

Game Design Education as Practical English Instruction

Kyle Thompson, M.A.

Introduction

Game design as a practical activity affords a high degree of collaboration, communication, reflexivity, evaluation, critical thinking, and imagination to participants (Daul). In this sense, it offers a broad and deep level of engagement with language, and therefore represents a promising framework for developing a sophisticated and flexible capacity for language use. Furthermore, an iterative design approach involves the use of all four skills focused on in language learning (Verspoor Marjolijn and Phuong Nguyen Hong Thi), and allows designers to make use of their own writing beyond the limited context of submission for course completion requirements, deepening the significance of language use.

Nevertheless, as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educational format, game design presents numerous challenges. Due to its reliance on collaboration, conceptual communication, and evaluation in the target language, it is highly challenging and susceptible to disengagement when the communication process breaks down. Furthermore, it is not a given that learners will have any deep familiarity with or interest in the concepts of game design and play, which is a key determinant of successful work even in a native language context (Brathwaite and Schreiber).

The numerous pitfalls of EFL teaching using this format were apparent to me while teaching a game design survey course at Himeji Dokkyo University in the Spring 2018 semester, and I summarize the details of my experience below.

Course details

The course was listed as General English I (Topic Studies) 総合英語（トピックスタディ） on the school calendar, and was offered as an elective during the spring semester of 2018 to second year students and above. Classes were held for 90 minutes on a weekly basis, and there were seventeen students enrolled in the course. The syllabus offered the following course description:

This course will introduce students to narrative game design by exploring how simple games can be used to develop stories through play. Students will learn the basic concepts and vocabulary of game design in English, and go on to design simple games that explore these concepts with specific player experience goals in mind. Classroom time will be split between short lectures, discussion, and group work to design around specific design challenges. This course will not focus on designing video games, and instead will mostly use non-digital games (card games, board games, tabletop role-playing games, etc.) to explore the concepts of narrative game design. By the end of the course, students should be able to produce a game in English that is focused on exploring a specific theme in a way that will provoke reflection and thought from the players.

As noted above, the course did not involve the creation of digital (video) games, and instead focused on analog game design (board games, card games, etc.). Despite the general familiarity of students with digital games, analog game design was selected as a format because of the way it allows for rapid prototyping and iteration, even with a very low designer skill level. This is quite different from digital game design, which requires an extensive period of familiarization with development tools before the design process can even begin. This ease of engagement allows analog games to bring the conceptual and linguistic levels of the design process to the fore (Brathwaite and Schreiber), aspects of game design that were deemed appropriate for a language learning class.

The emphasis of evaluation in the course was put on the development of student design portfolios, developed as a part of completing design challenges sourced for the most part from *Challenges for Game Designers: Non-digital exercises for video game designers* by Brathwaite and Schreiber, simplified for an EFL classroom and supplemented by some further design exercises.

During the semester, students were introduced to fundamental design concepts such as mechanics and dynamics, player experience goals, iterative design, luck versus skill in design, the race-to-the-end dynamic, and role-playing in games. Instruction was supplemented by playing games such as *War*, *Tak*, *World of Dungeons*, *Lasers & Feelings*, *Blackjack*, and *Fluxx*. Students also playtested each other's games, developed as a result of the design challenge assignments.

Lecturing, class materials, and assignments were entirely in English, adjusted to the level of the class.

Learning Objectives

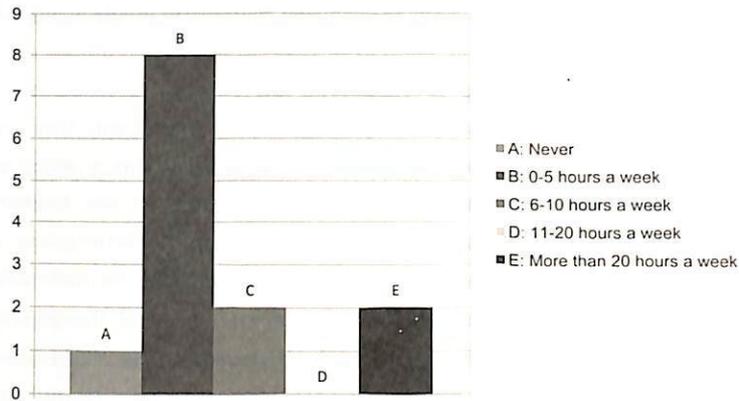
The course naturally aimed to teach the game design concepts that were its explicit subject matter, but had further and more subtle learning objectives as well. In the first place it aimed to offer students a reason to use English at a practical and dynamic level, reinforced by continuous context-shifting (play, writing, discussion, evaluation, revision, explanation etc.) and the self-evaluation required for successful iterative design (Verspoor Marjolijn and Phuong Nguyen Hong Thi 323). This was meant to give students an opportunity to do something with the language beyond performing according to the clearly defined requirements of a test or writing assignment. Furthermore it was hoped that students would feel less alienated towards their class work and instead attempt to improve it out of a sense of pride in accomplishment. Finally, because a familiarity with a wide variety of games is a prerequisite for good game design (Brathwaite and Schreiber), the course aimed to encourage an interest in playing more games and new types of games.

