Using a Japanese Card Game *Karuta* to Enhance Listening and Speaking Skills in Japanese Learners of English

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Abstract

Using unfamiliar foreign teaching methodologies and activities for language learning may raise affective filters in learners and hinder language acquisition. By introducing culturally familiar activities, students may become more motivated to participate and have lowered barriers to learning. The research investigated how an adapted version of the popular, traditional, fast paced game *Karuta* could be used for listening and speaking activities for learners of English as a foreign language. A listening activity and two versions of a speaking activity were developed: one with a free speech mode, and one with a supportive framework. Japanese high school and university students at the beginning or low intermediate scale were subject to these versions and asked about how useful they found it for English learning. Results were overwhelmingly positive about the use of *Karuta* for listening. However, students replied that the free speech mode was less useful than a supportively structured mode indicating that beginning/intermediate learners need a lot of help to develop fluency in high pressure speaking situations.

Introduction: What is *Karuta*?

The purpose of this study is to investigate the usefulness of a Japanese *Karuta* card game format in teaching English in Japan. *Karuta* is a 1000 year old Japanese card game（Bull, 1996）where players memorize Japanese classical poems, proverbs or other written expressions. To play, pairs or groups of players listen to a poem read aloud and they have to find the matching card from among the many spread over the playing area, usually the floor. The first player to touch the card wins it, and the player with the largest number of cards at the end of the game wins.

Karuta games are used for education at primary, junior and senior high schools in Japan. The games are speedy, competitive and exciting which motivates children to play, while they simultaneously learning about Japanese classical poems, proverbs and culture. They also develop their memory, cooperation and attitudes such as respect for others.

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Adapting the *Karuta* Game Format for Teaching English

The assertion that "teaching methodologies developed in the West are often difficult to introduce into EFL situations with different educational theories and realities ... in the long run EFL countries may be better off developing methods in their own contexts" (Daoud, 1996; Phillipson, 1992; as cited in Li, 1998, p. 698) implies that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) countries need to look to their own cultures and adapt activities and practices from there, rather than rely on importing methodologies from foreign countries.

It is unfortunate that many Japanese students seem to have little need to learn to use English and gain communicative competence (Sano, Takahashi & Yoneyama, as cited in Li, 1998, p. 680) because English is not utilized frequently in the society and students have few chances to use English outside of the classroom. This lack of use means that generally Japanese students have a small vocabulary and a limited number of English grammatical structures and as a result they are discouraged about expressing themselves in English and lose interest in studying English (Sano, Takahashi & Yoneyama, as cited in Li, 1998, p. 680). Yoneyama, Sugiyama and Tada (2006) and Nishigaki, Chujo and Kato (2008) found that *Karuta* can be used successfully to learn English. The Nishigaki et al. study (2008) found that vocabulary was learned successfully by using this game, but in this study we will take a different focus and investigate how it can be used for listening and speaking activities as opposed to memorizing words and meanings. Whether vocabulary is learned or not is not paid attention to as we are looking at how the format can be used to enhance output processes, and increase listening comprehension and speaking fluency.

Once motivation has been developed, the teacher needs to then consider how best to help students learn language in a meaningful way in meaningful contexts. Schema theory proposes that by bringing to mind a specific context, concepts and language useful to that context can be learned more easily (Early & Tang, 1991). By using picture cards, a variety of schema can be accessed and language associated with each domain can hopefully be more easily absorbed.

The Study

The research question was "How effective are *Karuta* activities for improving listening and speaking skills?" Students from a Japanese high school and a university were involved in the study and although they have had several years' experience of learning English, their level was judged to be at the beginning or low intermediate scale for listening and speaking.

The research took the form of a qualitative and quantitative interview which asked students' opinions

about the usefulness of the activity with regards to how they thought it helped their listening and speaking skills. Part one researched a *Karuta* listening activity, and parts two and three explored speaking activities.

Participants

The participants for parts one and two were 56 third year public high school students in Japan, who were 17 or 18 years old, and 17 private university students majoring in English, who were 20 or 21 years old. Part three participants were a different group of 18 students from the first year of the same high school, who were 15 or 16 years old.

