The Future of Education

Phrasal-Quest: Designing a Game-Based Storytelling Approach to Teach English Verbal Multi-Word Expressions

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Abstract

Since ancient times storytelling has represented the oldest form of communication, thus constituting the original teaching method and has developed over the centuries in many different forms, such as audio-books, engaging mobile apps and interactive digital games.

As a consequence, many researchers in CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) have stated that gaming software offer great opportunities for second language learners, mainly because of their motivational and interactive aspect but also due to their characteristic of transforming learners from passive to active agents by making them able to acquire new skills and consolidate their present knowledge.

In the context of English as a second language (ESL), one of the most crucial aspects is represented by verbal Multi-word expressions (VMWEs), in particular Phrasal verbs (PVs), whose mastery is fundamental for a learner's language proficiency. Nevertheless, especially when lacked in their mother tongue, ESL learners tend to avoid using PVs, thus preventing their language fluency.

In the light of CALL and Cooperative Learning (CL) approaches and the P21's Framework, this paper aims at presenting an ongoing experiment on the teaching of English PVs to Italian secondary school students, based on the development of a class-interactive role-playing computer game called Phrasal-Quest by using a role-playing engine called EVO-RPGE[5].

The game is based on an original story set in London, dealing with a friendship between an Italian and an English girl and the PVs chosen are those related to food and cooking. The story progressively reveals itself in the virtual environment and the students are involved in and interact with the game through their personal Smartphones.

Accordingly, several quests related to the chosen PVs gradually appear during the story-narration so that students could focus their attention on them by reflecting on their meaning and understanding their usage.

Moreover, the story has been syntactically and grammatically constructed according to CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) levels for secondary school students (A1-A2), with the aim to make them learn and fix other grammatical structures.

The idea of this paper is also to respond to today's students' need for digital citizenship skills by creating an innovative instructional product.

Keywords: *Storytelling, Digital gaming, SLA, Multi-word Expressions, Innovative Learning.*

1. Introduction

One of the most important aspects in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is represented by the mastery of vocabulary because knowing how to appropriately use words and phrases leads to effective communication.

In addition, researchers[1] state that mastering vocabulary is fundamental in language-use because even if a learner has acquired and is able to use the grammar rules of a certain language the lack of an extensive vocabulary can prevent the production of a proper communication.

In the context of English as a second language (ESL), one of the most challenging aspects seems to be the English phrasal verbs (PVs) that characterize informal spoken English, thus playing a great role in enabling language fluency.

PVs are Multi-word expressions (MWEs) generally defined as idiomatic phrases that combine a verb with a preposition, an adverb or both and that whose meaning is different from the literal meaning derived from the combination of the individual elements.

Actually, it is estimated[1] that learners who lack PVs in their mother tongue usually tend to avoid using these phrases, thus preferring single words.

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Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present a role-playing game that, by providing a captivating story and a motivating gaming experience, could be valuable resource for SLA, thus giving students a great amount of language input in the form of authentic English dialogue.

2. Storytelling, Gaming and SLA

Storytelling not only represents the oldest form of communication and transmission of knowledge and wisdom from one generation to another but also it has always been used to educate and instruct.

In the last few decades, developments in new media technologies have drastically changed the field of storytelling that has evolved in different forms. One of these forms is represented by games that have recently been addressed[4] not only as a way of entertainment but also as an instructional tool.

In effect, games seem to respond to contemporary language teaching needs[6] in the sense of an urgency − regarding language-use − on making students able to live and work in today's world by acquiring the necessary language skills of speaking, writing, listening and reading.

In fact, role-playing games focus on meaning rather than on isolated linguistic constructions[2], so that they can foster learners' autonomy and a long-term language maintenance.

Moreover, role-playing games can enhance collaborative learning[3] because, despite traditional face-to-face learning − in which each student only communicates with the teacher − the game sustains social interaction between the players as students confront and help themselves on the next moves to choose to go further in the story. In this way, even motivation is enhanced, together with immediate feedback.

3. The Game

Fig.1. The Game

Phrasal-Quest is an interactive role-playing game that aims at improving SLA by Italian learners of English. It is specifically addressed to secondary school students at their 8th grade.

The game deals with MWEs, especially VMWEs (in particular, PVs) but it is constructed by also using the grammatical rules provided by the syllabus students are expected to be able to manage at the end of the school year.

In this way, they have the opportunity to better understand, comprehend and review tenses (e.g. *Present Simple*, *Present Continuous*, *Future Simple*, *Past Simple*, *Present Perfect* of regular and irregular verbs, *Modals* like *Can, Would,* and *Should*, *Active* and *Passive voice*), typical English constructions (e.g. *like/love + -ing* form, *let's…, why don't we…?*), comparative and superlatives of adjectives and adverbs, in addition to an extensive vocabulary they can assimilate in a more enjoyable way.

