

Transcultural German Conversation Lessons Using Traditional Japanese Games

Asuka Yamazaki

Introduction

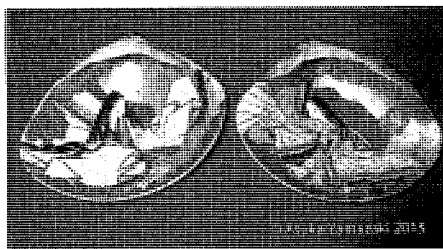
This study investigates transcultural German conversation lessons using traditional Japanese games and hobbies from the Middle Ages until modern times, and analyzes students' learning motivation and learning effects therein, which has not been considered in conventional studies on German foreign language learners in Japan. Regarding this purpose, various fields of study such as international pedagogy and neuroscience have presented many relevant studies about pedagogical game theory or the learning effects of school and university lessons using games. For example, significant studies on similar themes were conducted by an international academic society, the *European Conference on Games Based Learning* that was established in 2007. In another notable study, the neuroscientist Paul Howard-Jones, who advocates for the educational “gaming” concept (2012) and focuses on the “dopamine effect”, in which games cause an increase in students' motivation and have remarkable learning effects. It is also important to note that academics such as Gabe Zicherman and Christopher Cunningham (2011) or Toru Fujimoto (2015) advocate for the “gamification” concept for classroom design by introducing the Roll Playing Game developed by Feline Fuelled Games.

Regarding German lessons using games at universities in Japan, in May 2015, the *Japanische Gesellschaft für Germanistik (Japanese Society for German Studies)* released the latest research results in “Analysis of the Present Condition of German Education and German Learners in Japan.”¹⁾ According to this investigation, the teaching materials chosen by Japanese university teachers for their German lessons are mostly textbooks (91.6%), audio materials like CDs (79.2%), DVDs (49.4%), or computer software (21.4%). In comparison to such

major teaching materials, less than 2.3% of them introduce games into their German lessons. In recent years, since Japanese universities have a tendency not to offer German courses and since 11.7% of German learners experienced a decrease in their learning motivation during German courses, it is necessary for teachers of German lessons to increase the number of students taking German and to preserve their learning motivation.

Based on the present condition of German education in Japan, the author developed a research project supported by public funds,²⁾ and performed German conversation lessons in an educational playing environment, not only to build students' active learning attitudes, but to promote learning effects. Indeed, the author regards games as an important factor in creating a cultural learning process, as Johan Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens* (1938) and Roger Caillois in his *Les jeux et les homes* (1958) argue that games develop and enrich the culture of the humanities. As part of this project, not only does this paper analyze both the practice and the learning effects of a German conversation lesson using traditional Japanese board games and hobbies from the Middle Ages to the present, but also does it investigate the transcultural learning effects of these experiments.

The reason why such a local cultural element is included in a learning strategy for a foreign language is because it allows for multiple layers of cultural meanings and possibilities during learning. According to the German cultural scholar Uwe Wirth (2011, p. 27), who researches “cultural techniques,” multicultural phenomena occur due to the intercultural transplantation of different cultural elements. It is possible that in the foreign language learning process, students can



Kaiawase, a pair of shells with traditional images. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

perform a cultural transplantation of their studied language, of the nondomestic element into the domestic local environment, in order to internalize this new language. From a transcultural viewpoint, this process can apply learners' knowledge and experience of national property

as a resource for language acquisition. That means that foreign language learning becomes a place of abundant cultural experience for both teachers and students.

In these experiments, as a transcultural learning model, three traditional Japanese games or hobbies were introduced: 1. 福笑い (*Fukuwarai*), the “lucky New Year’s game of happy laughter,” a family board game played as a New Year’s celebration; this formerly popular game for children has gone out of fashion, and nowadays it is rarely played; 2. ミニチュア枯山水 (miniature *Karesansui*), a miniature version of a Zen garden that originated in the gardening culture of Zen Buddhism around 1450, during the Muromachi period; to partake in this noble hobby, a high spirit and aesthetic sense are required; and 3. 貝合わせ (*Kaiawase*), a shell matching game played by court aristocrats from the eleventh century till the early-seventeenth century; this traditional luxury game is well known as a handcrafted work made from natural materials; however, in the present day, it is hardly played, except on the occasion of a special ceremony or event. Introducing these games and hobbies into German conversation lessons, this study investigates the learning effects and motivation therein.

