A Constructivist Approach to Game-Based Language Learning: Student Perceptions in a Beginner-Level EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

This article provides information on an action research project in a low-level EFL setting in Japan. The project aims were to 1) foster spoken communication skills and 2) help students engage with their own learning. The project investigated the applicability of board games as a mediating tool for authentic communication as part of a wider TBLT approach to language development. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from 115 first and second year Japanese university students via a questionnaire at the end of a seven-week course using the experimental methodology. Responses to the questionnaire indicated that the framework was perceived to be valuable in both fostering communicative skills and improving student engagement. Methodological improvements were also suggested. Implications applicable to teachers working in similar contexts are discussed, as well as possible improvements for future implementations.

KEYWORDS

Analog Games, English as a Foreign Language, Game-Based Language Learning, Tabletop Games, Task-Based Language Teaching

INTRODUCTION

The framework introduced in this paper is an explorative game-based language learning (GBLL) framework, designed in accordance with task-based language teaching (TBLT) theory and practice. This study reports on preliminary findings regarding the implementation of the framework in a beginner-level context at a Japanese university. Data was gathered in the form of a questionnaire given to learners at the end of a 7-week initial implementation. The questionnaire contained both qualitative and quantitative measures and this paper provides detailed analysis of students’ responses to both, as well as implications for future implementations.

Context of the Study

The framework under review in this paper was designed to be used in low-level English classrooms. This specific domain was selected based on two criteria.

Firstly, the authors of this paper are involved in teaching low-proficiency learners. Both researchers are based in Japan where there is a call from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to improve English teaching pedagogy in order to foster communicative skills.

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more effectively. MEXT aims to nurture students that can “assertively make use of their English skills, think independently, and express themselves” (2014, p.3). We argue that teaching from a constructivist perspective is key to achieving MEXT’s goal. Pedagogical considerations should include learning through the joint creation of social experiences and encouraging learners to become active agents in their learning. TBLT has been shown to facilitate such learning, and the present study utilizes the interactional affordances of board games as part of a TBLT approach to language learning.

Secondly, there is a growing number of studies that investigate the use, and benefits of virtual worlds, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) and, commercial off the shelf video games in a number of contexts, both educational (for a review see Squire, 2003) and language learning specific (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2012). The common research paradigm for exploring the implementation of games in language learning contexts is for researchers to use digital games. However, for tabletop, non-digital games, research is still immature despite the potential benefits of the media in low-level EFL classrooms. This paper provides theoretical rationale and pedagogical considerations for one instantiation of a GBLL teaching framework. Additionally, a preliminary evaluation of the framework by a group of 115 learners is analyzed and discussed for future implementations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TBLT and Task Definition

The concept of task is central to second language acquisition (SLA), a claim that can be made without positioning task as a TBLT construct. Tasks or more simply “activities” in general, are what learners do with the language that they are learning. TBLT researchers however endeavor to define task as a specific term, highlighting elements of language-learning activities that promote language acquisition. TBLT research also considers the pedagogical use of tasks as part of a functional approach to language teaching. This emphasis on functional language use emerged as a reaction to traditional classroom teaching, which focused on discrete linguistic or grammatical components and the practice of those components (see Ellis, 2003; Long, 2014 for an overview of the emergence of TBLT). In other words, tasks require learners to move beyond the mere practice of forms and engage in meaningful interaction with interlocutors.

Although there is no single definition of task, a number of properties become apparent when referencing definitions such as those proposed by Ellis (2003). Firstly, a task should be meaning focused (as opposed to form/grammar focused). Thus, learners should be engaged primarily with making themselves understood and achieving task goals, not using discrete linguistic elements. Regarding goal-orientation, goals should be provided for learners to work toward. Task success is measured in terms of learners’ ability to achieve such goals. Additionally, tasks should have a connection to real world activities, often described as task authenticity. These real-world tasks are considered target tasks: the tasks that learners are expected to do with the language outside of the classroom. Long (2014) proposes the creation of pedagogic tasks which are simpler versions of the target tasks. These pedagogic tasks can then be arranged in order of complexity, preparing learners to engage fully with final target tasks (p.225-226).

With the above definition of task, it is possible to draw parallels between tasks and the activities that people engage in when playing games. The next section provides an overview of similarities, which have been proposed through GBLL research.

TBLT and GBLL

GBLL researchers have explored themes relating to language learners’ willingness to communicate (Reinders & Wattana, 2015), methodological considerations (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2012; Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012), and the practical and pedagogical challenges of implementing digital games in language learning contexts (Godwin-Jones, 2014). Comparing TBLT and game-play, Sykes (2014, p.153) provides a succinct overview of the similarities that exist between tasks and quests, the distinct task-like activities found in games. Tasks and quests share the following properties:
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