

Digital Games in Language Learning and Teaching

(Book Review)

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There is an increasing interest in the use of digital games in language learning and teaching. Unsurprisingly this book was published simultaneously with *Language at Play: Digital Games in Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning (Theory and Practice in Second Language Classroom Instruction)* (Sykes et al., 2012). In a way, both intend to cover a gap in language learning that was grasped by different researchers (Garcia-Carbonell et al, 2001; Gee, 2003) but required a conceptual framework of application. In this sense, the book has been clearly divided into two different but mutually dependent parts: part I, “From theory to practice”, which comprises chapters one to four, and Part II, “From practice to theory” that includes chapters five to ten. The approach is rather academic and more oriented towards general language arts – with some exceptions- than towards foreign or second language learning and teaching, so some of the readers may somehow be surprised by the fact that it would have been more appropriate to mention that it was intended for first languages than for second. Said so, the book is quite well theory-practice balanced and one may feel that there is a clear practical purpose in this volume.

Some of the outstanding premises in the book are, first, that learning through games, especially through the multiplayer online role-play ones and the commercial off-the-shelf ones, is mostly a problem based approach; second, that it is necessary to provide learners “tools with which to solve the problems” (page xii); and, third, that learning, like gaming, is a circular process of error-feedback-reconstruction which requires the continuous reconstruction of the learner’s knowledge. Thus, the book is clearly cognitive-oriented. Indeed, like any other cognitive approaches (p. 64) it also pays some attention to how learning is constructed through interaction especially through communities of practice (chapter 3). This is especially remarkable and visible when multiplayer modes occur (chapter 4). One of the ideas that is basic to this cognitivist approach is that games provide the player (or student) with a rich environment from which cognition is developed but is also enriched by the provision of rich input provided within the scenario itself (Smith, 2004). Thus self-directed learning is facilitated by “the adequate support, scaffolded reflection and critical thinking” (p. 55). One of the criticisms that can be done is that although chapter three intends to support some constructivist approach to learning, Filsecker and Bundgens-Kosten – the authors- recognize “finding a game that closely matches the PBL pedagogy or constructivist learning theory is not easy” (p. 56). The problem that can be understood from this perspective is that computer games are limited to suggest the kind of problems the students face, and also the limited role of human-computer interaction as mediator in human learning. It may also be valuable, however, for teachers or games in which behaviorism plays a significant role in self-learning, say by the interaction of stimulus-response dyads. Chapter four intends, on the other hand, to suggest how multiplayer interaction has the potential to improve learning through interaction. Again the problem is that mediation in this chapter is not clearly defined and although the author, Mark Peterson, somehow suggests how the interaction is done through the students’ capacity to “adapt” their language by interacting with their peers, the impact of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 178; Kim & Blankenship, 2013 among many others) and its function in learning is neglected when, in fact, it could enhance the potential of the learners’ interaction in

learning. Overall, this chapter four acknowledges the importance of the social factor in increasing cognition and facilitating language learning, especially, in situations of second language acquisition.

The second part begins by the attractive chapter five which intends to show some findings obtained from digital gaming in foreign language learning which includes the type of multiplayer interaction in which gamers take part and the kind of games that promote more communication, and subsequently learning. It also stresses the potential of discussion forums and language advising (the reader may not want to miss the theoretical underpinnings presented on pages 108-111). One of the most interesting chapters, seven, addresses the importance of Intelligent Tutoring Systems in serious games. Serious games have potentially acquired a significant role in education -more in other subjects than in foreign language- over the years. Surprisingly enough, after a well done research in a Southern American university the authors conclude that “the results of the study indicated that learning is better for the non-game environment (Coached Practice), but engagement is better for the game-based system (Showdown)” (p. 133). This statement has some significant potential implications. First, it may mean that scenarios have a potential influence on interaction and practice but not as much on learning itself, as well as that learning is probably more productive by individual or one-on-one means (whether computer mediated or not). The consequence challenges the old theory that practice leads to learning (Widdowson, 1978). However, it seems difficult to understand if this only happens in computer game scenarios or in other applications as well. According to this, tutors have a more valuable role than productive online practice which may be mediated by error-feedback. It may also imply that both serious games and educational websites require of some tutoring devices if learning is to happen. Chapter seven analyzes the procedural effects of memory in playing games and language learning. In so doing, the author, Reichle, looks again into the cognitivist approach that tends to prevail in most papers in the volume. As complementary to the previous chapter, this author really believes that “practice of coupling morphosyntax with gameplay mechanics could also prove fruitful in real-world language learning settings” (p. 139). It is certainly true that mechanics was considered as the key in language learning back in the 1960’s (Chastain, 1976; Dillers, 1978) and then rejected by communicative approaches (Savignon, 1983). However, revisionists tend to believe that by so doing the role of memory had been ignored in language learning (Durrant & Schmitt, 2010). Interesting enough, this chapter goes back to this issue and suggests that some scenarios could be more valuable than others in promoting language learning. The fact that computer based games tend to reproduce the same language patterns in form of pre-fabricated lexical and grammatical structures (like instruction or computer responses) may trigger the use of memory to solve the situations presented to the player. These patterns can be practiced online and so students would not need to practice them in face-to-face communication especially when personality issues happen such as hesitation processes or problems for introverted or non-self-confident students (Wood, 2009). That is why, as indicated in chapter eight, students need to have to opportunity to interact with other players (or speakers) online and the willingness to participate in social acts through games is undoubtedly desirable in language learning both on voice- and text-based chats. In our opinion, one valuable finding in this chapter is that learners tend to communicate more freely because they do not have the pressure of the face-to-face interaction. Although the implications in terms of personality and the old narrow approach of the gamer as some kind of isolated person with limited contact with the exterior world are self-evident, this discussion goes beyond the scope of this book review. The book concludes with two chapters on the learning of vocabulary and collocations which are valuable to understand the potential benefits of adequate input in language learning. The potential problem in both cases is that most interactive games (which tend to be the most common) tend to reproduce real situational speech which may be natural for native speakers but not as desirable for second language learners.

As a conclusion, we should say that although we found that the book tends to show the dominant cognitive trend with limitations in aspects as the human-computer interaction or the prevalence of vocabulary as the cornerstone of language learning (which limits the influence of other aspects), we considered this book potentially positive because of the importance attributed to autonomous learning and because of the revision of repetition and mechanics in language learning. It really does not matter if you are for or against the positions presented in the book, what seems evident is that teachers and researchers will surely find it full of food for thought.

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