Building character: An application of Gee's theory of situated learning to a role-playing game in an English language classroom

Janine Berger[*]

Abstract: This project is an attempt to design a method of teaching English as a foreign language to Ecuadorian university students by applying Gee's theory of "situated learning". The researcher posed the following problem:

How can global empathy be incorporated into the EFL classroom so as to increase students' intrinsic motivation to learn the language and help them to learn it better?

and suggested the following answer:

Through a role-playing game in which students create avatars with specific, realistic characteristics including nationality, religion, socio-economic status and gender, and place them within the context of an ethical dilemma.

The game was implemeted with two groups of students, one at the A1 level (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and the other at the B2 level. Preliminary results show increased global empathy and are also promising in terms of student motivation and language acquisition.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, Role-playing games, game design, global empathy, intrinsic motivation

Resumen: Este proyecto es un intento de diseñar un método de enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera a estudiantes universitarios ecuatorianos mediante la teoría de Gee, "situated learning" ('aprendizaje situado'). La investigadora planteó el siguiente problema: ¿Cómo se puede incorporar la empatía global en el aula de EFL (inglés como lengua extranjera, por sus siglas en inglés), a fin de aumentar la motivación intrínseca de los estudiantes para aprender el idioma y ayudarles a aprenderla mejor? Y, después de plantearse dicha pregunta, sugirió la siguiente respuesta: Mediante un juego de roles en el que los estudiantes puedan crear avatares con personajes realistas específicos, incluyendo nacionalidad, religión, nivel socioeconómico y género, ubicándolos en el contexto de un dilema ético.

El juego se implementó en dos grupos de estudiantes, uno del nivel A1 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) y, el otro, del nivel B2. Los resultados preliminares demuestran un aumento en el nivel global de empatía y también son promisorios en términos de motivación estudiantil y adquisición de lenguaje.

Palabras clave: inglés como idioma extranjero, juegos de rol, diseño de juegos, empatía global, motivación intrínseca

---

[*] janineb@uhemisferios.edu.ec

Universidad de Los Hemisferios

_____

INTRODUCTION

It is an added challenge to use the classroom where we teach English as an international *lingua franca* as a space where we can also raise students' global awareness of such concepts as the diversity of cultural contexts, geographical challenges, socio-economic problems, gender relations and other important issues. Indeed, in this paper, it shall be argued that a method based on these ideals is superior in several respects to a more traditional book-based course insofar as the students are more deeply intrinsically motivated.

This project is an attempt to design a method of teaching English as a foreign language by applying James Paul Gee's theory of "situated learning" (Gee, 2003). In order to show why this theory is so essential to the best teaching practices, there will be clear links drawn to show how motivation theory is necessarily tied up in game-like environments that promote pro-social learning and global empathy. This method has the following aims:

The first is to increase students' intrinsic motivation to learn English.

The second is to raise students' "global empathy", which is their awareness and tolerance of similarities and differences between people across nations, cultures, socio-economic levels and other social markers.

The third is to improve their language acquisition by changing the teaching approach: instead of studying grammar and vocabulary in the abstract and then applying it (as is still the most common teaching method here), they learn the language by expressing their ideas within a fictional context.

As this paper describes the initial attempts to design such a method, the aims above are neither proven nor disproven here, they are simply the basis for creating the method. The project has been implemented as an experimental course at various levels and students have reacted well enough to suggest the idea deserves to be explored in greater depth in a future paper.

The first section will focus on Gee's theory of situated learning. Then we will turn to the concept of motivation, with a particular emphasis on Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's concept of "relatedness" as a key element of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) . This will lead us toward an overview of game-based learning theories which tie together learning theories and intrinsic motivation. The focus will be on ways that games can promote empathy and other pro-social values. There will be an analysis of the role of empathy in games that purport to raise awareness of specific global issues. In the final section related to theory, there will be an analysis of language learning within the framework

In the study itself, a detailed description of the teaching method will be given for different levels ranging from beginner to C1 level (Common European Framework of Reference for

Languages, 2019). This is an action research project in which Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum's "Values at Play" heuristic is applied comprising the three stages of *discovery, implementation* and *verification* (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014).

