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Using Three Games to Explore the Impact of Games on Learning**

Max BROOKS and Daniel CLAUSEN

言語学習におけるゲーム活用の新展開  
三つのゲームを使ってゲームが学習に与える影響を探る

ブルックス マックス ・ クラウセン ダニエル

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### Abstract:

Language teachers have long understood the value of games as a tool in the classroom. However, within the scholarly literature, there are lingering debates regarding the value of games for language acquisition, community-building, learner motivation, and the development of greater cognitive skills such as creative problem-solving. This essay explores issues related to the use of games as a tool for language learning. Three games were used with small groups of learners: (1) Fortunately / Unfortunately - a story-telling game; (2) Weird Word Wizards - a role-playing / vocabulary game; and (3) Review Board Game - Level 1 - a board game for reviewing conversational English and material covered in previous lessons. The first two games were used for a university game club. The last game was used in a class on English presentation. Short surveys were administered to students to assess the enjoyability of the games and the perceived value of each game for developing aspects of their English abilities. The researchers' experience with these games was used as a method of reflecting on future avenues for research on games and language learning. Though the sample sizes were small for each game, there is enough evidence to suggest that each of these games can be adapted and reused in language classes. Avenues for further research are also discussed.

語学教師は長い間、教室でのツールとしてゲームの価値を理解してきた。しかし、言語習得、コミュニティ形成、学習者の動機づけ、創造的な問題解決など、より高度な認知能力の開発におけるゲームの価値については、学術的な文献の中でも議論が続いている。このエッセイでは、言語学習のツールとしてのゲームの使用に関する問題を探る。(1)Fortunately/Unfortunately- ストーリーテリングゲーム、(2)Weird Word Wizards- ロールプレイング / ボキャブラリーゲーム、(3)Review Board Game - Level 1- 会話や前回のレッスンで扱った内容を復習するためのボードゲームである。最初の2つのゲームは大学のゲームサークルで使用された。最後のゲームは、英語プレゼンテーションの授業で使用された。各ゲームの楽しさ、および各ゲームが生徒の英語能力を伸ばす上でどのような価値があるかを評価するため、生徒に簡単なアンケートを実施した。また、ゲームと言語学習に関する今後の研究の道筋を考えるための方法として、これらのゲームに関する研究者の経験が用いられた。各ゲームのサンプル数は少なかったが、これらの各ゲームが語学の授業に適応し、再利用できることを示唆する十分な証拠がある。また、さらなる研究の道筋についても論じている。

**Keywords:**

game-based learning; gamification; student motivation

## 1. Exploring the Impact of Games

Games have long been an essential tool in classrooms of all kinds. Advocates of the use of games in the classroom often point out that they help improve learner motivation, create rapport between students, build critical thinking and social skills, and provide low-stress environments for learning. On the other hand, games come with a number of drawbacks. Certain games may require a large commitment in exchange for minor gains, while other games may distract from learning important course content. Nevertheless, the growing academic literature on games in language learning has provided much-needed nuance to the conversation. More importantly, this literature has informed teachers of best practices and helped to expand teachers' toolboxes.

This research furthers the conversation on the value of games for language learning through an exploration of three games: **(1) Fortunately / Unfortunately** – a story-telling game; **(2) Weird Word Wizards** – a role-playing / vocabulary game; and **(3) Review Board Game - Level 1** – a review game.

The researchers used both a game club at their home institution as well as an appropriate classroom setting to try out these games. The participants were encouraged to answer a survey regarding the usefulness of the game. The key rationale for this research project was to try out a variety of games to identify any that may be good candidates for intensive study or further development.

## 2. Unpacking Themes - Literature Review

There is growing literature on the use of games for educational purposes. Some of this literature catalogs the benefits and drawbacks of games on learning, while exploring larger theoretical issues (Plass et al., 2015; Lee & Hammer, 2011; Wu et al., 2012). Other research has explored games as a method for improving learner motivation and self-confidence (Karsudianto, 2020). While other literature attempts to introduce particular games to language teachers, such as “escape games” (a variation on escape rooms) (Bradford, 2021), tabletop games (York et al., 2019), and role-playing games (Crocco, 2016; da Rocha, 2018; Torres-Rodriguez & Martinez-Granada, 2022). Much of this literature uses practical examples from the classroom or experiments with games in more structured environments to show the benefits of games to teachers and learners. An additional benefit of this literature is that it often shares procedures and resources so that readers may implement these games in their own classrooms.

