

Fukudai Hero

A Video Game-like English Class in a Japanese National University

Ivan Lombardi
(University of Fukui, Japan)

Abstract Fukudai Hero is a gamified English class running at the University of Fukui, Japan. To gamify a class means to apply game dynamics to enhance students' engagement and motivation. In FH students play the role of trainee heroes in Fukudai – a fantasy kingdom modeled on the university, whose official language is English. Part of their journey towards mastery is mission-based. Missions require students to (pro)actively use English to achieve tangible goals. Main missions are given on a weekly basis, while extra missions can be chosen from a list. They are not compulsory. Students are responsible for their own journey and track their progress through a point-based system that translates to a grading scale: the more missions students complete, the higher their grade. This paper discusses the reception of FH, insights on the changes in engagement, samples of missions, class materials and student work from the first two pilot classes.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 A Class Like a Video Game. – 3 Fukudai Hero: Results. – 4 Conclusion.

Keywords EFL. Gamification. Engagement. Motivation.

1 Introduction

Critical reports on Japanese university students' motivation towards studying, in general, and English, in particular, are not unheard of. McVeigh (2002, p. 104) argues that «[Japanese] students are poor at learning, and the reason for this is not so much one of ability but of attitude, not so much for intellectual capability but an emotional rejection of academics». Moreover, he states that:

By the time students reach the *daigaku* [university] classroom many have been socialized to accept the idea that learning should not be pursued with too much seriousness. [...] A large number of students learn to despise anything associated with the classroom experience (McVeigh 2002, p. 202).

Shimizu (1995)'s survey points out that college students tend to expect their

English classes to be ‘fun’, ‘entertaining’, ‘cheerful’, ‘humorous’, rather than (academically) serious and requiring a personal learning effort. The opinion of many a university-level language teacher resonates through the pages of JALT (Japan Association for Language Teaching)’s journals (e.g. Berwick, Ross 1989; Gatton 1998; Falout, Maruyama 2004; Cowie, Sakui 2012). At the same time, the abundance of learner attitudes ranging from demotivation to amotivation (in the sense outlined by Dörnyei, Ushioda 2011) is perpetuated in informal reports and confidences exchanged by English teaching faculty members throughout Japan (as reported by McVeigh 2002, 2004).

While not every university student in Japan shows little interest in taking English classes, it is probably true that English is not a priority for many. This seems to be the case for engineering students especially (at least when it comes to general English, not ESP), according to Kimura et al. (2001) and Falout and Maruyama (2004). At the University of Fukui, engineering students have been protagonists of the first offering of Fukudai Hero (FH), a video game-like English class designed specifically with the intent of enhancing student motivation, engagement and proactivity.

2 A Class Like a Video Game

To run a ‘video game class’ does not entail using video games as teaching tools in class – quite the opposite, in fact: video games and their design principles inform the dynamics of the class (Lombardi 2014). This application of ‘game thinking’ to non-game settings is often referred to as *gamification* (Deterding et al. 2011; Werbach, Hunter 2012; see also Lee, Hammer 2011, Sheldon 2012 and Kapp 2012 for a contextualization into educational settings). The goal of gamification is not to make learning more fun – being ‘fun’ itself an ill-defined and hardly researchable concept (Rigby, Ryan 2011), but rather to make learning more compelling by emphasizing its components that relate directly to the psychology of motivation.

In past research (Lombardi 2013, 2014) the author has outlined a framework, grounded on both research in L2 learning motivation and gamification theories, for game thinking to operate within a language teaching context. Its main feature is to *capitalize on ‘game elements’ that naturally take place in the language class and highlight their game-like nature.*