Survey Results

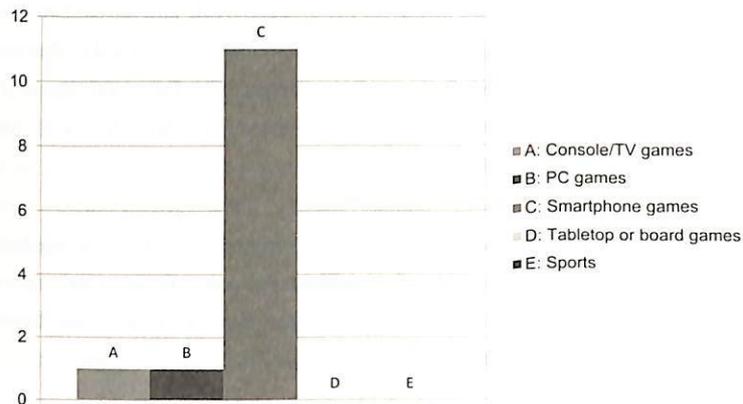
At the end of the course, a short survey was distributed to students to evaluate their experience with the class. Thirteen out of the total seventeen students enrolled in the class (77%) filled out the survey. Below are listed the survey questions and their results.

Question 1: How often do you play games? (video games, board games, smartphone games, sports, etc.)

The majority of students (70%) played games less than 5 hours a week, implying that gaming was not a major hobby for them. This was confirmed in conversation, where students stated that they rarely played games, had never seriously played them, or had only played them as children. Most students did not report having a deep background of experience to bring to their design efforts.



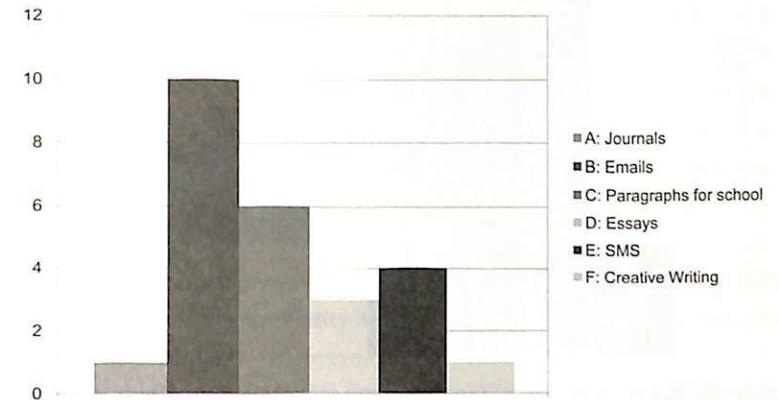
Question 2: What type of games do you play most often?



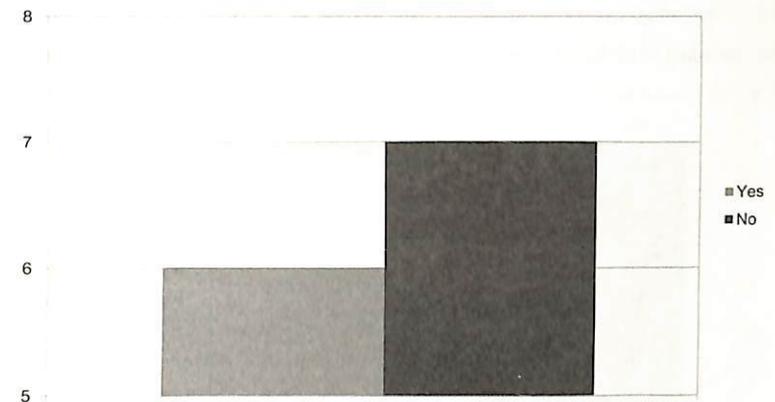
Almost everyone in the class played smartphone games if they played games at all. Smartphone games are by far the most popular gaming format in Japan, but while they can be quite complex, they do not offer a great deal of variety. Furthermore, no one reported playing tabletop or board games, the main type of game the course focused on.

