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## USING VIDEO GAME TO ENHANCE ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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### *Abstract*

Nowadays, technology has influenced almost every aspect of people's lives. Education, especially English Language Teaching (ELT), is one of them. Teachers should be creative with emerging technology to capture their students' attention as well as create fun activities in the classroom. One of the biggest challenges in teaching English is finding ways to encourage students to speak on their own without a teacher's prompting. Very often, teachers need to resort to activities in classroom that create artificial situations - and even then, the teacher's influence is felt by the students. The solution to these problems is using a media that is constantly updating and becoming increasingly popular every year but has received very little attention from the English Teaching community - video games. Esposito (2005) stated that a video game is a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a monitor or other display. The chosen games in this paper are (1) *Ultimate Chicken Horse* - a competitive racing game and (2) *Overcooked* - a cooperative game cooking game. The target age is 10-17 years old. These games, I believe, would provide the most benefits for both the students' soft and hard skills. The criteria for a game that has potential educational benefits are such: (1) *Local Multiplayer* - In essence, students need to be able to play the game in the same room for them to communicate effectively. (2) *Co-operative Goal* - I believe this will provide the most encouraging environment for students to practice. (3) *Communicative - focused* - The students understand that their success and overall enjoyment will be enhanced by communicating. I believe multiplayer games - specifically, ones with co-operative goals, can create a much better environment where students are self-motivated to communicate in English.

**Keywords:** *English, Communication, Games*

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### 1. THE "GAMEFICATION" OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

The world of education is constantly evolving to adapt and utilize new technology; the world of ESL is no different. Moving from audio tape to movie and textbook to online learning, teachers are always thinking of new ways to engage their students. The more recent trend is the "gamefication" of learning languages; borrowing elements from video games to provide not only to provide entertainment and motivation but to simplify the learning process in the minds of language learners. Elements such as high scores, collecting points to "purchase" items, and breaking the lessons into "levels" that can be completed.

The most popular example is the language learning application DuoLingo. The application, which is free to download and play, offers a wide variety of languages to learn and can integrate quite well into standard translation-based English classes through their "virtual classrooms" wherein a teacher can prescribe homework to the class for the students to complete at home - or anywhere, if the students download the mobile app.

As for the student's experience, the app motivates students through intrinsic rewards, such as points for students to collect and use toward vanity items (such as purchasing costumes for DuoLingo's owl mascot) or items that allow them to increase their high score even further. Lessons are broken into neat, clean levels that scaffold into more complex sentences. At any moment, a student can gauge their progress and see their "finish line". While teachers understand that language learning is a life-long process, students gain a sense of calm knowing their journey does have an "end" - however, arbitrary.

These two aspects provide a great benefit to the language learner: the points providing motivation while the levels provide a clear sense of progress. However, for all the positive benefits this new style of learning provides, to which DuoLingo helpfully provides a wealth of research backing their claim, a common question among teachers remain - does it actually work? "Work" in this case is very subjective as every teacher is aware that the difference between knowing and applying can be quite different. Many students achieve high scores on English tests only to be left at a loss for words when it comes to real life English conversation. In this respect, I feel the current selection of English learning applications and software fail their students; these apps provide the grammar and vocabulary, but provide no effective way to practice the target language.

Regardless, I believe that video games can still provide an enriching educational experience - it's just that we've been looking at the wrong type of games. Most language-learning applications test only spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. Writing activity is done under strict conditions - this sentence is either grammatically correct or incorrect. There is no room for creativity or experimentation with language. There is no way for students to truly interact and communicate. Simply put, you cannot have a conversation with an app.

However, there exists a rich well of games that provide a much more real and captivate communicative experience than any artificial conversation program. Regular everyday video games, specifically co-operative, team-based games have a greater potential to engage students and provide them with an ideal space to practice their communicative skills in their target language.

It is my belief that co-operative-based multiplayer games can provide an ideal system to encourage communication. A low level student or a student with confidence issues will begin to acquire and use new language at a slow but natural pace with the majority of this acquisition coming from more advanced peers.

## **2. THE LANGUAGE-LEARNING APPS**

Developers of language-learning applications have not been shy to tout the science behind their games. DuoLingo's claim is that, according to their own report, an eight-week program equaled a full-semester of a university language program with the biggest gains being among beginner students<sup>1</sup>. Impressive, to be sure, but could the students actually use the language effectively. I decided to test this by doing my own DuoLingo research on my staff. I "enrolled" my co-workers, levels ranging from absolute beginner to advanced, into an eight-week program consisting of self-study and weekly homework.

