An investigation of EFL learner's communicative actions when playing TRPGs online

Max BROOKS

TRPG をオンラインでプレイする際の英語学習者の コミュニケーション行為に関する研究

ブルックス　マックス

【研究ノート】

An investigation of EFL learner's communicative actions when playing TRPGs online

Max BROOKS

TRPG をオンラインでプレイする際の英語学習者の コミュニケーション行為に関する研究

ブルックス　マックス

Abstract:

This article examines communication methods and strategies employed by EFL learners when playing tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) in an online environment. While research has been undertaken into the use of TRPGs as a language learning tool, these studies have yielded very little data that can be used to inform both future research and classroom practice regarding TRPGs in the English classroom. To that end, a mixed-methods approach was employed to obtain both quantitative data (the most common interaction strategies employed by EFL learners when playing TRPGs) and qualitative data (learner opinions of the kinds of merits TRPGs have as a learning tool) from adult EFL learners. A group of learners took part in 2-3 gameplay sessions where they played the TRPG *Microlite20* over the internet with the researcher acting as game moderator (GM). These sessions took place over the span of a few weeks. Data was obtained from both the gameplay sessions and interviews with the learners that took place after the sessions. The study found that TRPGs such as *Microlite20* provided a wealth of interactions that allowed learners to engage in negotiation of meaning. This would suggest moving away from the "teacher as game master" approach that many researchers and teachers default to when implementing TRPGs in educational contexts.

論文要旨

この論文は、英語学習者がオンラインで卓上ロールプレイングゲーム（TRPG）を行う際使用するコミュニケーションの方法やストラテジーについて考察したものである。語学学習ツールとしての TRPG に関する研究は行われてきているものの、今後の研究や授業実践に活用できるようなデータは殆ど得られていない。そこで、本研究では、様々な方法を用い、成人英語学習者から量的・質的データを得るようにした。研究実施者がゲームモデレーター（GM）の役を担いながら、研究参加者はインターネット上でマイクロライト20という TRPG のセッションを２、３回行った。これらのセッションは、数週間に渡って行われ、データ収集はゲームプレイセッションとセッション後の学習者へのインタビュー両方において行われた。データ分析の結果、マイクロライト20のような TRPG は、学習者のインタラクティブの「意味交渉」が可能となるような場面を多く提供していることがわかった。このことは、教育の場面でロールプレイングゲーム（TRPG）を活用する際多くの研究者や教師が普通にとっている「ゲームマスターとしての教師」という立場を再考してみることの大切さを示唆している。

Key words:

TRPGs, Authentic Materials, Interaction Strategies

キーワード：

TRPGs、本格的な教材、相互作用戦略

Introduction

Tabletop Role Playing Games (TRPGs) such as *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* have been part of 'nerd' culture for almost 50 years. While plenty of research has been done on the use of games in the classroom, it has mostly focused on board and video games with little research done into TRPGs. However, it can be argued that it is easier to incorporate TRPGs into a classroom setting than it would be to use video games. Even in an online context all that is really needed to play a TRPG is a video or text-based chat system whereas video games require increasingly larger amounts of memory to run effectively.

What research there is into TRPGs in the classroom tends to take a broad focus on their implementation and their communicative nature. This project takes a more focused view, examining interaction strategies and techniques used by learners of English while playing TRPGs. After reviewing relevant articles about roleplay activities and games in an EFL context this paper will outline a research project involving eight learners of English as they navigated creating a character and playing 2-3 sessions of the TRPG *Microlite20*. With a specific eye to the kinds of interaction strategies and techniques that the participants used, as well as their overall opinions on the game.

Literature Review

Roleplay activities: Roleplay activities are one of the most versatile activities in teacher's toolbox (Garcia, 2018). Speaking in a foreign language has been tied to self-perception, to quote Hughes (2011); *'To learn to communicate expertly in another language a speaker must change and expand identity as [they learn] the cultural, social, and even political factors, which go into language choices needed to speak appropriately with a new 'voice'.'* (p.9). Therefore, roleplaying different characters and emphasising this change in identity could allow for greater development of a student's speaking ability. Quijano (2008, 2009) makes suggestions that history classes could incorporate RPG-based activities as a method of learning historical and ancient cultures and customs.

Roleplay activities have also been shown to have positive effects on learner's cultural understanding. They have been used to improve student's pragmatic and discourse knowledge by letting student's practice their interaction techniques and allows them to notice cross-cultural

differences between their culture and that of the target-language (Donahue & Heyde Parsons, 198). They can also motivate students to use their own culture as a core part of the roleplay to provide a degree of personalisation and heighten the learner's motivation (Gordon, 2012). The role a language learner takes on is meant to be one that allows them to be more receptive to the ideas and feelings of others (Heyde Parsons, 1983). A teacher might consider how the different kinds of roles performed by students would affect their learning process and their attitude in the classroom.

Fluency activities have "*remained largely unchanged over at least a thirty year period*" and consist mostly of awareness-raising exercises (Hughes, 2011, p.60) but integration of roleplay activities has improved learner's strategic competence in addition to raising knowledge of target-language vocabulary and allowing students to integrate prior-knowledge (Gordon, 2012). They also present opportunities to practice negotiation of meaning, recalling information and thinking quickly in response to unplanned and spontaneous language (Benati, 2018). This helps the students feel that they are using their English for a communicative purpose. Furthermore, roleplay exercises are easier to build upon than, for example, written dialogues, students will feel more comfortable 'taking risks' with the target language (Garcia, 2018). Sasaki (1998) found that, on average, roleplays tended to produce longer utterances and more varied interactions when compared to similar responses elicited from questionnaires.

Roleplaying games: Roleplay activities in the language classroom have been described as 'game-like' (Salisbury, 1970,). Therefore, it is possible to progress from more 'traditional' roleplay activities to TRPG-based activities as methods of language learning. The basis for some effective roleplay activities is shared with those for TRPG-based activities; having clear objectives and increasing the engagement and motivation of students (Quijano, 2009; Benati, 2018). In short, a TRPG-based activity would fall into the category of an 'open roleplay' (Benati, 2018).

In 2018, Quevedo da Rocha published the results of TRPG-based classroom activities used in a Brazillian language school. The study used "*GURPS*" (the Generic Universal Roleplaying System) as a framework for the activities but pared down the rules of *GURPS* considerably. The activity that incorporated the most TRPG-style rules required the students to pick skills, while the *GURPS* rules quantify these skills to allow for different degrees of success, this study allowed for a 'pass/ fail' system dependent on whether the player had the required skills or not (Quevedo da Rocha, 2018). This is an understandable decision given the granularity of GURPS' rules (Jackson, 2008) and aligns with observations that oral presentations prepared from 'densely informative' texts could cause and 'information overload' in students (Hughes, 2011, p.13).

