

Tabletop Games and Language Tasks in the EFL Classroom¹

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Abstract

Tabletop (board or card) games can be an effective tool in the language classroom, if considered and used properly. They offer many benefits, communicative and otherwise, and can be adapted for a wide variety of learners and contexts. This paper will address the merits of language practice with games, as well as a brief history of the changes from classic to modern games. The language functions of tabletop games will be explored, followed by an analysis of several specifically communicative games. Finally, opportunities for students to engage with language both pre- and post-game will be suggested, and important points about teacher roles and challenges in using games will be covered.

テーブルトップゲーム（ボードゲームまたはカードゲーム）は、適切に検討および利用されれば、語学のクラスで効果的なツールになる可能性がある。それらは、コミュニケーションやその他の多くの利点を提供し、さまざまな学習者や状況に適応させることができる。本論文では、ゲームを使用した言語練習のメリットと、クラシックゲームからモダンゲームへの移行の簡単な歴史について論じる。テーブルトップゲームの言語機能を探求し、続いていくつかの具体的なコミュニケーションを必要とするゲームを分析する。最後に、ゲーム前とゲーム後の両方で生徒が言語に取り組む機会を提案し、ゲームを使用する際の教師の役割と課題に関する重要なポイントについても網羅する。

Keywords: Board games, language functions, communicative tasks

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Games used for language learning have been a fixture in classrooms for many years. In preschool lessons through university-level courses and programs for English for specific purposes, games can be found in nearly all types of syllabi. The use of games is well established, ranging from short warm-up activities to the main focus for task-based lessons, and their benefits for learners have been documented in much academic research (Fotini & Makrina, 2017; Smith, 2006).

How can a game, especially for the purposes of language practice, be characterized? Games are instances of play that are governed by clear rules and objectives. They are closed activities with an explicit beginning and end, and through their ludic elements generate enthusiasm and motivation in participants (Margineanu, 2003). Furthermore, language play has been shown to promote language learning (Bell, 2009) and proficiency. Formats vary greatly, from games that are entirely spoken or use only a piece of paper to digital games that require a video game console, computer, or tablet. In this paper I will focus on tabletop games, which include games that are played on boards and/or use a set of cards, as these combine the elements of authenticity, tactility, and social interaction which make them so effective as tools for language learning.

History of modern tabletop games

Many people today are familiar with board and card games. Classic games such as Monopoly and Candy Land have long been a part of rainy days and holidays spent with friends and family. Common to these games are simple, accessible rules, along with highly luck-based play structures (all movement dictated by the rolling of dice), leading to minimal player agency. Additionally, games can last for an indeterminate amount of time, and the winner is often made clear long before the end, resulting in lowered motivation and enjoyment for the remaining players.

The mid 1990s saw what is referred to by many as a “renaissance” in tabletop games with the introduction of games like Settlers of Catan (Kay, 2018). Catan is a popular example of the growth of “Eurogames”, so called because of their birthplace in Europe, especially France and Germany. This new movement brought a number of changes and improvements to the traditional game structure: pure luck replaced by strategy and player behavior, specific maximum play time based on set scores or finite resources, and final scores only calculated at the game’s end, ensuring continued player enthusiasm. Today, there are over 100,000 different tabletop games, with genres ranging from abstract and social deduction to dungeon-crawler and wargaming. For the purpose of this paper, however, I will focus on a few types that have strong communicative potential for the classroom.

Types of tabletop games

Most tabletop games are competitive in nature. Many of the oldest games in human history, including backgammon, chess, and go, set players against one another, with a clear win condition and a defined winner. In more recent times, cooperative games such as Pandemic and Forbidden Island have been introduced, requiring players to work together toward a common objective or goal. In most cases, all players must fulfill the win condition for the game to end favorably, encouraging teamwork and collaboration. The systems of the game itself work against the players, who will either win or lose together.