However, learning games are not without their drawbacks. Questionnaire research by Stojković & Jerotijević (2011, May) found that teachers avoid using games in class for a number of important reasons, including a lack of time (see also, da Rocha, 2018, p. 545), an unfamiliarity with

rules, and an inability to monitor student work. The concerns uncovered by Stojković & Jerotijević (2011, May) reflect many of the concerns the researchers have found during their professional careers. In environments where students are expected to achieve certain test scores or master specific skills in a short period of time, games can seem like a frivolous distraction from learning. In these contexts, simply making classes more fun or interesting is not a sufficient rationale for using games.

Nevertheless, there may be a role for games in even the most content-intensive learning environments. For example, Karsudianto (2020) found that the use of “mingling games” helped improve learners’ self-confidence and motivation. It is entirely possible that different types of games could help to improve not only self-confidence and motivation, but also instill a sense of community. Indeed, at the beginning of a learning process, experiences of “graceful failure” (Plass et al., 2015, p. 261; da Rocha, 2018; Torres-Rodriguez & Martinez-Granada, 2022) in the context of a fun learning experience might help to create forms of learner resiliency that benefit students later on in the learning process.

In addition, there is enough evidence on the benefits of games to not dismiss them when they do not work. A game that seems to “misfire” in a single instance may just need a little adjustment in design. For this reason, as scholars, it is just as important to be honest, transparent, and critical of failures (and partial successes!) as it is to promote the most successful instances of games in the classroom.

### **3. Educational Games - Three Experiments with Short Surveys**

With both the drawbacks and benefits of games firmly in mind, the researchers designed several games to implement in a university game club and in an English presentation class. In order to help the researchers understand the strengths and weaknesses of these games, short surveys were administered after the games were finished.

#### **3.1 Fortunately / Unfortunately**

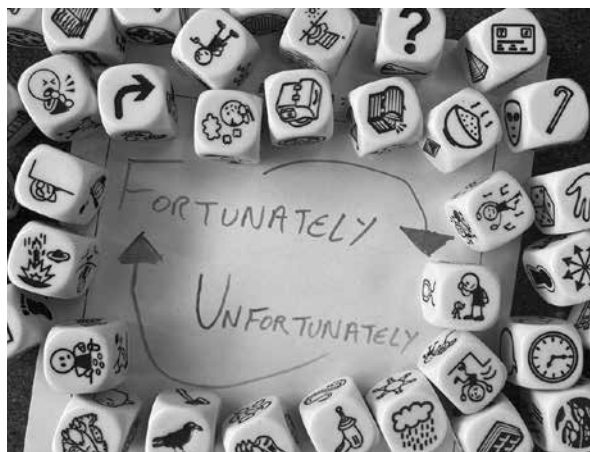
On June 21, 2023, four participants came to a session of the home institution’s game club. During this meeting, the group played “Fortunately / Unfortunately,” a game that encourages students to build verbal communication skills through story-telling.

Materials needed:

- Optional: paper, pens, and pencils.
- Optional: story-telling dice.

Directions:

- The players sit in a circle.
- Each player takes turns adding one sentence to the story. The first person starts with a sentence that begins with “Fortunately…” The next person must then add a sentence that begins with “Unfortunately…”
- The players continue adding sentences to the story, alternating between “Fortunately…” and “Unfortunately…” The story can go in any direction the students choose.
- The game ends when the players get tired of the story or players cannot think of how to continue.



**Fig 1.** The materials used for *Fortunately / Unfortunately*.

During this session, the activity was enhanced on the second round with story-telling dice. Not only did the players have to alternate between using “fortunately” or “unfortunately” depending on whether it was their turn, but they also had to roll a dice with pictures on it. They then had to incorporate the particular picture into their sentence.