This research was performed from April 2014 to November 2017 in different conversation classes (for beginner and advanced levels) at three different universities in Japan, Mie University (2014–2016), Kyoto Sangyo University (2015–2016) and Nihon University (2017). The total number of students who participated in this project was 64 (18–26 years old).

1. Popular Japanese Family Game: Making Grotesque Faces and Laughing

According to Toshikatsu Tada (1992, p. 2 and 6), a history museum educator, 福笑い (*Fukuwarai*) begin to take root in the late-Edo period, in the second half of the eighteenth century, and became a popular family game, as it was greatly loved by children until around 1960. However, in the modern age, this game is played less due to changing family structures and the abundance of video games. On a paper depicting an outlined face, a blindfolded player tries to place different parts of it, like ears, eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth. Such homely faces are almost ひよつとこ (*Hyottoko*) and おかめ (*Okame*), the traditional male and female fool types, whose famous masks are used for traditional performing arts in Japan.

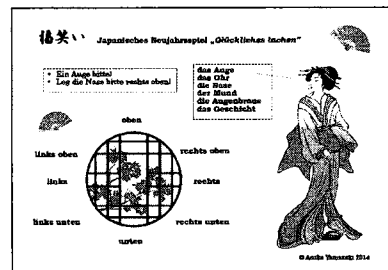


A student tries to create the face of *Hyottoko* while wearing “Sniper” mask, a famous comic character. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

Each face has characteristic and partly exaggerated features, like a big forehead, plump cheeks, or short nose. The more disproportionately and disjointedly the pieces are placed, the funnier the face and the stronger the laughter from players and observers become. According to Hiroshi Inoue (2004, pp. 18–22), a scholar of laughter and humor studies, in Japan, comedy culture is already recorded in *古事記* (*Kojiki*), Japan’s oldest historical record,³⁾ in which people believe as a matter of religious faith that their mutual laughter is transmissible to the gods, whom they join in a laughter that finally brings the people happiness and a full harvest. Playing such a funny game in family circles makes

people laugh with joy and brings them good fortune from the beginning of a fiscal year. Therefore, in the process of creating the face, an aesthetic exaggeration or distortion is required, different from a realistic body image, in order to maximize the humor.

In the author’s experiment, *Fukuwarai* was introduced as a teaching material for elementary level German, in order to learn the words for facial features and directions. One pair of blindfolded players takes a special blindfold, on which their eyes are replaced by famous comic or anime characters, so he or she can get into the famous character, and play the game with a feeling of amusement. In such a relaxing classroom climate, players turn around



The work instructions for *Fukuwarai*.
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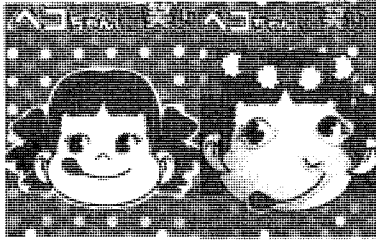
three times to lose their sense of direction, sit on a chair, and ask their partners for a certain part, saying, for example, “A right eye, please” (“Rechtes Auge, bitte”). The partners hand them this part, and direct them by saying directional words like “Right!” (“Rechts!”), “Upper left!” (“Links oben!”), or “A little below!” (“Ein bißchen



unten!”), specifying where the blindfolded partner should place the facial feature on the faceless outline. However, the partner sometimes leads the player in an incorrect direction, in order to create a funny face. When the partner says “place it here!” (“Legen Sie es hier!”), the player places the part on the face. He or she proceeds with placing other parts until the face is completed.

In the actual lessons, by means of work instruction, the students repeatedly have to say directional words due to the many facial parts or other objects, like hats or bows, used in the game. Therefore, it was remarkable that they naturally memorized the German words after playing this game just once. In the author’s experiment, the colorful face features and easy instructions had a notable impact on the students, so that they effectively met the learning objective and achieved their goal.

