

Game-Based Learning and Classroom Interactional Competence: Opportunities for Pedagogical Innovation in the Japanese EFL Context

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Introduction

There is increasing importance put on Japanese learners of English having practical English communication skills. This means being able to communicate and interact with other English speakers, and specifically, university graduates being able to use English in the workplace (MEXT, 2003). It appears then that interaction might be a key concept to consider when preparing Japanese learners to meet these goals and one that I believe is not currently sufficiently considered in my own context of EFL at the tertiary level. Walsh (2012, p. 1) suggests by putting interaction or classroom interactional competence (CIC) at the centre of the classroom, teachers and learners will be better equipped to “produce classrooms which are more dialogic, more engaged, and more focused on participation.” This paper will review a wide range of literature and offer suggestions about what kind of interventions using both CIC and game-based learning may be appropriate. Particularly, the paper will recommend that strategic collaborative board games (a kind of tabletop game) are worthy of further investigation by teachers. These games are cooperative, interactional, and require sophisticated use of language to complete the goal.

Game-based learning flourishes in practice and research in educational contexts all over the world. Computer video games in particular have been shown a great deal of interest by researchers for their motivational and immersive qualities and their ability to promote certain behaviours in learners. Tabletop games, such as board games and roleplaying games, have many of the same qualities and mechanics as computer video games but have

largely been overlooked by educational researchers. This paper will suggest that addition and adaption of strategic collaborative board games such as Forbidden Island (Leacock, 2010) and Pandemic (Leacock, 2007) to the oral communication classroom might positively affect the oral proficiency and development of Walsh's (2012) concept of classroom interactional competence (CIC) in Japanese learners of English.

In Japanese university EFL courses, oral communication classes largely take the form of article and opinion-based discussion. In these classes, many students have difficulty interacting in this kind of setting, which is to be expected considering their educational background up until this point. Communicative language teaching (CLT) and communicative competence are both concepts that have been part of Japanese educational policy since 1989, when they were brought in to help transition away from the traditional grammar-translation (a methodology that focused on reading and writing skills primarily centered around translation) approach (Stewart, 2009). Since then, there has been increasing importance placed on practical English communication, for example, a 2003 policy stated that university graduates should be able to use English in their workplace (MEXT, 2003). But many would argue that policy is not reflected in educational practice: university entrance exams generally only test written skills with questions and answers often being in Japanese (Kikuchi, 2006) and many textbooks used at the high school level lack authentic communication activities (Ogura, 2008). Also, many Japanese high school teachers complain of the 'wearing two pairs of shoes' syndrome (Sakui, 2004), i.e. they are required by government educational policy to implement CLT, but at the same time have to prepare students for the previously mentioned university entrance exams.

Not surprisingly then many of my students, especially first-year students, have difficulty with the oral communication classes they take. Specifically, they have difficulty with the interactional nature of the group oral communication classes. For example, difficulty initiating new topics after interest has been exhausted in the topic presently being discussed and knowing how to respond when they cannot grasp what another learner is trying to express.

This paper presents the main areas of literature to be examined in the following order: interactional competence and game-based learning. First, literature covering the definition of interactional competence, its importance for second language learners, and studies where the concepts of interactional competence and game-based learning have been combined will be discussed. After this, specific studies concerned with raising learners' awareness of interactional competence and actual interactional competence ability will be explored. In the next major section, the paper introduces game-based learning literature and the following areas reviewed: why games are so ubiquitous in modern society outside and inside of the classroom, what a game is, why educators keep looking towards games, and what benefits they might offer learners and specifically EFL learners. Finally, studies using specific games are reviewed as well as their affordances for pedagogic interventions.

Interactional Competence

The phrase 'interactional competence' was first used by Kramsch (1986) in an article that argued that by overestimating the importance of accuracy, teachers would be in reality disempowering their learners and losing an opportunity for more meaningful cross-cultural understanding. Kramsch (1986) believed the more important aspect of language usage to focus on was the ability to successfully interact during real-world communicative situations with native speakers of the language. In her 1986 paper she gave the example of successfully negotiating ordering a cup of coffee in a Parisian café. Kramsch (1986) postulated that by moving away from a focus on accuracy and developing curriculums that took into account dynamic human interaction during communication this would provide more meaningful learning for second language learners.