Table 1. Parallels between game elements and classroom dynamics

Game element	Classroom dynamic	Suggested parallel
Protagonism	Participation	A great deal of the enjoyment of gaming comes from being completely in charge of the ongoing action (<i>protagonism</i>). Success or failure are dependent on effort and ability. Similarly, language learning is most effective when the learner perceives that he or she is in control of the process, and actively involved in it (<i>participation</i>).
Narrative	Context	In video games, a coherent <i>narrative</i> gives meaning to the action. In other words, it helps players understand why they do what they do. Similarly, in language teaching <i>context</i> provides meaning – the reason why a language is learnt, and the rationale by which materials, items, topics, language functions, etc., are selected within a course.
Goals	(Learning) goals	<i>Goals</i> drive behavior in both video games and learning processes. To have a clear and unambiguous goal translates into an active knowledge of one's whereabouts in the progress towards the goal itself.
Feedback	Feedback	Video games constantly give the players real-time, tangible <i>feedback</i> on what they can do, they cannot yet do, and the best way to reach their goal. In language teaching and learning, <i>feedback</i> is vital and should follow the same pattern, emphasizing what learners can do and how to build on their abilities to reach out for their goal.
Points	Grades	By far the most common measure of performance in video games, <i>points</i> represent an immediately intelligible display of progress. Accumulating points is so satisfying because they are a fair and real-time reward for effort and success. <i>Grades</i> serve the same purpose in language teaching and learning settings – provided that they are not associated with a 'subtractive' rationale.

For a comprehensive list and detailed explanation, see Lombardi 2014.

The claim underlying this research is that language learning motivation in classroom settings can be improved by making sure that pre-existing classroom dynamics mirror good game design principles and practices that are known to engage video game players. To do so means to adopt a *game-informed perspective* on language teaching:

The examination of motivation in digital games can help explain the tension educators often feel between the intense engagement of students with digital games and their lack of similar intensity when they are involved in school or other learning environments. Our hope is that by examining the engaging properties of digital games, educators develop a better understanding of motivation and are able to engage students in all educational contexts, not just game-enhanced ones (Sykes, Reinhardt 2013, p. 91).

In such a perspective, significant change in motivation can be achieved with minor changes in everyday teaching practices. This is the essence of the pilot offerings of FH.

First Pilot Class (FH1)

At the University of Fukui, second-year students of the Faculty of Engineering are offered general English classes that meet twice a week and focus on the balanced development of speaking, listening, reading, writing, as well as on specific preparation for the TOEIC test. In the spring semester 2014, one class was selected by the experimenting instructor to pilot the FH project. Selection criteria included:

- availability (the teaching schedules were assigned to instructors prior to the enactment of the project);
- an even numbers of students (24, which allows for both pair work and work in small groups or teams. 16 students major in mechanical engineering, 8 in architecture);
- a wider range of gender diversity compared to other classes taught by the same instructor (19 M, 5 F);
- TOEIC score range (430 to 470, roughly corresponding to the A2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference and thus qualifying the learners as 'false beginners'), the highest among the classes assigned to the instructor.

To accommodate for both of the learning goals promoted by the University Language Center - self-expression in English and TOEIC -, one of the two weekly class meetings was devoted to FH (15 + 1 introductory class), while the other followed a routine of TOEIC preparation (14 classes.)

On the first FH class, the instructor welcomed the students and introduced (in English, with Japanese support on the PowerPoint presentation for better understanding) the idea of a 'video game class'. Five points were emphasized:

- FH takes place in the fictitious Kingdom of Fukudai (blend of *Fukui Daigaku*, University of Fukui), whose real-life equivalent is the university campus. Students are trainee heroes, and they have to prove worth of becoming full Fukudai Heroes. The official language of the kingdom is English;
- FH is student-centered - that is, students can choose their path towards mastery and proceed at their own pace. The teacher is not the king - his role is that of a *senpai* (advisor or mentor);
- FH is mission-based. Missions are tasks designed to get students to use spoken or written English in and out of class. Their successful completion brings the wannabe heroes closer to their final goal. There

- are two kinds of missions: *Weekly Missions* (WM), which students are strongly encouraged to tackle as they provide the main source of progress through the class, and *Extra Missions* (EM), i.e. tasks that students can proactively choose to try any time, and as many times as they want, to speed up their journey and make their experience richer;
- FH emphasizes the student's progress towards the goal ('additional' feedback), rather than their shortcomings ('subtractive' feedback, see Sheldon 2012, and Lombardi 2014). Therefore, it uses the mission system to provide immediate feedback that makes the 'competence in the making' clear;
 - FH uses a video game-like points system to make feedback tangible. Each mission has a value in points that students earn on completion. Starting from scratch, they build up their competence (and their grade, as per the conversion chart below) and can constantly keep track of their progress, compare it with their peers and the final goal that they set for themselves.

