

# Using ALC Press Inc.'s NetAcademy Next as the main resource in lower-level university English CALL classes in Japan: A case study

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*In this article, the results of a case study are reported. The focus was on the development and implementation of a "regular class" format (a standard lesson plan) for teachers of lower-level English learners whose English CALL courses incorporate ALC Press Inc.'s NetAcademy Next as the main resource. The relevant literature was firstly drawn upon to determine what a class for lower-level English learners should aim to provide (including chunk-based reading, reading aloud, repetition, etc.). The "regular class" format and a handout template to complement it were then created. Both were then implemented in the researcher's Spring, 2018 CALL classes and feedback sought from ninety-four learners.*

**Keywords:** CALL, NetAcademy Next, low-level learners, lesson plan, handout

## 1. Introduction

### *ALC Press Inc.'s NetAcademy*

The Internet-based English-language-learning application, NetAcademy, is provided by ALC Press Inc. It is considered by many teachers to be a self-study tool. The previous version was NetAcademy2. Given this, much of the literature regarding the application has focused on efforts to have learners use NetAcademy2 as a self-study tool. According to the literature, this has not been easy or particularly successful. Fryer, Stewart, Anderson, Bovee, and Gibson (2011) noted that if completion of a pre-set number of NetAcademy2 units was not made part of the assessment of their course, few learners would complete them. And, Heffernan's (2013) institution had learners use the TOEIC (Test of English for

International Communication) component of NetAcademy2 as part of their e-learning program. They found that “a small percentage of students (approximately 5%) did not do any of the work required of them on the e-learning system” and that “a large portion of the students (approximately 30%) started and finished their work on the TOEIC-style questions within 24 hours before the stated deadline of required completion” (p. 144).

NetAcademy Next is the latest version of the application. Information about it can be obtained from the developer’s website (ALC Press Inc., 2017). Though it is beyond the scope of this article to provide detailed information on this application, some brief introductory information will be provided since what information the developer provides on its website is in Japanese only and no screenshots of the pages the learners regularly use have been made available. At the researcher’s institution, learners sign in and then have access to two comprehensive English courses (beginner and intermediate levels) and three levels of TOEIC courses. Both levels of comprehensive courses provide sub-courses – listening and speaking, reading and writing, grammar (input and output), and a proficiency test. The use of headphones and a microphone are required to use all courses. The listening and speaking sub-course provides thirty regular units and four review units. An institution can therefore require learners to complete some or all units across a specific period of time. To complete one of the listening and speaking units, the learner must complete the six steps in the listening part and the three steps in the speaking part. Step one of the listening part has learners listen to a text (e.g. a conversation) and then answer three multiple-choice questions displayed on the screen by clicking an option (A, B, C, or D). Hints are provided in Japanese. The learner can click the “Directions” button to receive general guidance in Japanese at any time. The learner has a limited number of seconds to answer the questions. After choosing, he/she clicks the “Answer” button to check his/her answers. Clicking “Next Step” takes the learner to the screen for step two. Here, the learner sees flashcards for key linguistic items used in the text listened to. They are displayed in English and then Japanese (after a short delay). After all items have been displayed, the set is then displayed again in the same order. At this point, the learner can click to go to step three. Here, the learner sees an item displayed in English and also two buttons, each with an item in Japanese. The learner should click the button for the item which corresponds to the meaning of the English word. He/She has 5 seconds to do so before the next English item is displayed. After all items have been displayed and an item chosen for each, a results page is displayed indicating the learner’s correct and incorrect choices. After reviewing this, the learner again clicks to proceed to the next step. In step four, the learner sees the text that he/she listened to displayed on the screen. He/She must listen and follow along as the chunking of the text is indicated in orange. The goal is to have the learner read as he/she sees this and work on his/her chunking ability. He/She must do this three times before then being able to proceed to the next step. In step five, the learner sees the same text disappear word by word. The goal is to have the learner develop his/her reading speed. Accordingly, he/she is able to choose from three levels of reading speed, perhaps choosing to read faster after each successive try. Again, he/she must do this three times in order to proceed to the next step. In step six, the learner listens and types the sentences that he/she hears. A hint is provided in English with key items missing from the sentence each time. The learner can change the speed of the playback of the audio from “Normal” to “Slow”. After completing this step, the learner has completed the listening part. In step one of the speaking part, the learner listens to a model say a key sentence from the text and then the learner repeats it into his/her microphone, focusing on intonation and rhythm. What the learner says is

recorded and then a representation of his/her intonation and rhythm is displayed on the screen. He/She can then compare that of the model with his/her own. After completing two of these, the learner can proceed to the next step. In step two, the learner sees the text displayed on screen again and records him/herself reading aloud and then shadowing a model. In step three, the learner listens and responds, thereby completing a conversation with the model in a turn-by-turn fashion (note that not all listening texts are conversations). After completing these three steps, the learner has completed the speaking part.

The tertiary-level institution where the researcher is employed uses NetAcademy Next as the main resource for multiple compulsory first-year CALL (computer- assisted language learning) courses. Given the experiences of the researchers mentioned above, this would seem to make sense. Teachers in such CALL classes can provide the proper foundation and structure, handouts and activities which maximize learners' understanding and use of the relevant content, and also appropriate feedback and assessment. They can also motivate learners to complete the required number of units. Using this tool effectively in such classes, however, can be a challenge. One reason for this is that such classes may include very low-proficiency (henceforth, lower-level) learners. The main goal of this article, then, is to provide a "regular class" format for teachers to help them when using the application with such learners.