Many researchers (Hall, 1995; Markee, 2008; Walsh, 2011; Young, 2011) since Kramsch have picked up the idea of interactional competence and have attempted to refine its meaning and develop categories of communicative features that function within the construct of interactional competence. And maybe more importantly, try to offer strategies and techniques that teachers and learners can practically apply to their teaching and learning. Later in this

literature review, studies attempting to raise learners' awareness of IC and researching possible ways to improve IC will be examined. But first, let us consider the components that compose IC.

Walsh (2011) reviews several researchers' ideas concerning the features that make up IC, as well as introduces his own. Firstly, Walsh (2011, p. 161) references the specific features of IC written about by Young (2003): these include turn-taking, topic management, signaling boundaries and so on. Walsh (2011) then introduces Markee's (2008) three components that compose IC. These are as follows (Walsh, 2011, p. 161):

- language as a formal system (including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation);
- semiotic systems, including turn-taking, repair, sequence organisation;
- gaze and paralinguistic features.

Walsh (2011, p. 161) while agreeing with what Markee says about second language learners developing IC, that it is something co-constructed, disagrees with Markee's focus on accuracy: "...a person who has a high level of interactional competence is not necessarily an accurate speaker." This is going back to Kramsch's (1986) original point about how teachers and researchers need to look more at how communication is jointly achieved between interactants, rather than the grammatical accuracy of an individual's language. From this summary and from other researchers' articles it seems that IC is the measure of how successfully communication is jointly constructed between two interactants or more. Hence IC is not a measure of an individual's performance, but of all interactants involved in communication. The most important features of IC that repeatedly appear in researchers' work are turn-taking, repair, and topic management.

More recently researchers such as Walsh (n.d.) have considered how interactional competence functions in the classroom. This has resulted in the coinage of the construct of classroom interactional competence (CIC). Walsh's (2011) concept is looking at the interaction and dialogue in the classroom between learners, and between learner and teacher. It involves features of interactional competence such as turn-taking, repair, overlaps and interruptions, and topic management. Walsh proposes to enhance

learning and chances for learning by saying that teachers and learners need to become more interaction focused and make efforts to improve both the CIC of teachers and students. Some current researchers have picked up this thread and are now either researching possible methods of raising learners' awareness of IC and even explicitly teaching learners methods to develop their IC.

Recent Studies in Interactional Competence

This section will look at two recent studies: one is exploring the idea of using conversational narratives to help learners develop their IC (Lwin, 2012) and the other (Barraja-Rohan, 2011) is about using conversation analysis to explicitly teach IC. Lwin's study begins by introducing the idea that IC is necessary to be a competent speaker of a language and also by saying Vygotsky's social-cultural theory heavily informs the idea of IC (Interestingly this is a thread that runs through a lot of game-based learning research too. This will be expanded upon later). So starting from the initial premise that IC is an important aspect of overall language proficiency, Lwin then introduces the idea of 'conversational narratives'. Conversational narratives are social exchanges where a speaker recounts real-life events. They are not monologues though, and are co-constructed by other speakers' comments and reactions, which can reframe and change the direction of the narrative. Lwin (2012, p. 91) explains, "Unlike elicited narrative, narrative embedded in or interleaved with ongoing conversations in ordinary social exchanges involves more than one participant and its dynamics depend not only on an individual's language competence." It is clear then to successfully co-construct spontaneous conversational narratives that the interactants would display appropriate usage of the components making up IC. Lwin's hypothesis based on this assumption is that it would be useful for L2 learners' IC development to be aware of the different roles found in conversational narratives and specific patterns or features that can be found in the narratives. Conversational narratives are certainly complex enough examples of extended talk that to be successfully co-constructed interactants would need to display competent usage of aspects of IC. Also as Young (2011, p.

436) points out, the idea of explicitly bringing L2 learners' attention to how linguistic resources are used during conversation has precedence in many other researchers' work.

Lwin's (2012) methodology takes the analytical framework from Ochs and Talyor's (2001) study. This framework is a collection of narrative roles that Ochs and Talyor (2001) identified in their study. For example there are roles such as Protagonist, Introducer, and Primary recipient. These were among the narrative roles that were found to consistently occur in examples of authentic conversational narratives. The data comes from twelve informal speech events where two high-level (IELTS band 8) ESL learners and their instructor chatted over lunch in the instructor's home. Lwin (2012) categorises the participants' utterances into each of the narrative roles and then analyses the results. As to be expected the instructor is a pivotal interactant and self-initiates most of the Protagonist roles, but what is interesting is how all speakers move between roles creating chances for each other to meaningfully add to the unfolding narrative. It is also interesting as Lwin (2012) points out in the conclusion that for certain socio-cultural reasons some L2 learners may not compete for certain narrative roles. For example, in Chinese culture (the study was conducted in Singapore, and the participants were from China) it is usual for learners to consider the teacher as a highly knowledgeable authority figure who should be shown respect by not challenging their utterances. It is important for instructors to take this into consideration so as to give L2 learners instruction that will prepare them to interact appropriately in social contexts using the target language.