The project, in summary, consists of having students imagine a character of a given age, nationality, religious or ethnic group and socio-economic level. They then imagine their character in different situations through interactive storytelling activities.

Finally, there will be an analysis and discussion of the results with recommendations for further application and study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Situated Learning

Gee's theory of situated learning is that, rather than learning concepts in the abstract and in isolation and then applying them, people learn better when they are immersed in a context and learn on a need-to-know basis. Video games are intentionally designed his way: many are extremely complicated to learn, yet few gamers choose to read a manual or follow a complete tutorial from beginning to end before attempting the game. Thus, the game mechanics and strategies are given at the precise moment the player needs them. As the player advances, the game requires the player to apply the concepts learned at the beginning, but with adaptions according to needs. In English class, the same theory can be applied: rather than having a sequence of courses in which increasingly difficult grammar is taught and tested in the abstract with only a superficially interesting topic with which to practice, students can begin immediately by immersing themselves in a project through which they find they are required to ask for the grammar and vocabulary they need. The project described herein for he beginner students allows for adapting the learning to three different avatars: thus, for example, the students learn to use the present simple by describing the daily routine of the first character, and then find they need the same structure but different verbs and phrases when describing the second and third. At the B2 level, the challenge is slightly different: the students will have been taught all of the main structures on the syllabus, but throughout the project, they will begin to ask interesting questions about the specific similarities and distinctions between closely related language points, much as a first-person-shooter gamer will notice subtle, yet important differences between certain weapons.

Furthermore, it is essential that the questions regarding these similarities and differences emerge from the students. As an example, there is a key difference between a *teacher* and a *professor*, which the learner will appreciate if she wants to explain that her character works at a small rural school. Note that the teacher cannot and should not attempt to prepare formal lessons on all

possible queries in advance; instead, the teacher's role is to design a project where these questions will arise from students who create their own *need to know*. This is why the next section will address the question of intrinsic motivation.

Motivation

It is something of a truism to say that people do not learn unless they are motivated. Most people agree that having the desire to learn something, the intrinsic motivation to choose, apply effort and persist in a given task, will facilitate learning in the long run. However, intrinsic motivation is rather difficult to define as it feels different for each individual, and the desire to achieve a goal depends on a number of factors including:

- Expectation of success (Brophy, 1999) (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995) which Deci and Ryan describe as the idea of feeling "competent"; having little hope that one will master English, for instance, due to negative prior experience can be deeply discouraging. Also under this heading is "self-efficacy", or the individual's perception of her ability to carry out the task (Bandura, 1997)

- Attribution theory (Weiner, 1992) and "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2006) which refers to what the individual believes are the causes of possible success or failure and whether they are within the individual's control such as personal effort and persistence as opposed to being beyond her control such as inherited intelligence or the teacher's whims

- Value of success (Atkinson & Raynor, 1974): it is important to clarify here that success cannot mean simply achieving high marks on exams (which many students perceive as based on external agents such as the teacher's whim), but rather success in mastering the language, which may arguably be quite different.

Zoltan Dornyei (2001) adds elements of motivation specifically related to second or foreign language learning including:

- Integrative motivational subsystems which relate to the affinity the learner has for the native-speakers of the target language.

- Instrumental motivational subsystems which are the "pragmatic values and benefits associated" (p18) with the L2.

In this study, for example, Ecuadorian learners have perhaps had little direct contact with native-speakers of English, but they will certainly be familiar with English language music, films, video games and other cultural artifacts, and it is a reasonable assumption that most find these interesting. However, outside of the realm of entertainment, many students, particularly those not

aspiring to work at an international level in business, politics or academics may find little relevance in learning the language.