These five points embody the descriptors reported in the previous section - namely and in this order, *narrative*, *protagonism*, *goals*, *feedback*, *points*.

In the end, students were told that FH would be worth 35% of their final grade for the English class (the remaining 65% being in common with other classes of the Language Center and comprising quizzes, a midterm and a final exam, as well as active participation to TOEIC classes).

In response to the curiosity aroused in students, the instructor started the second FH class by distributing to each student/hero his or her very own Character Sheet (Appendix A). This sheet allows students to choose their avatar - a powerful tool to trigger what Gee (2007) calls the «psychosocial moratorium» principle of video games, i.e. the willingness of players to take more initiative and risks than they would in real life, as the consequences are perceived to be affecting the virtual self instead of the real self - and a fictitious name serving the same purpose. In addition, the sheet reminds students of the points-to-grade conversion chart:

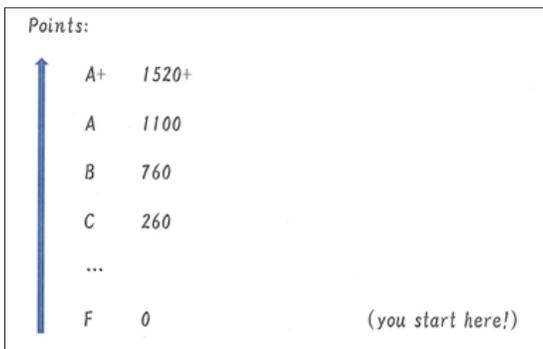


Figure 1. The points-to-grade conversion chart

As in Sheldon (2012)'s «multiplayer class», students start as novices in the world of Fukudai, and need to work their path to mastery by gaining experience points (XP). This chart allows students to be autonomous in choosing their way to get XP, as well as to set personal goals. In combination with the points chart on the back of the Character Sheet, this system helps students-heroes feel in control and keep constant track of their journey experiencing English communication.

After distributing the Character Sheet and reviewing it with the students, the instructor started regular classwork, introducing the first topic in the textbook («Staying healthy in the modern world») and working on listening, reading and speaking pair work activities. At the end of class, he gave the students a Mission Sheet (like the one shown in Appendix B), containing the task to accomplish in the next seven days. In short, Mission #1 stated:

Your mission is to eat a healthy meal and take a picture of it (before eating it!)

Please bring the picture to class next Tuesday, and be ready to tell us why you think it's healthy.

The mission is worth 50 points. Extra points if you cooked the meal yourself.

The first Mission Sheet provided both the content of the mission and a format that was unchanged throughout the semester: a B5 paper with a short introduction, the description of the task (what to do in and out of class), the due date, the value of the mission in terms of points, and the condition to meet to have extra points.

The following Tuesday the instructor devoted 30 minutes of class time to students' reports on Mission #1. Surprisingly enough for a non-compulsory task, everyone did it and came to class with a picture to comment. In turns, all heroes briefed on their mission to the class, as did the instructor himself - thus revealing himself once again as a 'playing character', and not a teacher in the strictest sense of the word. After that, the class resumed working on the textbook to expand the topic and focus on vocabulary until the end of class, when the instructor delivered the second Mission Sheet and started stamping points and extra points on the heroes' Character Sheets. Using the teacher's personal seal (see Appendix A) to assign points triggered a particularly hysterical reaction in the students: it was the final detail that made them hooked to the FH class.