Overall, Lwin (2012) presents an interesting possibility about how teachers might use narrative roles to develop L2 learners' IC. This is something because of its concrete nature that might easily be developed into practical activities designed to raise awareness of conversational narrative conventions and how they specifically operate. This study shows by looking at authentic examples of face-to-face real-world communication through a narrative lens we might gain more ways to more compellingly present the concept of IC to L2 learners and therefore develop L2 learners' usage of IC.

The next study to be examined in detail is Barraja-Rohan's (2011) paper

entitled, “Using conversation analysis in the second language classroom to teach interactional competence”. This study rather than offering a possible instructional method actually proposes one (teaching interactional competence through conversational analysis), and then carries out an action research study where participants are taught using the proposed method. Where the two studies are very similar is in their focus on empowering learners to use the target language in authentic communicative social settings. Barraja-Rohan (2011, p. 499) explicitly says: “The focus of the course was clearly on communication and not accuracy, an approach advocated by Kramsch (1986), which reflects what interactants orient to in naturally occurring conversations.”

The study begins by introducing the idea of conversation analysis (CA) as a second language teaching and research method. CA takes examples of authentic spontaneous conversation and uses them to explain how interactants achieve conversational and wider social goals by categorising features of the conversation into explicit items such as adjacency pairs, turn-taking, preferred and non-preferred responses, and so on. Barraja-Rohan (2011, p. 481) asserts that CA can then offer a way to illustrate the IC ability that native speakers implicitly acquire to L2 learners and thereby help them to develop their own IC. The action research project in the study then set out to achieve this goal.

The project was held over two semesters and consisted of initially one group of 20 adult migrants who had been living in Australia for an extended period of time but had gained limited L2 conversational ability. The aim of the project (Barraja-Rohan, 2011, p. 487) was firstly to “...raise student’ awareness of the features of spoke interaction;” and “Second, it was to develop an understanding of the structure of conversation in order to turn students into ‘conversation analysts’ by observing real life conversations.” The CA concepts that were taught to learners are as follows: response tokens, assessments, and adjacency pairs and sociocultural norms of interaction. These concepts were first introduced, then learners practiced them in various exercises, and finally learners were asked to reflect on their usage of the taught concepts. Barraja-Rohan (2011) looked at samples of pre-instruction

and post-instruction conversation to judge whether the intervention had been successful or not. Overall, it appears that the action research project was very successful. Barraja-Rohan (2011) compares pre-instruction and post-instruction conversations of two learners that show significant gains in IC and pragmatic socio-cultural knowledge. This is also illustrated by an anecdote in which a student accurately assesses a teacher's response to an invitation—"Well, I'll try to come—as a dispreferred response. The anecdote aptly summarises how the explicit teaching of IC features through CA was an empowering and meaningful experience for the learner. This was also reflected in learner feedback through comments such as (Barraja-Rohan, 2011, p. 494): "I can know how to keep conversations going when I speak to native speakers. [sic]" These two studies offer a valuable insight into how researchers might look for types of discourse that are significantly complex enough that they are fruitful sites for the development of IC. And also, how teachers might explicitly instruct L2 learners using methods such as CA to raise their awareness of IC. Barraja-Rohan's (2011) study in particular shows promising results that have translated into L2 learners being able to function at a higher level than previous in the target language's society.

Interactional Competence and Games

There has been little research that has directly linked the areas of IC and game-based learning. This is intriguing because overarching educational theories such as social-constructionism are used to support both research areas. Williamson (2009) affirms that the constructivist model of learning is one often associated with games, where learners do not passively receive knowledge but moment by moment construct it through their interaction with the game. He states (Williamson, 2009, p. 13): "Learning with games is said to be social, to involve interaction with objects, to be active and participative rather than passive and merely receptive, and to involve the constant construction of meaning and knowledge." Walsh (2011, p. 158) echoes this sentiment by saying: "...I aim to show how a better understanding of classroom discourse will have a positive impact on learning, especially where learning is regarded as a social activity that is strongly influenced

by involvement, engagement and participation; where learning is regarded as doing rather than having.” Both of these researchers (one is researching games-based learning and the other classroom interactional competence) clearly emphasise that learning is a socially constructed concept and if regarded as such more meaningful learning can take place. Having said that there is little research linking the two research areas one study was found which will now be examined.