Quevedo da Rocha (2018) concludes that TRPGs can be used to improve English speaking skills,

and observed improvements in fluency and accuracy, grammatical competence, and elements of peer-teaching and group coordination as the students became more aware of their classmates' strengths and limitations. However, very little qualitative or quantitative data was presented with which to reinforce this. While he may indeed be correct in his assertations, it is hard to gauge to what degree the activities helped improve his class's language ability. A certain amount of speaking in the classroom does not necessarily indicate that speaking is being taught, but rather that the teacher is *'using speaking to teach'* (Hughes, 2011, p.7-8). It is possible that the mechanics of TRPGs were taught through the medium of English, but skills related to fluency, accuracy and turn-taking were not learned by the students.

Quijano also proposed strategies for using TRPGs in the classroom, finding that upper-intermediate and advanced learners benefit most from TRPG activities as they must *'constantly in engage in unrehearsed, authentic communication'* (2009, p.2), and that if the possibility of disagreements breaks out then more advanced (typically older) learners will have the maturity to distinguish between the game and real-life (2009). The procedure outlined revolves around using the game as an authentic material, with no special attention paid to teaching specific areas of language. However, a rubric is suggested grading the students on *'(1) willingness to participate, (2) effective communication, (3) performance, [⋯] and (4) cooperation with other students to accomplish a goal.'* (2009, p.13). Quijano also extolls TRPG's virtues in fostering a collaborative, task-based learning style among players (2011).

Quevedo da Rocha's (2018) activities were primarily based on contemporary life, following the idea that roleplaying activities need to simulate reality to be effective language-learning tools (Garcia, 2018), However setting TRPGs in more "exotic" locales (space stations, fantasy kingdoms, etc.) can still provide students with exposure to, and an opportunity to use spontaneous and unrehearsed language (Quijano, 2009). While roleplays based on everyday life are more accessible to students and provide them more chance to participate fully, there is a place for "fantasy situations" if they can be used as a learning tool (Garcia, 2018).

TRPGs have also been shown to positively affect academic performance of university learners of English. Students who performed oral presentations based on TRPG sessions showed almost double the percentage increase in grades when compared to students performing presentations based on intensive reading (Quijano, 2008). It is not precisely clear what caused this improvement in performance, but it appears that TRPGs caught the attention and engagement of the students as active participants in the narrative. The study did not examine the motivational aspects of TRPGs, both the experimental and control groups had a period of sustained silent reading as part of their sessions, and it is always possible that the experimental group had more chance to practice their language skills during the TRPG sessions, and motivation was not a factor in their

improvement.

Quevedo da Rocha (2018) and Quijano's (2008) work provide a useful model for implementing TRPGs in the classroom. However, primarily focuses on children and young adults. There has not been as much research undertaken into older learners. There is also have little first-hand information from learners on how they felt about TRPG-based activities or what their explicit advantages are compared to other mediums. Nor is it clear precisely what kinds of interactions occur in-game.

Egerton (2020) presents another approach to classroom TRPGs, focusing on explicit language rather than furthering communicative competence and, like Quijano (2009), highlighting that TRPG activities have the students producing unrehearsed language spontaneously. He suggests teaching lexis in "chunks" and using them as modifiers for student' in-game actions, granting them a higher chance of success if they use the lexis being taught. More attention was drawn to how RPGs could produce higher engagement, as the classes were focusing on the activity rather than the instructions (Egerton, 2020). Egerton also touched upon TRPG activities in online, a necessity at the time due to COVID-19 (2020). The use of TRPGs in distance learning has received very little attention or focus. While the use of online resources to take notes and practice reported speech in relation to the game has been posited as a good way to use TRPGs to assess notetaking and writing skills (Quijano, 2009), very little has been published on playing TRPGs over the internet. It is worth exploring this area as it has been noted that many students feel more confident using English in an online environment (Rankin, et.al, 2006).

Studies into the usage of TRPGs in both an EFL and general educational context tend to lack differentiation between commercially available TRPGs in terms of mechanics, genre and intended gameplay style. For example, in *D&D*, each player has eighteen skills to keep track of and will call upon an individual one for climbing, fighting, looking for clues etc (Wizards Of The Coast, 2016). whereas *Honey Heist*, a small-scale game where players play as criminal bears (Hewitt, 2017), has two skills ("criminal" and "bear") acting as broad umbrellas for different actions, and additionally serving to keep track of the player's characters state of mind. Despite this, many studies use "TRPG" as an umbrella term. Whereas studies into video games in educational contexts focus on the individual game being studied, rather than a whole medium or genre (Peterson, 2012; Rankin et.al, 2006). It may be beneficial for further research to make their case for individual games or rules systems rather than attempting to generalise.

Other related studies: There is little literature on the use of TRPGs as a language learning tool. However, other studies into using TRPGs, and similar activities in non-language classrooms can provide some information. One such example would be Zalka's (2012) thesis on the use of TRPGs to

teach literature for high-school students. The findings showed that the study's participants enjoyed the game sessions, and even individuals who were not familiar with each other worked together and collaborated. This would indicate a similar activity would work well in a communicative language learning context. Observations showed "*several examples of players learning from each other instead of the Game Master*" (Zalka, 2012, pp.70), indicating that opportunities for peer-teaching could be utilised within a TRPG framework.

Peer-teaching through TRPGs may work well with a task-based approach to learning. Understanding the rules of the game, and the application of the player character's skills and abilities would work as an overall task, with smaller task-cycles being performed by the learners going through different situations present in a TRPG adventure (combat, solving puzzles, levelling up etc.) perhaps even involving separate language focuses (Harmer, 2007).

D&D, specifically has been used to teach reading skills, students with a perceived low-level reading ability spontaneously began skim-reading and checking indexes of books for specific information pertaining to their characters (Mazzanoble & Tito, 2015). This was brought about through intrinsic motivation with the students wanting to accomplish goals within the game. Interaction between students and a teacher taking on the role of GM was also used to teach tone and mood in written English. Though Mazzanoble and Tito (2015) do work for the publisher of *D&D* and are likely to exhibit some bias.

The core assumptions about TRPGs can be applied to all types of video games, as they all involve playing some kind of role (even just distinguishing between your actions in-game and out-of-game) (Unterhuber, 2011). A "gamemaster approach", where a teacher takes on a role of moderating and running the game but not taking part in the same way as the rest of the players, can even be applied to using video games as a teaching tool. Thusly, despite having limited materials on TRPGs in EFL some information from studies of computer and video games in EFL can be interpreted. Young's description of 'learning games' (Young, 2012 quoted in Steinkuehler & Squire, 2014) leaves room in its definition for TRPGs to be accepted as learning games, as they meet much of the same criteria. Studies made independently into TRPGs and video games, also highlight similar uses in context. For example, Quijano (2009) and Steinkuehler & Squire (2014) both posit the use of video games and RPGs respectively as a useful tool for presenting historical periods in context.

