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Developing Cognition at a Model United Nations Event

Nicholas Musty

Abstract

Fostering the development of critical thinking skills is a major objective of higher education for students of all disciplines, although some fields offer greater opportunities than others for doing so. For learners of English as a foreign language, a subject which has not always sought such a gain, an increasing number of ideas are available which can help learners to grow in ways other than just language learning. The Model United Nations (MUN) conference event has recently become an option for students in Japan to participate in an intensive programme of debate and discussions with a large number of participants from numerous countries, meaning that English needs to be used throughout while they are also forced to employ a number of cognitive strategies. Based on an update of Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001), this paper discusses a number of aspects of an MUN event held in Osaka, Japan, in June, 2017. These examples illustrate ways in which participants are able to practise and develop strategies for critical thinking as well as employ a range of knowledge types. In encouraging students to use such a wide range of skills, the MUN is described as an effective way of leading students to improve in a wide number of areas.

Learners of English as a foreign language in Japan spend years in the classroom studying the building blocks of the language and the glue that holds it together. Many of them never have the opportunity to use English outside of a pedagogical setting, and for those that do there is often a long wait until the opportunity arises. Many educators do seek to involve their learners in authentic situations which enable them to use English for
genuine communication with others, but such chances are not always easy to find. Furthermore, it is only relatively recently that high school curricula have required the learner to employ original thought and create their own discourse in English, using critical thinking skills (Mineshima, 2015). In recent years, an event known as Model United Nations ("MUN"), at which learners from both Japan and overseas come together to debate matters of global importance in a simulation of a United Nations conference, has been growing in popularity here. While some publications have explored the benefits of this for the learner, its applicability to critical thinking skills in Japan has yet to be explored. This paper will introduce the concept of MUN through a discussion of Japan English Model United Nations ("JEMUN"), a three day conference held in June, 2017, making reference to an updated version of Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), a key work describing levels of critical thinking.

**MUN conferences**
Since the 1940s (Muldoon, 1995), the idea of hosting a mock conference at which students represent the countries of the world and attempt to resolve some of the problems most affecting them, has been employed as a tool for teaching in a variety of disciplines. Such a simulation has obvious benefits for students of international relations but participation in an MUN conference has been seen to lead to progress in a number of skills (detailed in the next paragraph) to benefit learners from a much wider range of disciplines. This includes language learners, taking part in a second language ("L2"). June 2017 saw the inaugural JEMUN residential conference take place at a large university in Osaka, Japan, which welcomed around 250 high school and university students, the majority of whom took part
as delegates, as well as chairs, assistant chairs, secretariat and a pool of journalists, who reported on proceedings in a variety of formats. In addition, a team of advisors (including the writer of this paper) was available to guide participants, as well as six guest speakers who addressed participants on matters of relevance to the conference topic, sustainable and accessible tourism. Delegates were tasked with representing a country, which they had researched in the weeks and months ahead of JEMUN, and cooperating with their counterparts to produce a resolution by the end of the third day. Various key aspects of JEMUN will be described throughout this paper.

The educational benefits of taking part in an MUN conference have been documented previously. As mentioned above, students of international relations are provided with useful opportunities to focus on skills of relevance to their degree (Engel et al., 2017; McIntosh, 2001) while those students looking to foster a political engagement are also thought to be able to do so through an involvement in MUN (Levy, 2016). Furthermore, it is common practice for the students to take on key roles in the planning and organisation of MUN events, offering them genuine opportunities to develop leadership skills, even though this can result in a tendency to follow procedures from previous MUN conferences, as opposed to keeping them updated with careful monitoring of genuine UN process (Muldoon, 1995). On top of these cognitive demands, recent conferences in Japan foreground an additional dimension, that of foreign language (specifically English) instruction. Two major MUN events held in the west of Japan, JUEMUN (Japan University English Model United Nations) and JEMUN specifically refer to the language in which the conference is held in their name, a non-native language in Japan. At JEMUN 2017, approximately two thirds of participants were domestic. This points to the multiplicity of
purposes at an MUN, especially one held in a foreign language for many
of the delegates. In fact, research suggests that transferable skills can be
gained from MUN participation (Adamson, 2016), so that regardless of
degree or main area of interest, all delegates are able to work on a set
of competencies which have the potential to contribute to their overall
academic proficiency.