## 2. Research questions

The researcher will attempt to provide answers for the following research questions:

1. Drawing on the second-language acquisition (SLA) literature, what should a lower-level CALL class for Japanese tertiary-level learners consist of?
2. How do such learners wish to complete NetAcademy Next units?

## 3. Literature review: What do learners need?

What follows are the results of a literature review that the researcher conducted to ascertain what pedagogical elements a course for lower-level learners should include based on their learning needs.

Table 1. What lower-level English learners need according to the relevant literature

Need	Researcher(s)	Reason(s) / Details
Extensive listening	Kurita (2017)	Proficiency tests draw on/test these skills so heavily
Improve L2 proficiency	Kato and Tanaka (2015)	Plays a large role in determining their L2 reading performance
Chunk-based reading	Yubune (2012)	Improves listening and reading comprehension and increases reading speed
Reading aloud	Kato and Tanaka (2015, p. 190)	Specifically improves: reading rate, reading performance, reproduction of key words and phrases, phonological decoding, and perhaps most importantly, phonological representations for things such as rhythm, stress, and intonation
Improve listening comprehension	Brown (2001; 2007)	Learners need practice discriminating among different sounds and recognizing different: word classes (adjectives vs. adverbs), grammatical systems (e.g. go vs. went), classes (e.g. plurals – I like dogs.), and rules, and also stress, rhythm, and intonation, and discriminating between emotional reactions and getting the gist of short listening texts
Improve speaking skills	Brown (2001; 2007)	Learners need practice producing different sounds, choosing correctly between word classes and systems, and producing different utterances with the correct stress, rhythm, and intonation; They also need practice producing utterances with the correct number of lexical units and practice using non-verbal cues and strategy-based tactics (such as self-correction)
Principled L2 instruction	Dornyei (2009)	Teaching should be personally engaging for learners and meaning focused; Learners should receive large amounts of input preceded by explicit preparation using pre-task activities, be taught formulaic expressions (and taught about their pervasiveness and usefulness), be given plenty of opportunities to practice (through creative, but controlled practice), be encouraged to pay attention to form and appropriateness, be taught about, and encouraged to use, language-learning strategies and tactics (i.e. explicit techniques to facilitate implicit learning), including rote learning
Interaction	Fujii, Ziegler, and Mackey (2016)	Can provide opportunities for interactional modifications, which include negotiation of meaning, modified output, and feedback
Noticing	Okazaki (2012); Schmidt (1990)	Promotes acquisition; Teachers should promote noticing by e.g. exposing learners to language frequently
Repetition	Brown (2007); Harmer (2007)	Spaced repeated encounters with language promotes acquisition, increased accuracy, and possibly the updating of learners' linguistic systems

Need	Researcher(s)	Reason(s) / Details
Appropriate speaking speed and use of the L2	Brown (2007)	Teachers should speak slowly and clearly and limit their use of the learners' L1 to maximize learner exposure to the L2 and comprehensible input
Translations	Calis and Dikilitas (2014); Yokono (2016)	Helps students to understand meaning at the sentence level
Choices	Schcolnik, Kol, and Abarbanel (2006)	Learners can construct personalized knowledge due to relevance
Develop inter-cultural communicative competence	Bachman (1990); Byram (1997); Hymes (1972)	Learners can develop new habits through teachers providing the basic information and answering learner questions in an incidental manner, and the learners then practicing
Motivation building	Dornyei (2001, pp. 137-144)	Learners may need "re-motivating" through the teacher establishing a supportive classroom atmosphere, promoting collaboration, having learners do inter-cultural tasks to change their attitudes towards other cultures, including tasks to increase learners' intrinsic motivation, maximizing learners' ability to succeed, and making lessons stimulating and enjoyable by e.g. playing games

## 4. Method

### 4.1 Research design

According to Creswell (2012), a "case" can include the implementation of a new program. For this study, the "case" was a compulsory first-year English CALL course. The exploration for this case was twofold: (1) to develop a "regular class" format for the researcher to use for the specific context and cohort; and (2) to report learner feedback about the overall course during which the format was used. The case was instrumental and the issue was how best to serve the lower-level learners in the specific context since they must use NetAcademy Next as the main resource in their first-year compulsory English CALL courses.

### 4.2 The context, cohort, and course

The study was conducted at a private university near Tokyo. The learners in the faculty (The Faculty of International Studies) were majoring in either "International Tourism" or "International Understanding." They were between eighteen and twenty years of age. They were enrolled in four first-year compulsory English CALL courses that the researcher was responsible for teaching. The classes met once a week for ninety minutes. There were approximately twenty-five learners enrolled in each class. Two of the courses (CALL 101) focused on listening and speaking, and two (CALL 102) focused on reading and writing. The institution created the courses to mirror the structure and content in NetAcademy

Next. That is, in CALL 101 classes, learners used the section of the application which was for beginners and which had affordances to help learners to develop their listening and speaking skills. The learners were informed at the beginning of term that 20% of their final grade for a specific CALL course was for unit completion. Learners were typically required to complete all units within a specific section of the application (e.g. listening and speaking) by the end of term (with approximately fourteen of those being completed during class time). Before learners were placed into classes, they were divided into proficiency levels (levels 1 (lowest) – 6 (highest)) based on their performance on the CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication), an online proficiency test (see the Results section for details of the respondents' CASEC and TOEIC scores). They were then placed into a class with other learners of the same level. It should be noted here that learners in this faculty were typically more motivated than those studying in the other faculties on campus (e.g. Management, Health and Nutrition). This was perhaps mostly due to their majors and their personal and professional goals. That said, some of these CALL classes did have learners who had to repeat the course since they had not met the course requirements in a previous term, which may have been the result of low motivation at that earlier time.

