Unmasking the Mystique: 
Utilizing Narrative Character-Playing Games to Support English Language Fluency

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ABSTRACT

This classroom-based action research study investigated the creative implementation of fluency instruction for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners through the use of a virtual character-playing simulation called Place Out of Time (POOT). The researchers sought to identify what supported and impeded student participation in this game-based learning environment. Participants included 35 ninth grade students at a highly ranked university preparatory school in Eastern Europe. This study employed narrative inquiry, drawing from game discourse (e.g., participant observations), surrounding discourse (e.g., classroom observation) and meta discourse, (e.g., interviews, focus groups, and post-activity reflection papers). Thematic analysis revealed the students’ desires for an increase in academic rigor related to POOT instruction. Four sub-themes pertaining to academic rigor emerged: content legitimacy, accountability, website functionality, and dynamic interactions. Subsequently, the authors advise classroom teachers to consider several crucial factors when instituting creative fluency instruction with high-achieving EFL students: exercise precaution when labeling learning environments as “games;” apportion feedback that is frequent, contextualized, and consequential; and oversee and redirect non-participation.

KEYWORDS
Character-Playing Games, Classroom-Based Action Research, English Fluency, International Schools, Place Out of Time (POOT)

INTRODUCTION

Learners confined to artificial classroom settings often struggle to ascribe and embody contextualized meanings (Lombardi, 2007). Contextualized meanings are a fundamental part of the learning process (Gee, 2004). To elaborate on this point, Gee articulated that there are several essential components required for the development of situated meaning (e.g., dialogue, image, experience, action). These essential components can impact one’s ability to transfer and apply knowledge. The limited ability to transfer and apply knowledge is often exacerbated among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (Chen, et al., 2013; Ozverir, Herrington, & Osam, 2016). To address this, the research presented in this paper explores how EFL learners can organically increase literacy and fluency opportunities through virtual interaction. The authors contend that gameful learning1 may offer EFL learners a captivating environment in which to engage with natural language on a more routine basis and subsequently improve English fluency.

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Fluency Instruction with English Language Learners

Creative implementation of first-language fluency instruction has occurred with younger-aged cohorts in traditional settings. Cahill and Gregory (2011) documented originaire teaching methods with young learners that incorporated techniques such as riddles, Readers Theatre, songs, and speeches. A valid argument can be made that the components of creative first-language fluency instruction should be reflected amid the innovations within EFL instruction across K-12 settings; however, there is insufficient literature on age-appropriate activities intended for high school EFL students.

Authentic communication experiences in EFL classrooms are necessary to increase fluency and deepen foreign language comprehension. Research posits that social learning spaces nurture the capacity for language acquisition. Interaction between students and classroom teachers is crucial, and peer-to-peer synergy holds greater potential for increased authentic engagement, particularly with EFL learners. Yet, Chen, Chen, and Sun (2010) contend that collaborative learning environments, allowing EFL learners adequate practice with reading comprehension, are scarce.

Furthermore, the geographic isolation of EFL learners may inhibit the opportunity for genuine communication in ideal settings, and therein lead to insufficient language input (Wu, Chen, & Huang, 2014, p. 209). EFL learners are often educationally restrained by exiguous exposure and accessibility to native speakers.

Retrospectively, educators must “think beyond convention, … to design engaging opportunities for young people to learn and express their understandings” (Lamb & Johnson, 2010, p. 76). Gameful learning environments may present a viable solution for educators (Chiu, Kao, Reynolds, 2012) through the optimization of virtual interactions with native speakers.

Gameful Learning Environments

Digital gameful learning environments may amplify opportunities for peer-to-peer involvement. From a broader perspective, Gee (2008) attests to the potential of videogames as a learning platform. Gee, in addition to many other scholars (c.f., Holden et al., 2014; Goodman, 2010; Kupperman et al., 2011; Sousanis, 2006; Young et al., 2012), has demonstrated the substantive meaning of games within multitudinous game genres. More specifically, deHaan (2005), as well as Chen and Yang (2013), found games to help fortify context and fluency contrivances in English language learning.

Critiques concerning the optimal utilization of games have materialized. Clark, Yates, Early, and Moulton (2010) attest to the need for evidence of effectively constructed educational game-like experiences. Similarly, Van Eck (2006) explained that pedagogical and preparatory focus for game-based learning warrants a shift towards “practical guidance for how (when, with whom, and under what conditions) games can be integrated into the learning process to maximize their learning potential” (p. 17).

Therein, the goal of this research was twofold. First, the authentication of pedagogical innovations related to digitally-mediated, character-playing worlds was prioritized. By this, the researchers sought to better understand what elements were effective and ineffective in game-based learning environments. However, the researchers recognized the highly contextualized nature of game-based learning, and shifted away from the binary question of whether a game worked or did not work. Instead, the researchers sought to understand more completely the specific conditions in which game-based learning flourished. This speaks to the second goal of the research: to address the vacuities in the field’s understanding about the use of game-based learning with specific attention to EFL learners. Given these goals, the researchers reconnoiter the utilization of a learning tool called Place Out of Time (POOT) and its use with English fluency instruction involving students from a high-achieving, international school in Eastern Europe.
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