

# Teaching German Language Conversation Courses through Games (vol. 1): Using German Educational and Intellectual Board Games

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## Introduction

This study investigates German conversation lessons using German educational and intellectual board games, and analyzes students' learning motivation and learning effects. Recently, international concern about the learning method using games in lessons is increasing, after international academic societies such as the *European Conference on Games Based Learning* (ECGBL) and *Digital Games Research Association* (DiGRA) published studies on pedagogical game theory and the learning effects of school and university lessons using games.<sup>1)</sup> In Japan as well, research about universities using games in lessons is being conducted. We can refer to the study of Arita (2011) who introduced German Board Games in first-year education class to analyze the development of the intellectual and logical thinking of the students. Moreover, in foreign language courses using the board games, Levy (2017), Hiramatsu (2017), and Menant (2019) examine improvements in language skills and encouragement to communicate among students.

However, in the common lessons at the Japanese universities, games or plays are not so often introduced. As *The Japanese Society for German Studies* (JGG) revealed in its latest research, less than 3.2% of German language teachers in Japanese universities use games in their classes (2015: 89). It was further reported that a certain number of students in German language courses lose their learning motivation over time (Ibid.: 97 and 126). Therefore, it is necessary to create a comfortable learning atmosphere and promote active learning attitudes in students. In this context, the author considers the non-electronic educational

games made by wood or paper as good teaching material, since with such kind of games, the students can easily be involved in playing together. They also promote mutual communication and physical exercises to create a relaxing and amusing atmosphere. Also, in comparison with the digital and electronic teaching games, non-electric board games are eco-friendly, harmless to human body, and they don't cause any eyesight problem known as the computer syndrome.

According to the information provided by *Das Deutsche Spielearchiv Nürnberg*, the research and documentation center of German social board Games, Germany has traditionally a strong game culture. Every year, about 700 new games are produced and showed at the internationally renowned trade fairs in Nuremberg and Essen.<sup>2)</sup> Besides, the concept of the use of educational game to promote easy learning is already prevalent in Germany, with toy makers producing various board games, toys and playing goods. Based on the latest German studies about educational effects using board games, Hiramatsu (2017: 2f.) indicates that the board games are officially introduced in the German language education for immigrants. In Germany, the board games are integrated into the classes as effective educational tools, regardless of the learner's mother language.

In this context, in April 2016, the author participated at the *Colloquium of International Board Games Studies* that was organized by *Das Deutsche Spielearchiv Nürnberg*.<sup>3)</sup> The participants held academic discussions about board games from the ancient age to the present days, and argued how the games have a traditional and sociocultural significance and are useful as a tool for communication, not only among family or friend circles but between people of different cultural backgrounds.

During the conference, the society offered the attendants an opportunity to go on a research trip to *HABA* Manufactory, the headquarters of a well-known German game manufacturer. It was a significant experience to understand how board games support the social and cultural life



The official headquarters of *Haba* (April, 2016)

of the people and unite them, from children to adults, regardless of nationality, gender, and mother tongue. After this cultural experience, the author encourages further experiments to introduce educational board games or plays into the lessons of the Japanese universities, in order to develop students' logical thinking, their language skills, as well as introducing the students to the German game culture.

Furthermore, as already shown in the author's paper Yamazaki (2019), during a 90-minutes lesson, 7-10 minutes of short break is necessary for the learners to maintain healthy physical condition, as they should move their bodies to promote physical activity during the lesson. By introducing games into classes, it is possible not only to change the atmosphere, but also to encourage active learning by promoting students' movement.

This paper investigates the German conversation lessons for beginners and advanced students using educational games, which especially gained favor with the students and received good educational feedbacks from them. It also verifies both the learning and motivation effect. This research was carried out from April 2014 to November 2019 in different conversation classes (for beginners and advanced levels) at four different universities in Japan (Kyoto Sangyo University, Kyoto University, Mie University, and Nihon University). The total number



The official headquarters of *Haba* (April, 2016)

of students from ages 18 to 26 who participated in this project were 94.

