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Jidoukan Jenga: Teaching English through remixing games and game rules

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James York
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Key points

• **What is this?** This is a recollection of a short lesson with some children. I used Jenga and a dictionary.

• **Why did you make it?** I want to show language teachers that simple games, and playing simple games in students' first language can be a great foundation for helping students learn new vocabulary, think critically, and exercise creativity.

• **Why is it **radical**?** I taught using a **simple** board game (at a time when video games are over-focused on in research). I **show** what the learning looks like (I include a photo). The teaching and learning didn't occur in a laboratory setting, but in the wild (in a **community** center). I focused on the learning **around** games.

• **Who is it for?** Language teachers can easily implement this lesson using Jenga or any other game. Language researchers can expand on the translating and remixing potential around games.

Tweet synopsis

Let students play simple games in their L1. It's ok!

Then:

- You, the teacher, can help them critique the game in their L2.

- You, the teacher, can help them change the game in their L2.

- You, the teacher, can help them develop themselves.

#dropthestick #dropthecarrot #bringmeaning

View at the LLP Playground: <https://www.llpjjournal.org/2020/04/13/jidokan-jenga.html>

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1. Introduction

“Jidoukans,” local community centers, are Japanese child welfare institutions, provided by the government’s Child Welfare Act. Jidoukans create playful opportunities for children, parents and the community through board or card games, toys, and monthly events such as seasonal parties or sports competitions.

My university students and I run a Game Club one Saturday afternoon a month at our local Jidoukan¹. The elementary school kids learn games and make friends, and we get to experiment with different teaching activities with games.

We collaborated closely with the Jidoukan staff to create our Game Club. The Jidoukan staff was very enthusiastic about working with university students and a professor. They mentioned many times that they thought that the university students were good role models for the children who visit their center. The Jidoukan staff gives us a lot of freedom in our Game Club, but they did not want our teaching and games to be explicitly educational. The Jidoukan staff value play and social relations, so they encourage us to explore games and playful activities for practicing language, math or history, but these are secondary goals to providing a space for children to play and have fun in a variety of ways. They did not want our Club to resemble an after-school cram school, or a conversational English school (even though some parents have asked us to teach more English).

My students and I have access to hundreds of tabletop (board, card, speaking) games and also video games (we have brought *J.S. Joust*, *Mario Maker*, and *Wii Sports* to the Jidoukan). My students and I plan our Club activities through email and face to face meetings. We share our ideas for what to try with children, I recommend and teach games if my students need it, we practice games and lessons, and we share our notes in a private Google Document before and after the lesson. Several of these experimental lessons have resulted in later graduation thesis work and academic publications.

One day, I had a small group (a 6th grade boy and two 3rd grade boys). The three boys chose to play with me after I and my other students had introduced what we wanted to do with the 15-20 kids that came. The older boy had studied some English, and one of the 3rd graders goes to a cram school for English. I tried a new activity with them using Jenga. I spoke in Japanese to them for the instructions and main interactions.

I used Jenga for this activity because it was a game that I suspected that they had played before. I was more interested in them doing something with a game that they knew than them learning to play a new game. Also, Jenga’s rules are much shorter than most board game rule books and the rules are written in simple language that I thought that elementary school students would be able to understand. Also, Jenga is a short game which allows for time for the remixing and language work.

The lesson I describe next was the entirety of what I had planned to try at this Jidoukan Game Club meeting. The children’s language and rule ideas were unexpected, of course, but the steps I took to play and interact with them were activities I had planned in advance.

My general goals as a teacher were:

- to help students express their opinions and ideas in their second language,
- to help students gain some game literacy (the relationship between changing rules and changing a game and how a game is played), and
- to help students practice critical thinking and creativity skills

My general goals as a researcher were:

- to explore the practicality of using a simple game to scaffold skills (language, literacy, critical thinking, and creativity) in a short time frame.

¹ Comment from Yiting Han: “I like this kind of third-space learning community.” (April 13, 2020, 16:01)

2. The lesson

1. They had all played Jenga before, and they explained the rules to me in Japanese.
2. We played the game twice.
3. I asked them what they think of Jenga, and they shared their views in Japanese. We then used my dictionary to look up the main English words of their views and I helped them make complete sentences, which they repeated back to me. This interaction took about 5 minutes. They were able to say new ideas in English by themselves after I helped them.
 - "It's good."
 - "The tower might fall down."
 - "My heart is beating."
 - "I have to concentrate."

They were able to say new ideas in English by themselves after I helped them.

4. I then showed them the rules to Jenga in English (I had printed the rules before coming to the club) and I explained some of the key terms to them:

tower, 3 blocks across, with only one hand, a loose one, take one block, put it on top.

I then, in Japanese, asked them to change the game any way they wanted. They suggested pulling two blocks, and not putting them on the top but on the table in front of us as points. I showed them in the rules where the related sentences were and worked with them to change the rules:

"a block" became "2 blocks," we deleted the text "put it on the top of the tower," and added text to say "put in front of us."

5. We played our version twice.



"Jidoukan Jenga" – the modified rules and the game in play

I then asked them what they thought of the new game and helped them look up translations for the main words². They were able to say, with my help:

“It’s more difficult than normal Jenga.”

6. Since we had made a new game, I asked them to make a new name for their game. They suggested that, because we were playing in a Jidoukan, a community center, we should name our game “Jidoukan Jenga” which I wrote on the top of the paper.

7. We chatted in Japanese about the “lesson.” They said, in Japanese, that they thought they made fun rules, that they were happy to be able to make their own game, and that they encountered some difficult words that they didn’t know. These children had not remixed games in the Game Club before (though I and my students often let groups of children “house rule” the games we play together). These children said, in Japanese, that they would like to try this kind of activity again.

3. Reflection

The lesson was hard for them (one boy left halfway through to join a different table and a card game³) but the general flow seemed to work. I’ve done Snakes and Ladders written rule remixing with university students and it always seems to work well and can be done in 90 minutes. I’d like to give this Jenga-based game and game language remix activity⁴ a try with some junior high school students who have had a little more grammar and vocabulary training already. It seems to be a somewhat smooth way to create a common ground⁵ for teachers to help learners communicate and analyze and create games and language.⁶

TEACHING TIP

Don’t focus so much on students playing games in their second language. Let them play in their first language, then help them to express themselves and be creative⁷ in both languages.

² Comment from Fred Poole: “I like this modeling of good L2 practices.” (April 15, 2020, 22:59).

³ Comment from James York: “I love how informal this whole learning context is..!” (April 13, 2020, 13:05).

⁴ Comment from Yiting Han: “can be applied to many other games I think, or maybe can let students take initiative to choose the game.” (April 13, 2020, 16:15)

⁵ Comment from Fred Poole: “This whole lesson feels very Vygotskian to me. Using the game as a mediator for interaction. You have a common ground through which to talk and discuss ideas. A few years back in China I had a private class with a young learner who was rather difficult to reach... however when I pulled out Minecraft our lessons took off. It had somewhat of a similar effect albeit we didn’t remix the game. I think one of the undervalued benefits of remixing... is this idea of ownership and investment. Once new rule are added the students have a vested interest in the game that goes behind ‘fun’. (April 14, 2020, 23:03).

⁶ James York’s “Kotoba Rollers” curriculum (described in an [LLP walkthrough](#)) helped make me more comfortable starting with what learners want to say in their first language, and then helping them say it in their second language.

⁷ Comment from Yiting Han: “love the creativity.” (April 13, 2020, 16:18)