Table 1 *Participants in the Listening and Speaking Activities*

Part Number	High School	University	Date
1. Listening activity	n=56. 3rd Year Male: 28 Female: 38	n=17. Male: 9 Female: 8	October 2010
2. Speaking activity （Free speech）			
3. Speaking activity （w/supportive frameworks）	n=18. 1st Year Male: 12 Female: 6	－	January 2011

Part One : *Karuta* for Listening

Twenty picture cards of Japanese foods and a written description of the pictures in English（appendix 1） were used. The reader read out a description of one of the pictures, for example: "It is a typical Japanese food. There are various kinds, but most popular one is fresh, raw fish on top of boiled rice with vinegar." Then the players in a group search for and take the card whose picture matches what the reader reads out. The method forces the students to listen to and understand the meaning of what is being read out in order to get the correct card from among the many available. In this activity, the students were probably using top-down listening strategies by listening for keywords and matching them to the pictures. After this activity the participants were provided with a questionnaire and asked whether or not it was useful for improving listening skills.

Part Two: *Karuta* for Speaking

To see how *Karuta* can be used for the productive activity of speaking, the students took the role of the reader and had to describe the pictures while other students had to listen and take the cards. However, this time no pre-written descriptions were given, and the reader had to generate language in real time. For example, a speaking student who wanted to describe one of the picture cards, *sushi*, may have said, "It is ... Japanese food. Raw fish ... vinegar, rice." In this speaking activity, each student in a group was asked to speak in turn, and was not pushed to speak within a limited time. Although timings and measurements were not kept, the researcher found that students had noticeable difficulty in fluently

producing sentences which could be used by players due to poor accuracy and vocabulary use. This led to a further adaptation of the activity presented in part three.

Part Three: Adapted *Karuta* for Accuracy and Fluency Speaking

Noticing how students performed in the free speech activity, the game was modified to include a supportive framework based around a theme to try to improve fluency and accuracy. Twenty *Karuta* picture cards themed on superlatives were used. For example, pictures of the highest mountain in Japan, the fastest animal in the world and so on were presented together with a sentence framework for describing a picture card: "It's the _____est _____ in _____."

One student in a pair spoke spontaneously about one picture card without saying directly what it was, and the other student searched for the matching picture card and took it. For example, if she described *Mt. Fuji* she said: "It is the highest mountain in Japan." The speaking student was required to keep on speaking about as many picture cards as possible within 10 minutes. The partner was required to listen carefully and try to take as many cards as possible. After 10 minutes, they were asked to change their roles. Before the activity, all the students were told that the pair who would acquire the largest number of cards in the end would be a winner.

Also, the students were asked to negotiate with each other if it was necessary in order to clarify the meaning of vocabulary. Many students were observed to use L1 in the negotiation.

Results

Part One: *Karuta* for Listening

Most of the Japanese high school and university students (92.9-100%) said that the activity was useful for improving listening skills.

Table 2 *Question: Is Karuta Useful for Improving Listening Skills?*

	Yes	No	I don't know
56 High School students	92.9%	5.4%	1.8%
17 University students	100%	0%	0%

Part Two: *Karuta* for Speaking

For the free speech activity most students (55.4% of the high school students and 70.6% of the university students) responded that the activity was useful for improving speaking skills. However, qualitative feedback indicated that free speaking was challenging for students as some were not sure what words were suitable or how they could express themselves in English. They suggested that if they

knew what to say and how to describe the picture, *Karuta* might be useful for developing their speaking skills. From this, the activity was adjusted to provide a supportive framework for speaking.

Table 3 *Question 2: Is Karuta Useful for Improving Speaking Skills?*

	Yes	No	I don't know
56 JHS students	55.4%	42.9%	1.8%
17 SU students	70.6%	23.5%	5.9%

Part Three: Adapted *Karuta* for Speaking

Seeing the difficulties and considering the feedback from part two, the game was adapted to include a supportive sentence framework. Results from this activity were vastly improved with 94.4% of the participants agreeing that *Karuta* was useful for improving speaking skills. A free speaking activity, which required unstructured spontaneous output, may have overwhelmed the beginning/low intermediate level students' capacity to formulate sentences. The new version contained a sentence framework which supported students' output to try to lessen the cognitive load during speech.

Table 4 *Question 3: Is Karuta Useful for Speaking Skills?*

	Yes	No	I don't know
18 High School students	94.4%	0.0%	5.6%

Discussion

Improving Listening Skills

As Nation and Newton state, "Listening is the natural precursor to speaking; the early stages of language development in a person's first language (and in naturalistic acquisition of other languages) are dependent on listening" (2009, p. 37). Because it is such an important aspect of language acquisition, it is vital to focus on activities that promote listening comprehension. *Karuta* promotes listening is four ways:

First, although the usefulness of authentic English materials (Field, 2002; Lund, 1990; Poter & Roberts, 1987) cannot be ignored, compared with an audio player, a card reader's voice could be easier for students to listen, and the reader can also adjust speed and intonation in response to realtime feedback.

Second, the *Karuta* picture card game can motivate students. A visual-based exercise is easier for younger students to concentrate on (Ur, 1984), so it motivates them to participate and engage with listening activities.