For this experiment, the author introduced the written questionnaire survey only among the students in a small class to ask about the learning effect or increasing motivations. Since this paper is the first volume of "Playful Teaching German Language Conversation Courses," the results of the questionnaire survey will be analyzed in the discussion of the paper's second volume. It will deal with the German conversation lesson

introducing original board games or plays made by the author. The photos of the students showed in this paper were used with their permission, and they willingly agreed to let their photos be used for publishing the paper. I would like to thank all the students who cooperated with me and allowed me to take lively shots in a fun-filled and relaxed atmosphere.

Since this learning method using games is not limited to German courses, and can be used for all foreign language lessons such as French, English, Chinese, Korean, etc.; therefore, the author wrote this article neither in Japanese nor German, but in English to be read by the teachers of different mother languages. Meanwhile, she hopes to contribute to promoting the learning motivations for all foreign language learners, regardless nationalities, ages, or mother tongues.

### 1. Practicing Basic German Sentences and Names of Colors

Normally, the students who are in first year and have just begun to learn German in a class cannot get used to their new classmates and feel nervous. Therefore, it is important to ease the tension among participants early in the lesson and encourage them to communicate as much as possible. Having a common enjoyable experience by playing a little game is quite effective.

Haba's *Zitternix (Keep it Steady)* (ステイツキー), a wooden game for children, is especially suitable for this purpose, since everyone can easily understand its simple rules and enjoy playing it together. In this game, each player rolls a dice by turns, and according to the color on the dice, he or she carefully pulls out one colored stick from all sticks bundled with a wooden ring. Sticks are coated in three different colors like yellow, red, and blue and are of different thickness. If a player collapses the bundle by pulling a stick, he or she



A student rolls the dice and others look at on it. 27 sticks are bundled with a wooden ring. As it takes nearly 15 minutes to play the game, it acts as short refreshment for students during the lesson.

loses the game.

In German conversation course for beginners, the author introduced this game for easy memorization of sentences using a subject and verb, as well as these three colors. If the student has just started learning German, it is better to focus on learning simple words like names of colors. When pulling a stick, the player says only “rot” (red), “gelb” (yellow), or “blau” (blue), in order to concentrate solely on memorizing simple words without interrupting the progress of the game.

After learning basic sentences using a personal pronoun and verb, it is recommended practicing speaking easy sentences during playing the game. When a player turns to throw a dice, he or she says, “Ich bin dran” (It’s my turn), and all other players say, “Du bist dran” (It’s your turn). Before throwing the dice, the player says, “Ich würfele!” (I play dice!).

In case the teacher uses this game in the second semester or in the advanced class, it is suitable to use it for practicing a complex alteration of German adjective. For instance, if a student pulls out a stick saying the sentence, “Ich nehme den roten Stab” (I pull out the red stick),



“It’s my turn!” A student says and pulls carefully a yellow stick. Each stick has different points. Whoever scores most points, wins the game.

then the other players also say, “Du nimmst den roten Stab” (You pull out the red stick). When a yellow or blue stick is pulled, the player can make the change in adjective by saying “Ich nehme den gelben Stab” (I pull out the yellow stick) or “Ich nehme den blauen Stab” (I pull out the blue stick).

Since the bundle on the table is unstable, it can easily collapse. Therefore, the participants felt thrill and enjoyed themselves while playing the game. When the game ends, each player says, “Ich gewinne” (I won), or “Du gewinnst” (You won), and the others say “Ich verliere” (I lost), or “Du verlierst” (You lost).

This game can be played by 5–6 persons. It is suitable to introduce this wooden game early

in the course in order to receive the desired educational effect. Students naturally start communicating with each other and develop a feeling for the language using easy German sentences. Moreover, while playing the game, the atmosphere of the class becomes cheerful.

## 2. Enjoying Practice of Counting the Numbers

According to the Masukawa (2000: 6-57 and 133-144), the popular Japanese card game *Karuta* (かるた) originated from *Kaiawase* (貝合わせ), the shell-matching game famous during the Heian period in the Middle Ages, as well as the European card game imported around 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the Edo period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Karuta* became popular because of its easy rules of playing. Each player competes to collect as many cards as possible.

In the German conversation lessons, the author introduced this card game of *Karuta* in order to encourage easy memorization of numbers in a playful atmosphere. In the conventional German conversation courses in Japan, almost all teachers depend on teaching materials like textbooks that are not enough to create an amusing atmosphere to encourage learning.