Deci and Ryan (2000) postulated three elements without which intrinsic motivation will not exist: a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness. It is this last one that shall be the primary focus of this paper. Relatedness is the idea that our work matters to others. Jeremy Rifkin (2010) goes so far as to suggest that our biggest human need is the "drive to belong", and indeed, those who cite Self-Determination Theory have paraphrased the term relatedness, most notably Alfie Kohn, (2019) who called it "belonging" ("Autonomy, Belonging and Competence" which he calls the ABC's of motivation), and Daniel Pink (2009) who termed it "purpose", in the sense of making sure one's work is meaningful to others. These three terms, *relatedness*, *belonging* and *purpose* are key to this project, as we shall see.

Language classes should be, but all too often are not, meaningfully communicative. Students will not have a sense of *relatedness* or *purpose* if the work is primarily done individually in course workbooks or online platforms, for while these teaching tools may certainly be helpful in drilling correct structure and even, to a certain extent, in structuring the syllabus for the teacher, they often fail to help students practice communication in a personally relevcant and meaningful manner. In order to learn a language, one must have something to say, and someone to whom to say it who has a vested interested in understanding it (this goes for written communication as well). Scott Thornbury (2005) notes that our world is text-based (*text* here refers to both spoken and written forms of language that are not limited to the sentence such as advertisements, films, recipes, even t-shirts).

While teaching purely sentence-level structure may be easier as it follows a relatively stable set of patterns, it is far from what Thornbury describes as the "natural" state of language as it is commonly used.

This is fundamental both from a motivational perspective, for one sees the "why" of what one is learning, as well as from a language learning point of view as one understands the importance of the "how" of producing and comprehending language correctly. Meaning- making is accomplished between two or more people. In this project, students create stories that are fundamentally interactive, requiring a substantial investment in the creation process not only by the story writers and tellers, but also by the readers and listeners.

A sense of *belonging* is also important in EFL classes because, here in Ecuador, English is rarely spoken outside the classroom. This means that the students in the class have to bond, to a certain extent, into a small, self-contained English-speaking community. The aim of this project

is, in a sense, to widen this small community by adding fictional characters about whom students can talk and write.

Game-Based Learning

Relatedness, *belonging* and *purpose* are ideas that, though strangely absent in conventional views of the classroom, tend to turn up a great deal in the field of game design. McGonigal (2010) goes so far as to call them a "fix", something that people, consciously or unconsciously, miss when forced to live without. Games-based learning is, among other things, an attempt to bring these elements into the classroom. The idea is that when people feel that their own work is important to, and connected to, the work of peers, they will feel better about it, especially if this confers upon them feelings of belonging to a particular culture which Gee (2003) calls an "affinity group".

An affinity group is composed of people who share something they perceive as a commonality of interest. Gee gives the example of birdwatchers who may form an affinity group with members ranging from children fascinated by pigeons to academic ornithologists. In the EFL classroom, English as a language itself may not be enough to form a cohesive affinity group, especially given that the students in this study are all following different degree programs and may tend to group up along those lines. Proponents of game-based learning, such as Katie Salen (Salen Tekinbas, Torres, Wolozin, Ruffo-Tepper, & Shapiro, 2010), the lead designer of the Quest to Learn school in New York City, and Sasha Barab (2005) who created Quest Atlantis, maintain that affinity groups in which members feel a sense of relatedness, belonging and purpose enhance learning and that these can be brought into the classroom.

If we take as a starting point that games can turn classrooms full of diverse pupils into affinity groups, there are natuarally a wealth of game-types to choose from. The one described in this paper is essentially a role-playing game, though it differs from the traditional genres of *Dungeons and Dragons*-style tabletop role-playing games (RPGs), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) and live-action role-playing games (LARPs) both because this game is not fantasy-based, and also because the students need more time to consider their use of language and cannot be expected to act with the same degree of sponenaiety.

Empathy

Jeremy Rifkin (2010) traces the lineage of empathy from blood ties only in tribal, hunter-gatherer groups to religious ties to national and ideological ties. He wonders if it is really such a big step from having empathy with people of one's own nation to eventually having empathy for humanity writ large. This is the concept of "global empathy".