Third, students at high-beginning or low intermediate level might try to listen for detail comprehension or full comprehension（Lund, 1990）. One of the advantages of this game format is that the level of difficulty can easily be adjusted to increase challenge. As Krashen（1984）'s Input Hypothesis（as cited in Brown, 2007, p. 295）states, comprehensible input should be mostly understandable, but contain some new features, be it grammar or vocabulary, so that students are challenged to make progress. While simple keyword rich descriptions offer beginning/low intermediate students the chance to listen in a "bottom up" manner（Nation and Newton, 2009, p. 40）and match the description to the picture（for example, "fish," "rice" and "vinegar" in the example in part two）, higher level students can be challenged to take more of a top down approach, for example using inference, by modifying the description to be less detail specific and more general. For example, the description may force students to think laterally or take knowledge from other domains in order to arrive at the answer.

Fourth, since students have a chance to look at picture cards before listening, they can make a guess as to what is going to be said next（Lund, 1990）. Listening tasks demand individual responses, and this kind of selecting activity is effective if students are asked to work in pairs and in groups（Field, 2002）. In order to gain a card quickly while looking at many cards, students activate "schema knowledge"（Nation & Newton, 2009; Schank & Abelson, 1977, as cited in Richards, 1987, p. 163-164）. The students' expectation could heighten their listening function and contribute to better comprehension.

As a culturally familiar game appropriated for a different purpose, students may have reduced affective barriers to playing, and so hopefully achieve more successful experiences during play. Such "success-oriented" tasks can motivate students and make listening activities more effective（Ur, 1984, p. 27）. Through accumulating such small successful experiences of input/output activities, students may be led to keep studying English.

Improving Speaking Skills

Swain's Output Hypothesis（Swain & Lapkin, 1995）posits that while saying something in the target language, when a learner notices the gap between what she wants to say and what she is able to say, she may generate a "best guess" and test the hypothesis, modifying the output in dependence on feedback from others, i.e. Was the output comprehensible and meaningful? The testing and feedback loop is one way in which students can develop their spoken output. In this speaking activity, some of the students spontaneously gave their partner clarification requests in Japanese: for example, "What did you say?" and "I don't understand what you said. Please say it clearly." Considering the interaction hypothesis advanced by Long（1983）, such interaction by negotiation of meaning could be some help for them to generate their output.

The free speaking activity in part two may have been too difficult for students to do because they did not

have enough language resources to complete the task, and therefore, developed a negative response to the activity resulting in a reply of "unhelpful" to the questionnaire. In part three, the structured output with sentence frameworks was less challenging, and students were able to focus more on constructing superlatives and recalling nouns to complete the sentence. They also had the opportunity to test their knowledge by conferring with other players to confirm their hypothesis. The adapted game in part three was regarded as more helpful than the free speech in part two and so we might conclude that the beginning/low intermediate learners appreciated the support in helping them to describe the pictures while at the same time feeling more confident in testing their language through negotiation from other players.

In terms of fluency development, once the framework sentence pattern has been learned the learner can then focus on using different vocabulary to slot into the sentence. This not only gives the student more control over their output because they are free to describe the picture in any way they want, but it also helps to increase fluency as the cognitive load is much less and so recall can be much quicker because "the learner's knowledge is not sufficiently automated to ensure fluency" (Thornbury, 2005, p. 39).

Improvements to the Study and Further Research

The study has several problems which future research could usefully address. Firstly, the sample size was inadequate to draw any general conclusions about how well the activity works for a larger population, and it also was not compared with a control group so effects of the intervention cannot be certain. Secondly, clear measurements about ability pre- and post- intervention were not recorded which raise concerns about the effectiveness of the activity. Lastly, interactions between students were not recorded and only general observations were available for analysis.

More precise measurements of language acquisition are needed for the activity as presented here. Vocabulary acquisition in terms of words and meanings remembered and used correctly, accuracy and fluency and speed would all be useful measures of how well the game works for learning English. In terms of affective filters, qualitative investigations into how foreign teaching methods influence learners could usefully show how important or not it is to adapt local cultural activities for teaching and learning.

Conclusion

This study used an adapted version of a traditional game popular in Japan in order to help beginning/ intermediate level students practice listening and speaking skills for learning English. While the listening activity was highly regarded, an unstructured speaking activity was found to be more difficult and perceived as less useful. A structured speaking activity which combines student choice with support for speaking and an opportunity for negotiation of meaning was perceived to be more useful than the free speaking mode. In conclusion, using a culturally familiar local activity may motivate and help students

overcome affective barriers to learning, and the listening and speaking tasks were found to be useful activities for the students.