After eight weeks, I assessed their progress in using DuoLingo. The advanced students were the first to lose interest, citing the rigid nature of study as the primary reason. In my lower level students, I saw more investment and gains, at least, on paper regarding their vocabulary and grammar. However, they struggled to produce the language on their own during subsequent post-test interviews. While they had plenty of practice writing and reading, they had no opportunity to use the language creatively.

In contrast to these findings, science has begun showing that there is evidence that communicative, co-operative video games can make up for this shortcoming. In addition, online multiplayer games tend to foster communities which then can only be maintained through constant communication<sup>2</sup>.

## **3. THE GAMES**

Only a few games have the potential to be conduits for communication. An obvious example of an incorrect game would be single-player games. Another candidate to be disqualified are Massive Multiplayer, Online Roleplaying Games or MMORPGs. While MMOs such as World of Warcraft allow communication between players both textually and verbally, the discourse is often too unstructured to be accessible by low level students and provides no

incentive for shy students to speak when a perfectly enjoyable experience can be had by remaining silent. Therefore, my choice of game to test had to fit three criterion.

#### **4. CO-OPERATIVE**

While competitive games provide ample opportunities to critique an opposing player's actions, those opportunities often do not warrant a reply and therefore do not encourage any communication. Co-operative games, on the other hand, require a player to listen and respond - either verbally or through in-game action. Ideally, a spoken response would be better but even non-verbal responses can be a potential stepping stone on the way to improving communication skills - which leads me to my next point.

#### **5. INCENTIVE TO COMMUNICATIVE**

Students need to see a clear advantage in speaking English over remaining silent. This is why co-operative games are better than competitive; the need for teamwork encourages communication. A student may still be able to enjoy and contribute to his team without speaking; however, it will be clear to the student that his enjoyment and success will be more if he were to speak to his teammates. This will provide a more natural incentive than a teacher's prodding.

More-so, it gives them a safe space to start experiment on their own terms. While a student may only start with simple one-word comments and replies, he will begin to figure out more complex sentences through trial-and-error. Slowly, as his attempts to convey more complicated concepts, the positive reactions of those sentences - be it more enjoyment or better contribution to his team - he will be encouraged to engage more.

While teacher's provide students with the proper vocabulary, grammar, and structure to communicate accurately, their peers are much better at encouraging real-world communication and motivation. Peers don't error-correct each others grammar and vocabulary, instead allowing a comment to succeed or fail by its own merit. This allows students to have some more peace of mind in regards to making mistakes; as long as his peers understand, the attempt at communication was successful.

#### **6. FOCUSED ON A SPECIFIC LEXICAL AREAS**

Ultimately, the goal of using these video games is for students to develop language skills, which can only be done through practice. If a game is too wide in regards to the amount of language used, the student will not have the repetition needed to learn and expand. It is better to have games that focus on specific areas and goals of communication. Examples of fixed grammar and vocabulary could be giving and receiving instructions or describing physical and spatial features. It is better to let the students explore a small playground of words on their own than to set them off against an open wilderness of vocabulary.

#### **7. CHOOSING THE GAMES**

For my research, I chose two games to test: Ultimate Chicken Horse and Overcooked. The former, a competitive game to use as a control group to test whether co-operative goals are better than individual goals. The latter, a co-operative endeavor that focuses strongly on team-communication. Both of these games allow for four-players to play locally - meaning that they are all in the same room. I feel that local multi-player will provide a much richer learning environment than online multi-player games by virtue of the students having better access to their teammates vocal inflections, context, and even body language - however slight the last one might be.

I used a mixed-level group of students for both experiments. This was to gauge the levels of engagement across all levels as well as measure the levels of interactivity between levels. My hypothesis would be that lower level students will begin non-verbally with their level of communication slowly advancing to simple commands and replies and eventually

complex ideas. I also wanted to have as minimal teacher influence as possible aside from a simple "Speak English" rule which was only re-enforced through gentle reminders.

## **8. RESEARCH METHOD**

For this test I decided to use a random sample of students of various levels, aged 11-16. The purpose is to monitor not only changes in the levels of communication, but also to test whether low level students would acquire language from more advanced peers. Each session last approximately an hour, with the four players at a time playing - rotating students regularly (10 minutes for the first test and 3 minutes for the second test). This was to ensure that all students had roughly equal playtime. My predictions are as follows.

## **9. TEST 1-ULTIMATECHICKEN HORSE**

The first test is a competitive game wherein the students take on the roles of cartoon barn animals who must build a bridge to a finish line and then proceed to race towards it. Each player contributes one item per round - with some items being traps to hinder other players. I chose this game because it gave players plenty of opportunities to comment on each others' placement of objects or traps. As well, players could comment on other players progress towards the goal.