### 4.3 Active learning

In recent years, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has highlighted the need for tertiary-level courses in Japan to incorporate techniques and activities to promote active learning (see Ito, 2017, for details). In order to do so, the researcher decided to: (1) start the course by asking the learners to think about their interests and their personal and professional plans and goals, and each week, decide if the class's content was relevant to them, and to record any useful English that they would like to remember on the handout for that class; (2) try to engage the learners at all levels (motivation, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive); he would do this by creating a fun and supportive class atmosphere, encouraging the participation (i.e. questions, comments) of all learners, using a variety of emotionally engaging activities, tasks, and games, encouraging full participation in pair work and team work, and constantly reminding the learners of the usefulness of specific content to their futures; and (3) have learners further work on their ability to problem solve effectively in groups.

### 4.4 The design of the "regular class" format and handout

A "regular class" format is a lesson plan template that could be used for classes which are devoted to delivery of the main content and four-skills practice of it, and not to orientation, review, and assessment. In order to develop this format, the researcher carefully considered what roles the application and the teacher would play in such a CALL class.

**4.4.1 The role of NetAcademy Next.** To the researcher, it would seem that NetAcademy Next can/does provide for a considerable amount of what appeared in the literature review seen previously: (1) it has a heavy emphasis on listening- and reading-skills development, and provides opportunities for extensive listening and reading (and would therefore seem to help learners to develop low-level processing efficiency); (2) it aims to help learners to improve their reading comprehension and reading speed by including chunk-based reading; (3) it has learners read aloud, and so they should enjoy benefits, such as improvements

in reading performance; (4) it provides learners with an intermediate step, having them complete very structured conversations with the application; (5) it provides the necessary translations for learners to help scaffold their learning; and (6) it should help to build and maintain learners' self-efficacy and therefore their motivation given that it provides feedback and information about performance outcomes.

**4.4.2 The role of the teacher.** NetAcademy Next cannot (or does not as yet) provide the kind of *complete* solution that the literature review seen previously would recommend, however. It cannot/does not as yet, for example, provide feedback about learners' pronunciation (e.g. b vs. v), provide learners with *creative* practice, provide correction and feedback for learners after creative practice, or provide relevant topic-/task-specific inter-cultural information to boost learners' inter-cultural communicative competence. Given this, if the application is used within the context of a CALL class with a teacher present, then the teacher can do much to partner with the application and complement it. In the following table are suggestions for what teachers may do to complement the application.

Table 2. What teachers can do to complement NetAcademy Next to maximize its suitability for use with lower-level learners

Create a motivating class environment and help learners to build their self-efficacy
Provide pre-task activities to prime the learners so that intake may be maximized
Provide more opportunities for reading aloud – e.g. choral reading (all learners reading aloud at the same time) and overlapping reading (learners listen to the teacher and try to read in a way that matches him/her)
Point out the most important formulaic expressions featured in the application and give learners opportunities for controlled practice of those
Do enjoyable review activities with the learners after they use different sections of the application so that he/she can confirm that they are further developing their micro and macro skills
Have learners engage in meaningful and authentic interaction (so that noticing and use of interactional modifications may be maximized)
Provide appropriate feedback, including focus on form so that learners can further develop their micro and macro skills and also their inter-cultural communicative competence
Teach learners language-learning and communicative strategies and tactics
Provide learners with opportunities to self-reflect and record a variety of information important to their learning process and their futures

**4.4.3 The “regular class” format.** Having considered the role of the application and the teacher, the researcher was then able to develop a plan for a specific class type drawing on the literature review seen previously. What follows is the format for CALL 102 (the course with the focus on reading and writing):

1. **Review:** e.g. Dictation (5 minutes)
2. **Warm-up – explicit preparation:** NetAcademy Next Unit Picture (5 minutes)
3. **(a) Using the application:** NetAcademy Next – Reading (Steps 1–6) and Writing (Steps 1–3), and Reviewing as a Class (whole-class reading aloud and shadowing using Step 4) (50 minutes)  
or

**(b) Using the application: NetAcademy Next – Reading (Steps 1–4 only)**

and

**While- and post-study production:** Using the teacher’s handout, including extensive note-taking, a transformation task, opinion/response giving, and problem solving through group work (50 minutes)

4. **Self-reflection, quiz, and feedback:** With focus on form, controlled practice (i.e. drills), and inter-cultural knowledge and skill building (20 minutes)
5. **Homework setting** (5 minutes)
6. **Important points, Good-bye** (5 minutes)

Total: 90 minutes

Given the limited amount of time in each class, teachers can choose to alternate between 3(a) and 3(b) from one class to the next depending on the needs of the context and cohort. This has advantages for the teacher since it allows him/her to maximize the amount of class time that learners have to complete the different sections and steps of the application while also ensuring that the learners benefit from techniques and activities aimed at promoting active learning.