The study in question is entitled “Enacting Interactional Competence in Gaming Activities: Coproducing Talk with Virtual Others” and was conducted by Piirainen-Marsh (2011). This study’s aim was to investigate how players of a video game coproduce talk with the characters of the game. The participants were Finnish teenagers (L1 is Finnish) who had received some four years of English language education, one had even studied abroad in America, but neither could be categorised as active English foreign language learners. The setting was one of the player’s homes and the video game sessions were recorded by video and audio recording equipment. It is not made explicitly clear whether this was a pre-existing social activity that the participants engaged in regularly or whether it was a form of experimental intervention. But from reading the transcripts it would appear that it was a social activity the participants were already familiar with. To those unfamiliar with gaming it might seem unusual that two Finnish teenagers are co-playing (players take turns with a controller, but the player without the controller may have input into gameplay decisions and actively comments on proceedings) a single-player Japanese role-playing game translated into English, but depending on the game many titles are only localised for major countries making English the lingua franca of gaming (Chik, 2013). Also considering that it is a single-player game it is fascinating how the author claims that (Piirainen-Marsh, 2011, p. 19): “Practices of coproduction make visible how the participants attend to and analyse talk that unfolds in the mediated setting, enacting—and also testing—their interactional competences.”

This claim of enacting and testing interactional competencies in the case of coproducing talk with virtual characters is difficult to verify since the dialogue by its nature is not truly interactive. The virtual characters’

dialogue is unchanging and independent of the turns of the co-players. The way in which the co-players ‘interact’ with the virtual characters takes the form of (Pirainen-Marsh, 2011, p. 20): “choral coproduction or utterances or pre-emptive or anticipatory completion of a turn in progress.” Other features include gaze to signify attentional focus and participation framework and how affective stance is displayed. It could be argued that while these features do somewhat fall within the wider framework of IC, for example Markee (2008) includes gaze and semiotics in his definition, they do not fit the most basic definition which is as Walsh (2011, p. 160) points out: “... interactional competence is context-specific and concerned with the ways in which interactants construct meaning together...” Does the players’ choral repetition or anticipatory completion of lines of a virtual character’s prefabricated scripted dialogue really mean they are constructing meaning together? Even when the co-players directly address the virtual characters, they of course are unable to respond.

While it can be argued that the scripted dialogue of a virtual character cannot strictly be considered an interactant, the two co-players display IC that allows them to make playing the game a meaningful social activity. Pirainen-Marsh (2011) calls this the “The Interplay of Co-available Resources”. For example, when the player cuts short the scripted dialogue of a virtual character, the co-player responds with soft laughter (probably this bald interruption as a face-threatening act to the virtual character is found to be humorous). The player then brings the turn to completion by completing the virtual character’s dialogue himself. After which the player selected a gameplay option in a dialogue box, resulting in the co-player then reading aloud the English text in the dialogue box. It is interesting how a turn of gameplay resulted in a turn at talk, and Pirainen-Marsh (2011, p. 28) categorises this as acknowledgment: “P immediately selects the first option and the co-player (K) acknowledges his choice by reading it aloud (line 5).”

This study shows how even a single-player console game can be a site for meaningful social activity where a multitude of linguistic and interactional resources are deployed. The participants while not active EFL learners show an understanding of the English narrative by critically commenting and

engaging with it. It could be argued though that the study is not of a truly collaborative gaming activity, since the analysis is mostly concerned with the players' commentary on the prescribed narrative cut-scenes (it might be more accurate to call some of the transcripts examples of players interacting with gaming fiction) of the game and the actual gameplay as it might relate to interactional resources is not discussed much. What is evident though, is that the game is engaging and engenders meaningful social interaction between the two co-players. And it is perhaps these two qualities that attract attention from researchers, L2 instructors, and educators in general.