The following weeks kept on a similar routine, with a new mission every Tuesday (samples of which are collected in Appendix C) and the addition, from the third week, of EM: tasks that heroes can choose from a list and complete at any time for additional XP (see Appendix D). This helped to

further boost their engagement, as they could finally see a variety of options to reach their personal goals. At this point, the instructor felt no need to further tweak game elements to increase the students' motivation, and the FH class followed the same pattern until the end of the semester.

Second Pilot Class (FH2)

Using the same criteria listed above, in the second semester the instructor piloted FH on a different audience: first-year students from the Faculty of Education and Regional studies (majors: 14 in teacher education, 10 in regional studies; 10 M, 14 F; TOEIC score range: 415~510 - A2 or 'false beginners'; class objectives: everyday communication and self-expression, TOEIC preparation).

The core idea underlying FH was unchanged, as was the first introductory class. WM, instead, became in this offering more independent from the textbook, focusing on communicative tasks, class life and 'seasonal' topics (e.g. holidays). The FH to TOEIC class ratio was changed to 25:5, thus intensifying TOEIC preparation into five classes to be held just before the test date. The reason for this change was to solve a noticeable issue in FH1, where active students on Tuesdays tended to be unresponsive, late or absent on Fridays (with 81% of total class absences happening on 'TOEIC day'.) Extending the time devoted to communication in FH2 made possible for students to work on their missions in and out of class, which resulted in even higher commitment than in FH1. EM were handed out on the fourth week, as Mission #3 asked the heroes to engage in a treasure hunt to find the EM list itself (Appendix C). EM had been rewritten with easier to understand instructions, but unchanged in content and scope.

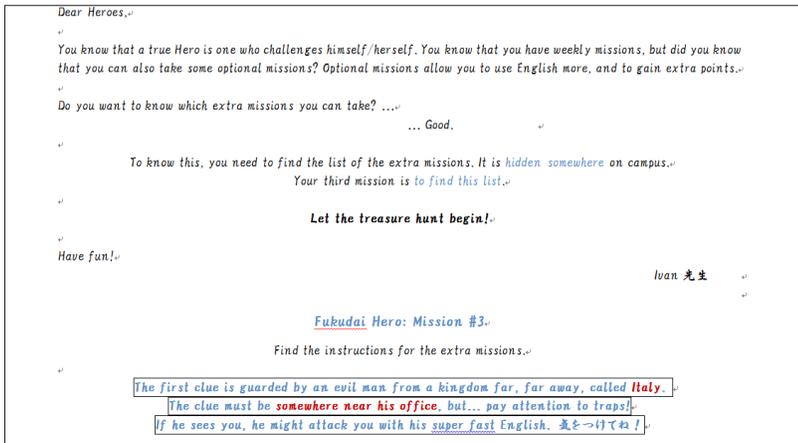


Figure 2. The introduction to Mission #3

One last difference from the first offering of the class was the value of FH in the syllabus, now worth 40% of the students’ final grade.

3 Fukudai Hero: Results

On the last day of class of both FH1 and FH2, the instructor passed around a feedback sheet to collect comments. For FH1, the comments were largely positive, with 20/22 respondents (91%) saying that they enjoyed FH, and particularly its missions system that allowed them to choose what to do and when to do it – thus making possible to skip one or two missions when overwhelmed by engineering classes homework or exams, and make up for the points in a different way when they have more free time. Moreover, 21/22 (95%) stated that they would like to be in a video game class again.

From the point of view of the instructor, enhanced student engagement with the learning materials was noticeable, especially when compared to two other second-year courses taught during the same period. Every student did at least seven WM throughout the semester (while in non-gamified English classes homework and study outside of class were largely neglected), and the majority tried at least one EM (the most popular being ‘Relax in English’, see Appendix D). Students were motivated to do so also by realizing that the total amount of points given by the 15 WM added up to 750 – that is, just a 10 points step below the threshold to get a B in FH. In the end, 2 of the 22 students who ended the class (one was recruited for a project-based English class after three weeks, and the other quit the university for personal reasons) worked their way up to A+; 9/22 had A; 8/22 had B; 3/22 had C. The grading scale is standardized for all classes at the University of Fukui.