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Appendix 1
Karuta reading cards on Japanese foods

#1: It is a bowl of rice. It has deep-fried prawn as a topping. What Japanese food is it?　　　　　　（*Temdon*）

#2: It is fermented soybean. It's also essential for Japanese people's breakfast. It's popular because it's a healthy, balanced diet. You can add chopped green onion and soy sauce. But some people don't like the smell and sticky string. What Japanese food is it?　　　　　（*Natto*）

3: It is a soup with soybean paste. It's essential for Japanese people's breakfast. Usually, the hot soup is made by adding several ingredients such as *tofu*（or soybean curd）, seaweed, or vegetables. What Japanese food is it?

（*miso-soup*）

#4: It is a typical Japanese food. There are various kinds, but most popular one is fresh, raw fish on top of boiled rice with vinegar. What Japanese food is it? (*sushi*)

#5: It is also a typical Japanese food. It's easy to make it: Roll rice in the palms of the hands, add pickled plum or bonito flakes in the middle, and wrap it with seaweed on the outside. It's called Japanese fast food. What Japanese food is it? (*o-nigiri*; *o-musubi*)

#6: It is a kind of stew. It is cooked for hours in kelp broth and soy sauce. It is popular in wintertime. There are various kinds of minced fish, Japanese radishes, fried tofu (or soybean curd), devil's tongue jelly, and eggs are put in the pot. What Japanese food is it? (*oden*)

#7: It is also a typical Japanese food. It's deep-fried prawn, vegetables, fish, or shellfish. It is served with dipping sauce. What Japanese food is it? (*tempura*)

#8: It is an ordinary noodle topped with deep-fried tofu (or soybean curd) and green onion. Since the Japanese fox likes deep-fried tofu, the noodle is called "fox noodle." What Japanese food is it? (*kitsune udon*)

#9: It is a buckwheat noodle. It's put on the bamboo dish, and served with dipping sauce. The thin and long noodle is said to be a symbol of living long. What Japanese food is it? (*soba*)

#10: It is another type of noodle. There are barbecued pork and bamboo shoots on the top of the noodle. It looks like a Chinese noodle, but it's created in Japan. What Japanese food is it? (*ramen*)

#11: It is barbecued chicken. It's grilled over a charcoal fire. It's flavored with a mixture of say sauce and sweet sake (or Japanese liquor), or with just salt. Green onion is sometimes between pieces of chicken meat. What Japanese food is it? (*yakitori*)

#12: It is a kind of Japanese pizza. There are various ingredients put on the top, as you like, such as beef, pork, chicken, seafood, and green onion. Customers can cook it on the hot table-top iron griddle. What Japanese food is it? (*okonomiyaki*)

#13: It is an egg dish. Put into a cup shrimp, chicken, *shiitake* mushrooms, ginkgo nuts, and lily roots, pour a mixture of beaten egg and broth, and steam the cup. What Japanese food is it? (*chawan mushi*)

#14: It is a ball-shaped pancake. There are a few pieces of octopus inside. It's flavored with special sauce, mayonnaise, green seaweed, and bonito flakes on top. You can buy at stands or at stalls on festival days. What Japanese food is it? (*takoyaki*)

#15: It doesn't look like a Japanese dish. It's one of the most popular dishes for Japanese people. It's not as hot and spicy as Indian one. What Japanese food is it? (*curry and rice*)

#16: It is a fish-shaped pancake. It is usually filled with red bean paste that is made from sweetened *azuki* beans. It can sometimes be filled with custard, chocolate, or cheese. What Japanese food is it? (*taiyaki*)

#17: It is a Japanese dessert that has been popular for 100 years or so. It is made of small cubes of agar jelly and a white jelly made from red algae or seaweed, mixed with either water or fruit juice. It is served in a bowl with boiled peas, rice-flour dumplings, and a variety of fruits. What Japanese food is it? (*mitsumame*)

#18: It is a Japanese food usually found in a box. It usually consists of grilled eel served on rice. What Japanese food is it? (*una-ju*)

#19: It is a typical Japanese meal. It consists of very fresh raw seafood sliced into thin pieces, and is served with soy sauce and Japanese horseradish (or *wasabi*) paste as well as *shiso* and shredded *daikon* radish. What Japanese food is it? (*sashimi*)

#20: It is a typical Japanese meal. It is a pot dish. Food are cooked in a pot at the table. There are many different types of pot dish; most are stews and soups served during the colder seasons. It is usually stewed in broth with various ingredients such as fish, meat, soybean curd (or *tofu*), and vegetables. What Japanese food is it? (*nabe*)

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