Question 3: What kinds of writing have you done before in English? (Circle all that apply)

Writing experience among students was quite varied, but experience with creative writing was almost non-existent. For many students this course therefore represented their first creative writing experience in English.



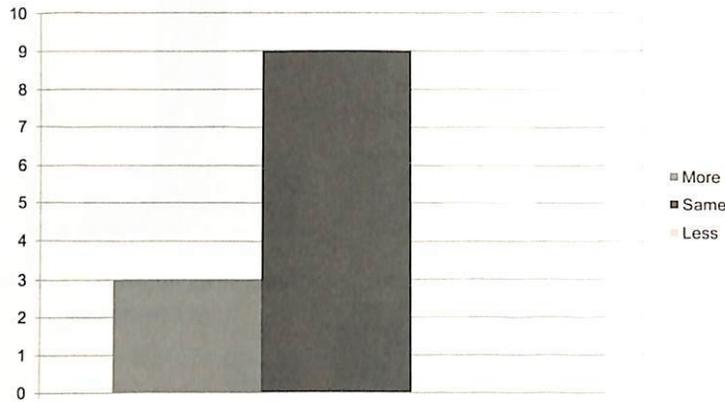
Question 4: Since beginning the class have you started playing any new types of games?



Results here were mixed, but there was some reported success in encouraging students to play a greater variety of games. However, as noted above, the variety of games students were playing was quite limited to begin with.

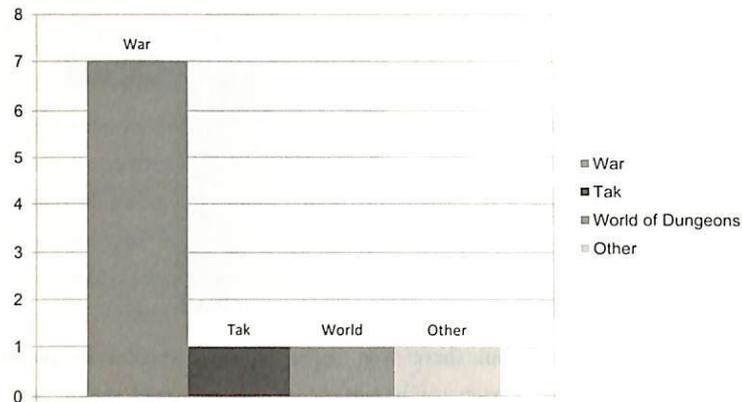
Question 5: Since beginning the class do you play more games, the same amount, or less?

The course did not have a major positive effect on game play patterns, but it was not negative either.

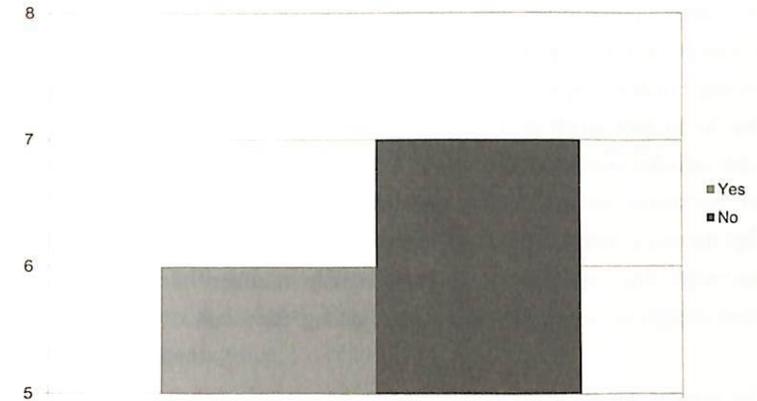


Question 6: What was your favorite game we played during the course? Why? (Choose from: War, Tak, World of Dungeons, or your own game)

Most students preferred the traditional card game War, and reported that they enjoyed it because of its simplicity. The game is a pure game of chance that requires no skill and has a very simple rule set.



