The Effects of Digital Game Play on Second Language Interaction

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study into the effects of digital game play on learners’ interaction in English as a foreign language. 30 Thai learners of English enrolled in a 15-week University language course completed 18 face-to-face classroom lessons, as well as six sessions playing Ragnarok Online, a popular online role-playing game. The game had been altered to include a number of quests for learners to complete. To gauge the effects of playing the games, participants’ language use in both text and voice chats was recorded and analysed. Game play resulted in a large and significant increase in English interaction that used a wider range of discourse functions, and also resulted in significantly more frequent contributions compared with English interaction in class. We discuss some of the theoretical and pedagogical implications of these findings.

Keywords: Digital Game-Based Learning, Interaction, MMORPGs, Second Language Acquisition, Willingness to Communicate

INTRODUCTION

Digital games have been shown to be able to make contributions to learning in various domains (for a review, see Hainey, Connolly, Stansfield, & Boyle, 2011; Kirriemuir & McFarlane, 2004; Mitchell & Savill-Smith, 2004; Randel, Morris, Wetzel, & Whitehill, 1992). Also in the area of language learning and teaching, the potential of games is starting to be explored. Games have been shown to motivate students (Anyaegbu, Ting, & Li, 2012; Liu & Chu, 2010), to encourage greater time-on-task (Gee, 2007) and to increase learners’ Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (Reinders & Wattana, 2012, 2014b). What has not been established conclusively, however, is if playing games leads to more interaction in the target language. Interaction has been argued to play a crucial role in second language acquisition (SLA) (Long, 1981) and it is therefore important to identify environments conducive to L2 (second language) production. Below, we will briefly discuss the role of interaction in L2 acquisition before looking at previous research into the use of digital games for language learning purposes.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Interaction in L2 Learning

Since the late 1970s it has been recognised that language interaction (i.e. communicating with others) plays an important role in the SLA process (Hatch, 1978a, 1978b). Some researchers see its role as mainly providing learners with “comprehensible input” (i.e. input that is attuned to their developmental level), which will help them to build up working hypotheses about the meaning and grammatical rules of the language, i.e. will help them develop their “interlanguage”. For others, interaction directly contributes to learning. Long’s interaction hypothesis (1981, 1983, 1996), for example, emphasises the importance of negotiation for learning, or the “modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility” (Pica, 1994, p. 493). Interaction and negotiation help to improve understanding, and this in turn results in more comprehensible input, which is of further help to the learner. Another advantage of interaction is that learners play an active part in it; they have some degree of control over the semantic content of the exchange and derive some support from the context in which the interaction takes place and can thus pay more attention to form rather than to meaning only. Learners are more likely to be alert, as interaction requires active participation, and they are more likely to get help from their interlocutors, who may repeat or rephrase content.

However, it has been pointed out that although interaction can have beneficial effects, conversational success in itself does not necessarily result in learning (Faerch & Kasper, 1980). It is, for example, possible to “manage” a conversation by extensive use of contextual information, without paying attention to grammatical features that might be helpful in the further development of one’s interlanguage.

Nonetheless, many researchers have argued for the important role of learner language production in learning, with perhaps the most widely cited being Swain’s “output hypothesis” (1985). This hypothesis was developed as a result of observations of Canadian immersion students who, despite years of receiving exposure to the second language, did not fully develop certain grammatical aspects of French. Swain found that the immersion classes were characterised by a lack of opportunities for language production and afforded few opportunities for “pushed output”, i.e. output that required them to “stretch their interlanguage”. Many students were able to use communication strategies to get their meaning across and were never challenged to further develop their language. Swain suggested that by requiring learners to produce comprehensible output, they would be pushed to be more accurate and to pay attention to both form (e.g. grammar) and meaning, and in so doing move from semantic only, to both semantic and syntactic processing. In addition, Swain (1998) suggested that output would 1) induce noticing of features in the target language, 2) allow for hypothesis formation and testing (see also Ellis & He, 1999; Pica, 1988), and 3) give opportunities for meta-talk (i.e. talking about the language and its meaning and form). Subsequent studies have further investigated these and other potential benefits and it is now widely acknowledged that output and interaction play an important part in learners’ eventual success in acquiring a second language (Ellis, 2008).

Encouraging Interaction in the L2 Classroom

Encouraging learners’ interaction inside the foreign (in contexts where the target language is not naturally spoken, e.g. in a Spanish class in Holland) or second (in contexts where it is, e.g. an English course in New Zealand) language classrooms is one of the greatest challenges for language teachers. In English as a foreign language (EFL) learning settings such as Thailand (the setting for this study), learners typically only find opportunities for practice within the classroom, and little or no language use takes place outside in everyday
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