**4.4.4 The “regular class” handout.** To create the “regular class” handout, the researcher considered what affordances the NetAcademy Next application itself would provide and what support a while- or post-study handout could provide. The researcher at first created the “Unit Summary Sheet” (see the following pages), and for many of the classes in the term, he had learners complete it only. For some classes, however, he created a more comprehensive handout, and had learners engage in more active learning activities, such as problem solving through group work. What follows is one such more comprehensive handout.

The first two pages of the handout were designed to further support the researcher’s efforts to incorporate active learning into the course. Therefore, it had a personal writing task and problem solving through group work. The third page was designed to include more elements that the literature would recommend based on the previously seen literature review. This included: (1) a feedback section that the learners could use to record any teacher feedback related to their linguistic performance and also any inter-cultural information that would boost their inter-cultural communicative competence (see Appendix A, Table 5); (2) a quiz which could be used to maximize learners’ noticing of key linguistic content (e.g. related to word classes) and also formulaic expressions; the quiz would also provide a source for review/repetition activities in future classes and also opportunities for learners to experience success; and (3) a “Useful English” section to give learners a choice about what to “take with them” into the future (to further promote active learning) (e.g. words, formulaic expressions, etc.).

What needs emphasizing here is that the “regular class” format was designed to be suitable for both CALL 101 classes (which had a focus on listening and speaking) and CALL 102 classes (which had a focus on reading and writing). As mentioned, one of the goals of the study was to find a way to use the mandated CALL application with lower-level learners while also incorporating techniques and activities to promote active learning. An additional goal was to ensure that four-skills practice was also provided in both class types. Each course was also designed to include elements that were skill specific, however. For example, in CALL 101 classes, there was a focus on helping learners to improve their pronunciation

Course:	<b>CALL 102</b>	Day: _____
Focus:	<b>Unit Summary Sheet - Unit 10</b>	Time: _____
Date:		Name: _____
Teacher:		

### 1. Plan

Today, we'll do unit 10 reading steps 1, 2, 3, and 4 only.

### 2. Picture

Look at the picture. Answer the questions:

What kind of music is it?	Probably... classical / rock
Is the audience enjoying it?	

### 3. Step 1 (NetAcademy)

Start doing the unit. Read and answer the questions in NetAcademy.

### 4. Steps 2 and 3 (NetAcademy)

Study the vocabulary in step 2 and then do the vocabulary quiz in step 3.

### 5. Note-taking

Read (using Step 4) and take notes:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dallas - Sports: f _____ and b _____</li> <li>● _____ largest city</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Houston - Home to: N _____</li> <li>● _____ largest city</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● San Antonio - Has the A _____, an old _____</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Austin - It's the s _____ c _____</li> <li>● There are many l _____</li> <li>● Popular music types: _____</li> </ul>

Figure 1. An example of the "regular class" handout (continues over)

### 6. Transformation Task

Complete this poster to advertise Texas to foreign visitors (you can read again):

Visit Texas - There's a lot of fun stuff to do!	
In Dallas, you can enjoy...	Houston is the home of...
In San Antonio, you can see the...	In Austin, you can listen to...

### 7. My Opinion

Write an answer (20 words) (you can read again):

<p>Which city in Texas would you like to visit most? Why?</p>	
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### 8. Problem Solving (Group Work)

Discuss and solve this problem in your group:

<p>Your company wants to have a party with your American co-workers in Texas. They can't decide which city (e.g. Houston) to have it in. Help them decide! Give reasons.</p>	<p>Our solution:</p>	<p>Other groups' solutions:</p>
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Course:	<b>CALL 102</b>	Day: _____
Focus:	<b>Unit Summary Sheet - Unit 10</b>	Time: _____
Date:		Name: _____
Teacher:		

### 1. ALC NA Next

IN-CLASS: Complete **units 1-10 (and the two review units) and GRAMMAR units 1-8** in class. TODAY: **do Unit 10 (reading, steps 1-4)** - you have 40 minutes! Use your handout. HOMEWORK: Complete all units (including **all remaining units**) **by 7/31**.

### 2. Self-reflection

What was today's unit about? Write a short summary IN ENGLISH. What English in the unit will be useful for your future?

Summary	Useful English

### 3. Quiz

Complete this short quiz using vocabulary and grammar from the unit (**do the quiz below and then use Step 4 to check your answers**):

Vocabulary - Spelling	Grammar
a. bas__etball	a. It's the fifth _____ city in Texas.
b. ni__th	b. It's the best place ___ the world ___ eat steak.
c. south__ __n	c. Every night ___ __ week, there's live music.
d. fo__ __th	d. Bands come _____ the country.
e. h__ndreds	e. Almost _____ you meet is musical.
f. for__ __gn	
g. instr__ment	

### 4. Feedback

Listen to the teacher and take notes:

Grammar + Pronunciation	Culture	Drills
		Let's practice!

Finished? Show the teacher! Glen's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

(e.g. using minimal pairs), and in CALL 102 classes, learners were introduced to and practiced using reading strategies and tactics (e.g. reading for gist vs. reading for details). This is not reflected in the “regular class” format or handout because it was not part of every such class and other handouts were used to add these elements. For example, learners were given a reading strategies and tactics portfolio. Across the term, they were asked to try using five different strategy-based tactics and self-reflect after doing so.