Is it possible, then, to feel empathy for someone with whom one has nothing in common? And can games help us to do this? Karen Shrier (2018) states: "While we may never be able to be a cat, a dog, or a person different from ourselves, perhaps **games** can enable us a glimpse into another's lives, and time in a world where we can care about them for a little while". In a working paper written for the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development / UNESCO, Schrier and Matthew Farber study to what extent games may help with different aspects of empathy including "perspective-taking, identity, reflection, choice-making, agency, storytelling/narrative, relationship-building, and communication." (Schrier & Farber, 2017). Ryan Green, creator of "That Dragon Cancer" (Green, 2019) designed the game about his own experiences dealing with his son's diagnosis and eventual death primarily to get through his own tragedy, but the game has generated empathy not only in those in similar circumstances, but also in those who are not losing a child to cancer (Bartelson, 2019). This project allows students to feel empathy for a character of their own creation who, though fictional, is based on a deeper understanding of other cultures and living conditions.

Global Citizenship Education

In this paper, the term "global empathy" shall be used to mean empathy for people who are culturally different, geographically distant, or from a different walk of life. In this project, the students are primarily middle-class, (at least nominally) Catholic, Ecuadorians of mixed Indigenous and Spanish descent. Can they imagine what life might be like for a poor elderly Muslim Pakistani man, or a young girl growing up in rural Vietnam, or the privileged daughter of an American billionaire? They can, but in order to do so, they need both facts and imagination. For example, they must understand the facts and causes of poverty and wealth, they must understand climate and geography, they must be minimally versed in the basic tenets of different faiths. Then they can imagine a person living in these circumstances and develop an empathy for this fictional character.

Global citizenship education (GCE) is a burgeoning area in educational circles (Bourn, 2014). Fernando Reimers (Reimers, Chopra, Chung, Higdon, & O'Donnell, 2016) and his students believe that devoting a portion of the curriculum to GCE is more than simply about adding more content, it is about empowering learners to do good in the world. One will only wish to do good, and one will only succeed in doing good however, if one perceives the "other" to be as worthy as oneself. Furthermore, one needs to be acutely sensitive to both the similarities and the differences without over generalizing to the point of bigotry or, perhaps worse, assuming people are the same in ways they are not. Duflo and Banerjee (2011), for example, did fascinating studies on exactly

_____

how the extreme poor think in ways that are fundamentally different from people who have a higher income, and these studies allow agencies and NGOs to provide assistance in ways that really help. Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl Wudunn (2008) took a similar approach to women's rights across the globe, and indeed made a game of their best-selling book "Half the Sky" to further illustrate the points they wished to underscore.

Games for Change (Games for Change, 2019) is an organisation devoted to encouraging the design of (mostly digital) games to increase global empathy. Asi Burak is the current president of the organisation and lead designer on a video game about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Burak, 2017). His studies on the game show heightened empathy for the "other" side when played by Israelis and Paelstinians as well as the sympathizes on either side. Brenda Romero does the same with analog games in her series *Mechanics is the Message* depicting such events as the Middle Passage and the Holocaust. Ian Bogost (2007) terms the mechanics in these sorts of games "procedural rhetoric" which means that the game teaches an idea through play rather than through explanation. Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum (2014) have further developed the study of pro-social game mechanics in their "Values at Play" project.

Language Learning

It is reasonable to assume that one can be motivated to learn English through the cultivation of empathy and a desire to do good; this is the basis for attempting this project.

However, a further, and perhaps more fundamental question is whether this approach, as opposed to the rote memorization of grammatical structures, will facilitate learners' acquisition of English as a foreign language. Gee (2003) seems to suggest that this is so by virtue of the theory of "situated learning". This theory states that rather than teaching an abstract concept such as a grammar point and then assuming the students can simply apply it as needed, learners need to first see the language in a meaningful context. They then transfer what they have learned to a slightly different context and note how the concept itself needs to be adapted. Gee is primarily a linguist within the specialized field of "discourse" which is how meanings are conveyed through and across longer chunks of language such as conversations, essays, stories and other contextualised utterances. He gives the example of the word "work" which has a slightly different meaning depending on whether one is talking about physics, art, or the work involved in keeping a marriage together. Scott Thornbury (2005) also notes that one can only truly uncover the deeper meanings of grammar through inductive rather than deductive reasoning, in other words by seeing examples from the bottom up rather than applying them top-down.