Game-based Learning

Games are a cultural phenomenon. The 2013 Spilgames 'State of Online Gaming Report' announced that the global number of people playing video games "is expected to surpass 1.2 billion by the end of 2013". The history of games is equally impressive; for example, board games can be traced back to around 2500 BCE (Tam, 2008). Also, as far back as the Middle Ages people were using games for specific educational purposes (chess was used to teach strategies of war to noblemen (Vale, 2001)). Now if one looks at current educational practices we can see language learners inside and outside of the EFL classroom playing games in the L2. In the classroom, this might be something as simple as playing snakes and ladders to practice the present perfect (Rinvoluceri, 1984, p. 28), or it could be as sophisticated as a tabletop roleplaying game (TRPGs are collaborative games revolving around storytelling (Quijano, 2007)) such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. Outside the classroom, a learner might play a massive-multiplayer-online-role-playing-game (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* in which they will communicate in English. (English is the lingua franca of the game, which allows players from various countries playing together on the same server to communicate (Pirainen-Marsh, 2011; Chik, 2013)). In light of all this, it is not surprising that many educators and EFL teachers are increasingly interested in games, and what these games can offer learners and the classroom experience. What is unclear though is our understanding of such issues as: what types of games are the most meaningful for specific groups of

learners, what constructs of pedagogic and linguistic theory can be found in games or linked to them.

What is a Game?

Like in so many disciplines, agreement and consistent usage of terminology is an issue. Crookall and Oxford (1990, p. 17) point this out when they mention the variety of terms used in game literature such as “simulation, game, role-play, simulation/game, simulation-game, game/simulation, gamed simulation, role-play simulation, role-playing game.” However, it is not useful to differentiate between every type, because depending on the specific game, the game might possess characteristics found in multiple categories. It is useful though to consider two basic classifications that are closely intertwined: simulation and game. Crookall and Oxford in their book ‘Simulation, Gaming, and Language Learning’ (1990, p. 14) define a simulation as a representation of a real-world system that can operate as a legitimate reality in its own right, but significantly in a simulation the cost of error is much lower or negligible to the participant (all communicative classrooms are essentially simulations in this sense, since they represent real-world communicative situations that allow learners to practice with low cost for error). However, games do not necessarily have to represent a real-world system (they are usually inspired by them though), and they usually include risk, or some cost related to participant performance (winning or losing). Games may even have real world consequences, such as losing of money in a game of poker for example.

In Pivec et al.’s (2003) paper ‘Aspect of Game-Based Learning’ a collection of defining characteristics of games are given. They are as follows:

“[Thorton et al., 90] claim that interactivity is an essential aspect of a game. [Johnston et al., 93] suggested that dynamic visuals, rules, goal and interaction are the essential features. [Baranauskas et al., 99] stated that the essence of playing is challenge and risk. According to [Malone, 81], four elements of computer games can be defined: fantasy, curiosity, challenge and control.”

The characteristics that overlap the most between all writers are these ideas of fantasy/reality and risk/challenge. And if these characteristics can be taken as the key defining features of games, it is of great relevance for language learners. The reason being that these defining characteristics of games can be tied to existing theories of language acquisition. For example, the idea of a representational reality with low cost for participant error means second language learners might be more receptive to input because they are less anxious and more engaged when playing a game (this is referring to the input theory of affective filter hypothesis (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 37)). Also, the idea of risk can be linked to pushed-output theory (Ellis, 2008) since games can force language learners to focus on certain language forms in order to win the game.

Why Should L2 Learners Play Games?

One of the strongest proponents for game-based learning is Marc Prensky. Prensky does not write specifically about the EFL context, rather about how computer games can benefit all learners in all educational contexts (2001). His two main points as to why computer games should be used as learning tools are firstly that “learners have changed in some fundamentally important ways” and secondly that “computer games can provide a new way to motivate today’s students to learn” (Prensky, 2005, p. 97). The first point at its strongest implication means that because the current generation has grown up playing games, their brains are physiologically different to their parents’ brains and hence educational input is best suited to be delivered via computer games. (Prensky, 2001, p. 40). It is very difficult to conclusively prove this, and some of the evidence given which relates to neuroplasticity comes from experiments on lower mammals (Prensky, 2001, p. 41). And also, while gaming is a very popular pastime, it is important to remember as Williamson (2009, p. 2) points out “gaming is by no means a universal activity in all young people’s lives.” The second point, that games are motivational, is less controversial. Many researchers (Butler, 1993; Philips, 1993; Quijano, 2008) agree that good games possess qualities that can be motivational for in particular L2 learners. But whether modern computer games necessarily