Rankin, et.al.'s (2006) study into the Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMO) *Ever Quest 2* examined student interactions with both players and non-player characters (NPCs). There are two major differences when examining interactions with both players and NPCs in computer game compared to those in a tabletop RPG worth noting. In most computer games an NPC is a

character with programmed and scripted responses to player input, in a TRPG the NPC actions would be dictated by a Game Master (GM) (another player who, instead of controlling a character, controls the actions of the game world itself). Thus, interaction with NPCs in a TRPG would be interactions with a real person, and could evolve and develop on the fly, whereas they will remain static in a computer game. In *Ever Quest 2*, and many other MMOs, interaction between other players is often (but not always) done through an in-game text chat. It is important to bear in mind that interactions between players in a face-to-face TRPG would allow for the players to engage in richer communication through listening to tone, rhythm, observing facial cues and hand gestures. Indeed, a comment made by students in Rankin et.al's study is that there was a lack of aural content in the game for the students to interact and listen to (2006).

Almost every tabletop TRPG will include a far richer amount of aural and spoken content than a video game. Additionally, few video games allow players to input their own dialogue or solutions to problem. Even when multiple options are available, these have usually been pre-determined by the developers. TRPGs, by virtue of all participants taking part in the narrative (Quijano 2009) present more opportunities for the learner's language use to make an impact, adding a degree of personalisation and investment not often found in video games.

From the current literature available, gaps in the field of using TRPGs for language use have been identified. Chiefly, the process of how learners of English play TRPGs in their target language is not currently known. Knowledge of what interaction strategies and techniques learners use would provide a better idea of how best to integrate and adapt TRPGs into an EFL context. This provides three research questions with which to base the research on:

Research questions: This study is guided by three questions:

1. What interaction strategies and techniques do EFL students use when playing tabletop roleplaying games over the internet?
2. What effect does playing tabletop roleplaying games over the internet have on EFL students' fluency and confidence?
3. What are EFL students' perceptions of tabletop roleplaying games over the internet as a language learning tool?

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used for data collection and analysis. The study followed a primarily theoretical framework (Hughes, 2011) to build upon claims made by other researchers. Quijano (2008, 2009, 2010) and Quevedo da Rocha's (2018) work claims that TRPGs are useful language-learning tools but there is not a huge wealth of quantitative or qualitative data from these studies. Other researchers have provided more in-depth data as the results of their own

studies, but it is still evident that little research into TRPGs as a learning tool has been conducted. Areas revolving around the specific forms of interaction that take place within TRPGs have largely been ignored. This project primarily aimed to analyse the learner's use of language within a specific context.

The Participants: In total there were eight participants. The participants came from a variety of countries and backgrounds and were majority female (1:7 split). Ages ranged from 22-45 years old. Most of the participants were in some level of higher education. The participants English level varied, although most were upper-intermediate or advanced learners. All participants lived in Scotland, except for three players based in France, the USA and England, respectively. This was not deemed to be a problem as due to COVID-19 this study was conducted online.

Choice Of Game: Kronenburg's (2012) selection criterion for using commercial video games in the language classroom was followed as closely as possible. Several of the criteria did not apply to TRPGs; by their nature the participants have more input into the games' goals, content and narrative than video games traditionally do and there was no syllabus with which the game needed to be integrated into. A fantasy game was picked as this is the "traditional" idea of what a TRPG is. Additionally, as some of the participants had experience playing fantasy video games, it was felt this genre would be easier for them to follow basic concepts such as hit points, spell slots and enchanted equipment.

Microlite20 was chosen for a variety of reasons. It can be argued that all TRPGs provide a high-level of multimodal communication compared to video games (Quijano, 2009). All communication is with real people, rather than scripted interactions. All TRPGs can be argued to have a great deal of agency for players to customise their characters, *Microlite20* specifically provides a tremendous number of options for character customisation all within one book. In contrast, the game mechanics are very light, originally designed to fit on a single page of A4 paper. The game encourages the players to complete a task by picking one of four "Skills" and three "Stats" to add a bonus based on which two they think are appropriate and to give a reason for why. It was believed this would allow for more learner engagement than just picking a skill off of a list. As *Microlite20* is free financial concerns were no longer. Certain rules that it was felt inhibited character versatility; namely that certain classes were unable to use certain kinds of armour or weapons were removed.

First Interview and character creation: First, each participant took part in a one-to-one semi-structured interview with the researcher. Each participant was asked questions about their experience learning English, their use of English in everyday life and their experiences playing games. This data was used to give an insight into what aspects of the gameplay sessions would influence their enjoyment of the game, and how their learning experience affects their belief in the

game's validity as a learning tool.

Immediately after these interview sessions, the researcher helped the participants create a character using the *Microlite20* rules. After they had completed their characters each participant chose their starting equipment. With the exception of one face-to-face interview, each participant did this online using a video chat program. The researcher provided the participants with a copy of their character sheet after this session concluded.

The eight characters and their players were: **"Creator"** (an elf rogue played by a male Korean PhD student), **"Superman"** (a dwarf wizard played by a female Chinese master's student), **"Willa"** (a tiefling (half-demon) wizard played by a non-binary Portuguese master's student), **"Hazelnut-Milk"** (an elf mage played by a female Vietnamese master's student), **"Saryas Qaniser"** (an elf mage played by a female French university graduate), **"Radley"** (a male elf cleric played by a Czech woman based in the U.S.A), **"Angela"** (a human paladin played by a female Portuguese university student), **"Era"** (an elf

Fig.1 *""Radley" drew art of the three members of her group at various points in the game"* **Image published with permission of the artist.**

mage played by a female Brazilian master's student). To maintain anonymity, the player's characters will be used in place of their actual names.

Gameplay sessions: The participants were structured into three groups of three. As there were a total of eight participants, one participant ("Willa") took part in two groups. The criteria for who was placed in which group was primarily based on availability during the week, but some consideration was given to whether the participants knew each other or not. Each group ended up with two people who knew each other, and one other person. Group A consisted of "Creator", "Superman" and "Saryas", Group B consisted of "Willa", "Angela" and "Radley" and Group C consisted of "Willa", "Era" and "Hazelnut-Milk".

The groups met online; it was intended to conduct all the meetings over the web conferencing app Zoom. However, one participant expressed reservations towards using Zoom, so one group (Group B) met on Discord. Another group encountered errors with Zoom and conducted most of their sessions over Facebook's video chat. These platforms were ones that all members of the group had access to and were comfortable using.