For increasing the educational effect of learning German numbers and creating an amusing atmosphere during the lesson, the author introduced Haba's  $3 \cdot 4 = \text{Klatsch}$  ( $3 \text{ Times } 4 = \text{Swat!}$ ) ( $3 \times 4 = \text{パチッ!}$ ). This game has the same basic concept of *Karuta* combined with an idea of a fly swatter; therefore, the students can easily understand its rules and play it.

On the table, 45 fly cards with different numbers written on them are scattered, and 5 flower cards with numbers from 1 to 10 written on both sides are stacked nearby. After a player turns a flower card to show a



After a student throws the dice and pulls a flower card, all students practice the numbers saying as "Acht mal sieben ist... sechshundfünzig!" (Eight times seven equals... fifty-six!). Then, they begin to find the correct number.

number and throws a dice, all players multiply the number appeared on the dice by the number of the flower card. Then, they compete to find the multiplied number among the scattered fly cards. Whoever first identifies the correct number card, he or she must say this number in German loudly to hit it with a swatter, and then that player gets the wooden fly. The player who gets the most wooden flies wins.

For the effective practice of counting the German numbers, all players should read aloud the German numbers as many times as possible during the game. For instance, when a number shown on the rolled dice is “drei” (three) and a number on the flower card is “acht” (eight), all participants have to say together, “Drei mal acht ist...!” (Three times eight equals...!). The player who identifies the fly card



He concentrates to find the correct number with his fly swatter, while controlling his competitive spirit.

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He identifies the correct fly card and excitedly hits it with his fly swatter. He is enjoying playing the game, since it gives a small break from learning and de-stresses the mind.

with the number 24 says, “vierundzwanzig” (twenty-four), before hitting it. After he or she hits the correct card and gets it, in order to memorize the number, all players together repeat the whole sentences in German, as “Drei mal acht ist vierundzwanzig” (Three times eight equals twenty-four). This fly swatter game has many possible combinations of the numbers, therefore, the students can practice counting and memorizing many German numbers. If they want to intensively practice only the numbers in multiples of 10 like 10, 20, 30, etc., they can use only one flower card with 10 number and throw the dice, and then look for the fly cards with multiples of number 10 written on them.

This game was especially preferred by the students because of its competitive element as they need to

find the correct number card quicker than the other ones. Besides, the flapping with fly swatter evokes in the participants an amusing and exciting feeling. Also, the lovely illustrations of different flies on the cards have a visual and emotional effect on increasing the motivation of students.

### 3. Learning Prepositions by Combining Different Animal Figures

Learning German prepositions is especially difficult for beginners, because of their complicated grammatical structure and rules, as the article changes according to the genders of nouns and different prepositions. Such complicated grammatical rules confuse the students and they lose motivation to learn the language. To avoid poor awareness of German language and to promote playful learning, the author introduced students to Haba's *Tier auf Tier* (Animal upon Animal) ( *ワニに乗る?* ), a wooden blocks game. The game has one alligator block as the base for all animal blocks, and consists of four units of seven



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A student carefully puts an animal on another one.



A student carefully puts one animal on the other one. After putting on the animal, all students say "Der Igel ist auf dem Affen" (The hedgehog is on the ape).

kinds of animals each, such as ape, penguin, sheep, etc.

In the author's experiment, at first, for partner practice, each unit of seven kinds of animals is divided into two pairs, in order to intensively practice various German prepositions using those animal parts. Each pair forms German sentences using a suitable preposition according to the position of each animal upon the other animal. The prepositions to be used are basic ones such as "neben" (next to), "über" (over), "auf" (on), "unter" (under), "zwischen" (between), etc. For instance, a

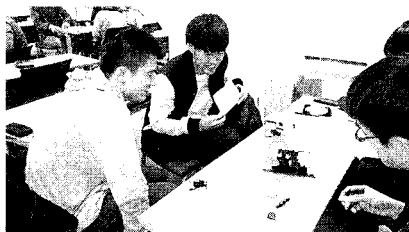


player puts an ape on a sheep, the other player asks him or her, “Wo ist der Affe?” (Where is the ape?), and the first player answers, “Der Affe ist auf dem Schaf” (The ape is on the sheep). If the answer is correct, the pair repeatedly says this sentence together to practice German preposition.