Furthermore, since the comic or anime characters’ faces, usually familiar to students, are distorted, due to incorrect placement, players were amused, resulting in the loss of their awareness of learning while playing the game: they spoke German words painlessly and with enjoyment. Regarding this, the famous Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes, in his *Rabelais and His World* (1968), that seeing a distorted, grotesque body image causes people to have extraordinary experiences, while it is a principle of laughter that it triggers the overthrow of



During the game, the famous character Peko-chan's face was also humorously distorted. © Fujiya, co. Ltd. (Photos: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

in visible learning, a positive classroom climate is needed to promote learning. In this context, *Fukuwarai* is suitable for maintaining a positive, relaxed climate in the classroom and in the teacher-student relationship. We can also consider that the laughter principle of this game is common to all cultural spheres, and its playful educational and transcultural effects can be adapted to learning any foreign language, in order to easily increase the incentive for learning.

authoritative space. The classroom tends to become a kind of power space due to the authority and leadership of teachers over students. However, in the author's experiment, through the participation of all members, including the teacher, in this once-popular, unique game, a horizontal and collective teacher-student relationship can be built in a relaxed and amusing atmosphere. According to John Hattie (2012, p. 77), a leading educator



A student has almost completed the face of *Okame*. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

2. Using a Traditional Japanese Hobby: Imagination and Meditation Enrichment

In connecting the local region with foreign language learning, transcultural consumption continues through the students' use of the local cultural resources or property in their environment. Using traditional games or hobbies is, by itself, an educational strategy, since it promotes both the development of students' mutual cognition in addition to their aesthetic and moral sentiment. With respect to this point, Friedrich Schiller, the German philosopher and author in the eighteenth

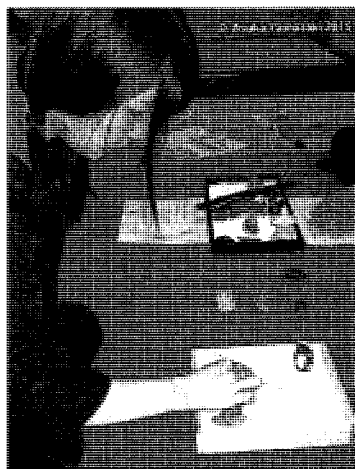


German lesson using *Karesansui* in a Japanese-style room. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

students experience a learning process where the oral use of a foreign language is contextually connected to their local aesthetic space. Therefore, these students can apply their creativity within an authentically aesthetic experience to create novel perspectives and possibilities for the target foreign language.

Based on this pedagogical viewpoint, as a second experiment, the author introduced a miniature 枯山水 (*Karesansui*), or Zen garden, the gardening of which is a traditional Japanese hobby. According to Matsu Yoshikawa (1991, pp. 24–40) and Kenkichi Ono (2009, pp. 129–168), scholars' of gardening history, *Karesansui* is mainly made up of rockwork, in order to symbolically express the scenery of mountains and water without using actual water. This noble, artistic hobby originated in the mid-fifteenth century, during the Muromachi period. This aesthetic and

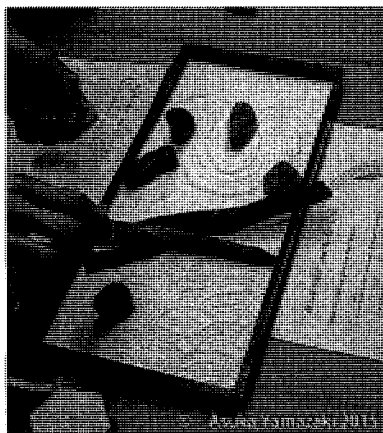
century, theorized the play concept of aesthetic education for humanity and for promoting their universality in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). In his pedagogical doctrine, the concepts of play and art release man from all compulsion and frees them naturally as well. Through aesthetic experience, man harmonizes reason and sensitivity with intellectual and emotional enrichment. Concerning this educational concept using games and hobbies, the



A student plays the role of gardener, and concentrates on creating a garden together with her client. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

gardening culture were influenced by both Buddhism and its arts and culture, which came from China. Particularly, Zen Buddhism's view of nature is deeply concerned with the abstract style and fashion of *Karesansui*. This gardening culture developed in connection with the philosophical and aesthetic views of the age until the Azuchi Momoyama period around 1600, and was greatly loved by aristocrats, feudal lords, and priests, not only to display their excellent tastes or power, but also to practice meditation and contemplation.