An advantage of games as a learning tool is that they already follow a pedagogical framework; games will start off simple getting progressively more difficult, while introducing new mechanics

and gameplay elements as the game moves forward (Steinkuehler & Squire, 2014). The gameplay scenario was based on the *"Five Room Dungeon"* (Jones, 2017) as it allowed for the introduction of *Microlite 20's* gameplay elements in a developing difficulty level. It also showcased the game's different elements independently, examining what interactions the participants had in different scenarios and whether one particular "focus" would be most beneficial for introducing TRPGs into the language classroom.

The scenario involved first a battle with two animated statues to enter a castle, a task that required investigating a seemingly empty room for items that would help in the next puzzle, a roleplay related exercise with "Jeff", a skeleton merchant that could give extra equipment and could be convinced to warn the party about upcoming dangers, and lastly a "boss" battle with a giant golem and a puzzle involving decoy treasure chests. These sessions were recorded for later analysis.

Post-interview: Interviews were conducted after the game sessions to get an idea of how the participants felt about the game mechanics and their perceptions of TRPGs in a learning environment. These interviews were semi-structured. One participant was unavailable to take part in a post-interview. Notes were taken during the interview, and the interviews were recorded for later analysis.

Data Analysis: Qualitative data for the study primarily came from insights of the participants during the interviews, character-creation and gameplay sessions. Data from the interviews and character creation sessions was recorded and transcribed for a more in-depth analysis. This data was used to answer the second and third research questions.

Goffman's (1969) strategic interaction model was used as a basis in order to define and quantify conversational and interactional instances and strategies. As Goffman's moves best fit into situations where players are competing against each other or attempting to save face it was decided to create a different categorisation system to better reflect the participant's interactions. To this end elements of Goffman's strategic interaction theories and the Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) were adapted to give a more in-depth list of potential moves, and to allow for a more flexible interpretation of what the interactional moves were in aid of, and whether they succeeded at these goals.

The moves were categorised as:
- **Action statements** – these were any statements of an action that the participant wanted to do. Usually declarations of what their character was going to do within the game ("I want to attack", "I'll follow her" etc.).

- **Requests for action** － requests for action were direct requests for another participant to do something. These usually took the form of in-game actions directed towards other participants ("You should use a spell", "Can you heal me?" etc.). However, some were out-of-character statements directed towards the researcher or other participants ("Can you show me that sheet?", "I can't see the screen") etc.

- **Suggestions for action** － Similar to requests for action, but more open-ended and less direct. Whereas requests for action were in the moment, such as requiring aid during combat or puzzles, suggestions for action were often taken to decide on where the group should go or how they should start or approach a less-intense situation such as navigation or communication.

- **Clarification requests** － these were requests to clarify previous statements, such as information that had not been properly expressed by the researcher or another participant. Or to double-check understanding of the game's rules and mechanics.

- **Clarification statements** － clarification statements were the inverse of clarification requests; responses to requests for clarification or spontaneous reformulations, or additions to previous utterances that provide additional context or clarity.

- **Information requests** － information requests were requests for information that had not been explicitly mentioned.

- **Information Provisions** － information provisions were statements that provided information.

- **Statements of understanding** － statements such as "yes", "okay" and "I see" were used to express that information was understood.

- **Other** － this category was used to log interactions that did not contribute to the overall interactions of the groups. These included observations by one participant that were not picked up on or elaborated upon by another or jokes and comments that were primarily dealing with situations outside of the game.

These moves were itemised and tallied. This data was gathered primarily to answer the first research question, but also whether students made more advanced utterances or interaction techniques over the course of the sessions and could thus use them to answer the second research question. It should be noted that "naive moves" where the participant made an interaction move that they were not fully aware they were making, were also counted. This was in order to provide more usable data (Goffman, 1969). It was also decided that if it was obvious enough to infer that a specific interaction was a "control move" (Goffman, 1969) (where the speaker adopts an indirect form of speaking or a different action in order to achieve an action) then the move would be counted as the intended action rather than the action it was phrased as. This matched well with the CCSARP's view of requesting strategies; what Goffman calls a "control move" can be categorised as a request made on the indirect level (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

When observing requests for action and clarification it was decided that the primary focus would be on observing the "head act" of a request (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) unless it was considered a "control move". The primary focus of this study was on the interactions themselves and not the way in which they were made.

During the first gameplay session it was noted very early on that the vast majority of interactions were happening "out-of-character", with participants referring to each other by their own names rather than that of their characters and addressing each other for information explicitly on their character sheets or that they could recall. Even when "in-character" interaction was observed the lines were somewhat blurred between, making distinguishing between these interactions even harder. To that end, no distinction between "in-character" or "out-of-character" interactions were made.

The sessions were recorded so that the researcher could tally up different interactional "moves" that took place in the character-creation and gameplay sessions.

Validity concerns: There were a few concerns about the validity of this study. There were some concerns towards violence and conflict in the game. It was decided that every encounter the players faced could be engaged combatively or in a peaceful manner such as through engaging in stealth or diplomacy. The players also never went up against living opponents instead fighting against magically animated statues or objects.

Originally, a conversation class taught by the researcher were going to be the participants for this study. However due to the UK going into lockdown this became unfeasible. Not all members of the class were available, and so other participants were found meaning the group had slightly skewed profiles compared to those of the conversation class, it also meant the groups were a little less familiar with each other than they would have been otherwise.

Lockdown also necessitated moving the study online, as mentioned above the study took place on three platforms. While the focus of this study is on the interaction actions participants made, it should be noted that all three chat programs possess different functions. The biggest difference comes from discord, the platform used by Group B. Discord allows the implementation of a short program where players can roll a die themselves, whereas the other groups had to use a random number generator operated by the researcher. This could have led to a difference in the overall amount of communication between groups about dice rolls.

In addition to dice, other tactile materials typically used in TRPGs were unavailable. The participants were provided with character sheets detailing their characters statistics, equipment

and abilities, but these were digital rather than physical copies. This may have negatively affected the motivation of more tactile or visual learners as they did not have physical objects to use or images to look at that may have otherwise helped their engagement and understanding of the game sessions.

Results

Overview of data: Seven gameplay sessions were held. Groups A and C played twice, and group B played three times. During data analysis it became clear that "Willa's" participation in group C indicated she was using knowledge from her sessions as part of group B. It was decided to not tally group C sessions for data related to interaction moves but were kept and examined for any specific utterances that could provide insight into feelings towards the gameplay sessions.

Interaction Moves In Group A: Group A logged 308 total interaction moves across two sessions; 173 in session 1 and 127 in session 2. Most of these moves were made by Creator's player (126) followed closely by Saryas's player (125) and finally Superman's player (57).