Out of the four students, 3 filled out surveys with 2 students rating the game as a 5 (very good) and 1 student rating the game a 4 (good). All three of the students who filled out the survey were foreign exchange students. However, each rated their language ability differently. One rated themselves as a Beginner (CEFR A1), one as an Elementary user (CEFR A2) and one as an Upper-Intermediate user (CEFR B1)

The three respondents thought that the game improved the following skills:

What elements of your learning and education did today's game benefit? 今日のゲームは、あなたの学習や教育のどのような要素に役立ったのでしょうか?  
3 responses

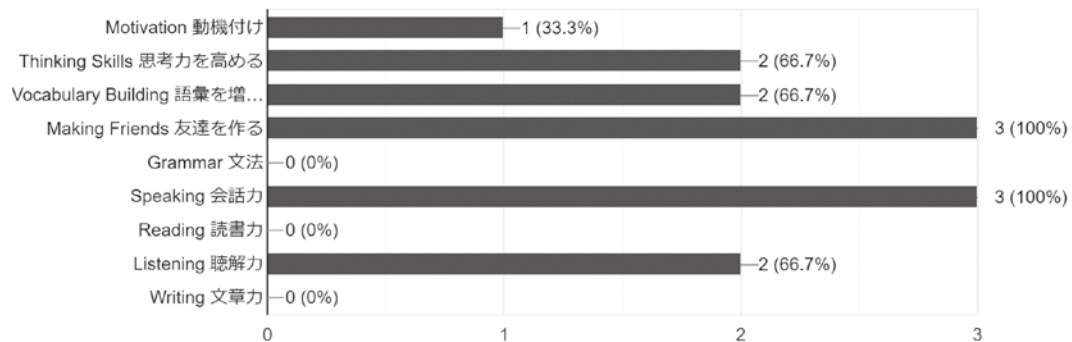


Fig 2. Linguistic skills that the players of *Fortunately Unfortunately* felt the game helped to improve.

### 3.2 Weird Word Wizards

On June 28, 2023, three participants came to the game club. During this meeting, the group played “Weird Word Wizards,” a game that encourages vocabulary-building and spelling.

Materials needed:

- Scrabble tiles with point numbers (We used two sets).
- Profile sheets.

Directions:

- Each player is informed that they are a wizard (Hagrid voice optional). Each player then writes down a name for their character.
- After they have given their character a name, each player spells out their character’s name with tiles from the game of Scrabble. These tiles have different point totals that make up their character’s health total.
- The players then choose whether they are a “Human”, “Dwarf”, “Elf” or “Hobbit”. Depending on what kind of character they choose, they get extra points for spelling words related to a specific topic. (For example, “Dwarfs” get +1 point for words related to earth and stone.)
- The players then choose a magic specialization from a list. As above players get extra points for