This game is well-constructed as the animal blocks can be put on the other animals, regardless of the position. Therefore, by placing a penguin next to a frilled lizard, the player can use the expressions “Der Pinguin ist neben der Kragenechse” (The penguin is next to the frilled lizard). The players are also required to change an article from nominative to dative according to the gender of the noun of each animal. Of course, this game can be put to practice to say that the prepositions use the accusative. For example, “Ich setze den Affe auf den Krokodil” (I put the monkey on the crocodile) or “Du legst dieses Schaf unter diese Schlange” (You put this sheep under this snake). This practice of using different prepositions brought a great learning effect, since the students enjoyed creating combinations of the wooden animals and learned prepositions with practical examples.

After completing partner practice, finally, 4-5 persons gather and play the game according to its original rule. The wooden crocodile is put in the center of the table, and players try to put their animals on top of it and create an animal pyramid. Whoever puts all of his or her animals on the pyramid first, wins. While playing the game, for German practice, they together speak the sentences with prepositions like, “Die Schlange ist auf dem Krokodil” (The snake is on the crocodile) or “Der Kuh ist zwischen dem Hund und dem Affe” (The cow is between the dog and ape).

Since the game inspired students' creativity and enhanced their ability to reason as they tried to place the animals without making them fall, they enjoyed practicing the sentences



They are concentrating on the game Haba's *Tier auf Tier*. By combining as many animal blocks as possible, they put them from various angles and tried to make an animal pyramid larger vertically and horizontally.

with prepositions and learned the language.

This game was a very favorite among the students. However, there were some students who concentrated on the game so much that they forgot to practice speaking German. To address this problem, the author went around the classroom and found such groups who talked to each other only in Japanese, and then encouraged them to speak in German. Nonetheless, the experiment to use a block game in the lesson proved successful, as the students learned German prepositions in a practical way, by creating an amusing and exciting classroom atmosphere.

#### **4. Learning to Express Feelings and Names of Body Parts**

According to Hacking (2006: 5), game of dice is the oldest source of amusement for human beings and was already played in the Roman era. This universal game is easy to play, since its concept lay on the probability that the numbers appearing on the dice are equiprobable; therefore, anyone can enjoy playing the game with confidence.

Focusing on the concept of the dice game, the author introduced *Roll & Play*, ( *ロール&プレイ* ) a game produced by toymaker *ThinkFun*. This game originally aimed to promote the cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity and develop the language of children. The rules of this dice game are simple: each player throws the big dice whose surface is coated with six different colors. According to the color shown on the dice, he or she pulls a card with the same color from the many cards scattered on the table, and follows the instructions written on the card. All six types of color cards are categorized into 6 different instructions, such as “express a feeling,” “count a number,” “look for an object with a certain color,” “touch a body

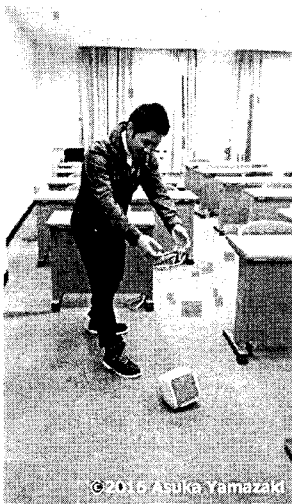


On the surface of the cards, different instructions are written with lovely illustrations.

part,” “act in a comical gesture,” and “mimic an animal’s cry.”

As a teaching material, the author introduced this game in the advanced German conversation course, in order to create a relaxed atmosphere, as well as to enhance learners’ mobility, and activate their thought process.

In the author’s experiment, the participants play the game according to the original rule. A player rolls the dice and pulls up one card, and follows every command that is written on the card in German in imperative form. Then, he or she reads aloud this command, and performs it. Almost all commands are



A student throws the big dice and pulls up a colored card on the table.

funny and comical and expressed in colloquial language, such as “Dreh’ dich zweimal im Kreis” (Turning round twice), “Wirf einen Kuss” (Blow a kiss), or “Quak’ wie eine Ente” (Cry like a duck). To encourage playing the game without any hesitation, the author took the first turn, threw the dice, and did a funny action. Then, the actual game began. Since the students must do childish gestures and actions, so different from their ordinary lives, this game unexpectedly made them burst into laughter, making the classroom atmosphere pleasant and enjoyable.