In this project, students have the opportunity to apply their understanding and production of the English language in a wider variety of contexts because they are considering the lives of people who may be in many ways very different from themselves. Furthermore, because the project is fundamentally creative, the students have the opportunity to have greater voice and choice in the scope of language they learn; and because it is fundamentally empathetic, they will have greater motivation to express their ideas with deeper precision.

STUDY

Background to The Project

The students at Universidad de Los Hemisferios are fairly homogenous in terms of age (18-24), ethnic heritage (Indigenous and Spanish descent), religion (Catholic, though more or less religious to differing degrees), and language (Spanish). Because of the scholarship system, they do have different socio-economic backgrounds which unfortunately is reflected in the quality of their primary and secondary schooling. Some will have attended "better" schools and will have had better experiences with English and consequently enter at a higher level, while others will have had little or no English education, or at least have failed to learn due to poor teaching and enter as beginners.

Nearly all of the students have come from "traditional" educational backgrounds, and thus are used to textbooks, lectures, and exams. This project pushes them out of this framework as there are no textbooks or exams and lectures are provided only on demand. The students are graded instead on a portfolio wherein they present all of the stages of the work outlined below and make corrections as needed. The grade is therefore binary: 100% is awarded for work that is complete and corrected by deadline and 50% otherwise.

Methodology

Action research is also known as practiotioner based research (McNiff, 2010) in that it is the practitioner herself who identifies a problem and methodically attempts to solve it; Kemmis and McTaggert (1992) note that action research is not simply problem-solving, but also problem posing, where problems are not seen as pathologies but as avenues for growth. Stenhouse (1979) suggests that action research should contribute not only to practice but to a theory of education and teaching.

This project comes under the heading of action research for a number of reasons. The researcher on this project posed the following problem:

_____

How can global empathy be incorporated into the EFL classroom so as to increase students' intrinsic motivation to learn the language and help them to learn it better?

And suggested the following answer as a hypothesis:

Through a role-playing game in which students create avatars with specific, realistic characteristics including nationality, religion, socio-economic status and gender, and place them within the context of an ethical dilemma.

These questions will hopefully lead to a new theory of EFL teaching at the crossroads of the fields of game design, social justice, and language teaching.

The project research method follows the "Values at Play" heuristic developed by Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014) which includes three components:

- "*Discovery*: Discovery involves locating the values that are relevant to a given project and defining those values within the context of the game.

- *Implementation*: Implementation includes translating values into game elements (…). The heart of design, it is the process of realizing values in terms of the basic practical elements of a game.

- *Verification*: Verification requires establishing the valiuditiy of the designer's efforts to discover and implement values. Verification is a form of quality control." (p. 75)

The "Building Character" Project

In this section the project will be described as it was done with two different groups: a beginner level (A1) and an upper intermediate level (B2).

A1: This group met every day for two hours for 6 weeks.

After a few classes focussed on basic classroom language, students began by creating three different avatars within the following parameters:

1. The students flipped a coin to determine the gender of each avatar (given that this is a Catholic university, gender is given as binary).

2. The students rolled two 10-sided dice to determine the age of each avatar (though ages below 10 required a new die-roll)

3. The world map was divided into thirteen different regions. For each avatar, the students drew from a deck of ordinary playing cards and selected a country from the given region. The students were then asked to look up the countries (in the L1 if necessary) and find an appropriate religion, language and name for each avatar.

4. Finally, the students and the teacher discussed the differences between the following socio-economic groups:

- Poor (Ace)

- Working class (2)

- Middle class (3)

- Priviledged (4)

They then drew one card for each avatar from a deck of cards reduced to A,2,3,4 to determine the socio-economic background of each.

5.   Students used the verbs *be* and *have* to describe their avatars physically. They then exchanged descriptions and found photos to match.

