Chapter 8

Inclusive Language Education and Digital Games: A Literature Review and EFL Students’ Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies play a significant role in language education. One of the most well-received technologies by language learners is digital games. These games facilitate connections between diverse language learners regardless of age, gender, sociocultural and educational background, and diversity. Since the concept of inclusive education is gaining momentum, the popularity of digital games presents new possibilities for inclusive practices in language learning. In research for this chapter, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 EFL students who had extensive experience playing video games. The objective was to discover whether digital games had the potential to drive inclusive language education forward and how this could be done. Student insights into the value of playing video games are presented based on interview data that were analyzed thematically. Finally, the implications and suggestions to use digital games for inclusive language education are discussed.
INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies and the profusion of appliances to connect to the internet, for business, education, socialize or play/entertainment have been found helpful in language learning (DeHaan, 2013). More specifically, students and teachers today have a wide range of options for language learning that did not exist in predigital times. Newspapers and magazines can be accessed to read online, along with blogs, forums and video news. YouTube, podcasts, and streaming provide opportunities to listen to real texts and discourse. There are numerous Apps and tools online that allow for repeated exposure and practice, oftentimes with automated feedback. Social media plays a role in socializing with people all over the world, even celebrities, that are not within easy reach from students’ homes, districts, or towns. Students and teachers can access digital media and promote authentic conditions for learning languages from a communicative approach (Menon, 2019).

Among the many options for language learning and entertainment, video games are trendy among young internet users (Skyes, 2018). Video games are considered to be engaging and motivational (Reinders & Wattana, 2015) to cater for students with a wide range of differences for inclusive education purposes (Whitton, 2009). Besides motivation, second language learning has been found to be enhanced when video games are used among students with diverse backgrounds (Chick, 2014; Parsayi & Sooyoof, 2018 a, b), including students with special needs (Bouzid, Khenissi, Essalmi, & Jenni, 2016). To date, few studies have been conducted to review thoroughly how different features of digital games can help language teachers, students, policy makers, and material developers to ensure inclusive education in language teaching and learning contexts, can benefit from the affordances of digital technologies, including video games. Thus, this chapter aims to fill this gap by giving voice to EFL students themselves by gauging their perceptions of their use of video games in their language education courses.

COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH, SOCIOCULTURAL LANGUAGE LEARNING AND VIDEO GAMES

The authors’ stance on language education favors the contemporary communicative approach, that incorporates the tenets from sociocultural theories/social cognitive theory applied to language learning and teaching (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Suchy & Holdnack, 2013). Briefly, language learning is seen as a lifetime process that enables the learner to use language, for social practices, to act upon reality for a specific communicative purpose. The communicative purpose is as varied as the social practices required (Pennycook, 2010). There are learners that need to learn language for their job, to be desirable in the job market or interact with clients, patients, or even students if they are sellers, doctors, or teachers, respectively. There are learners who need to learn language to play or socialize with individuals and communities of their liking, such as video gamers. Language learning can happen formally, in instructed education contexts, and informally, outside instructional contexts. It can happen explicitly, being aware of the learning, or implicitly because of their interaction with content, products, and people through various engaging practices, such as consuming videos on YouTube or Netflix in a foreign language with subtitles. The sociocultural aspect of language learner influences learners, in their identities, and the construction of the self in connection with others. However, in language education, from a sociocultural perspective, there is — or there should be — a dialogue between self and others to make meaning, to find common ground as well as embrace difference and diversity in a positive, constructive manner.