In this form of gardening, stones, sand, trees, and other objects are abstractly arranged in a garden space. The most important elements are the different natural stones that are placed on the white sand, because they symbolize either islands of gods or normal islands, or in some cases suggest animals, such as a tortoise or tiger. The white sands covering the garden symbolize a sea or river, on which different geometrical lines or patterns are drawn with a broom, in order to express waves or an ocean whirlpool. With such materials, people create aesthetic reproductions of nature, which is originally wild and uncontrollable to humanity. In this artificial, waterless reproduction of nature, not only are people's senses of awe toward nature displayed, but also are their instinctive desires to see the living



A student designs a beautiful wave pattern in the sand. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

beauty of nature aesthetically sublimated.

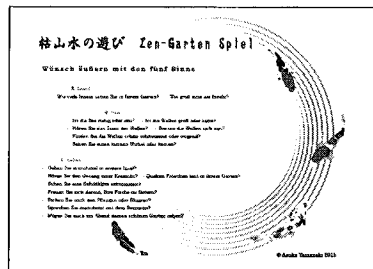
Karesansui is a philosophical form of gardening that condenses the world of nature's beauty, so it is recognized as a noble hobby.

In recent years, this gardening culture has been put on the market in miniature, and has become a popular object for practicing meditation at home. In the author's attempt, the miniature *Karesansui* was introduced as a teaching material in an advanced German conversation course. In pairs, one student played the role of a gardener and the other as a client placing an

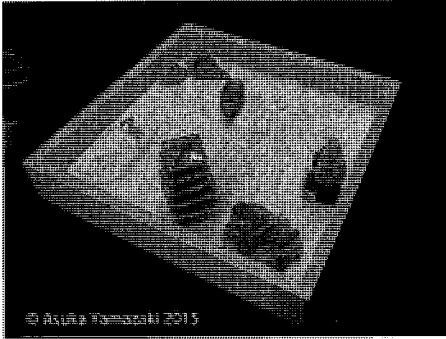
order, in order to cooperatively create a garden. The gardeners asked their clients what kind of garden they wanted, and the clients described their image of the garden. The questions were not to be asked directly, but in an indirect way using the five senses: for example, when the gardeners metaphorically asked their clients, “How many islands do you want to see?” (“Wie viele Inseln wollen Sie sehen?”), it suggested “how many stones does the client want placed on his or her garden”. In other cases, the gardener asked, “Do you hear birds singing?” (“Hören Sie Vögel singen?”) or “Would you like to smell the fragrance of flowers or plant?” (“Möchten Sie den Duft von Blumen oder Pflanzen riechen?”), which asked whether the client needed an object for birds or other small animals like a tortoise, or flowers or plants. It was also interesting that the gardener asked, “Would you like to take a walk in your garden in the evening or at night?” (“Möchten Sie sich gerne am Abend oder in der Nacht in Ihrem Garten aufhalten?”), which asked whether the client needed an object to represent a lantern.

By asking indirect, suggestive questions, the gardener let the client call up an image of an ideal garden. It was not favorable for the client to order a garden arranged with many stones and objects, because such gardens seem to lack refinement due to their complicated structure, and it also shows too much desire. In order to create a garden as a small, complete beautiful world, both students cooperatively took care of the aesthetic and natural arrangement, and set their sights on harmony between nature and humans.

After the gardener received a request from the client, he or she got started on realizing the client’s ideal garden. In order to arrange the garden cooperatively, the gardener indirectly suggested ideas to the client using German sentences in the subjunctive mood: “I would suggest you scatter sand here” (“Ich würde Ihnen vorschlagen, hier den Sand zu zerstreuen.”), or “My idea would be to build a bridge here” (“Mein Vorschlag wäre es, hier eine Brücke zu bauen.”).



