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Cuaderno de Investigación en la Educación
Centro de Investigaciones Educativas
Facultad de Educación, UPR - Río Piedras
Apartado 23304
San Juan, Puerto Rico 00931-3304

Tel. (787) 764-0000, exts. 4382, 4383, 2642
FAX (787) 764-2929, email: cie@uprrp.edu
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Video games

AND THE ESL ACQUISITION PROCESS

Johansen Quijano Cruz
Graduate Student
University of Puerto Rico
Faculty of Education
TESOL Program

SUMARIO

Este artículo presenta el potencial que tienen algunos videojuegos para ser utilizados como herramientas de apoyo en la enseñanza de inglés. Menciona cómo los juegos de interpretación de roles (“role playing”) exponen al estudiante al lenguaje y los hace escucharlo, leerlo y hablarlo. También discute algunos postulados de varias teorías de la enseñanza que dan paso al uso de esta clase de videojuegos en el salón de clases. Se narran algunos datos relativos a un experimento efectuado en la Escuela Superior de la Universidad de Puerto Rico (UHS), en el cual se utilizó un videojuego para practicar varios elementos literarios. El artículo finaliza con dos testimonios de profesionales que, siendo estudiantes, trabajaron como tutores en la Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Bayamón; ambos aprendieron inglés a través de estos videojuegos.

Palabras clave: videojuegos, enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua, adquisición del lenguaje, exposición al lenguaje, comprensión auditiva, fluidez verbal, dominio de la lengua

ABSTRACT

This article presents the potential of role-playing video games as instructional tools in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. It discusses how this type of video game exposes students to native speech, requiring them to listen, as well as read and even interact verbally with the characters. It also mentions some well-known and widely recognized teaching approaches which postulate and indirectly support the use of video games in the ESL classroom. It adds some examples of an experiment carried out in the University High School

(UHS) regarding video games and the application of several elements of literature. It then concludes with statements from two professionals who, as students, worked as tutors for the University of Puerto Rico, Bayamon Campus, that claim to have learned English through video games.

Keywords: video games, ESL classroom, language acquisition, language exposure, listening comprehension, speaking fluency, reading proficiency

When people hear the term “video games” they think of violent games where one character shoots fireballs at another, or where a space soldier hunts down other space soldiers to kill them. Throughout their short 25 year history, games have been targeted by angry parents and politicians, and have been labeled as “corruptors of youth”, “breeders of mindless zombies”, and “Satan’s instrument in the world”. However, amongst all these accusations, people have not noticed that certain video games, specifically Role-Playing games, have incredible potential as a language development and enhancement tool, and may even have uses in the language classroom.

In Role-Playing video games the player takes control of a character, or a group of characters, and embarks in adventures that range from escaping a space hotel invaded by aliens to saving the world. Relaxing background music sets the stage for such adventures. This music, according to what the suggestopedia approach states, opens the mind of a person, in this case the gamer, and makes it more receptive. This is where the structure of the game comes in. Role-Playing games have extensive plots, interesting characters, colorful settings, and themes relevant to everyone. The interaction between characters and player exposes the player to the language.

One example is the game Life Line, for PS2. In this game, the player takes the role of “The Operator” who is trapped in a control room. By using a microphone, the player interacts with the character, gives her directions as to where to go, what

to look for, and who to talk to, in order to reach the lifeboats to escape a drifting space-station. In this game the player practices listening comprehension, as he or she has to listen to the advice that the character gives, as well as practice speaking skills. The game recognizes all native dialects of English, as well as Arabic, Japanese, and Hispanic accents. This game could be used in language labs, so that students practice the skills mentioned, which are the skills necessary for communication.

The game *Growlanser* has an in-depth story in which characters are constantly interacting, sometimes by text messages in the screen and others by voice-overs. This interaction does not happen only once or twice during these games. The game *Growlanser* in specific has around 60 hours of dialogue and 512 kb worth of text. This is the equivalent to a 1000 page novel. All of this interaction between characters expose the gamer to the language, and through this exposure, they acquire the language. When playing this game the student is drawn into a mystic world, similar to the world of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, where animals speak, some humans have wings, and all the races live in peace, until an evil being threatens to escape imprisonment. The players have to travel the world looking for allies, helping the innocent, and using their problem-solving skills to answer riddles and solve puzzles. This game not only enhances the player's ESL knowledge, but also their problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

Role-Playing games in general, such as *Lunar*, *Final Fantasy X* and *Life Line* all have a plot, characters, themes, and setting. These are the elements of literature usually discussed in the classroom. A way in which video games could be incorporated indirectly in the classroom is through means of a final project in which the students would have to make an oral book report. The teacher could give them the choice of doing the report on an actual young adult novel or a video game from a list. Letting students use book reports about video games can be done in any grade in which the elements of literature are being studied, but the effect of the language acquisition is maximized in seventh and eight grade, as these students tend to want to uncover every

secret of the game, which means that they will spend more time exposed to the game, and therefore, the language. This activity was done in UHS during the first semester of the 2005-2006 academic year. The seventh English lab class was divided in five groups. The students were then asked to do oral reports on either a book or a video game. One group of students, who's names cannot be disclosed, chose to do their oral report on the game Final Fantasy X. Although at the beginning of the semester their spoken English was almost unintelligible, by the end of the semester they were speaking English with some degree of fluency.

When students are given the choice of what to read, they usually choose something that fits their interest. If they are allowed to choose a video game that calls their attention, they will undergo a meaningful learning experience while playing. They are playing a game they enjoy, and are practicing reading, speaking, and listening skills. The development of these skills will be meaningful to the student, as it is related to something that interests them.

Several people claim to have learned English through video games. . Javier Guzman, a former employee in UPR-Bayamon's English Lab and current sub-director of Leonardo's computing department, said that he learned English thanks to Final Fantasy 7. Whenever he would not understand a word he would look it up in the dictionary, "and I associated definitions within the context of the dialog that the word took place. And they helped my spelling as well." René Esteves, a 21 year old independent Graphic artist born and raised in Puerto Rico and former UPR-Bayamón Writing Lab employee also owes video games his near native speaker English fluency. "Playing RPGs specifically has heightened my vocabulary to exorbitant heights. School English education wasn't good, so I had to learn on my own." In both cases there was an event which could be considered the key event in video game use for ESL. Both René Esteves and Javier Guzman would sometimes not be able to advance in certain parts of the game, so they would look up the words in a dictionary. Since the experience was a meaningful and enjoyable

one, they would remember both the word and the context in which it should be used.

When games are used properly in the classroom, they will give them a chance to practice reading, as well as speaking and listening comprehension. Practicing is one of the base concepts of the behavioristic theory, suggested by Thorndike, as well as one of the principle concepts of several educative approaches. Two of these approaches, which are commonly used in Puerto Rico, are the Direct approach, which states that L2 is learned through practice, and the Audio Lingual method, which uses practice and repetition as its sole base of teaching and learning.

In the end, while everyone agrees that games such as the Halo, Grand Theft Auto, and Dragon Ball series are unnecessarily violent, Role-Playing games such as Lunar, Final Fantasy, and Arc the Lad IV serve as tools for language acquisition. This does not mean that games should replace text books or stories, but that they should be considered as extra classroom resources. Whether they are used in the classroom or not, video games have become a part of society, as well as one of our youth's favorite pastimes. If this hobby can help our youth in the language acquisition process, then we as teachers should use them as an extra teaching tool.

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