The most common type of move observed over group A's sessions were statements of action (80 total instances) followed by statements of understanding (63 total instances) clarification requests (54 total instances), clarifying statements (46 total instances) information provisions (17 total instances), suggestions of action (16 total instances) and requests for action (11 total instances). No information requests were observed over either session. A total of 15 actions across both sessions were categorised as "other".

There were less moves made in session 2 than there were in session 1, both in terms of total number of moves and moves made by individual participants. However, individual players did produce more utterances of certain interaction types in session 2 than they did in session 1. Both Saryas' player and Superman's player produced more statements of understanding, clarification statements and statements of action in session 2 than they did in session 1. See Fig.2 for further details.

Interaction Moves In Group B: Group B logged 993 interactions across 3 sessions; 285 in session 1, 361 in session 2 and 347 in session 3. Most of these moves were made by Angela's player (444), followed by Willa's player (375) and then Radley's player (174).

The most common type of move observed in Group B's sessions were clarification statements (247 total instances). This was followed by statements of action (219 total instances), requests for clarification (158 total instances), statements of understanding (103 total instances), suggestions for action (84 total instances), requests for action (43 total instances), requests for information (9 total
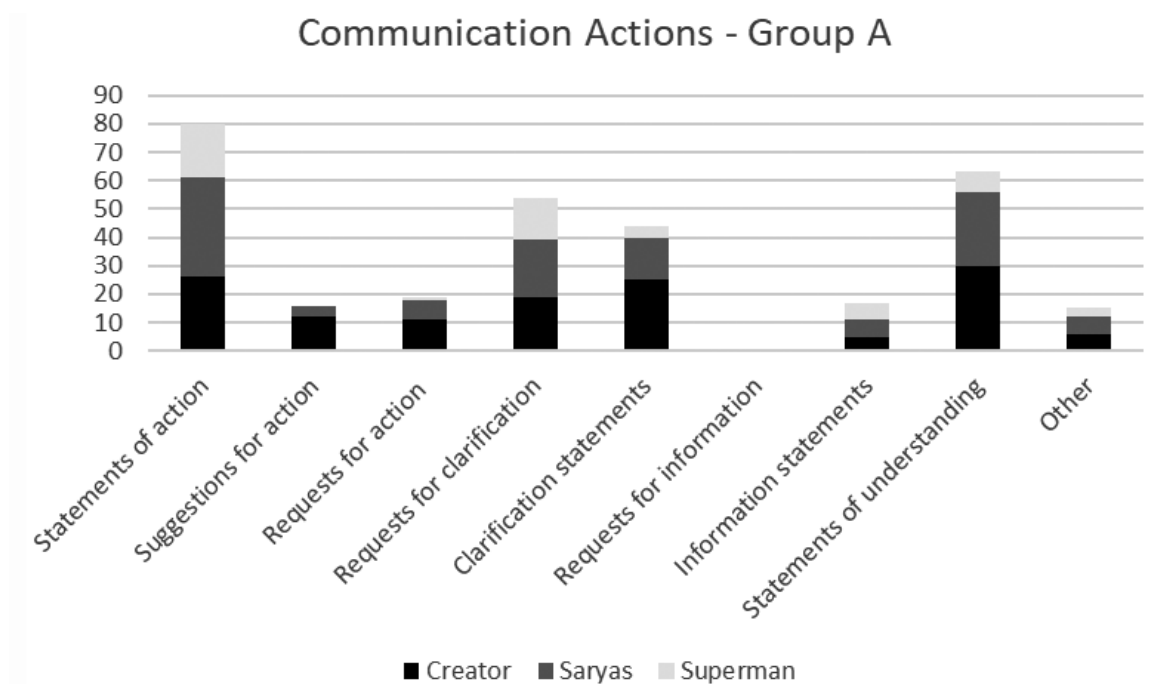
Fig.2: Breakdown of interaction moves by Group A, note that no requests for information were observed.

instances) and information provisions (6 total statements). A total of 124 statements across all three sessions were categorised as "other. See Fig.3 for a further details.

Observations during game sessions: The participant's levels of motivation throughout the game were also observed. The participants had no extrinsic reasons to play the game, levels of intrinsic motivation from sustained interest in the game (Zalka, 2012) fluctuated. Some participants were generally positive, others were less enthused. The most motivating aspects for learners appeared to be character creation and interactions with other players and NPCs. Combat seemed to be the least motivating element. Low dice rolls also seemed to frustrated participants.

Two participants of Group B worked on craft projects related to the game in-between sessions. "Angela" used modelling clay to create models of her character, "Radley" drew art of the three members of her group at various points in the game (See **Fig.1**, **Fig.4** and **Fig.5**). This indicates that interest and motivation stemming from TRPGs is linked to the personalisation aspects it presents to learners rather than game mechanics.

Different learning styles and group dynamics emerged when looking at the experiment from a task-based learning perspective. At some point in the sessions, every group had a discussion about what spells and abilities they possessed as a group, and how they could use them to solve certain problems.
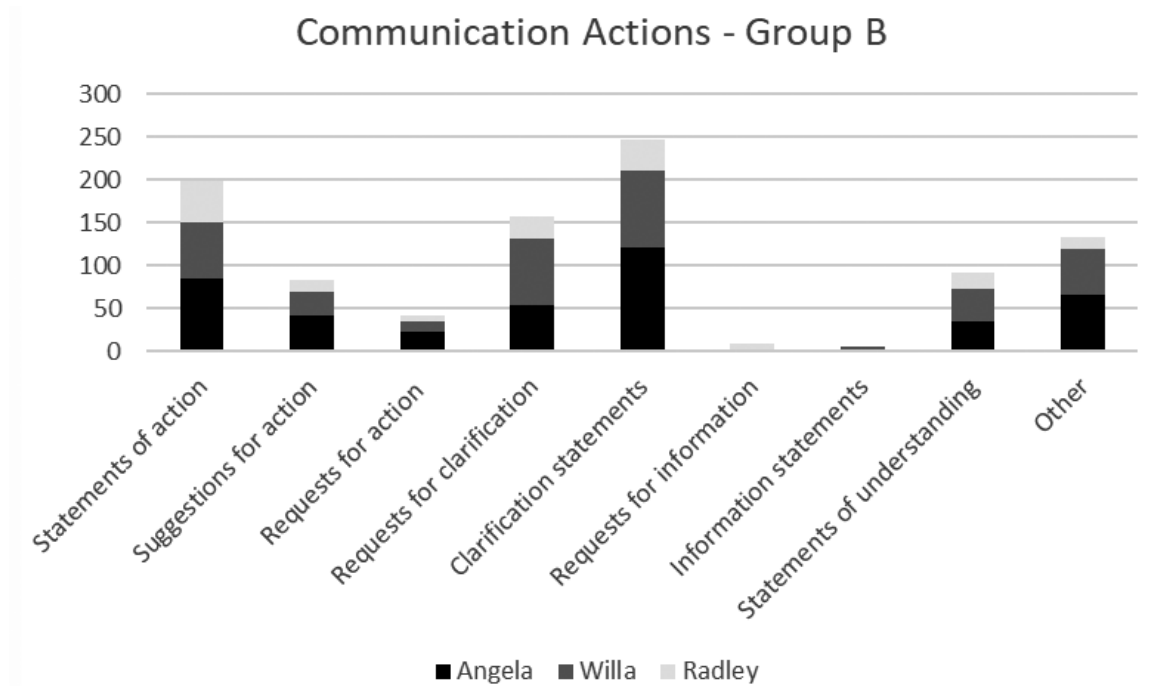
Fig.3: Breakdown of interaction moves by Group B.