Among the supposed learning gains to have been put forward for an
MUN, interpersonal skills (Sheehan et al, 2015), research (Adamson, 2016),
critical thinking skills (Asal and Blake, 2006), team building (Datta, 2013),
professional writing skills (Engel at al, 2017), and technical skills, particularly
for those involved as journalists tasked with reporting on proceedings, a
role not universal across MUN conferences (Sheehan et al, 2015), appear to
be of particular significance. Language skills are seen as a tool as opposed
to a main focus, but it has also been acknowledged that those participants
with a better command of the language tended to be more dominant, while
one study reported that none of the L2 participants surveyed were satisfied
with their ability to communicate with others (Adamson, 2016). However,
overall student satisfaction levels are high among L2 participants (Adamson,
2016) and, as is explained above, there are many gains in addition to
language from which participants benefit. This paper aims to add to these
with a discussion of cognitive and knowledge gains.

Method of analysis
Critical thinking is a skill which has been described as an ultimate aim of
higher education (Collins & Onwuegbuzie, 2000). In Japan, students have
been known to perform badly against many of their overseas counterparts
(Davidson & Dunham, 1997) although testing has been seen as biased in
favour of what is generally considered to be western perspectives (Oda, 2008), meaning that it is somewhat unfair to decry Japanese education systems as failing to foster critical thinking. However, in the field of education in English as a foreign language (EFL), a “yakudoku” or grammar-translation method has prevailed (Gorsuch, 2001), with an emphasis on rote learning. Recent syllabus changes in high schools have seen an increasing requirement for teachers to instil a sense of creativity and originality in their EFL students, but early reports suggest that this remains somewhat patchy, with a failure to identify the extent to which learners should be encouraged to employ cognitive processes which go beyond remembering a set of vocabulary (Mineshima, 2015).

One challenge for critical thinking theorists has been to agree on a precise definition of the concept. The term appears to refer to a number of different theories. One of the most influential writers in this area has been Bloom (Bloom et al, 1956) and it is an updated version of his taxonomy that will be employed in this paper. Although the original publication was highly influential, the latter one forms the key lens of this paper, as it is thought to be of even greater relevance to education in its current circumstances (Conklin, 2005). Through this key work, the opportunities for learners to build on their critical thinking abilities through taking part in JEMUN will be illustrated with examples of various aspects of the conference.

**MUN analysis through Bloom’s updated taxonomy**

According to Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), the updated taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing is based upon two axes, which plot cognitive processes against knowledge. This paper will initially detail the six cognitive processes, with examples of how each is employed at JEMUN.
After that, a similar pattern will be followed for each of the three types of knowledge.

**The six dimensions of cognitive process**

Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) claim, as did Bloom (1956), for six cognitive processes, namely remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, and create. Although these are seen to fall within a hierarchy (with remembering at the bottom and creating at the top), there is said to be a need for learners to engage at all levels, as opposed to seeing only the top level as an end goal. This section explains how an MUN conference works to ensure participation in all six dimensions.

**Remember**

This refers to the ability to retrieve “relevant knowledge from long-term memory” and includes “recognising” and “recalling” (Krathwohl, 2002:215). There is certainly a lot for JEMUN participants to remember as they take part in the event. In debate, they benefit from being able to reel off relevant facts without having to consult notes, which could lead to a loss of the floor to another committee member. Remembering their country speech also means that they are able to deliver it without having to constantly refer to notes. Delegates will need to respond quickly, recalling facts from their declarative memory (Anderson, 1976).

**Understand**

This involves “[d]etermining the meaning of instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication” and the processes of “[i]nterpreting,” “[e]xemplifying,” “[c]lassifying,” “[s]ummarizing,” “[i]nferring,”
“[c]omparing,” and “[e]xplaining” (Krathwohl, 2002:215). Students not averse with the process of an MUN conference are provided with a step-by-step orientation lesson before they take part. This explains, for example, the difference between a formal debate, an informal debate and an informal informal debate (the first involves all delegates in a room giving speeches, the second sees them voting on amendments to resolutions and the last involves discussions in smaller committee groups). While delegates, chairs and advisors are at hand to guide those who struggle, a certain amount of pre-existing understanding is necessary in order for delegates to participate effectively.