possess new or unique motivational qualities, that claim is debatable. Indeed, as Williamson (2009, p. 10) points out: “The absence of credible data to support using games for educational purposes has not dissuaded a good number of games advocates from making major claims about their values.” Game-based learning is somewhat synonymous with video game-based learning, and the majority of current research in various fields concentrates on examining video games. But the field of game-based learning is vast and covers a wide variety of games, each with their own unique qualities of gameplay. One of these games is the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG). TRPGs are as Quijano (2008, p. 2) explains: “In these games, the students (or players) take the role of characters in a story, and together with the teacher (or game master) they create a cooperative narrative while following a system a system of preset rules. Tabletop RPGs, are a type of game that can be used to ameliorate the language acquisition process, as well as to grasp the students’ attention, get them involved in spontaneous use of language, become immersed in the activity, and have fun while doing it.” (To clarify, the ‘game master’ role is responsible for introducing narrative scenarios, judging how the players’ actions will alter the narrative depending on pre-set rules, and then giving feedback to players.) These claims are to a degree substantiated by empirical evidence (Quijano, 2008) and this evidence will be examined in the final section of the literature review. But first, the purported language learning benefits of TRPGs will be reviewed.

The communicative approach can be found in many current EFL contexts around the world. Also, in countries where it was not previously part of national L2 curriculums, such as Japan, it is fast being adopted (Stewart, 2009). Lightbrown and Spada (2006, p. 196) define communicative language teaching (CLT) as follows: “CLT is based on the premise that successful language learning involves not only a knowledge of the structures and forms of a language, but also the functions and purposes that a language serves in different communicative settings. This approach to teaching emphasizes the communication of meaning in interaction rather than the practice and manipulation of grammatical forms in isolation.” Taking this into consideration, a big part of the argument for TRPGs as Quijano (2007,

p. 3) points out is that the TRPG “...encompasses all of these qualities...” Certainly, it can be argued that the interactive and authentic nature of TRPGs with their focus on communicating meaning in order to collaboratively construct a narrative is consistent with the pedagogic ideology that is encapsulated in CLT. Another parallel that can be drawn is if a teacher is to play the game master (GM) role, the role dictates that players (learners) are guided rather than told. This is consistent with CLT philosophy that teachers should be facilitators for learning rather than instructors. A final point to consider relating to the GM role is that it could be used introduce concepts related to CIC. For example an EFL teacher playing the GM who actively assists learners (Walsh, 2011, pp. 168–69): “By shaping learner contributions and by helping learners to really articulate what they mean, teachers are performing a more central role in the interaction, while, at the same time, maintaining a student-centred, decentralised approach to teaching.”

As already mentioned, games such as TRPGs have relevance to language learning because of their focus on authentically communicating meaning and because they offer the opportunity for teachers to support learners in the GM role, by implementing aspects of CIC for example (Walsh, 2011). Another way that TRPGs and games in general might possibly assist language learning is the relationship between games, creativity and language learning. Small scale (35 participants) empirical research shows (Otto, 1998, p. 771): “...creativity is an important difference between individual learners...more creative language learners hold an advantage in a CLT setting.” Other research (Tin, 2013) talks about the importance of making language-learning tasks more creative. The reason being that when learners are given tasks (for example information gap) that rely on the exchange of ‘known meaning’ (Tin, 2013, p. 2) “such tasks may result in a lack of desire to explore, develop, and retrieve less accessible language. Learners may lose a desire to explore language utterances that are in the process of maturing or in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).” Tin (2013) suggests creative writing such as poetry may be one such way to implement more creativity in language-learning tasks. Another valid suggestion might be TRPGs with their collaborative interactive construction of an ‘unknown’ and changing

narrative as a way of fostering more creative language-learning tasks. Not only TRPGs, but also many games depending on their specific gameplay mechanics rely on the exchange of unknown and changing meaning, which is different upon each playing of the game.