For FH2, collected feedback shows that 100% of the 23 respondents enjoyed FH. Among the reasons for their liking, they mentioned fun but challenging missions, a lot of chances to speak, the opportunity to choose a personal path of learning, and the possibility to tackle missions in small groups. 100% also said that they would like to take another video game class.

From the point of view of the instructor, engagement was phenomenal. Reasons for this change, alongside a positive attitude and acceptance from the students, should be found in a better tailoring of missions on students' needs, and on achievable, but challenging, communicative tasks – while missions stemming from topics in the textbook could not always engage the whole student body in FH1. The majority of the students undertook and completed all of the WM and some EM, the most popular being 'Talk to me!' and 'Keep in touch', see Appendix D). In the end, 10 of the 23 students who ended the class (one having quit the university for personal reasons) had enough points to get A+; 7 had A; 6 had B; none had less than B.

4 Conclusion

Fukudai Hero is a game-informed English class, in the sense that it recreates the motivational dynamics of video games in order to enhance student engagement and commitment to English classes (which, in Japanese university settings with non-English majors tends to be one of ebbs and flows throughout the semester). The first two offerings at the University of Fukui seem to have reached their goal, despite demanding learning goals and content. However, being pilot classes, they do not yet offer hard data on student motivation – which is a goal for the next offerings in the upcoming academic year.

In its present form, FH can be seen as a companion to English communication courses. It serves the purpose of giving students a feeling of autonomy, competence and relatedness in what they do at school (Rigby, Ryan 2011). As a work in progress, FH is still ancillary to the class. In fact, it could be seen as a fancy (though effective) way to make homework more interesting. Though slightly reducing, this perspective is legitimate: in this sense, FH gives students a tangible purpose to do a mission, or 'homework', and a choice of time, place and modality to do it. In the future, however, FH should be more embedded in the class, thus making the whole experience of English classes game-like.

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Appendix A

Fukudai Hero Character Sheet (front) **Appendix A**
Fukudai Hero Character Sheet (front)

FUKUDAI HERO

Character sheet

Your name: *Ivan*

Your hero's name: *Ivan先生*



Draw or glue your avatar here

Points:

↑	A+	1520+	
	A	1100	
	B	760	
	C	260	
	...		
	F	0	(you start here!)

How do I get more points?

You are awarded points when you complete one mission. Weekly missions will allow you to get a good grade, but you can do better! If you choose to undertake optional missions, you can improve your grade, even up to A+. The choice is yours.

Are you going to be the best hero in Fukudai?

Fukudai Hero Character Sheet (back)

Fukudai Hero Character Sheet (back)

This is your points chart. Keep it safe! Here you will receive points for your efforts and you can keep track of your total score. Work hard, and you'll get to the top. Remember: a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step...

10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25
50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50	50
100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Appendix B

Sample mission sheet (Mission #11, fall 2014)

Dear Heroes,



Christmas is coming!

Fukudai Hero: Mission #11

Before next Tuesday (12/23), please record a video message of you wishing a merry Christmas and a happy new year to your classmates, friends, and whom ever you want.

It will be a very nice present for everyone in the class!

You can do it alone, or, even better, in groups. You can say what you want... but in English, of course :D

When you have done it, please send it to me via LNE or email, or show it to me before/after class. 100 points and a lot of fun!

(bonus points if you wear a Santa hat in class on December 25!)

Appendix C

Sample weekly missions (shortened text)

Spring semester

Mission #1: (The topic on the textbook being 'healthy lifestyle')

Eat a healthy meal and take a picture of it (before eating it!)

Bring the picture to class, and be ready to tell us why you think it's healthy.

The mission is worth 50 points. Extra points if you cooked the meal yourself.

Mission #2: (The topic on the textbook being 'healthy lifestyle')

Take a 30-minute walk or bike ride. Take 3~5 pictures of interesting things you see.

Bring the pictures to class and think of a clever title for each one. Be ready to talk about your walk/ride.

The mission is worth 50 points. Extra points for particularly appropriate titles.