For example; while Group A were trying to figure out how to safely descend a staircase, "Creator" opened the other participant's character sheets and was telling participant's what spells were available to them. Creator's player took on the role of a facilitator and involver (Scrivener, 2005) as he begins nudging his fellow participants towards an option without directly suggesting or initiating it.

Creator:　　　*Just, I think, [Superman] and [Saryas] choose one of them. One of- feather fall or floating disk. Or … floating disk, I think.*

Researcher:　　*Okay.*

Creator:　　　*What do you want to choose? One of them?*

Saryas:　　　*Can I use a spell, no?*

Creator:　　　*A spell? Can you use a spell to be safe on the ground?*

Researcher:　　*Yeah, uh, feather fall basically means when you drop you float gently, rather than fall.*

Creator:　　　*That is feather fall?*

Researcher:　　*Yeah.*

Creator:　　　*Okay, yeah, yeah. [Saryas], there is feather fall.*

Group B, had a similar conversation upon realising the room full of treasure they entered might be booby-trapped. This time the participants asked each other what they were capable of doing rather than checking each other's character sheets. In this scenario "Angela" is working as a facilitator and involver (Scrivener, 2005), being more explicit in her attempts to elicit reactions from her fellow participants.

Angela:　　　　*Oh my God, we need to investigate the statue ··· oh Jesus.*

Researcher:　　*Pardon?*

Willa:　　　　*What?*

Angela:　　　　*We didn't investigated [sic] the statue, we're so dumb. We just went into the room like "Ka-ching! Ka-ching!". Guys, we didn't investigate the statue.*

Researcher:　　*Would you like to investigate the statue?*

Angela:　　　　*I'm scared now! Uh, [Willa] do you have any spell or anything about statues?*

Willa:　　　　*Um, I just have a spell to, uh, detect magic. Can I detect magic coming from the statue? Is it magical?*

Fig.4 *"Radley" drew art of the three members of her group at various points in the game.'* Image published with permission of the artist.

No major improvement in fluency or accuracy was observed over the course of game sessions. The sessions took place over a short time frame, and primarily used grammatical functions that the learners were familiar with.

Post-game interviews: Participants were mostly positive towards the sessions. Common factors towards their enjoyment included the teamwork and cooperative aspects of the game, with participants enjoying taking on a collaborative role and working together with the rest of the other players. Some players felt it was hard to interact with other players and form strategies. They felt like they were going along with a plan, not contributing towards it. It was suggested that more overt collaborative elements, perhaps using skills some characters had but others did not, could improve teamwork and co-operation within the game. It was noted by one player that as she was already friends with one participant, but didn't know the other, that their session was a bit awkward and that player got "carried along".

Some players found the game unstructured and did not know what their goal was. They suggested a more structured plot and items they collected being used to solve puzzles encountered later. players similarly found their greater goal unclear and were not sure what they were supposed to be doing. One participant felt time limits could have helped the groups collaborate more by "forcing" them to communicate and think of plans more quickly. Several participants found the dice-rolling mechanic frustrating, with low rolls making them feel they were not making progress. One participant commented that the rules were somewhat difficult to understand, but they picked them up as they went along. They suggested going over the rules in-depth beforehand may prevent this confusion. Other learners had similar problems, they felt they

did not have the chance to go over the rules in the gameplay sessions and felt that they were not picking the mechanics of the game up. Many of the players who did not play TRPGs for fun found the rules overly complicated. Those who were more familiar with RPGs found the rules easy to understand compared to other games. However, they acknowledged that other participants had some difficulties with the mechanics and suggested the rules should be laid out more clearly, and accommodations made for different language levels.

Participants felt *Microlite20* did not work as a learning tool but offered suggestions to improve it. Most commonly they suggested overt language use in the game rather than just as a communication method. One learner suggested that puzzles based around English use and getting the correct answer would not only provide an explicit learning opportunity but would fix frustrations learners had with low dice. One participant felt the game could work for teaching lexis, as they learned a new word (plinth) through the game. They suggested that more structured input to teach lexical sets through repetition may work well with the game. Participants generally agreed it was a good activity for higher level students and upwards due to the more abstract language use. All participants felt the rules needed to be laid out clearer to aid in understanding.

The participants generally did not enjoy the study being online and would have preferred to have played in-person. Common problems were the difficulty of communicating online due to lag, audio quality and the lack of being able to use body language, mime or emotions to express their meaning. Another player said that they would have been able to better act as their character if they played face-to-face. The lack of visual feedback was another issue, one participant said that maps, health bars and pictures would have not only helped visualise the setting but better inform decision making. Another common issue was a lack of tactile materials, some players suggested using cards with their spells and abilities written on them to help itemise what they could do or maps to help figure out where the participants were in relation to objects and monsters. Participants did have some positive feelings, one participant was happy that they could remain anonymous and felt more confident talking with their camera off, another noted they could use translation software for unfamiliar terms.

Discussion Of Findings

What interaction strategies and techniques do EFL students use when playing tabletop roleplaying games over the internet? The most observed kinds of action from group A and group B's gameplay sessions were clarification statements, action statements and clarification requests. The abundance of both requests for clarification and statements that reformulate and clarify previous statements would indicate that *Microlite20* provides a good ground for employing negotiation of meaning (Long, 1983). It could be argued that requests and suggestions for action be included as further evidence of negotiation of meaning happening within the game. These moves

can leave room open for participants to not just expand on the details of plans as a group, but also to fill in gaps in knowledge. For example, if one participant did not know the proper words to fully voice an action suggestion in English, they would need to reformulate it without changing the overall meaning (Long, 1983; van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2020).