6.   Students then learned about the appropriate grammar structures, vocabulary and other elements of language in order to write about the character's possessions, daily, routine, hobbies and job, family, and childhood. At various points, the students exchanged their work in order to read and illustrate it.

Having completed this in the first half of the course, the students were then told that each avatar had a secret. They were required to give clues as to the secret by following these instructions:

IMPORTANT!

This person has a secret.

Nobody knows this secret except you.

This file contains information about this secret.

DO NOT SHARE THIS INFORMATION WITH ANYONE!

1.   Use *his/her* to write 6 sentences about this person's PERSONAL INFORMATION.

(The structure is *His/Her* name/email/birthday etc *is/isn't…*)

2.   Use *be/have* to write 6 sentences about this person's FAMILY MEMBERS, POSSESSIONS, and JOB.

(The structure is *He/She is/isn't…* or *He/She has/doesn't have…*)

3.   Use the *simple present* to write 6 sentences about this person's DAILY, WEEKLY, MONTHLY and YEARLY ROUTINE.

(The structure is

Every morning/night/Tuesday/Christmas etc, *he/she + verb +S* or *he/she doesn't + verb.*)

4.   Use the *present continuous* to write 6 sentences about what this person is doing RIGHT NOW.

(The structure is *He/She + is + verb + ING* or

He/She isn't + verb+ ING)

5.   Use the *past tense* to write 6 sentences about what your character did WHEN HE/SHE WAS YOUNG.

(The structure is *When he/she was* age, *he/she + verb +ED* or *He/She didn't + verb*).

If the verb is irregular, you can find it online.)

6.	Include as many PHOTOS or PICTURES as possible about the sentences above as "evidence".

7.	You have an AUDIO RECORDING of this person telling his/her secret (1 minute).

When this was complete, the students took the time to read each other's work and attempt to guess the secret.

Each student then prepared additional questions and answers about each other's avatars.

Finally, to close the course, each student wrote and presented a short eulogy for each avatar and a mock funeral was solemnly held.

B2:	This group met twice weekly for two hours for sixteen weeks.

The students began by creating one avatar per pair within the following parameters:

1.	The teacher will give you a text from "Working" by Studs Terkel. This will tell you a bit about your avatar's career and his/her opinions about it. You may change the name and/or gender if you wish. **Agree on your ideas**. Then you will **each** write about this in your own words in 5 sentences. Use 2 new words or phrases you found in the text. Use any two grammar tenses from the book.

2.	Choose two numbers between 1-7. The teacher will give you two texts about special talents and intelligences, which you will apply to your character. **Agree on your ideas**. Then you will **each** write about this in your own words in 5 sentences. Use 2 new words or phrases you found in the texts. Use any two grammar tenses from the book not used in point 1.

3.	Choose a letter of the alphabet. The teacher will give you an ethnic and cultural heritage. You must research the country of origin and the religion, plus two interesting facts about the culture. **Agree on your ideas**. Then you will **each** write about this in your own words in 5 sentences. Use 2 new words or phrases you found in the texts you researched. Use two grammar tenses from the book not used in points 1 and 2.

4.	Choose a letter between A-E. The teacher will ask you to research a particular disability. Consider how this disability manifests in your avatar. **Agree on your ideas**. Then you will **each** write about this in your own words in 5 sentences. Use 2 new words or phrases you found in the texts you researched. Use two grammar tenses from the book not used in points 1, 2 and 3.

5.	Find the Myers-Briggs Personality test online at https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test Do the test together and invent answers for your avatar. **Agree on your ideas**. Then you will **each** write about your avatar's results in your own words in 5 sentences. Use 2 new words or phrases you found in the personality test. Use two grammar tenses from the book not used in points 1, 2, 3 and 4.

6.	Find 10-15 images related to your avatar.

7.	Create a 2-minute minimum video showing your avatar doing something he or she likes.

This assignment took up the first third of the term. In the second term, the students worked in groups of 4-5 (carefully separated from their original partner) which each chose a "subculture" such as feminists, anorexic-bulimics, Hell's Angels, survivalists, videogamers and others. They were encouraged to find and "lurk" in some of these groups online, read and understand posts and note down some of the vocabulary used.