While every tabletop game can be said to be either competitive or cooperative in its design, there is a further division that can be explored: games that are communicative. While not a commonly discussed classification, this type should be of great interest to teachers who would like to introduce games into their classrooms. Simply put, communicative games are those in which players must communicate (usually but not exclusively verbally) with each other to play. Here, communication is a primary and essential aspect of gameplay, and without it the game cannot function. Though simple and popular games like Uno and snakes and ladders are commonly adapted and used in language lessons, at their core they are not communicative, as play can begin, progress, and end without meaningful communication taking place. Truly communicative games will compel players to interact with one another by exploring and practicing a number of functions of language, which shall next be discussed.

Benefits of tabletop games

Most tabletop games are authentic materials. That is to say, they have been designed with L1 users in mind, and are not specifically meant to be used for the purpose of learning a language. They are authentic in that they involve language that is not overly simplified or contrived. Though many games feature scenarios and settings that are fantastical in nature, the tasks and objectives of these games almost always require communication between players, using language functions that have real outcomes (Hadfield, 1999).

Along with authentic materials such as songs, movies, and magazine articles, games can be powerful motivators for learners who want to interact with language beyond the textbook (Treher, 2011). Indeed, for L2 learners, being able to enter into a space normally reserved for L1 users is both challenging and stimulating (Bell, 2009). Tabletop games can also be motivating by their visually stimulating and tactile nature. Many games are colorful, aesthetically attractive, and include interactive pieces such as player markers, coins, tokens, and illustrated cards.

Games are also intrinsically social and shared experiences, and require sustained face-to-face interaction, as opposed to digital games that are largely played alone through the use of a screen (Wrobetz, 2021). This aspect of tabletop games allows them to become effective tools for developing a number of social skills that go beyond pure language, particularly in the case of young children. These skills include listening to others, collaborating and working in a team, taking turns, assertiveness, and winning and losing graciously, among others (Couzin, 2002). For students of any age, playing these kinds of games can also be valuable for improving their interactional competence (Bowyer, 2021).

Going further beyond language for its own sake, games can fit well into a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach, as there are many examples of diverse cultural, historical, geographical, and scientific subjects featured in modern games (deHaan, 2019). Finally, tabletop games also have a place in task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches, as the very nature of games is for participants to follow specific rules and steps in order to complete objectives. These objectives will often require the navigation of information and reasoning gaps, and even opinion gaps in some cases.

Language functions

Communicative games not only provide players with many chances to speak, but through their fundamental rule systems they necessitate turn-taking, thus giving each participant their turn in which to speak (Smith, 2006). This naturally leads to similar language forms being repeated, which itself creates a secure and relaxed atmosphere for the practice of speaking (Cook, 2000).

Halliday (1978) proposes seven functions of language for young learners as they develop verbal communication. These are heuristic, for seeking information and asking questions, imaginative, for telling stories and using creative language, personal, for expressing opinions or emotions, instrumental, for communicating needs, interactional, for forming relationships, regulatory, for giving commands and influencing the behavior of others, and representational, for giving facts and information. Though not all L2 students are young learners, these seven functions are useful for framing the kinds of communicative skills that any language learner should be actively working towards, and which tabletop games can create opportunities to practice.

A further three functions shall be added here, representing a few of the additional tasks that learners might engage in during gameplay, and which certainly have their place in authentic language usage. These are inference, for making a conclusion based on evidence, negotiation, for discussing with others to reach an agreement, and deception, for misleading and hiding the truth. A number of specific games will now be examined in detail, to illustrate the rich variety of communicative scenarios that this medium can offer teachers and students.

Game examples

Insider

Insider (“Insider - Oink Games,” 2021) is a compact card-based game in which players take on one of three roles (see Appendix A). One player is the master, and knows a secret word. The other players are commoners, and must guess the word by asking the master questions, which can only be responded to with answers of yes or no. However, one of the commoners is secretly playing the third role of insider, and knows the word. The insider will try to help their fellow players by asking questions that might lead them to the correct answer, but must take care not to make their role as insider evident. Thus, the insider should choose questions that are neither too direct nor too vague. Once the word has been guessed (within a set period of time), then a discussion and vote takes place on who the insider might be. Points are awarded to the insider for the secret word being successfully guessed but their identity remaining hidden.