Comparing action statements to requests and suggestions for action would seem to indicate that participants in TRPGs tend to focus more on individual actions than discussing group actions. However, it is important to remember that statements such as "I agree, let's do that" and "I'll follow her" were counted as action statements. As were action statements that followed requests and suggestions for action from other players. This would appear to reinforce the findings of Quevedo da Rocha (2018) and Quijano (2009) that TRPGs provide a good model for task-based learning and problem-solving. While the game present in this study was not structured in a way to properly take advantage of this, the findings appear to support Quevedo da Rocha (2018)'s use of TRPG activities in small groups in order to allow for a greater level of student interaction and problem-solving.

The relatively low number of requests or provisions of information among the data may indicate that TRPGs would be ill-suited to be adapted into information gap activities. But some participants were observed to make suggestions, clarification statements and action suggestions regarding abilities on their and other participant's character sheets. This would seem to indicate that TRPGs could be used to create information-gap activities, either having the participants communicate with each other in order to complete a task or simply to ascertain information about each other's characters similar to the ways in which Quijano proposed running his sessions in small groups of players interacting with each other (Quijano, 2009).

Statements of understanding were difficult to interpret. It could not be said for certainn whether they indicated understanding or whether they were face-saving measures (Goffman, 1969). "Other" statements are similarly difficult to interpret, but given that they included utterances such as jokes, observations and expressions of frustration (among others) would indicate that TRPGs are an environment that provides meaningful communicative input and a chance to use language that is rarely used in a classroom environment (Quijano, 2009 and 2010).

What effect does playing tabletop roleplaying games over the internet have on EFL students' fluency and confidence? No major data that supported the idea that playing TRPGs improved learner fluency was found. Nor was any major data that supported the idea that playing TRPGs raised learners general confidence in English. The participant's confidence with the rules of *Microlite20* were seen to improve over the course of the sessions. It could be argued that the decrease in clarification requests in subsequent sessions indicate learner's becoming more

accustomed to the rules. However, as all other interaction moves decreased as well, it would be unwise to assume that a decrease in clarification requests indicates an improved understanding of *Microlite20*'s mechanics. Statements by participants over game sessions did indicate that they gained an increased understanding of the rules through repetition.

What are EFL students' perceptions of tabletop roleplaying games over the internet as a language learning tool? The participants had mixed views of tabletop roleplaying games as language learning tools. These opinions ranged fro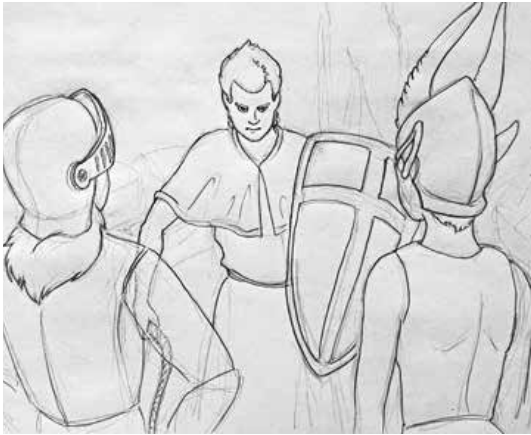m supportive to dismissive. Most agreed that *Microlite20* would require some tweaking before it could be effectively used in a classroom environment. This is in keeping with Quevedo da Rocha's (2018) suggestions for modifying the framework of TRPGs into more small-scale activities.

Fig.5, *""Radley" drew art of the three members of her group at various points in the game"* Image published with permission of the artist.

Quijano (2009) discusses that a certain level of emotional maturity is required from learners when using TRPGs that may involve interpersonal conflict, players need to be able to differentiate between the actions of their fellow players and those of their characters. During sessions, minor interpersonal conflict was observed among group B's characters. However, there was a clear distinction that it was "Radley" who was lying to the party, and not his player. Radley's player made sure her fellow participants knew that he was lying, but she expected them not to use this information to "spoil the story". *Microlite20*'s rules allow players to roll a dice and determine whether or not their character can perceive truth in a statement, providing an extra "buffer" between discomfort.

Conclusion

Summary of findings: The findings of this study show evidence to support the idea that *Microlite20* provides EFL learners with a tool that generates a significant amount of unrehearsed and unprompted spoken English. This is in line with the findings of Quijano (2008, 2009 and 2010) and Quevedo da Rocha's (2018) studies. Of the interactions observed, there were a high number of statements that clarified and explained actions and situations. This indicates that *Microlite20* could be used to structure language-learning activities revolving around task-based learning and negotiation of meaning. Additionally, participants provided insight into what areas of *Microlite20* should be emphasised or improved to ensure EFL learners get the most value from it. This included motivation, engagement and specific contexts or learning aims students felt would be well-suited for the game.

While this study focused on *Microlite20* and cannot be said to speak for the interactions that would occur in every TRPG, it could provide a basic framework of how to better frame TRPG based exercises in an educational setting. It also highlights certain areas for future research into the use of TRPGs as a learning tool both in online and face-to-face environments. The findings below apply to *Microlite20* specifically and TRPGs in a more general sense.

Recommendations for TRPGs as learning tools: Many clarification requests in the study were directed towards the researcher (who was acting as GM). It can be inferred that to integrate negotiation of meaning most effectively into a TRPG it would be best to move away from the "teacher as GM" approach that has been the norm in studies of TRPGs in the classroom and do more work encouraging learners to take the role of GM within TRPG-based activities. Ideally, this will maximise the elements of peer-teaching and negotiation of meaning that the games can offer the English classroom.

These findings recommend that when using *Microlite20* in the classroom, learners should be given as much free-reign as possible. This allows them a greater degree of control over the game and the direction of the plot, gives them a greater feeling of autonomy and allows for more personalisation. It may even allow learners to explore elements of the target language that appeal to them most. In a virtual environment, it is best to use a platform that allows learners themselves to initiate actions related to game mechanics (dice rolls etc.). Again, this gives players a greater impact on the game and feeling of autonomy.

Recommendations For Future Research: A major limitation of this study was COVID-19 requiring it to be conducted online. TRPGs are considered very tactile games (using lots of dice, miniatures, notebooks etc.). Participants who are more tactile or visual learners may not have gotten the most they could have out of the gameplay sessions. Conducting the study in a face-to-face environment could provide an interesting comparison, especially if materials that represented the game world were used, as this may produce different kinds of statements if less clarification about the environment around the participants is needed. As might another online study using a program like Roll 20 that is specifically designed to visualise a TRPG environment.

As mentioned under the recommendations for using TRPGs as learning tools; it may prove beneficial to have learners themselves act as the GM and take charge of TRPG activities. In theory, this would provide a good framework for peer-teaching and negotiation of meaning, it is first prudent to perform a few studies examining what kind of interactions take place in that scenario, whether students enjoy acting as a GM, and the feasibility of such an idea in a classroom setting before starting any classroom practice.