In the second round, the author intensified the challenge. Now, the attendants have to throw the dice three times, and pick up three cards with three different colors, in order to combine the three gestures and perform them simultaneously.

To make the game more amusing, the author arranged that they always must pull one sound card (“imitate animal’s cry”) among the three cards. For example, a player who throws the dice and picks up three cards with instructions like “Mach’ einen albernen Tanz” (Do a silly dance), “Mach ein überraschtes Gesicht” (Make a surprised face), and “Brüll’ wie ein Löwe” (Howl like a lion) must combine the three gestures and perform in a funny way.

In further rounds, some challengers voluntarily tried to combine four or five commands and perform those actions simultaneously, such as “Schwenk’ deine Arme” (Swing your arms), “Sing’ ein Lied” (Sing a song), “Quiek’ wie ein Schwein” (Squeak like a pig), “Finde etwas Grünes” (Find something green), and “Stampfe sechsmal” (Tap six times). Through their unique and funny actions, all students burst out laughing. Since this teaching material had an effect just like a party game, they enjoyed playing and were motivated to learn German words and sentences.

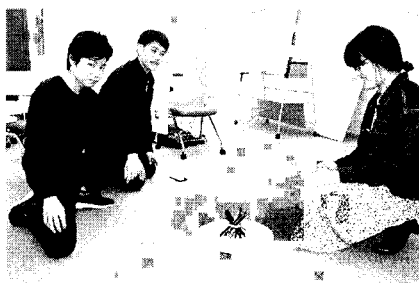


They enjoyed playing *Roll & Play* in German. The more unusual the students’ gesture, the more amusing the classroom climate becomes.

Explaining the concept of games, Shirai (2004: 28) defined “the entertainment system” as one in which freedom, isolation, rules, profits, and fiction for player are maintained. Based on this game theory, it can be said that through the party games in the lesson, the learners become free from the stress of the usual lessons. The active learning time is realized while drawing out the learner’s motivation, as well as the communication between them that creates a comfortable and amusing learning atmosphere.

### Conclusion

Using the games in the lessons made the students willing to learn and enjoy practicing German. Through the games, the students naturally communicated with their classmates, with whom they would have rarely got the opportunity to talk in the usual lessons. In addition, there were students who



They enjoyed playing Haba’s *Zitternix*. A student looks at you and says, “It’s your turn!” Why don’t you try to introduce this amusing game in your foreign language course and have fun with your students?

usually didn't feel motivated and were asleep in the class. However, they were more passionate while they were engaged in the games and played their roles in creating an amusing and relaxing atmosphere.

Therefore, the introduction of the games led to greater involvement of almost all the students in the lessons, without any regard to their motivation or language skills. Introducing readymade games for practicing foreign language learning is suitable for a teacher who does not have time to make teaching materials and games. Also, the game rules are easy-to-grasp. In addition, through the games, the students can experience European game culture that is respected since the Renaissance period. As they spend the playful learning time with other students regardless their nationalities or mother tongue, it increases their motivation to learn.

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### Endnotes

- 1) The Websites for those educational academic societies are the following: *ECGBL* (<https://www.academic-conferences.org/conferences/ecgbl/>) and *DiGRA* (<http://www.digra.org/>)
- 2) Deutsches Spielarchiv Nürnberg (2019) Deutschland - Land der Spieler: Nürnberg - Stadt der Spiele, *Official Website*, accessed, Nov. 12, 2019, (<https://museen.nuernberg.de/spielarchiv/das-deutsche-spielarchiv/aufgaben-und-perspektiven/>).

- 3) *The International Society for Board Game Studies Colloquium 2016* was held from April 12, 2019 to April 16, 2019 at *Museen der Stadt Nürnberg*, the German Games Archive in Nuremberg. The society organized for the attendants the *Haba* manufacture excursion on April 15. During the colloquium, on April 15, the author gave a presentation with the following title: *Transcultural German Conversation Lessons Using Traditional Japanese Games*. Also, I held a workshop regarding this theme on May 30, 2015 at the Congress of *The Japanese Society for German Studies (JGG)*. The title of the workshop was: *Dynamic Play Learning System: Über die Einführung von Spielen in deutschen Konversationskurse*.