Apply
This means “[c]arrying out or using a procedure in a given situation” with the processes of “[e]xecuting” and “[i]mplementation” (Krathwohl, 2002:215). It is not sufficient to simply remember and understand what has been learnt. A successful delegate is someone who seeks active involvement throughout JEMUN, and in order to do that they are required to synthesise a variety of knowledge and explain the point of view felt to be of most importance. A competent delegate is someone able to adequately draw on the most appropriate information available to them and apply it to the matter at hand. It should be pointed out that such facts and opinions are not intended to be those of the delegates themselves, rather of a country which they have, often arbitrarily, been selected to represent. This requires more careful consideration when it comes to an application of the circumstances at hand, since the discussion of matters related to Japan are bound to be easier for students residing in Japan than one of matters related to Libya or Egypt.
Analyse

Analysing means “[b]reaking material into its constituent parts and detecting how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose” through the processes of “[d]ifferentiating,” “[o]rganizing” and “[a]tributing” (Krathwohl, 2002:215). JEMUN asks all delegates to do a great deal of research before embarking on a three day conference. Its online learning hub includes links to a number of sites which feature a huge variety of data concerning international and regional matters, in particular a wealth of pages on the United Nations site, which documents meeting activity such as resolutions. A plethora of facts and figures are available for some of the countries, while others are massively under-represented or under-reported. Whatever the extent of information available, participants are faced with the task of not only locating data relevant to both the country which they are representing on the topic with which they are concerned, but also analysing it closely in order to determine its suitability. Once the data has been analysed, the delegate should be well-placed to put together a position paper and a country speech, and to debate the matters at hand alongside other delegates.

Evaluate

This process involves “[m]aking judgments based on criteria and standards” through “[c]hecking” and “[c]ritiquing” (Krathwohl, 2002:215). At JEMUN, this can occur hand-in-hand with the previous dimension as an analysis of the data available is unlikely to be sufficient without some elements of evaluation, which seek to assess the agreement of this information with the country’s perceived position. It is inevitable that there are ideas and solutions available which are relevant to both the country under
representation and the committee topic, yet with ultimately a negative impact on that country, perhaps to the advantage of a neighbouring one. A good delegate needs to evaluate these competing ideas, since it is not enough to state that an idea has been found. One group of students were tasked with describing a problem affecting resources in Chile, and chose to focus on fossil fuels. Initial research found them referring to wine production, initially a completely unconnected problem. Closer evaluation of these two areas eventually led them to draw a conclusion that lack of resources would cause a slowdown in fossil fuel production, but the economic effects of this could be partly compensated for through tapping into the potential of local vineyards. Successful evaluation and a joining of the dots assists the delegate in tackling the matter at hand with success.

**Create**

The final dimension refers to “[p]utting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product” through “[g]enerating,” “[p]lanning” and “[p]roducing” (Krathwohl, 2002:215). As with the real United Nations, one of the main goals of an MUN is to put together a resolution which will deal with the matters at hand to the committee. It is a long process involving hours of work by (in the case of JEMUN) usually twelve participants to research their country before a lengthy debate which is intended to result in a working paper. The writing of this involves the joint efforts of the committee to create a document which, in the real world, could have a massive impact on people’s lives and their environment. While paying very close attention to the syntactical norms of a resolution, delegates are allowed to use their ideas to put together a working paper which will solve the problems which they have identified. Once their paper
has become a draft resolution, delegates from other committees are then expected to review it with the intention of creating amendments as they feel appropriate, which are eventually to be evaluated by the entire room of delegates in order to decide which are felt to be appropriate.

**The knowledge dimensions**

The six dimensions of cognitive process can be plotted against another axis which compares four types of knowledge, namely factual, conceptual, procedural and metacognitive. The following sets out how these types can be seen to tie in with an MUN conference.

**Factual**

This knowledge type means the “basic elements that students must know to be acquainted with a discipline or solve problems in it.” It includes knowledge of “terminology” and “specific details and elements” (Krathwohl, 2002:214). MUN delegates are required to know a large number of facts. Organisers aim to have each one of them representing a country unfamiliar to them. This means that a Japanese student will never be charged with representing Japan, although having a Japanese presence at an MUN in Japan is seen as desirable. This role would be carried out by a student from overseas. For a delegate to represent their own country might be seen as authentic to a genuine United Nations conference, but it would be unfair and mean that that delegate could be taking a far more subjective approach than that of other delegates. Representing a country far from one’s own demands greater objectivity and it is advantageous to gain a basic understanding of some key facts of that country. Knowing the name of the country’s leader (and how to pronounce it), the approximate population and
some details of relationships with neighbouring countries allows delegates to be more convincing in their roles.