The final aspect of this relationship between creativity, language learning and TRPGs to be explored is the correlation between people who regularly play TRPGs and their creative cognitive abilities. Chung (2013) brings these ideas together in a study, which includes empirical research, entitled ‘Table-top roleplaying game and creativity’. This study gathered 170 participants who were regular players of TRPGs, electronic role playing games (ERPG), and a non-player group (ERPGs would include games such as the previously mentioned World of Warcraft). Divergent thinking tests were then administered to all groups and the results analysed. Divergent thinking is an indicator of creative thinking and includes such skills as (Chung, 2013, p. 58): “(a) fluency (e.g. numbers of ideas produced); (b) flexibility (e.g. types of ideas produced); (c) originality (e.g. number of rare ideas produced); and (d) elaboration (e.g. the development of ideas with more details).” Chung (2013, p. 56) summarises the results as follows: “It is found that TRPG players score higher in divergent thinking tests. ERPG players score lowest among the three groups. TRPG could be regarded as a form of improvisation. It could also be a preferable activity for the promotion of creativity.” It should be made clear that this study is not from a TESOL based journal and all testing was done in the participants L1, however it might have some interesting implications for L2 language production. For example, its results reemphasise the importance of training in spontaneous production of language to improve cognitive ability, and as far as the results of this study show, that is best achieved by playing TRPGs compared to ERPGs.

Recent Studies in Game-based Learning

This section like its earlier IC counterpart will bring together several recent studies that focus on game-based learning and gaming in general as they might relate to language learning. The first study (Quijano, 2008) to be examined is entitled “How Tabletop Role Playing Games Affect Student

Academic Performance”. This study is a quasi-experimental research project that took ten Puerto Rican post-secondary ESL students and divided them into experimental and control groups. Both groups were given a pre- and post-intervention diagnostic test (Quijano, 2008, p. 3) that was “used at regional levels in the public high schools of Catano, Puerto Rico”. The experimental group played a TRPG once a week over the period of a term and gave an oral presentation about their experiences at the end of the term. The control group spent the same period of time each week engaging in sustained silent reading (SSR) and at the end of the term they gave an oral presentation about the novel they had been reading. The results showed that the TRPG experimental group performed better in the post-test showing a performance increase of 52.97%, while the control group improved by 29.57% in comparison. It is unsure whether this study can provide wide-reaching or particularly valid conclusions because of the low number of participants, the limited approach in methodology, and the uncertainty about what exactly the ‘diagnostic test’ is testing (no appendices are provided).

One type of game that has not been introduced yet and holds great potential for innovative pedagogic practices is board games. Board games are most commonly used in language classrooms in a simplistic manner for example (Chang & Cogswell, 2008): “elicit target language forms (i.e., yes/no questions for Guess Who, Wh- questions for Clue) and...can be adapted to focus on forms.” However, more recently a new type of board game has been created which might have more in common with TRPGs than Snakes and Ladders. The board games being referred to are classified as collaborative strategic board games (CSBGs), and games such as Pandemic (Leacock, 2007) and Forbidden Island (Leacock, 2010) are the most well-known examples of this genre. To introduce this new genre of games the study entitled “Collaborative strategic board games as a site for distributed computational thinking” (Berland & Lee, 2011) will now be examined.

Pandemic (Leacock, 2007) is a collaborative strategic board game, this means players must play cooperatively to achieve victory conditions and no players are eliminated from the game during play, either all players win together, or they lose together. The goal of this particular game is to cure

various diseases before the infection spreads and kills the world's population. The premise of the study is to show (Berland & Lee, 2011, p. 66): "...how this family of strategic board games can prompt novice game players to engage in relatively complex computational thinking." The study recorded a group of novice players playing Pandemic and then categorised group discourse into computational functions such as conditional logic, algorithm building, debugging, simulation, and distributed computation (Interestingly debugging is very similar to the idea of repair often used in CA and IC research). To illustrate what these terms mean as they relate to group discourse here is the definition and an example of distributed computation during gameplay (Berland & Lee, 2011, p. 70):

"Distributed computation applies to rule based actions. For instance, if 3 people act together through a rule-based plan, this is distributed computation as considerations, contingencies, and strategy formation involve multiple parties with different knowledge resources."

Patrick: "Okay, for my turn first off I'm going to cure Lima...And then I'm going to move LJ...I'll move you here because that way you're only two away."

L. J.: "You can move me to one of your cards, and then I'll teleport there."

Michael: "But you can only trade the card of the one you're standing in."

L. J.: "Oh, that's right"

Michael: "Just because you have one, you can't turn all of them in..."

As can be seen from this short transcript the interaction taking place is complex and the meanings communicated are not simply 'pass the dice' or 'it's your turn', not what might be expected from a board game. It is clear that these new collaborative board games are not only sites of complex computational thinking, but also sites where dynamic communicative social interaction is taking place too. Berland and Lee (2011, p. 79) further suggest educational applications of these types of games: "We suspect that many of these contemporary strategic board games could represent an important, and as-yet, under-considered foundation from which designers can intentionally

develop computational thinking...we are exploring the instructional design issues associated with turning board game based computational thinking into a digital media literacy.” Equally, because of the communicative and interactionally complex nature of the game, it may be hypothesised that there could be applications in contexts other than computational thinking and digital literacy.