Mission #5: (Preparing to welcome an international guest)

Choose a bit of Japanese culture that you want to introduce to the visiting professor.

Prepare a short talk (30 seconds~1 minute) to give her insights on Japanese culture.

The mission is worth 100 points. Extra points if everyone chooses a different topic.

Mission #7: (The topic on the textbook being 'culture and music')

Choose a music genre that you want to talk about. Work with a partner. You and your partner will interview each other on the topic. Record yourselves!

The mission is worth 50 points. Extra points if you actually sing while performing.

Mission #10: (The topic on the textbook being 'prodigious memory')

Write a short text in which you describe what you do to memorize vocabulary.

In class you will present it to your classmates and learn about different memorization styles. Then, you will choose one and try to apply it to TOEIC-related vocabulary.

The mission is worth 100 points. Extra points if your style is chosen more than once.

Fall semester

Mission #1: ('Getting in a communicative mood')

Engage in small talk with the staff at the university Language Development Center.

Try to use the questions and communication cues that we practiced in class this week.

The mission is worth 50 points. Extra points can be awarded by the LDC staff.

Mission #3: ('Treasure hunt')

Find, decipher and follow clues and riddles scattered around the university campus.

Each clue will guide you to the next one, and eventually the treasure (the list of extra missions).

The mission is worth 50 points. Extra points for the hero who first finds the 'treasure'.

Mission #7: ('Teamwork')

Meet with your poster presentation group and brainstorm three possible topics.

Choose three topics, write down ideas, and bring everything to class next week.

The mission is worth 50 points. Extra points if one of your topics is endorsed by at least 75% of the class.

Mission #10: ('Every man is the artifex of his destiny')

Write your own final challenge choosing from the items of the whole textbook.

Choose five communication questions from the textbook or previous challenges, or make your own. Be ready to answer to these questions next week!

The mission is worth 100 points. Extra points if you get full marks when answering.

Mission #14: ('Becoming a senpai')

Write an advertisement to introduce Fukudai Hero to the new wannabe heroes.

You can choose if you want to prepare a poster, a news announcement, a presentation, a drawing, an audio/video message, or any other means of expression.

The mission is worth 50 points. Extra points for creativity.

Appendix D

Sample extra missions (text only)

Extra missions introduction

Extra missions are missions that you can choose.

You can choose these missions if you want it, when you want it, alone or in groups.

Extra missions give you the opportunity to power up your score!

They are worth many points because they are difficult.

You will have to speak a lot in English. Are you ready?

Missions worth 25 points

TALK TO ME!

If you see me on campus or in the city, come and talk to me!

It's a good opportunity to speak English. Don't be shy!

You can also come to my office sometimes.

I am always happy to speak with you.

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE WORLD?

Read a newspaper or magazine article in English.

Then bring a copy of the article to me, and tell me what you think about it.

That's a *great* way to learn new vocabulary, by the way!

Missions worth: 50 points

BUSINESS LUNCH

I usually eat lunch and dinner on campus. Why don't you join me?

English, gossip, and 50 points will be waiting for you.

BRAINSTORMING!

You can give me ideas for new missions! Just write me an email or a LINE message with your idea. If we can make it work for all the heroes, you really deserve those 50 points!

Missions worth: 10-100+ points

RELAX IN ENGLISH

Look around you when you are at the LDC.¹ See those DVDs, those books? They are all for you. If you watch a movie or read a book, please tell the staff at the counter that you are in my class. They will give you a badge, so I can give you points.

(10 min = 10 points, 90 min = 90 points, and so on)

KEEP IN TOUCH

Why don't you write me sometimes, via email or LINE?

I will most surely give you some points for your effort!

Crazy missions

You read so far, Hero? You must be really motivated!

There are many opportunities for missions.

Some can be crazy. But all are good.

Why don't we throw a party in English? Why don't we go out to English karaoke? Why don't we organize a group reading? Everything is possible, if you wish.

But it must be you starting the idea, asking me and the other heroes. This gives great points, but especially great FUN!

I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

¹ University of Fukui *Language Development Center*