Microlite20 was used for this study, but not all TRPGs follow the same rules or use the same mechanics. Thus, other TRPGs may have learners produce different speech acts and perform different interaction strategies. It would be worth conducting studies with other TRPGs to see if they produce any majorly different interactions or speech acts from *Microlite20*. Thus, providing data into whether specific game mechanics or situations produce specific linguistic interaction methods and help tailor TRPG activities for specific classroom needs.

The next step in researching tabletop roleplaying games as a language-learning tool would be to conduct a similar study face-to-face rather than virtually. This would confirm whether the interaction methods used are the same across both contexts. From there, it can be better surmised what kind of linguistic elements can be best incorporated into TRPG-style activities for use in language teaching and then develop the different ways and roles with which learners can use TRPGs to improve their language ability.

References

Benati, A. (2018). Role Play. In: Lionatas, J.I. & DelliCarpini, M. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Blum-Kulka, S. & Oshtain, E. (1984) Requests and Apologies: A Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP). *Applied Linguistics*. Volume 5 (Issue 3). pp. 196-213

Donahue, M. & Heyde Parsons, A. (1982). The Use of Roleplay to Overcome Cultural Fatigue. *TESOL Quarterly*. Volume 16 (Issue 3), pp. 359-365.

Egerton, J. [International House World Organisation] (2020, May 19). *ELT RPG - Games with Aims – James Egerton, IH Rome Manzoni* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgkLpPJLeoQ&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1xTRvMc UILNnElHKlXLHHHnmvwRBNMQ3X3XPYC5eW6Zd0MZ5OMwj0RNLA. Last accessed 13/11/2022.

Garcia, M.N. (2018). Using Dialogues, Role Plays, Songs, and Poetry in Teaching Speaking. In: Lionatas, J.I. & DelliCarpini, M. *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Gordon, T. (2012). Using Role-Play to Foster Transformational and Social Action Multiculturalism in the ESL Classroom. *TESOL Journal*. Volume 3 (Issue 4), pp. 698-721.

Harmer, J. (2007). *How To Teach English*. 2nd ed. Harlow: Longman.

Hewitt, G. (2017). *Honey Heist*. Itch.io. https://gshowitt.itch.io/honey-heist. Last accessed 20/09/2022.

Heyde Parsons, A. (1983). Comments on Meghan Donahue and Adelaide Heyde Parsons', "The Use of Roleplay to Overcome Cultural Fatigue" (TESOL Quarterly, September 1982). Reply to Alptekin. *TESOL Quarterly*. Volume 17 (Issue 1), pp. 142-143.

Hughes, R. (2011). *Teaching And Researching Speaking*. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson.

Jackson, S., Punch, S., Pulver, D. (2008). *GURPS Basic Set Characters*. 4th ed. Austin: Steve Jackson Games.

Jones, C. (2017). *How Making Up A Dungeon On The Fly Is As Simple As Counting To 5*. Available: https://nerdsonearth.com/2017/12/5-room-dungeon/. Last accessed 15/07/2020.

Kronenburg, F. (2012). Selection Criteria for Commercial Off-the-Shelf (COTS) Video Games for Language Learning. *International Association for Language Learning Technology*. Volume 42 (Issue 2), pp.52-78.

Long, M. (1983). Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics*. Volume 4 (Issue 2), pp. 126-141.

Mazzanoble, S. & Tito, G. (2015). *D&D In The Classroom*. Available: https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/dd-classroom. Last accessed 11/06/2020.

Mazzanoble, S. & Tito, G. (2018). *Kade Wells and Sarah Roman on Teaching With D&D*. Available: https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/kade-wells-and-sarah-roman-teaching-dd. Last accessed 11/06/2020.

Peterson, M. (2012). Learner interaction in a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG): A sociocultural discourse analysis. ReCALL. Volume 24 (Issue 3), pp.361-380.

Quevedo da Rocha, F. (2018). Roll a D6: a role-playing game based approach to the EFL classroom. Brazilian English Language Teaching Journal (BELT). Volume 9 (Issue 2), pp.535-546.

Quijano, J. (2008). How Tabletop Role Playing Games Affect Student Academic Performance. *Revista Paideia Puertorriqueña*. Issue 1 (Volume 3).

Quijano, J. (2009). Tabletop Role Playing Games. In: Andrade, M. *Classroom Practices: Language Games*. Baltimore: TESOL Press. pp.61-70.

Quijano, J. (2010). English Dungeons and Dragons: Tabletop Role Playing Games in the ESL Classroom. *PRTESOL-Gram*. Volume 37 (Issue 2), pp.9-11.

Rankin, Y., Gold, R. & Gooch, B. (2006). 3D Role-Playing Games as Language Learning Tools. *Eurographics*. Volume 25 (Issue 3).

Salisbury, L. (1970). Role Playing: Rehearsal for Language Change. *TESOL Quarterly*. Volume 4 (Issue 4), pp. 331-336.

Sasaki, M. (1998). Investigating EFL students' production of speech acts: A comparison of production questionnaires and role plays. Journal Of Pragmatics. Volume 30 (Issue 4), pp. 457-484.

Scrivener, J (2005). Learning Teaching. 2nd ed. Oxford: Macmillan.

Stukey, R. (2020). Microlite20 RPG Collection (2020 Edition). DriveThruRPG. Available: https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/311250/Microlite20-RPG-Collection-2020-Edition. Last accessed: 20/09/2022.

Unterhuber, T. (2011). The Gamemaster-Approach To Game Studies. In: Evans, M. *Video Game Studies: Concepts, Cultures And Communication*. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press. pp.31-37.

Van der Zwaard, R. & Bannink, A. (2020). Negotiation of Meaning in Digital L2 Learning

Interaction: Task Design Versus Task Performance. *TESOL Quarterly*. Volume 54 (Issue 1), pp. 56-89.

Wizards Of The Coast. (2016). *Systems Reference Document (SRD)*. Dungeons And Dragons. Available: https://dnd.wizards.com/resources/systems-reference-document. Last accessed: 20/09/2022

Zalka, C.V. (2012). *Adventures In The Classroom Creating Role- Playing Games Based On Traditional Stories For The High School Curriculum*. Masters Thesis. East Tennessee State University.

As mentioned in the body of the text, the illustrator of **Figure 1, Figure 4**, and **Figure 5** ("Radley") was a participant in this project. Permission was obtained from the researcher to reproduce her images; however, she has not been referenced in the reference section so as to maintain her anonymity.

brooks ［@］ tc.nagasaki-gaigo.ac.jp