#### *4.5 Ethical considerations*

Towards the end of the course, the learners were informed that the researcher would like to conduct academic research (in part to help improve the course for future learners) and that this would involve them completing an end-of-course questionnaire. He pointed out that: (1) their participation would be completely anonymous and strictly confidential; (2) any learner who did not wish to participate need not do so; and (3) the learners could withdraw at any time. All learners completed the questionnaire (with this constituting informed consent). One respondent contacted the researcher later in order to withdraw from the study. Therefore, that respondent’s data was not used for the purposes of data analysis.

#### *4.6 Data collection*

The questionnaire was constructed by the researcher. It had two main purposes. The first was to elicit data related to biography (e.g. gender), etc. For this, six closed-ended questions (nominal scales) and one open-ended question (“What was your most recent CASEC score?”) were used. The second was to elicit data related to the respondent’s impressions of the various aspects of the course. For this, a five-point Likert scale was used. The respondent was also provided with a box into which he/she could write any additional comments. The questionnaire was written in English and translated into Japanese by a professional translator. The English and the Japanese were checked to make sure they matched. The questionnaire was then piloted and small updates made. After piloting, the questionnaire was completed by all learners in the researcher’s four compulsory CALL classes towards the end of the Spring, 2018 term. In addition to the questionnaire, throughout the course, the researcher also had learners show him their class handout towards the end of each regular class. He used these to gain further insights on a class-to-class basis.

#### *4.7 Data analysis*

The statistical program JASP was chosen for the data analysis (<https://jasp-stats.org/>). The data was initially entered into a spreadsheet (Microsoft Excel). The data was then cleaned. There were a total of nine skipped questions (this represents missing data). This constituted just 0.4 percent of the total (2,256). It was therefore determined that the missing data could be substituted with the average for each variable (see Creswell, 2012). This was done manually by the researcher (directly into the data sheet). The researcher then used JASP to compile the various descriptive statistics.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Who responded to the questionnaire?

The data for ninety-four questionnaires was included in the data analysis. The following table lists the gender and major of each respondent. Note that the female to male ratio was almost 2:1.

Table 3. Gender and major

Gender	Major		
Male	35	International Tourism	49
Female	59	International Understanding	45

### 5.2 What level were the respondents?

On the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to choose from four choices – “beginner” (1), “high beginner” (2), “intermediate” (3), and “advanced” (4). The mean was 1.543 (1/4) (mode = 1.000, standard deviation = 0.7429). This would indicate that, on the whole, the respondents considered themselves to have been between the beginner and high beginner levels. In terms of CASEC score, the mean was 433, which equates to a TOEIC score of 336 (JIEM, Inc., 2018). The Association of International Communication (2014, as cited in, Suzuki, 2017) found that, in one recent year in Japan, “the average TOEIC score of first-year university students was 424” (p. 6). The average TOEIC score of learners in this study was, then, almost a full 100 points below the average reported for a typical first-year university student in Japan. This would seem to justify the researcher’s efforts to better cater to the needs of these lower-level learners. You will remember that the institution also places learners into classes based on their proficiency level (level 1–6). In the case of the four classes the researcher taught, the CALL 101 learners were level 2 and the CALL 102 learners were level 3.

### 5.3 How did they respond?

In the table below are descriptive statistics for the items on the questionnaire. The table would seem to indicate that: the respondents were quite highly motivated; they were satisfied with the course; the course motivated them to continue their English studies; the course was not too difficult for them (more details will be provided about this); they would like to complete NetAcademy Next units within the context of a CALL course with a teacher (rather than strictly as homework), using the teacher’s handouts and completing any activities the teacher sets; using the teacher’s handouts and completing activities led the learners to think about their future English needs to some extent; they did not consider writing about themselves and doing problem solving in groups too difficult, and they did find doing so somewhat helpful in getting them to learn more deeply about a topic; it would seem that they would like to interact somewhat more with their teacher and classmates in English perhaps rather than completing all steps in a specific unit (though they were uncertain about this); and, though again uncertain, they did not seem to think that they were being given too much NetAcademy homework or that too many units were being covered.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for the Items on the Questionnaire

	Mean	Mode	Standard deviation
"Is your motivation for English study high?"	1.872 (/4 = Low motivation)	1.000	0.9530
"Overall, I am satisfied with this course."	4.191 (/5 = Strongly Agree)	4.000	0.7225
"Because I took this course, I now feel more motivated to study and improve my English."	4.021 (/5)	4.000	0.8548
"How difficult was this course for you?"	2.862 (/5 = Difficult)	3.000	0.6493
"How suitable were the teacher's classes for lower-level English learners?"	3.606 (/5 = Very)	3.000	0.8324
"I would rather do NetAcademy completely as homework. I don't need to do it in a CALL course with a teacher."	2.191 (/5 = Strongly Agree)	1.000	1.100
"I would rather do NetAcademy only in this course. The teacher's handouts and activities are not necessary."	2.266 (/5)	3.000	1.119
"I think we need to do NetAcademy and the teacher's handouts and activities to improve our English."	4.330 (/5)	5.000	0.8474
"I often thought about my future English needs because of the teacher's handouts and activities."	3.787 (/5)	3.000, 4.000	0.8783
"Writing about myself, doing problem solving in a group, etc., helped me to learn more deeply about a topic."	3.585 (/5 = Strongly Agree)	3.000	0.8726
"Writing about myself, doing problem solving in a group, etc., was too difficult for me."	2.564 (/5)	3.000	0.9679
"I don't think I need to complete all sections of each NetAcademy unit (e.g. listening, step 6). It would be better to interact in English with the teacher and my classmates more."	3.457 (/5)	3.000	0.9466
"I would like to spend more time exploring each NetAcademy topic. We cover too many topics in the course. I would like to learn more deeply about each topic."	2.989 (/5)	3.000	0.9446
"I think that we are given too much NetAcademy homework."	2.553 (/5)	3.000	0.9460

## 6. Discussion

The most important findings will now be discussed.