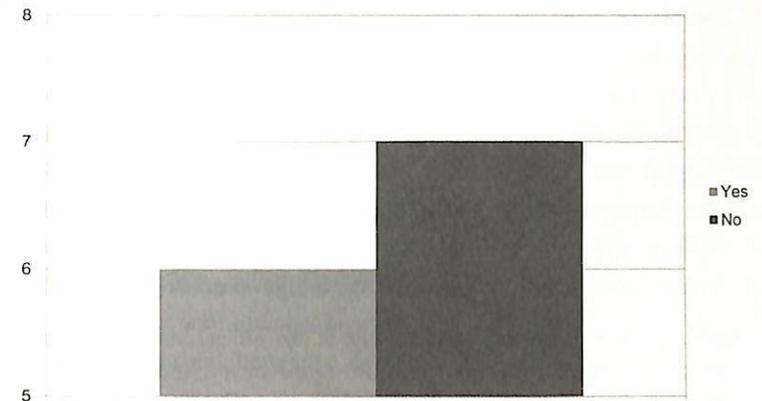
Question 7: Would you try designing a game on your own?



Nearly half (46%) of students said they would try designing a game on their own again. Given the lack of familiarity with games that most students had, this was quite a surprising result.

Question 8: Since beginning the course do you feel more confident in using English?

This result was less encouraging, because while students did not come into the course with much experience with games and game design, they did all have a background studying English. A bare majority of students did not feel more confident using the language, suggesting that they did not gain a sense of mastery through in-class listening and coursework.



Analysis

Two factors point to the disappointing results of the course. First is the result of Question 8, which suggests that it was not very effective in achieving its goals of fostering student capacities and confidence. The second is a considerable reduction in student numbers in the final semester, suggesting that many students were not satisfied with the course.¹ Additionally, only a handful of students enjoyed the more sophisticated games played in the course, with a majority enjoying the very simple game of chance, *War*. The only highly encouraging response was with Question 7, where a sizable number of students said they would try designing their own games after taking the course.

The reasons for these outcomes cannot be directly intuited from the survey results, but some hypotheses can be ventured. As seen in Questions 1 and 2, students did not sign up for the class out of a deep interest in games, but rather happened to take the course for reasons of scheduling convenience. When asked in person at the beginning of the course, none of the students had understood that it was a game design class from the syllabus listing. Other students of the school who were games enthusiasts did not know the course existed when told about it outside class. While this did not preclude the possibility that some students could develop a deeper interest in games (as seen in Questions 5 and 7), it also did not help heighten the enthusiasm for learning in the class from the outset.

In addition to their lack of familiarity and enthusiasm for games, students also generally had a varied but low English communication level, struggling to hold even basic conversations in English. There were no restrictions on English ability for entering the class, and this did not foster a good environment for practical English use. Students often reverted to using Japanese for conversation and collaboration purposes, negating many of the learning objectives of the course. Without sufficient understanding of the language the evaluation and critical thinking components of the iterative design process were ineffective at

¹ This hypothesis is problematized by the results of the official course evaluation, which were very positive. 76.5% of students responded to the survey, and on a five point scale on average rated the course a 4.38 in terms of increasing their desire to learn, and a 4.46 in terms of general satisfaction. It is not clear why student retention was low while reported satisfaction was high.

promoting both design improvement and language learning. In particular, the analysis and creation of role-playing games was well beyond many of their language abilities.

The importance of these problems was demonstrated in the second semester, when students with a somewhat higher English communication ability and degree of interest in games joined the class and helped to create a more engaged classroom atmosphere. Initial assessment of this second semester suggests that the learning format should not be rejected out of hand, but introduced to students with an intermediate and higher English ability to examine its effectiveness in a more receptive student group.

Conclusions

The spring semester game design course was introduced with the hope of encouraging collaboration, English language communication, reflexivity, evaluation, critical thinking, and imagination in students, as well as a new interest in games and design, but in some ways was unsuccessful. This is attributable to an unclear communication of course content and objectives to students, leading to a student group who lacked the fundamentals necessary to deeply engage with the course material, both in terms of language use and game design. Further investigation into the effectiveness of this teaching format should be conducted at intermediate and higher levels of English communication, as well as with students who have a greater familiarity with games. Preliminary assessment of a second group with a higher language level suggests that this approach may be productive.

Works Cited

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Abstract

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education aims to introduce learners to the practical use of the language, but tends to be either overly formalistic and lack opportunities for iteration, analysis, and deep engagement with subject matter. One possible avenue to address these deficiencies is to integrate EFL with game design education, a practical activity that affords a high degree of collaboration, communication, reflexivity, evaluation, critical thinking, and imagination to participants. This approach was attempted in a one semester class at Himeji Dokkyo University, and yielded mixed results. The course was fairly successful at encouraging interest in game design, but was less successful at achieving its EFL teaching objectives. This paper analyzes survey results collected at the end of the course and discusses possible conditions for the success of an integrated EFL and game design course.

Keywords : Game design, EFL, English language education, Iteration, Japan, Critical thinking