Affordances of Games

I believe that of out all the types of tabletop games mentioned so far, collaborative strategic board games hold the greatest potential for developing non-traditional pedagogic approaches. In this section, I will outline their suitability for this.

Anxiety is commonly reported by learners in oral communication classes that have traditional activities, however, when a group of learners are told they will ‘play a game’ or told they will ‘complete some speaking exercises’ it can conceivable change how they orientate themselves to group members and the task (game or speaking activity) itself. Games offer a meaningful reason for speaking without the possible face threatening consequences of mistakes that a task framed as a formal class speaking activity might. This may lower anxiety and offer more opportunities for uptake of input due to the affective filter hypothesis (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Another important consideration for strategic collaborative board games and games in general, is that while they (depending on the game) offer the ability for players to produce a huge variety of types of discourse, they operate within set rules and guidelines. This lack of ambiguity can be particularly useful for learners with poor self-concept and negative learner identity (Kohonen, 1992).

Another expect of the fixed expectations that a game such as Forbidden Island (Leacock, 2010) provides, is the turn of play. The conversational turn can be fraught with difficulty; especially in open-ended discussion tasks such as the ones in the existing traditional oral communication class syllabuses. However the turn of play is much simpler for learners to manage because the face-threatening act of turn nomination is removed. Each player

knows when to take his or her turn, and the individual responsibility is clear. The game makes each learners responsibility clear about what role they should play, and the expected level of contribution. Cooperative games such as Pandemic (Leacock, 2007) Forbidden Island (Leacock, 2010) are inherently egalitarian in this sense because the shared victory or defeat is the result of each individual's contributions. Responsibility and accountability are key concepts of effective collaborative learning. Kohonen (1992, p. 37) individual accountability among the learners, with each participant contributing to the team product and the team being in charge of helping its teammates to learn." From this one can see there is much is common with designing successful collaborative learning tasks and good collaborative games.

Conclusion

This review has brought together research from the areas of interactional competence and game-based learning. IC is now considered key in how meaning is jointly constructed, and some such as Walsh (2011, p. 166) consider that "In language assessment circles...interactional competence will become the 'fifth skill'." The research related to IC can be classified as conforming to one of the following types: explicit teaching of IC through some methodology (Barraja-Rohan, 2011) (for example CA), exploring possible methodologies to teach IC (Lwin, 2012), or analysing how certain components of IC function in a specific context (Pirainen-Marsh, 2011). This literature suggests there are plentiful opportunities to explore other meaningful sites of IC, and other possible methods of raising L2 learners' awareness of IC.

The game-based learning literature collects research illustrating just what a powerful and pervasive medium it is. It is apparent though that within educational research much of the focus is on video games, and other types are largely ignored. As for EFL research, there is the tradition of CALL, but this is not specifically related to gaming activities. It is apparent that EFL instructors make use of games (Chang & Cogswell, 2008), but often

in somewhat simplistic ways that focus on the accurate production of forms rather than for example, using them from a social interactionist perspective (Williams & Burden, 1997) and focusing on how L2 learners construct meaning in an authentic social context.

Finally, one of the reasons that games such as *Pandemic* (Leacock, 2007) and *Forbidden Island* (Leacock, 2010) are suitable for the English language classroom is that they promote behaviours that are consistent with already accepted collaborative learning practice (Kohonen, 1992, p. 34): “In a well-functioning cooperative group there is a sense of joint responsibility where learners care about and get committed to each others’ success as well as their own; a sense of ‘sinking or swimming together’.” The exact same idea is expressed in the following explanation of good cooperative game design (Zagal et al., 2006): “...a collaborative game should introduce a tension between perceived individual utility and team utility.” Collaborative games reinforce shared responsibility of learning goals, and encourage learners not only to consider their own success or individual contributions in isolation, but think how their contributions shape the overall group’s success. This is in its essence the social constructivist theory of learning, how as a social group learning is co-constructed by its members.

The implications of this for my own classroom practice is a renewed effort to introduce collaborative games in meaningful ways to the oral communication classroom, as well as including more explicit teaching of interactional competence strategies, while at the same time fostering ideas of learning communities and collaborative learning amongst my learners.

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