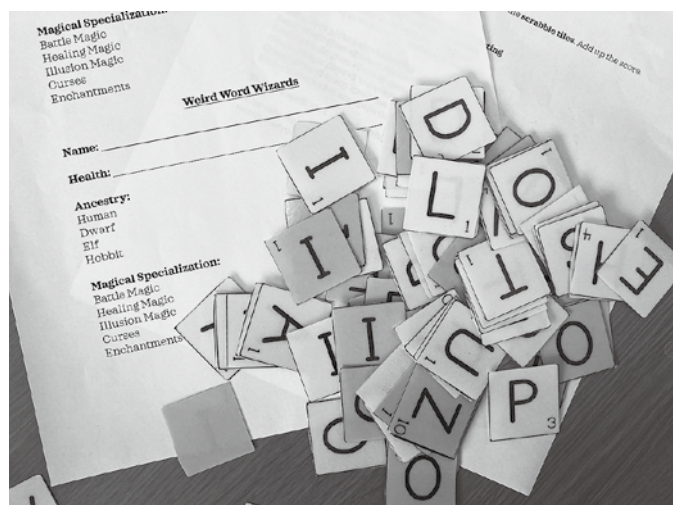


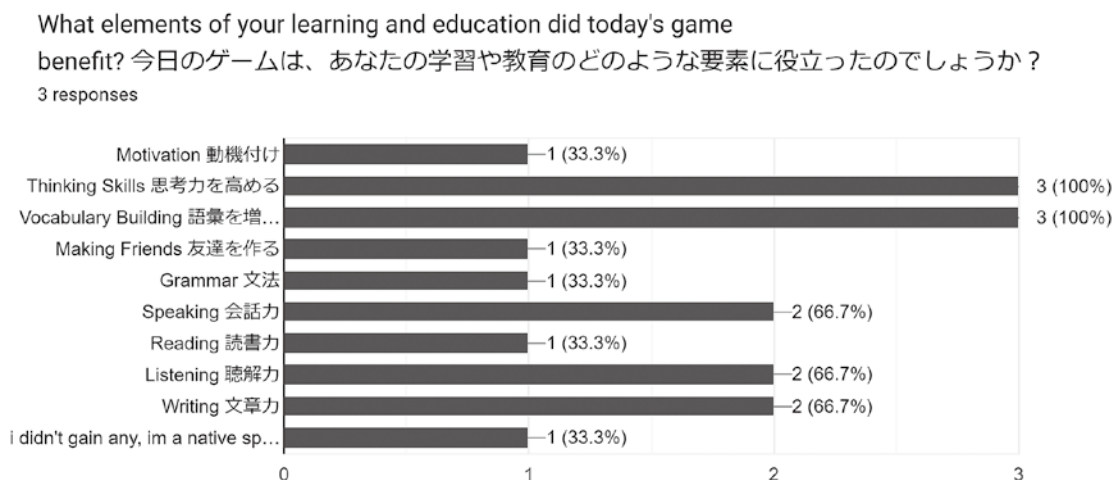
Fig 3. The materials used for *Weird Word Wizards*.

spelling words related to a certain topic. (For example, “Battle Magic” gets +2 for any words that hurt or damage.)

- At this point the game begins. The players are told that they will tell a story. The game master “teacher” then gives the students a scenario, each scenario is given a difficulty rating. An easy task like opening a door might only have a rating of 1 to 5, but a difficult one like fighting a dragon might be 9 or 10.
- The players describe what they want to do in one word, which they then spell out with their scrabble tiles. The total score of their word (plus any bonuses) is subtracted from the scenario’s difficulty rating. If this brings the difficulty to 0, then they pass to the next scenario. If it is still higher than 0, the next player decides what word they would like to use.
- The tiles they used are then removed from the pool of scrabble tiles that the students are using to spell their words.

Three students in total participated in the game – all native speakers of English. All three filled out the survey.

Out of the three students, **two students** rated the game **5 (very good)** and **one student** rated the game **4 (good)**. The three respondents thought that the game improved the following skills.



**Fig 4. Linguistic skills that the players of *Weird Word Wizards* felt the game helped to improve.**

**Note: The last item reads “i didn’t gain any, im a native speaker” (sic). But they did agree that the game helps with thinking skills and vocabulary building.**

### 3.3 Review Board Game - Level 1

On July 4, 2023, six students played “Review Board Game - Level 1” as part of a presentation class. The game was played in the last 15 minutes of the class as a wind-down activity.

Materials needed:

- Review Board Game Level 1 (See picture).
- Dice.
- Game piece for each student.

Instructions:

- All the students begin at the start square. They play rock, paper, scissors to see who goes first.
- Each player rolls the dice and moves around the game board. Each square has a particular challenge (Discussion Question, Role Play, “Imagine yourself …”, etc.) In addition, there are some squares that send the student back spaces or swap player positions.
- The player must complete the challenge before the next player can go.
- The first player who reaches the end wins.

