English Teachers’ Practice and Perspectives on Using Educational Computer Games in EIL Context

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ABSTRACT

With in-depth interviews, the study explored 36 Taiwanese high school English teachers’ practice and perspectives on using educational computer games (ECGs) in teaching English as an international language (EIL). The teachers were asked to experience an ECG for English vocabulary learning. Then, tape-recorded individual interviews were conducted. This study revealed that only few participant teachers had ever used computer games in their instruction; however, most of them were willing to use ECGs in their English classes in the future. It should be noticed that most participant teachers showed only poor understanding of ECGs and digital game-based learning. They recognized their insufficient specific pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), the need for technology-related skills, and the support from administration. Based on the finding derived from this study and those of previous research, cultural differences were further discussed. Also, implications for further research and teacher professional development were proposed.

KEYWORDS

Educational Computer Games (ECGs), English as an International Language (EIL), English Teacher, Game-based Learning, Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

With the globalization and the growing interaction with other people around the world, English is a tool for communication. As the amount of non-native English speakers has dramatically increased, English as an international language (EIL) has become a hot issue in the last two decades (Cook, 1999; Crystal, 1997; Doan, 2013; Dong, 2012; Jekins, 2000; Kachru, 1986; Widdowson, 1994). In the EIL context, vocabulary is recognized the fundamental element of a language learning; however, the acquisition of vocabulary is essential but quite challenging for EIL learners (Change, 2013; Chen & Truscott, 2010). Without effective teaching strategies and methods, English vocabulary is somewhat hard to learn for learners (Eckerth & Tavakoli, 2012). Research has confirmed that learners’ poor motivation is one of the significant factors causing the barrier in their vocabulary acquisition (Levy & Stockwell, 2006). In order to improve students’ motivation, recently, using digital games for English vocabulary learning has been proposed as one of the possible useful instructional strategies. However, even though the digital games have the positive effectiveness in English vocabulary learning,
learning, empirical evidence shows that EIL teachers seldom adapt these games in teaching practice (Can & Caticlilay, 2006). The possible reasons for not implementing games in the classroom have also been discussed by teacher educators. For teacher educators, an understanding of EIL teachers’ relevant experience, perspectives and attitudes in using games in their instruction should be crucial for designing and implementing professional development programs or courses regarding game-based learning. However, relevant studies focusing on the aforementioned issues have not kept pace with the prevalence of educational computer games. Therefore, as one of the initial attempts, the current study aimed to explore English teachers’ practice and perspectives on using educational computer games in EIL instructional context.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Integration of ECGs in English Teaching**

In order to motivate learners and meet their different individual learning styles, more and more researchers propose new teaching curriculum designs and methods. One of the potential methods is integrating educational computer games (ECGs) into classroom (Hinostroza et al., 2011; Turel & Johnson, 2012). ECGs are computers games with pedagogical purposes, have been widely discussed in the field of English teaching in recent years (deHaan et al., 2010; Ketelhut et al., 2011; Peterson, 2010; Yang et al., 2010; Zheng et al., 2009). In the past few years, many studies have also demonstrated the benefits of ECGs in English learning context (Barendregt & Bekker, 2011; Chiu, et al., 2012; Smith, et al., 2013; Zheng, et al., 2009). ECGs not only can enhance the interaction with learners (Barendregt & Bekker, 2011; Chen & Huang, 2013; Kebritchi, 2010), but most importantly, they can provide more active involvement, creating personal motivation and satisfaction, and accommodating multiple learning styles (Kebritchi, 2010).

Although ECGs have the potential power to motivate learners and increase the learning efficiency; however, teachers in teaching practice tend not to integrate ECGs as in class activities or as after school assignments. Some research suggests that it is due to the gap existing between learners and teachers (Blakely et al., 2010; Paraskeva et al., 2010). Learners nowadays have different learning styles which are changing rapidly with the development of technology and the Internet, while teachers’ teaching methods are not changing synchronously (Tao et al., 2012). Therefore, more understanding of teachers’ practice and perspectives on ECGs is needed.

**Teachers’ Attitude, Practice, and Barriers toward Game-Based Learning**

With the trend towards increasing use of games for accelerating learning, investigations on game-based learning have been increasingly conducted. Yet, most of them mainly discussed the potential benefits of using the ECGs on learners (Liao & Chen, 2012; Smith, et al., 2013; Zheng, et al., 2009) or focused on the effectiveness of the adoption of computer games in English classrooms (e.g., Chiu et al., 2012). Recently, some studies have investigated teachers’ impressions on educational computer games including teachers’ attitudes toward game-based learning (Millstone, 2012; Common Sense Media, 2012; VeraQuest, 2013), teachers’ practice of using technology inside and outside the classroom, and the barriers teachers may have when integrating technology into their instruction (Bill and Melinda Gates, 2012). In these studies, some significant results have been revealed. Regarding teachers’ attitudes and practice, teachers nowadays generally feel comfortable using digital games in the classrooms (Millstone, 2012; Common Sense Media, 2012; PBS LearningMedia, 2013). Teachers are confident in their ability to use the latest digital technology (Pew Research Center, 2013). It seems that teachers are open to using technology, and many are willing to use more technology (Millstone,
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