### 6.1 *The research questions*

#### 6.1.1 Drawing on the second-language acquisition (SLA) literature, what should a lower-level CALL class for Japanese tertiary-level learners consist of?

##### *Level*

As can be seen from the results, having completed the course, the respondents indicated that they were satisfied with it and that it had not been too difficult for them. This is particularly important since the overall goal of this study was to design a “regular class” format specifically for the context and cohort, and also lower-level learners in Japan generally who use NetAcademy as the main resource in their CALL courses. That said, it may seem that the respondents were not completely sure that the researcher’s classes were suitable for lower-level learners. A look at Table 6 (see Appendix B), however, reveals that 48.9% of the respondents indicated either agreement or strong agreement that they were (and only 5.3% indicated disagreement while the rest were uncertain). One can assume, then, that for many of the respondents, the level seemed suitable for lower-level learners. Additionally, in response to this item: “Writing about myself, doing problem solving in a group, etc., was too difficult for me.” (see Table 7), 44.7% of the respondents indicated disagreement or strong disagreement (while 39.4% indicated uncertainty). Thus, one could say that, overall, the course was appropriate for the context and cohort in terms of level.

##### *Active learning*

As mentioned previously, the researcher attempted to promote active learning through incorporating related pedagogical techniques and activities into the course. In relation to this, the respondents indicated that writing about themselves, doing problem solving in a group, etc., helped them to learn more deeply about the topics and that they thought that completing both the application units *and* the researcher’s handouts and activities was important in improving their English skills. This is encouraging. If teachers in Japan see fit to incorporate techniques and activities which aim to promote active learning, then learners in these CALL classes need to be accepting of the different techniques and activities and the need for perhaps less class time being available for unit completion. Another reason why it is encouraging is another finding reported by Suzuki (2017), sourced from the Institution of National Educational Policy (2014). It indicated that “51.2 percent of Japanese university students had not experienced group work or expressed their thoughts in English before they entered university” (p. 7). This shows that such activities are much needed in learners’ first year of university (though CALL classes need not be the primary context for doing them). Research by Todaka (2017) may indicate why focusing learners on their futures and their own reasons for studying the L2 may be so beneficial to their motivation for learning the L2. He found that keeping first-year learners focused on their own reasons for studying the L2 may help keep them motivated. A look at Table 8 indicates that almost sixty percent (59.6%) of the respondents in the current study either agreed or strongly agreed that the teacher’s handouts and activities helped them to think about their future English needs. Overall, then, it would seem that the researcher’s attempts to promote

active learning were not only appropriate, but also potentially motivating and providing of an experience that many of the learners may not have had prior to entering university.

*Different to secondary school / more communicative*

In line with the above, perhaps part of the reason why the learners responded so favorably to the course was the fact that, when in secondary school, so much focus may have been put on preparing them to take university-entrance exams (Brooks & Wilson, 2014). They may therefore have had far fewer opportunities than ideal to engage in communicative activities and develop their communication skills at that time. Nagamine (2017) notes that, because of the teaching techniques used by native-Japanese teachers of English who teach at the secondary level, learners may mainly acquire explicit knowledge. As a result, learners may not be able to use the knowledge in future target L2 oral communication. This is because they will not have had enough practice and experience taking part in actual communicative activities. Given their level of motivation, the faculty, and their major, this may be a welcome change for the respondents in the current study, and would seem of considerable importance to their futures.

### **6.1.2 How do such learners wish to complete NetAcademy Next units?**

*They don't want to do it as homework only*

As seen previously, the respondents in this study indicated that completing units like this within the context of a CALL-dedicated course with a teacher was preferable to completing the units as homework only. In fact, a look at Table 9 shows that 58.5% of the respondents indicated disagreement or strong disagreement with the item: "I would rather do NetAcademy completely as homework. I don't need to do it in a CALL course with a teacher." This may have been in part due to their perception of the teacher's handouts and activities as being important to their learning process and also the fact that they could complete so many units during dedicated class time. Pagel and Reedy (2007) reported on efforts to pair units of NetAcademy2 with specific non-CALL courses based on content, not skill. This would potentially require learners to complete all units for homework. The results of the current study indicates that those researchers may have difficulty motivating learners to complete the units. Though, if each non-CALL course required learners to complete only a few units, it may be possible provided that learners did not have to complete too many units in total across all courses across a single term.

In line with the findings of Fryer, Stewart, Anderson, Bovee, and Gibson (2011), and as noticed by the current researcher across the term, some learners in these CALL courses sought only to complete units if they were included as part of the course's overall assessment. Such learners did not seem motivated to complete additional units for the purpose of their own autonomous learning. That said, more motivated learners did ask if it were possible to complete as many units as they liked in an attempt to attain the highest grade possible for the course and to further improve their English skills (and move into a higher English-class level in the faculty). Finally, as found by Heffernan (2013), some learners in these CALL courses found it difficult to keep up with the weekly allotment of in-class and for-homework units. They instead asked what the end-of-term deadline for completion of the units was and promised to have them done by that date. What can be gleaned from the above is that: (1) the respondents would prefer to complete NetAcademy units partly in the context of a dedicated CALL class and partly as homework (and not as homework only); (2) teachers need to specify the number of units to be completed and motivate their learners

to complete them; and (3) given that some learners find it difficult to complete the required number of units week to week, perhaps they should be given the choice of completing some of the units after the term has ended, but before the teacher has to submit the learners' grades (i.e. by the end of the first or second week of August, in the case of the Spring term).