The work instructions for *Karesansui*.
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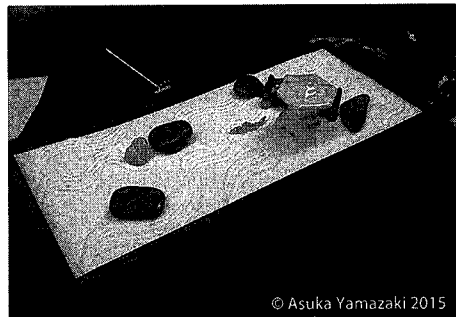


A client yearns for a garden with houses and animals. In the garden, we can see a crane, frog, and raccoon on the water, which has a fine wave pattern. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

If they had different opinions, it was necessary to discuss the arrangement of the garden with each other. In cases in which they lacked a desired object, they could use a stone in its place. Regarding this, in the famous Zen garden in 龍安寺 (*Ryoan-ji*), there are officially 15 stones symbolizing tigers and islands, although only 14 stones can be viewed from each angle at once: we have to call up the “non-

existent,” fifteenth stone in our minds. In such a situation, the gardener made a suggestion using a sentence, in the present subjunctive mood, like the following: “You can see this stone, as if it were a turtle” (“Sie können diesen Stein so sehen, als ob er ein Schildkröte wäre”). It was easy to develop their imagination to compensate for shortfalls, as the Zen spirit also considers simplicity an important factor for contemplation (Katsura Nishi 2005, p. 87).

In this experiment, all students enthusiastically enjoyed playing with this miniature *Karesansui*, and they had actually visited real Zen gardens in Japan. They tried to complete an abstract, artificial garden using both their imaginative and foreign languages, and they reproduced the calmness or roughness of nature in such a way that simultaneously expressed their inner states, cultures, and tastes. Here, we can consider how

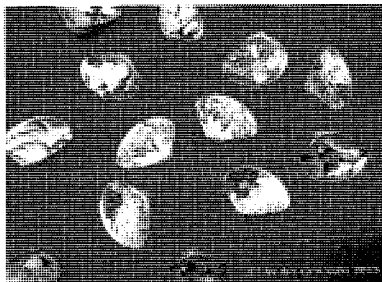


A student creates a beautiful Zen Garden. Their tastes and culture are directly reflected in it. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

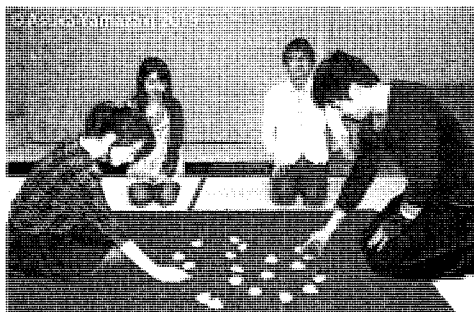
a foreign language is used for the mutual development of the gardener's and client's imaginations and for practicing meditation. According to the educational goal theory of Carole Ames and Jennifer Archer (1988) and the motivation theories of Dale H. Schunk and Barry J. Zimmerman (2008) and Jere Brophy (2010), students' learning motivation in classrooms drastically increases when they set a performance goal and pursue it. Regarding this theory, miniature *Karesansui* in an educational environment is suitable for increasing students' interactive performance, since it is easy to set short-term goals for completing an art work and creative self-expression, while they mutually use certain sentences in a foreign language. In the lessons, the concepts of Zen gardening, spiritual development, and unification of humanity with nature are mixed into the process of acquiring a foreign language. Such a heterogeneous experiment, mixing domestic culture and a non-domestic language, allows the students not only to recognize their transcultural educational achievement, but also to provide them with the possibility of transcultural formation in different linguistic areas.

3. A Medieval Court Aristocrat's Game: Revival of Traditional Culture

In the third experiment for the foreign language conversation lesson, the author introduced the traditional Japanese game 貝合わせ (*Kaiawase*), a shell-matching game. According to the scholars Kouichi Masukawa (2000, p. 51) and Seishi Namiki (2007, p. 13), this traditional game was greatly popular among court aristocrats during the Heian period in the Middle Ages, and was already recorded in books in 1040. The concept of this game is similar to the card game *Concentration*, or *Memory*, as players turn over pairs of matching objects. The inside of the paired shells are brightly painted with pictures usually taken from famous scenes or motifs in 和歌 (*Waka*), a traditional Japanese song genre, or with pictures of court aristocrats or gorgeous



The different beautiful pictures inside the shells in *Kaiawase*. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)