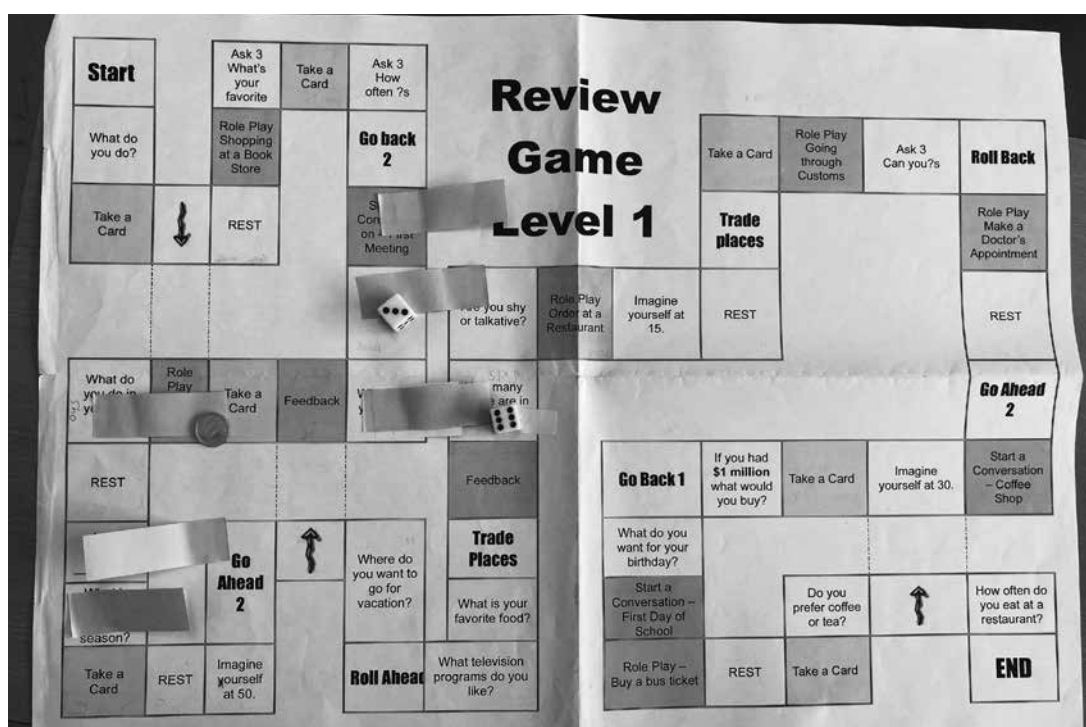


Fig 5. The materials required for *Review Game Level 1*.

Six students participated in the game altogether, three rated their English skill as Intermediate (CEFR B1) and three rated themselves as Upper Intermediate (CEFR B2). All six players filled out the survey.

All six of the students rated the game 5 (very good). The players thought the game improved these particular skills.



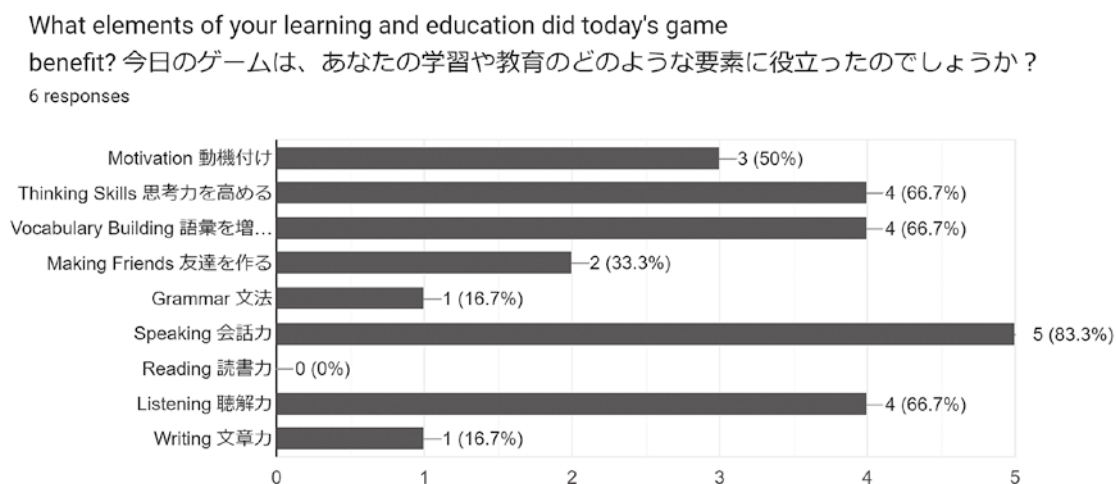


Fig 6. Linguistic skills that the players of *Review Game Level 1* felt the game helped to improve.

