

Chapter 18

A Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game and Its Effects on Interaction in the Second Language: Play, Interact, and Learn

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ABSTRACT

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) have been dramatically used in language education and identified in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) research as playing a central role in second language acquisition (SLA). This chapter addresses the integration of a commercially developed MMORPG Ragnarok Online into a language course as a basis for digital game-based language learning and reports on its effects on second language (L2) interaction. Thirty Thai learners of English who enrolled in a 15-week university language course were required to complete 18 face-to-face classroom lessons and six gameplay sessions. Learners' language use in both text and voice chats during gameplay was recorded and analysed to measure the effects of the game. The findings show that participating in MMORPG resulted in a significantly more considerable increase in L2 interaction that used a wider range of discourse functions compared with English interaction in the classroom. The authors discuss some of the theoretical and pedagogical implications of these findings.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5140-9.ch018

INTRODUCTION

From the earliest days of the use of computers in language education, there has been an interest in the pedagogical potential of digital games. Although in the popular media games are generally seen as useful for entertainment only, recent research has convincingly shown their educational benefits (for a review, see Whitton, 2014). As a result, the use of games is becoming more commonplace in classrooms at all levels, including in language education (Peterson, 2016; Sykes, 2015). Ongoing research has demonstrated the effectiveness of digital games in language learning and teaching, as evidenced in journal articles, book chapters, and dedicated volumes (e.g. Airong, 2017; Cornillie, Thorne, & Desmet, 2012; Dixon & Christison, 2017; Jinjing, 2016; Lee & Pass, 2014; Peterson, 2013, 2016; Reinders, 2012; Sykes, Reinhardt, & Liskin-Gasparro, 2013). These studies have shown that digital games have design features that align well with Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, and that they are beneficial to second language (L2) learning. One particularly promising connection is with research on interaction as digital games have been recognized as having great potential to engage learners and facilitate real-time L2 interaction with peers and other game players, including native speakers (Gee, 2012; Peterson, 2010b, 2016). Nevertheless, what has not been established conclusively and examined empirically is if playing digital games leads to increased L2 interaction among English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in both quantitative and qualitative aspects. In the following sections, we will briefly discuss the role of interaction in L2 acquisition before looking at previous research into the use of digital games to provide opportunities for language learning and interaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Interaction in L2 Acquisition

Interaction (i.e. communicating with others) has been argued to play an important role in facilitating the language acquisition process (Long, 1981). Considerable attention has been paid to the role of interaction in maximizing the conditions considered theoretically beneficial for SLA, such as providing learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input (see Krashen, 1985), engage in negotiation of meaning (see Pica, 1994), notice gaps in their L2 knowledge and obtain negative feedback about language use (see Schmidt, 1990), and produce output (see Swain, 1985). It is now widely acknowledged that output and interaction play an important part in learners' eventual success in acquiring a second language (Ellis, 2008). In order for effective learning to occur, it is crucial for language learners to engage in language production; to use the language to communicate, rather than merely to process language input (Ellis, 2005). It is therefore important to identify environments that provide opportunities for language learners to interact more in the L2.

However, encouraging interaction is one of the greatest challenges for language teachers, particularly in foreign language settings where learners typically have opportunities to practise the L2 in the classroom only, and have limited or no opportunities for L2 use in everyday life (Barrs, 2012). In EFL settings such as Thailand (the setting for this study), the quality and amount of English interaction in classes is disappointing. Such challenges occur for a number of reasons, but primarily because the medium of instruction (at all levels of education in the English classroom) is usually conducted in Thai (Khamkhien, 2010) and even when English is used, Thai EFL learners are notoriously reticent when it comes to communicating

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