in this study provide evidence that GBL can positively influence student engagement in a CLT based world language classroom.

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Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. There is no financial interest to report. All contributors have seen the contents of the manuscript, and all authors agree with the contents and the order of presentation. The listing of authors correctly identifies their level of contributions to this work. We hereby certify that the submission is our own original work and is not under review at any other publication.