It is my belief that this game will encourage a lot of one-way communication - that is, comments that do not require a reply or a change in game-play. What's more, I predict that lower level students will not get the intrinsic motivation they need to communicate more with their peers.

## **10. TEST-OVERCOOKED**

The second test is a co-operative game called Overcooked where students play chefs in a busy kitchen trying to cook increasingly complex meals under a time limit. One reason, I chose this game was because of the clear roles that need to be filled. For example, in one level, one person needs to chop vegetables; another to work the stove; and a third and fourth player to wash dishes and serve the finished meal. Not only that, but also each level contains a unique obstacle for the players to overcome - such as a "San Francisco"-themed level where the restaurant is continuously being separated by shifting faults. This encourages a constant shift in duties and strategy - which prevents students from falling into a compartmentalized system wherein each student has mastered their individual role and thus has no need to communicate with his peers.

## **11. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

After an extensive play-through of both games with many groups of mixed students, I am fortunate that the results matched my hypothesis. Both games performed as well as I had anticipated in regards to fostering communication. However, there was a clear difference in the amount and quality of communication.

The students enjoyed Ultimate Chicken Horse the most - probably because the lack of teamwork-based goals meant less pressure to perform. As for communication, the more advanced students enjoyed commenting on other player's choice in level design and placement of traps. Very often, students would joke about placing a trap for their opponent only to fall prey to their own devices. However, this type of communication only occurred between advanced-level students. Lower levels were content to play the game silently and showed no inclination to increase their levels of verbal engagement. While joking around with one's peers increases enjoyment of game, students without the necessary language skills to do so can not reach such a level on their own without help from their teacher.

Does that mean that this game - or any game with similar mechanics - are useless? I disagree somewhat. While games such as these lack intrinsic motivation for lower-level students or shy students, they can still provide valuable speaking practice for more confident,

advanced students. A potential wealth of engagement for advanced students may lie within YouTube and the emergence of "Let's Play" videos - where viewers watch humorous personalities play video games while commenting on them. Many of these videos garner views and subscription numbers in the thousands and millions - such fandom has the potential to be a strong motivator for an already advanced student. While I would not recommend a teacher to include games such as Ultimate Chicken Horse in their regular syllabus, their motivational benefits may be much better suited in a supplementary role.

The co-operative game Overcooked fared much better in regards to stimulating actual communication. Initially, the students opted not to communicate with each other, which resulted in low scores and a lot of burnt food. If there was any English being used, it was only to comment on the chaotic situation rather than address their peers. But then, slowly but surely, the advanced students began giving orders and status updates to each other. First, the commands went unanswered, but then people began to reply. Students began vocally volunteering ("I'll do it!") for various tasks. Soon, plans for being made on the spot and changing just as rapidly. The advanced students were actively communicating with each other.

The lower students, on the other hand, were a bit slower to develop but nonetheless showed a substantial interest in communicating. In the beginning, they were content to play a passive role; following orders without acknowledgment. However, as I predicted, they soon began to communicate using one-word answers ("Fire!") learned from their more advanced peers. The emulation of their advanced peers continued to begin to describe more complex ideas ("Put in pot!"). While the slight inaccuracy of grammar may be alarming to teachers, it's worth remembering that our goal was to encourage confidence and communication, not accuracy. Even so, with proper pre-teaching of vocabulary and grammatical structures, co-operative games can be a great way to allow students to practice and experiment with their spoken grammar.

In regards to encouraging active communication, I believe the initial test was a great success. The amount of interactivity during the co-operative game between advanced students was quite substantial compared to the competitive game. As well, low level students were much more encouraged to speak when they were provided with the social or strategic incentives of team-based goals rather than individual goals.

## 12. CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this test, I predicted that co-operative games would be a much better environment for encouraging students to speak English. While both competitive and co-operative games both fostered communication in advanced students, lower-level students responded much better to team-based games - both in an increased willingness to speak and in language acquisition from their peers. Such findings show that co-operative games could be a useful tool for teachers to use in a classroom.

While the gamification of language-learning is a new area of study for educators, there seems to be a lot of potential in expanding beyond the question-answer dynamic of the current language-learning games and applications. Indeed, we need to explore ways in which we can provide virtual environments where language-learners can communicate, and be encouraged to communicate, in ways that provide the strategic or social benefits of real-life communication. While my research suggests that such games already exist, albeit, unintentionally, educators should be at the forefront of developing games and applications with these specific goals in mind so we can better tailor the experience for our students.

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