This game falls within the bluffing and deduction genre, and involves multiple language functions for the two stages of play. Initially, players will ask questions (heuristic) and draw their own conclusions (inference) to work out the secret word. The next stage raises the stakes, as players will argue and debate (negotiation) on the identity of the insider, while the true insider must direct suspicion away from themselves (deception). Insider is highly adaptable for the classroom, as teachers can create secret word sets based on concepts or vocabulary that they would like students to practice.

Dixit

Dixit (“Dixit - Libellud,” 2021) is a game mainly consisting of a set of fully illustrated cards (see Appendix B). The images on the cards are often abstract, with no text. Players take turns to choose a card from their hand and give a hint about it without showing the other players. The rest of the players must then choose a card from their hands that they feel might also match the hint. The cards are then shuffled and displayed, and all players except for the hint-giver vote on which is the original card. Points are won for hints that are neither too easy nor too difficult (if all or no players guess the correct card, zero points are won).

There are many chances for the use of different language functions, particularly imaginative, but also personal and inference, as players may try to give hints that involve shared knowledge or experiences between only a portion of the group. Following up each round, teachers may choose to engage the students in a discussion of why a specific hint was given, inviting the sharing of memories and anecdotes.

Forbidden Island

Forbidden Island (“Forbidden Island - Gamewright,” 2021) is a cooperative game in which players are explorers on an exotic and dangerous island (see Appendix C). Each player takes on the role of a pilot, diver, or engineer, among others, and uses their specialized skills to navigate the island, which is steadily sinking beneath the water. The explorers must plan their actions together and collaborate to locate four artifacts, collect them, and reach the escape point in time.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, in cooperative games like Forbidden Island, all players must win together, or they will lose together, so discussion and teamwork is crucial. Therefore, all the communicative functions of working in a group, such as instrumental, interactional, regulatory, and negotiation language must be utilized. Forbidden Island can be a stressful game as the players are often at a disadvantage against the rising waters, but teachers can create post-game opportunities for evaluation and strategizing for the next play session of the game.

Cat & Chocolate

Cat & Chocolate (“Cat & Chocolate - cosaic,” 2013) is a simple game that relies on players’ creativity and storytelling abilities. One set of cards provides scenarios with a specific challenge or danger, while a second set shows seemingly random objects and tools (see Appendix D). A player draws a scenario card, such as being locked in a room with ghosts in a haunted house, and then must tell a story about how they escape using the objects on the cards in their hand. After listening to each story, the rest of the players vote on whether they accept it or not, with the storyteller receiving a point for a majority vote. In a unique twist, player teams are not known or revealed until the conclusion of the game, so players are compelled to vote honestly based on the quality of the story, rather than team loyalty. Imaginative language is the primary function in this game, followed by possibilities for classroom discussion about each story, with ideas and suggestions from the other students.

Lasers & Feelings

Lasers & Feelings (“Lasers & Feelings - One.Seven Design,” 2021) is a roleplaying game, requiring only paper, something to write with, and a few six-sided dice. Many

people have heard of games in this genre such as Dungeons and Dragons, but these can be daunting for new players and those unfamiliar with the concept. While most roleplaying games have complex rule systems and are designed to be played in successive campaigns over months and years, Lasers & Feelings is a “one-shot” game, with rules written on a single page and games lasting a few hours at most.

One player acts as the game-master, or narrator, and the other players each create a simple character that interacts within the narrator’s setting. The outcomes of most actions are decided by a roll of the dice and the nature of that action, being technical and logical (the lasers side) or physical and emotional (the feelings side). While the game rules incorporate a science fiction backdrop, they are vague enough to accommodate any setting, and teachers may want to suggest a theme that will be engaging to their students. Like all roleplaying games, Lasers and Feelings requires highly imaginative and interactional language from participants, but also offers a valuable chance to create and explore identities within the safe and controlled space of the game.

All of the games described here can be effective tools for generating authentic and dynamic language through a variety of functions. With some careful consideration, teachers can modify and adapt the games for their classrooms, and can search out alternatives for those that may be difficult to acquire. However, the possibilities for language usage do not begin and end with playing the game. There are a number of tasks that learners might be directed in for both pre-game and post-game practice, which shall now be discussed.