#### *Too much homework?*

One interesting finding was that the respondents did not seem to think that too many units/topics were being covered during the course or that they were being given too much NetAcademy homework. That said, if one looks at Table 10, it would seem that there was considerable uncertainty (42.6%), and some agreement (12.7%). However, since 44.7% indicated disagreement or strong disagreement with the item: "I think that we are given too much NetAcademy homework.", the respondents would *seem* to accept that extensive unit completion is a must if they are to improve their skills (and maximize their grade and potentially move to a higher class level in the faculty). Even so, two learners commented on their questionnaires that, while they recognized the need for extensive unit completion, they honestly felt that there was too much homework in CALL 101.

#### *They want to interact more*

Another interesting finding was that the respondents indicated that they would like to interact with their teacher and their classmates a little more in English. Taking a look at Table 11, for this item, 45.7% of learners indicated so (while 44.7% were uncertain). This may indicate either that many respondents have a belief that the class should provide a balance of using the application and applying the content – or that they find interacting with the teacher and their classmates enjoyable and perhaps desired time away from the application. Part of the reason for their uncertainty may have related to their expectation that less in-class time for unit completion could result in their having to do more homework. Whatever the case, providing learners with more time to interact in English could allow more time for *creative practice*, as recommended by Dornyei (2009), and as a result, interactional modifications in English, which lower-level learners can be trained to use (Fujii, Ziegler, & Mackey, 2016), and which are so important for helping learners to become effective inter-cultural communicators.

## 6.2 This case

It would appear that the course introduced and described here was appropriate for the context and cohort for whom it was provided. The learners seemed quite highly motivated, with almost all learners attending almost every class (though attendance did not always guarantee effort). Clearly, for this group of learners, in this faculty, the course was the right fit. Because the learners were relatively highly motivated, it is not clear that the course would be as appropriate for faculties where the learners are less so. That said, more effort to motivate such learners could help. The most important thing for this cohort was to not overwhelm them either in terms of workload or in terms of level. The researcher seems to have been largely successful at this. In the Fall term, the learners will take two additional compulsory English CALL courses with other teachers (although some may again be in the researcher's class). Given the results of this study, it is hoped that other teachers would consider providing learners with a similar "regular class" format given its advantages.

### 6.3 Other reasons learners benefit from it being a CALL course

Whatever the potential problems related to how the application can be effectively embedded within the context of a CALL course for lower-level learners, there would seem to be multiple additional reasons why it *should* be. One reason is that learners may learn the value of Internet-based resources for language learning. By allowing learners to have *positive* “first” experiences with such technology, they may be encouraged to continue using it (and other similar technology, such as smart-phone applications) going forward. The teacher helping to co-create a productive, supportive, and enjoyable context for learners’ first experiences would seem essential. The researcher’s vision of such technology (see Stewart, 2016) is an AI (artificial intelligence)-like application that could help learners to manage their overall language-learning process while at university. Even in such a case, it would be the context of its use that would maximize its potential adoption and the extent to which it would be used. Another reason is that first-year compulsory CALL courses introduce many learners to the idea of taking a CALL course. A positive first experience may encourage them to take *elective* English CALL courses later. It is in such courses that a range of other Internet-based resources, such as the video-sharing website, YouTube, can be re-introduced and used. Such courses: (1) allow teachers to train learners in the use of strategies for using such tools; and (2) are likely to encourage future autonomous learning since learners can be assigned tasks that have them choose content based on personal interest and/or their personal and/or professional goals. A final reason may be that using an application like NetAcademy Next within the context of a class *rather than a textbook* may mean that learners are more engaged and more motivated. The presumption is that even more lowly motivated learners may find enjoyment in using an Internet-based application *as opposed to a textbook*. This should perhaps be the focus of follow-up research.

## 7. Limitations

The results of this study should be viewed with caution. First, it was a convenience sample and the sample size was relatively small – ninety-four learners in total completed the questionnaire. Second, almost twice the number of respondents were female as were male. Third, nine items of missing data were substituted with the average for the category of item that was missing in each case. Fourth, some of the questionnaire items were overly wordy and the small amount of jargon used may have been confusing. Fifth, there were “forced choice” items on the questionnaire. Some respondents, not seeing an appropriate choice for themselves, may have instead chosen one anyway (albeit the “closest” one) even though it was not the right choice for them. Sixth, there were a number of leading questions. All of the above may therefore have resulted in some degree of response bias. In addition, the study was conducted at a faculty in which many learners are quite highly motivated to improve their English skills. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable more broadly.

## 8. Future Research

During the next iteration of the course, the researcher aims to assess the pedagogical effectiveness of the course. This is particularly necessary as all indicators of learner progress in the current study were provided by self-report measures rather than more objective measures. Another line of research perhaps worth pursuing is an attempt to develop two

different “regular class” formats – one for listening and speaking and one for reading and writing. The formats and handouts could then be made to be more skill specific.