Finally, the students worked in their groups to make short cell-phone videos in which each avatar was faced with an ethical dilemma foring him or her to choose whether to stay in the group or leave it. The video was shot with two possible endings. The students watched each other's videos and chose the ending they wanted to see.

At the end of the term, this group also eulogized their avatars in a mock funeral.

ANALYSIS

The project's aims were threefold: to motivate, to raise global empathy and to improve English through situated learning. The question for the moment is not whether these were achieved, but merely whether they were successfully incorporated into the methodology. Each shall be dealt with in turn.

Motivation

The aim was to help students feel relatedness, belonging and purpose as explained above. Since the project required a great deal of interaction among the students, group cohesion was encouraged. Each part of the project required students to communicate with each other. For example, each student needed to provide clear descriptions of the characters in order for the others to find appropriate pictures. The clues to the characters' secrets written by the beginner learners had to be well-written to enable peers to guess. In the upper level group, the students needed to perform their roles by acting and speaking well so that their audience might decide what story path to follow.

From observation, the students did seem more engaged as measured by two factors. In the first place, the students spent far more time on task. Unlike the more traditional book- based courses, most students often went entire two-hour periods without once checking social media, all the more surprising since few measures were in place to prevent this: no explicit rules about not using phones and other devices had been made, on the contrary, studnets were encouraged to use them to look up new vocabulary and check grammar rules such as which verbs take an irregular past tense form. The second measure of engagement was an increase in the number of "how do you say...? " types of questions as students grappled with trying to express their ideas. Again, these

_____

measures have not been studied formally, but preliminary observations suggest that the method works on these levels.

Global Empathy

This was achieved better with the beginners than with the upper levels, perhaps because the upper levels had too many other aspects to focus on including disabilities and specific character traits (Note: the upper level course was taught first). Also, in the B2 group, there was less explicit focus on socio-economic level.

In the beginner group, a small measure was taken comparing the students' knowledge of their characters' assigned countries at the beginning and end of the project. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. There was a higher percentage of answers left blank or marked "I don't know" at the beginning than at the end showing that students did in fact learn about the three countries of their avatars.

English

Students asked a number of questions related to the finer differences between certain grammar points or expressions, more than they seemed to ask when being taught with a book. This may be due to the fact that they were allowed to be creative and wanted to express themselves well, so that others would understand them. At the lower level, having students create three characters each allowed them to repeat structures, yet rather than being the mindless drilling it so often can become, the students were quick to see how to transfer certain structures while mindfully adapting them to the different characters, as Gee notes is the way of good game players.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER STUDY

Based on preliminary implementation and observation, this method seems to show promise.

In further studies, the following measures will provide a more complete picture of the effect of this new teaching method:

- First, in order to further answer the motivation question, it would be fruitful to measure students' motivation, using more formal tools such as questionnaires.

- Secondly, in order to measure global empathy, tools can be found and devised.

- Finally, a pre and post test of English can be applied, although this should be carefully designed to avoid testing abstract knowledge and should allow students to use available tools as they have been taught in class in order to allow them to demonstrate strategic competence. The test should ideally be grounded in a context (fictional or real)

rather than having a random assortment of questions with structure as the only point of commonality.

If by these measures, other teachers are convinced of the worthiness of the method, training courses can be arranged and further studies can be done.

Bibliography

Atkinson, J., & Raynor, J. (. (1974). *Motivation and Achievement.* Washington, DC: Winston and sons.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-Efficacy: The Excercise of Control.* New York: Freeman.

Barab, S. (2005). Making Learning Fun: Quest Atlantis, A Game Without Guns. *Educational Technology Research and Development, v53 n1*, p86-107 .

Bartelson, E. (08 de 01 de 2019). *ctrl500.com.* Obtenido de ctrl500.com/developers-corner/empathy-games-•-fighting-tears/ : https://ctrl500.com/developers-corner/empathy-games-•-fighting-tears/

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Bourn, D. (2014). *The Theory and Practice of Development Education: A pedagogy for global social justice.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Brophy, J. (1999). Toward a model of the value aspects of motivation in education: Developing appreciationfor particular learning domainsand activities. *Educational Psychologist, 34*, 75-85.