#### 4. Discussion

Each of the games was used in non-critical parts of lessons or in club activities so that the games could enhance the student's learning experience without adding stress or taking away from time spent teaching content that might be an essential part of the curriculum. However, from just the brief trials conducted for this paper, it is clear that these games could be applied in regular classrooms to reinforce key skills.

“Fortunately / Unfortunately” would serve well as a warm-up activity in communication classes for Elementary (CEFR A2) students and above. When using this game, the goal would be to get students talking and not be overly concerned with grammar or error correction. In addition, this game could also be good for a group writing activity. Students would complete a story as a group, get feedback and corrections from the teacher, revise the story, and then present the story to the class. The constraint of the game, having students think of contrasts to other student ideas, also encourages creativity and adaptation. For students who suffer from shyness, the constraints of the game may also serve as an impetus to socialize. Creative students, on the other hand, can take the story in interesting and unique directions. However, students lower than Elementary (CEFR A2) will likely need a more structured version of the activity. For example, the first two to three parts of the story could be done as cloze activities or by finishing sentence stems. The students would then be given more independence to continue the story with their own ideas.

It is still an open question whether “Weird Word Wizards,” can be modified for classrooms below Upper Intermediate (CEFR B2). The game, as it was conducted for the game club, worked well with native speakers, helping their creativity and vocabulary skills. For Upper Intermediate (CEFR B2) students, this activity may be useful for encouraging group work, unstructured communication, and negotiation of meaning. However, before this game could be used with students at lower levels, it is likely that the rules would have to be simplified and that a real-world

substitute would need to be found for “Wizards.” Given these limitations, the researchers would like more opportunities to test the game in different teaching contexts.

“Review Board Game - Level 1,” worked well as a review of both general English and specific course content. The biggest strength of the game is its flexibility. The game was made using a template from the online site *Lanternfish* ([https://bogglesworldesl.com/esl\\_games.htm](https://bogglesworldesl.com/esl_games.htm)). Using this template, the researchers have created different versions of the game – to use in classrooms at various levels. Another strength of the game is that competition does not come from language challenges, but rather from chance rolls of the dice. Therefore, weaker students can still win the game. From the experience of the two researchers, it has also been found that the game encourages cooperation, as students are motivated to help their classmates complete challenges so that the dice can move to the next player and the game can continue. In the future, the researchers would like to experiment with having students create their own board games using a mostly empty template. The hypothesis is that students will feel more connected to a game that they have had a personal hand in developing.

For each of the games discussed above, it is important to keep in mind that they are “works in progress.” Through trial and error, the researchers hope to improve the games and create resources that teachers can use with a minimum of preparation. However, in designing future games, the researchers will also attempt to better understand teacher and student needs at the university and create games and resources that meet those needs.

## 5. Conclusion

One of the limitations of the current study is that each of the games was conducted with small groups – 4 students, 3 students, and 6 students. In addition, though surveys were conducted anonymously and the researchers received some valuable feedback, future research would greatly benefit from observations from outside instructors, particularly instructors who may be skeptical of the value of games in the classroom. These “devil’s advocate” observations and critiques would shine an important light on the limitations of games and how instructors can overcome those shortcomings through improvements in design.

Another important question future research would need to investigate is whether specifically designed games could solve targeted problems at the host institution. Despite not having interviewed students or teachers, the researchers are aware of a number of ongoing problems with no easy solutions.

These problems include:

- Shy students who are having trouble forming support networks at the university.
- Improving student self-esteem and sense of purpose.
- Improving communication in real-world scenarios (such as job interviews).

- Providing short breaks (10-minute games and under) from intensive book work and drills.

However, there may be more pressing problems than those described above. Thus, the continuation of this research project could start with a needs survey and then work toward a game design. Rather than asking what we can do with games, we will ask how games can be useful to our students and university.

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