## 9. Conclusion

In addition to being a self-study resource, it would seem that ALC Press Inc.’s NetAcademy Next may also be precisely the kind of resource that tertiary institutions in Japan may be looking for if they decide to provide teacher-fronted, compulsory or elective English CALL courses to their learners. This may be especially the case for lower-level learners, as the application would seem to have them engage in many of the processes that may help such learners to achieve progress. The challenge for teachers may be devising a class format which enables them to effectively combine learners’ use of the application in class with elements critical to second-language acquisition that can currently only be provided by the teacher him/herself. The goal of this article was to provide an example of one such class format. What seems clear from the feedback from learners at the researcher’s institution is that they recognize the benefit of using the application within the context of a CALL class and they seem open to, and in fact desiring of, the teacher including elements supported by the SLA literature and also those that are considered to be part of active learning, such as problem solving through group work. This is encouraging since it allows teachers to provide a more complete, and arguably, a more engaging language-learning experience while also not overwhelming them if they are lower in proficiency level. Going forward, as the average proficiency level of first-year university students in Japan continues to decline (see Suzuki, 2017), solutions such as this may become all the more important.

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## Appendix A

To facilitate the development of inter-cultural communicative competence (see Bachman, 1990; Byram, 1997; Hymes, 1972; Safina, 2014; Smolcic, n.d.) in lower-level learners, teachers can provide a range of information and practice opportunities.

Table 5. Examples of what can be covered with learners to help improve their inter-cultural communicative competence

<i>Linguistic competence</i>	"I go beach." Why is it incorrect?
<i>Discourse competence</i>	(1) A: "Do you live in Tokyo?" B: "Yes, I <i>do</i> ." Why do we use "do" in the answer? (2) A: "What's new?" B: "Not much!" Why do we answer in this way?
<i>Socio-cultural competence</i>	(1) When we receive a gift, we may say "You shouldn't have!" Why? (2) "That dog is positively adorable." What might this sentence say about the speaker and his/her social class? How about gender? (3) What do young people in Australia do on New Year's Eve? What is Vegemite? (4) When is silence appropriate? (5) What does that non-verbal action (i.e. gesture) mean?
<i>Pragmatic competence</i>	What does this mean based on the context? e.g. "Give her a lift." may mean take the girl or woman in your car to where she wants to go. Or, it may mean lift – or try and lift – the object.
<i>Strategic competence</i>	(1) When someone is speaking too fast, we may ask "I'm sorry, could you speak more slowly, please?" (2) We use fillers (e.g. "Let me see...") to get more thinking time. (3) We may paraphrase what we say if the other speaker did not understand what we just said.
<i>Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes</i>	We should encourage learners to gain more knowledge about other cultures, develop skills so that they can successfully communicate with people from those cultures, and develop attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity, and so on. We should also encourage them to have empathy, self-awareness, and awareness and acceptance of inter-cultural differences.

## Appendix B

Table 6. Frequency and percentages for the item: “How suitable were the teacher’s classes for lower-level English learners?”

Response option	Frequency	Percent
2	5	5.3
3	43	45.7
4	30	31.9
5 (Very)	16	17.0

Table 7. Frequency and percentages for the Item: “Writing about myself, doing problem solving in a group, etc., was too difficult for me.”

Response option	Frequency	Percent
1	15	16.0
2	27	28.7
3	37	39.4
4	14	14.9
5 (Strongly agree)	1	1.1

Table 8. Frequency and percentages for the item: “I often thought about my future English needs because of the teacher’s handouts and activities.”

Response option	Frequency	Percent
2	5	5.3
3	33	35.1
4	33	35.1
5 (Strongly agree)	23	24.5

Table 9. Frequency and percentages for the Item: “I would rather do NetAcademy completely as homework. I don’t need to do it in a CALL course with a teacher.”

Response option	Frequency	Percent
1	33	35.1
2	22	23.4
3	31	33.0
4	4	4.3
5 (Strongly agree)	4	4.3

Table 10. Frequency and percentages for the item: “I think that we are given too much NetAcademy homework.”

Response option	Frequency	Percent
1	14	14.9
2	28	29.8
3	40	42.6
4	10	10.6
5 (Strongly agree)	2	2.1

Table 11. Frequency and percentages for the Item: “I don’t think I need to complete all sections of each NetAcademy unit (e.g. listening, step 6). It would be better to interact in English with the teacher and my classmates more.”

Response option	Frequency	Percent
1	4	4.3
2	5	5.3
3	42	44.7
4	30	31.9
5 (Strongly agree)	13	13.8

**Participant observations: The researcher.** The following was sourced from the researcher’s field notes (which were created across the term): (1) how other teachers were teaching their CALL classes influenced expectations in the researcher’s own CALL classes; (2) the learners enjoyed language games and these provided opportunities for less motivated learners to get involved, experience success, and enjoy the course; (3) trying to provide a complete solution based on the literature review meant that the researcher had to provide feedback incidentally at the end of class that would fill gaps left by the application and the researcher-provided handout (e.g. pointing out when learners were producing utterances which did not have the correct number of lexical units, giving feedback that would help build learners’ inter-cultural communicative competence – again, see Appendix A, Table 5); and (4) the learners seemed to take completing the “Unit Summary Sheet” near the end of each regular class quite seriously and seemed to appreciate the teacher checking the details of it and providing his signature (which seemed to maximize handout completion); among the updates that this handout requires is the addition of a section for learners to give their response to what they listen to/read (especially for classes in which only this handout is provided).