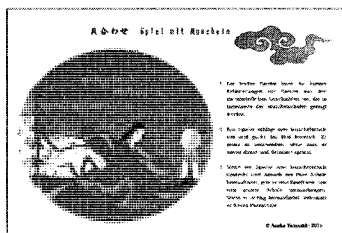
Two players sit on the floor facing each other and begin to play *Kaiawase*. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

paintings on a folding screen. The paired shells have the same or a similar picture or pattern. Players choose one shell to turn face up, and if they can make a pair, they get the shells. Whoever gets the most shells wins. This aristocratic game was played until the early Edo period (Masukawa 2000, p. 135f.), and was known as an important wedding gift for

upper-class daughters at that time, since it symbolized a wife's fidelity to their husband (Namiki 2007, pp. 34–39). However, in the present day, this custom has gradually disappeared, and we see it in museums as a traditional and precious craftwork. In our age, *Kaiawase* embodies the old traditional Japanese culture that is now disappearing.

The author tried to reproduce this medieval aristocrat's game in an advanced German conversation class. For this attempt, the precious 10 pairs of shells were prepared,⁴⁾ their insides illustrated with different beautiful aristocratic pictures focusing on famous scenes from medieval tales, such as 源氏物語 (*Genji Monogatari, The Tale of Genji*), 伊勢物語 (*Ise Monogatari, The Tales of Ise*), and 竹取物語 (*Takeroti Monogatari, The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*), or from 浮世絵 (*Ukiyo-e*), a famous traditional picture genre. Therefore, the participants read brief outlines of these tales or image interpretations in German in advance.

While playing this traditional game, the player turned a shell face up without it being seen by the other players, and indirectly described the scene on the inside of the shell in German. For example, he or she could



The work instructions for *Kaiawase* (© Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

have said, “There are two people standing face-to-face and talking” (“Es gibt zwei Menschen, die gegenüber stehen und miteinander sprechen.”). Without looking at the inside, the other players were allowed to ask for further information about the pictures two or three times, saying, for example, “What is the color of these people’s clothes?” (“Wie ist die Farbe der Kleidung dieser Leute?”), or “What is shown in the background?” (“Was wird im Hintergrund gezeigt?”). The player who turned the shell over answered briefly, in order to avoid other players identifying where the matching shell was. If none of the players found the matching shell, the first player put the shell back, and then the other players took turns



A student describes the picture inside a shell. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

turning over other shells and



A student identifies a matching shell and turns it face up. (Photo: Asuka Yamazaki 2015)

describing the pictures. When a player found a matching shell, he or she pulled out one flower card from ten given to each player beforehand, turned over the pair of shells, and kept it. Whoever collected the most pairs was the winner.

Kaiawase is known as a game that requires outstanding memory. For this reason, in the actual lessons, students felt the game was very difficult, and spent much effort on memorizing the placement of the shells. Moreover, due to the large number of shells, they repeatedly needed to hear or say the same or similar descriptions of scenes or motifs in German. Therefore, they came to memorize the same descriptive phrases or sentences. By playing *Kaiawase*, there were great

linguistic learning effects on the participants, thanks to the repetitive language practice. Moreover, this experiment increased their motivation and interest, since they had a rare opportunity to play this court aristocrat's game, and played it in a traditional Japanese-style room with a ceremonial aesthetic atmosphere, just as the aristocrats of the Edo period took delight in it.

The author used the foreign language as a medium to revivify a traditional national culture that has almost disappeared in the present day. We can consider here how heterogeneous elements are synthesized in the foreign language learning process and succeed in bringing this medieval custom back to life. This cultural transplantation between a language and games of different cultures broadens the cultural lives of the participants, as well as the possibilities for using a foreign language in their local lives. Through this cross-boundary work of cultural revival, not only did students experience the learning of a foreign language as cultural memory, but also did such a language acquisition process make it possible to breathe new meaning into these traditional customs.

Conclusion

In modern Japan, under the Meiji government (1867–1912), games were negatively regarded as a symbol of idleness, weakness, and corruption, and were excluded from society for the reason that they reduced people's productivity (Masukawa 2014, 302f and 308). The people's negative ideas against games have remained up to the present day. Therefore, it might be thought that games should not be introduced as a teaching material for German lessons in Japan. However, as already discussed in connection to international education trends, traditional Japanese games and hobbies can be used as teaching materials in foreign language lessons thanks to their outstanding educational effects.