Conceptual
This is described as an understanding of the “interrelationships among the basic elements within a larger structure that enable them to function together” and includes knowledge of “classifications and categories… principles and generalizations… [and] theories, models, and structures” (Krathwohl, 2002:214). A JEMUN participant requires a wealth of conceptual knowledge too. While it can be expected that students who join do have some knowledge of the UN as an international body, conceiving of the exact roles which it is expected to fulfil and how it goes about doing that requires a further stage of knowledge. Being able to conceptualise components of a UN meeting, such as a resolution or a non-friendly amendment is by no means guaranteed even among participants claiming to know some basic UN facts. When they are potentially encountering each of these concepts for the first time in an L2, it is important that time is allotted to ensure that delegates are able to deal with them.

Procedural
Procedural knowledge means knowing “[h]ow to do something; methods of inquiry, and criteria for using skills, algorithms, techniques, and methods.” It includes knowing “subject-specific skills and algorithms…subject-specific techniques and methods [and] criteria for determining when to use appropriate procedures” (Krathwohl, 2002:214). Another step is an understanding of the procedures involved in an MUN conference. Delegates are given a schedule in a handbook which lists each item on the agenda
throughout the duration of the event. However, knowing what actions they are expected to take at each stage as well as what other participants, including advisors, chairs and assistant chairs, will take, is an additional stage of the participation process. A smooth event relies on delegates knowing what they need to do at each stage of the process, and not having to wait to be given instructions by more experienced peers or advisors.

**Metacognitive**

Finally, metacognitive knowledge involves “[k]nowledge of cognition in general as well as awareness and knowledge of one’s own cognition,” such as “[s]trategic knowledge…[k]nowledge about cognitive tasks, including appropriate contextual and conditional knowledge… [and] [s]elf knowledge” (Krathwohl, 2002:214). In other words, it suggests the acknowledgement by delegates of what mental processes are taking place in order to contribute to their own learning and development. At JEMUN, this does not take place as one of the main aspects of the conference. A JEMUN conference is intended to be an authentic reconstruction of the United Nations and introducing metacognitive elements would be likely to affect this. However, after taking part in a conference, participants are asked to complete a questionnaire which, to an extent, requires a consideration of one’s own performance and delegates are able to expand their metacognitive knowledge as a result. In addition to this, instructors of some of the participants encourage them to reflect on their experience after it has come to an end.

**Summary**

A JEMUN conference demands a massive cognitive load on its participants. Anecdotally, this can be evidenced by the panic attacks and floods of tears
which are a familiar part of the procedure. At least for language learners, emotional involvement is linked to increased proficiency. This analysis of thought processes and knowledge involved in an MUN has demonstrated that delegates are expected to engage in each of the levels of critical thinking as stipulated in Bloom’s updated model (2001). This echoes the conclusions of Gao (2016), whose discussion of a simplified Model United Nations activity which took place in China, designed specifically around the revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), found participants able to fully engage with all six dimensions of cognitive process. There are inevitably some participants who actively seek more involvement at each of the levels, but the process of having delegates taking part in both regional and topic-based committees goes some way to ensure that they are encouraged to positively represent both the countries and committees and to relay between them.

**Conclusion**

This paper has not assessed whether or not critical thinking is effectively engaged in a JEMUN conference. It has only stated that, by one key defining text (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001), the opportunity does exist for critical thinking to take place. Reaching far beyond the walls of the classroom, a three day, two night intensive event, and its build-up preparation, provides delegates with a wealth of experience, through which they are able to develop an immense number of skills. Further research is needed to establish the success of a conference like JEMUN in doing so. This could be done by interviewing or surveying participants before and after an MUN to understand the extent to which they felt they had been able to improve. Having these learners associate the activities which they
had undertaken throughout the event with the skills in Bloom’s taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) would also be of value in confirming the position of this paper. Further research such as this could then be fed back into the conference, ensuring that its delegates are offered the best opportunity to develop a large number of skills.

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