Pre-game language opportunities

Just as an L1 user would do when presented with a new game, the set-up and rules of the game must first be learned by the teacher and students. Instruction booklets are authentic materials, and can be a good source of regulatory and representational language (deHaan, 2019). Additionally, like any hobby, tabletop games have their own unique jargon, which teachers may choose to address in their lessons (Bowyer, 2021). To support their comprehension of the rules and flow of gameplay, students might watch online videos that have been created for the purposes of explanation and modeling. These kinds of videos are also excellent examples of authentic materials, and can be used in conjunction with instruction booklets for practicing both reading and listening skills. Prior to playing a game, finally, predictions can be made and noted down, to be revisited post-game.

Post-game language opportunities

After a given play session, students can engage their experience with the game in a variety of communicative ways. A discussion of the game might be conducted, looking back on predictions that were made, documenting aspects that the players particularly liked or disliked, and assessing ways in which they could have changed their strategies in future sessions. Regarding these future sessions, students can create and propose “house rules”, or alternative rules to make the game more enjoyable and either less difficult or more challenging. Many modern tabletop games have systems that are dynamic enough to encourage multiple playthroughs, so students can potentially receive a good deal of enjoyment and language practice from a single game.

Teachers may be interested in taking recordings of the play session and then analyzing language usage with their students, or having students create their own review and how-to-play videos, which can then be shared with later classes (deHaan, 2019). There are many online communities for tabletop enthusiasts, such as BoardGameGeek (BoardGameGeek, n.d.), which can be a further source of authentic language and offer possibilities for interaction with native speakers through discussions and reviews. Such communities are also an excellent resource for students to research and decide what games they might like to play in the future. Finally, sufficiently motivated students might try to design and produce their own original games, which can then be tested and commented on by their peers.

Roles and challenges for teachers

Students, of course, will engage with games as players, but what of the duties of the teacher? Games create a unique chance for teachers to step back from their part as the central focus and take on new roles, such as judge or moderator for competitive games. They can be a participant in the game, or a resource for students who might need support. Teachers might become models for how to play a game, or managers for a classroom that is playing multiple games at once. Finally, the role of assessor may be required, so that the teacher can offer useful feedback and error correction to their students. It is important to consider the timing of feedback, whether it is given during play or after the game, and if it is directed or in a general, summarized form.

Every teaching context is different, so teachers must evaluate numerous factors before introducing games into their classroom. Lesson time, class size, and access to materials are of primary concern, as well as the player limitations and difficulty levels of any given game (Wrobetz, 2021). Games may be useful and adaptable tools, but teachers have to first consider their students' needs and goals, and then determine if and how games might fit those goals (deHaan, 2019).

Conclusion

In this paper I have briefly described the history of modern tabletop games and a few of the common types of these games. This was followed by an explanation of the benefits for language learners as well as the functions of language that can be applied to games. Five examples of games were discussed, along with specific in-class techniques for engaging students further. Finally, a number of pre-game and post-game language opportunities were proposed, and consideration was given to teacher roles and the challenges of using games.

Tabletop games can be an active and motivating resource for the EFL classroom. They can offer interesting scenarios for discussion and debate, and give students opportunities to practice language functions and explore roles that would be difficult (and potentially risky) in real-world situations. Games are authentic materials that are becoming increasingly mainstream in popular culture, and language learners can benefit greatly from engaging with them and familiarizing themselves with a variety of contexts and systems. Additionally, they are compelling motivators, visually and tactilely stimulating, and they provide opportunities for the development of social skills and interaction. However, teachers must carefully consider the abilities and needs of their students before bringing games into their lessons, and be aware of the limitations of games not inherently designed for large groups.

Bio Data

Martin Sedaghat is an English instructor at the Niigata University of Health and Welfare International Preschool. His research interests include game design and implementation in language learning, picture books for SLA, and language development in young learners.

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Appendix A Insider cards



Appendix B
Dixit cards



Appendix C Forbidden Island cards and pieces



Appendix D
Cat & Chocolate cards