Moreover, in the author's transcultural experiments, the foreign language acquisition process was integrated into local traditional games and hobbies. We can recognize here that every language is an integral part of its culture, but also that it has a universality that can connect with the local customs or cultures of students. In fact, such a practice can also be helpful due to the opportunity it provides for students to explain their local, traditional cultures to guests from

other countries. This practice improves students' ability to communicate in a foreign language, and has the potential to promote intercultural exchange between nations in the future. In our modern global society, which is increasingly complicated, a multicultural symbiosis accepting of various values is required to gradually build a cohesive society. Concerning this international tendency, rather than not consider the local environments in which learners live, it is possible to interactively use the local or national customs or games they already have, not only to facilitate further development in acquisition of new languages, but also to share multicultural experiences.

Questionnaire survey on the German conversation lesson using Japanese cultural game

福笑い <i>Fukuwarai</i>	excellent/ very effective	good/ effective	average	fairly ineffective/ poor	ineffective / very poor
Is it suitable for language learning?	11	3	3	2	1
Did it increase your motivation for learning?	7	6	4	1	
Did you acquire new cultural experiences?	10	1	4	1	2
Was it enjoyable?	10	6	1	1	
sum	38	16	12	5	3

枯山水 <i>Karesansui</i>	excellent/ very effective	good/ effective	average	fairly ineffective/ poor	ineffective / very poor
Is it suitable for language learning?	2	1			
Did it increase your motivation for learning?	2	1			
Did you acquire new cultural experiences?	2	1			
Was it enjoyable?	3				
sum	9	3	0	0	0

具合わせ <i>Kaiawase</i>	excellent/ very effective	good/ effective	average	fairly ineffective/ poor	ineffective / very poor
Is it suitable for language learning?	2	1			
Did it increase your motivation for learning?	1	2			
Did you acquire new cultural experiences?	3				
Was it enjoyable?	1	1			
sum	7	4	0	0	0

A large majority of the students recognized the language-learning effect of playing the board game *Fukuwarai*. Moreover, many of the students enjoyed playing the game. On the other hand, because the game is aimed at children, a small number of participants did not find it as fun to play. However, the questionnaire shows that many younger students who had not played *Fukuwarai* at home gained new cultural experiences.

With respect to the questionnaire focusing on the board games *Karesansui* and *Kaiawase*, few responses were obtained due to fact that only a small number of participants are in the advanced class. However, all of the students indicated that they enjoyed playing *Karesansui* during the lesson, since it allowed them to make a creative Zen garden through the power of their imagination. Moreover, they felt that their motivation for learning and learning effect increased.

Many students felt that playing *Kaiawase* was more difficult than enjoyable. On the other hand, they indicated satisfaction with the new cultural experience they obtained through playing this medieval game. In addition, because I set *Kaiawase* as a two-player language learning game, the time for each person to repeat the same phrases mutually increased. Thus, players obtained a high learning effect for language acquisition. I am therefore considering introducing *Kaiawase* as a language-learning game for beginners in future settings.

Endnotes

- 1) This research result from *JGG* is published on its website.
- 2) Regarding this project, the author presented a workshop on “The Dynamic Play Learning System: Über die Einführung von Spielen in deutschen Konversationskurse” at the conference of *Japanische Gesellschaft für Germanistik* on May 30, 2015. Also, she revealed the results of her research on “Transcultural German Conversation Lessons Using Traditional Japanese Games” at the international conference of *International Society for Board Game Studies Colloquium 2016* in Nurnberg on April 17, 2016.
- 3) Japan’s oldest historical record, 古事記 (*Kojiki*), describes an episode in which the sun goddess, Amaterasu, hides inside a rock cave and the world becomes dark. The other gods hold an entertaining dance party in front of this cave. Amaterasu returns from the inside, because she hears the laughter of the other god, and wants to see the outside.
- 4) The *Kaiawase* I used were made by 京都蛭堂 (Kyoto Hotarudo), a famous handcraft store in Kyoto.

Acknowledgements

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