Burak, A. (2017). *Power Play: How Video Games Can Save the World.* New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. (08 de 01 de 2019). *www.coe.int.* Obtenido de www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages: https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages

Deci, E., & Ryan, R. (2000). Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development and Well Being. *American Psychologist*, 68-78.

Dornyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Duflo, E., & Banerjee, A. (2011). *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty.* New York, NY: PublicAffairs.

Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.* New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Eccles, J., & Wigfield, A. (1995). In the mind of the actor: The structure of adolescents' acheivement task values and expectancy-related beliefs. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 21*, 215-225.

Flanagan, M., & Nissenbaum, H. (2014). *Values at Play in Digital Games.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Games for Change. (08 de 01 de 2019). *www.gamesforchange.org.* Obtenido de www.gamesforchange.org: www.gamesforchange.org

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

_____

Green, R. (08 de 01 de 2019). *http://www.thatdragoncancer.com/*. Obtenido de http://www.thatdragoncancer.com/: http://www.thatdragoncancer.com/

Kemmis, S., & McTaggert, R. (. (1992). *The Action Research Planner (3rd edition).* Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press.

Kohn, A. (08 de 01 de 2019). *Youtube.com.* Obtenido de The 3 Most Basic Needs of Children & Why Schools Fail: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3T8pFxIeyY

Kristof, N., & Wudunn, S. (2008). *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide.* New York, NY: Knopf.

McGonigal, J. (2010). *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World.* New York, NY: Penguin Random House.

McNiff, J. (17 de 04 de 2010). *www.jeanmcniff.com/booklet1.html.* Obtenido de www.jeanmcniff.com/booklet1.html: www.jeanmcniff.com/booklet1.html

Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us.* New York, NY: Riverhead Hardcover.

Reimers, F., Chopra, V., Chung, C. K., Higdon, J., & O'Donnell, E. (2016). *Empowering Global Citizens: A World Course.* Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Rifkin, J. (2010). *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis .* Los Angeles, CA: Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc.

Salen Tekinbas, K., Torres, R., Wolozin, L., Ruffo-Tepper, R., & Shapiro, A. (2010). *Quest to Learn: Developing the School for Digital Kids .* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Schrier, K. (24 de 01 de 2018). *www.gamasutra.com.* Obtenido de https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/KarenSchrier/20180124/313566/Using_Games_to_Inspire_Empathy__Pros_and_Cons.: https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/KarenSchrier/20180124/313566/Using_Games_to_Inspire_Empathy__Pros_and_Cons.php

Schrier, K., & Farber, M. (2017). The Limits and Strengths of Using Digital Games as "Empathy Machines". *Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development / UNESCO.*

Stenhouse, L. (1979). *What is Action Research?* NOrwich: Classroom Action Research Network.

Thornbury, S. (2005). *Beyond the Sentence: Introducing Discourse Analaysis.* Oxford: Macmillan.

Thornbury, S. (2005). *Uncovering Grammar.* Oxford: MacMillan.

Weiner, B. (1992). *Human Motivation: Metaphors, Theories and Research.* Newberry Park, CA: Sage.

APPENDIX: Country awareness pre-test and post-test questionnaire

Students at the A1 level were asked to complete this form for each of the three countries their characters came from, both when they were first assigned the countries and again at the end of the course.

País:

¿Qué sabes de ...

Los platos típicos?

La (s) religión (es) principal(es) y sus creencias?

La geografía y el clima?

Los trajes típicos?

Los deportes y pasatiempos nacionales/tradicionales?

La situación política actual?

Country:

What do you know about…

Traditional foods?

The main religions and their beliefs?

The geography and climate?

Traditional clothes?

National/traditional sports and pastimes?

The current political situation?

348 questionnaires were answered with 6 questions each.

- Number of answers marked "I don't know" in the pre-test: 179=51%

- Number of answers marked "I don't know" in the post-test:104=29%