As typical of role-playing games, students do not know what is going to happen but everything is revealed as they proceed in the story. However, at the beginning of the story the narrator presents the

location and explains the characters' physical features and qualities, so to make students aware of the background situation and let them be active participants in the story.

Moreover, students get to know the characters as each character has its own voice: the main characters are two thirteen-year-old girls, one is Italian while the other one is English. Accordingly, the girls have the same age of the students in order to create a feeling of familiarity throughout the class, as students can share the girls' experience and emotions. At the same time, the cultural difference between the two girls is used in the game as a way of reinforcing their friendship, thus showing students that cultural and linguistic differences can enrich their personal and cultural knowledge. In fact, on one side, the English girl helps her Italian friend learn the English language while, on the other one, the Italian girl introduces her English friend to some typical Italian expressions (e.g. *pasta al dente*). Also, at the beginning of the story the characters talk to each other and students follow the events by answering to the questions that gradually appear during the story-narration. On the contrary, at the end of the story, the characters start to interact with the students by asking them review-questions about what they have just learned. As a result, students have another opportunity to exercise with PVs and other grammatical rules by reinforcing their knowledge.

Furthermore, students are involved in the story through their personal Smartphones which seem to engage them because they allow a total interaction with the game. In effect, nowadays students are heavy users of digital technologies and the use of Smartphones gives them a sense of familiarity as they get to learn new things through their own "digital language".

4. The Adventure

The adventure is set in the city of London. Students are immediately introduced to the characters as Lucy's family − the first character − is presented together with her physical features and qualities.

Lucy is a thirteen-year-old English girl who lives in a big red house together with her father, mother, older brother and little sister. This description helps students acquire new and/or consolidate existing knowledge on how to describe people and things. Then, Lucy's routine is presented and students get to know Claudia, Lucy's friend, her story and her family. Claudia is an Italian Neapolitan girl who lives in London with her father and mother. She is Lucy's best-friend, and they do everything together, from doing homework to playing in the park.

To make students able to learn PVs, a story with relation to food and cooking has been chosen.

After the narrator's introduction, the actual story starts. Lucy and Claudia are at Claudia's home after school and Claudia's mother asks them if they want to help her make a typical Neapolitan recipe. This is the moment where the PVs learning process starts.

As the characters make their recipe, questions gradually appear on the screen, giving students a sense of chronological development of the actions.

Finally, at the end of the story, Lucy and Claudia show their happiness for having shared this experience together. Lucy is happy because she has learned something about another culture. Claudia is happy because not only she has had the opportunity to share something about her country with her best-friend but, thanks to Lucy, she has also empowered her English.

At this point, the two girls surprise the class by addressing to it and by asking students to test again what they have just learned. After the questions, they thank the classroom for having played together, and Lucy promises Claudia to teach her an English recipe soon.

5. The Questions

The questions are presented in the form of Multiple-choice (MP). In this way, students can better reflect upon the answers and proceed in the story without needing detailed knowledge of the topic.

Each student uses his/her own Smartphone to answer the questions that gradually appear on their screens. They can work individually or in groups, thus fostering their cooperation and communication. Students understand that they are not competing between them, but all working to reach the same goal. Therefore, they help themselves answer the questions while learning new things.

When all the players have answered, then the system chooses the most voted one by following the criterion of majority. At the same time, each player can also auto-evaluate themselves as the correct answer is displayed both on the screen and the Interactive Whiteboard (IWB).

At this point, if the answer is incorrect, then the system colors the incorrect one in red and the correct in green.

Fig.2. Example of a question

Moreover, the game has been developed so that when an answer is incorrect the system not only shows the correct one but also explains why it is incorrect and gives the actual meaning of the answer. Indeed, this explanation is often accompanied by sounds that reinforce the understanding.
In fact, in the example below, the narrator "shows" the students that the chosen answer is incorrect not only through an image of *frying something* but also due to the sound of *frying*.

Fig.3. Example of an incorrect answer

The music and sounds that accompany the story-narration to make it more enjoyable and entertaining are all copyright-free. Also, the images are copyright-free and often created and/or modified by using photo-editing software. The idea of using both images, music and sounds helps expose the class to different communication codes to enrich the learning process.
The text is spoken by using high-quality synthesized computer-voices that reflect the ages of the characters. All the voices of the characters are feminine, while the narrator's voice is masculine to differentiate him from them.
The interaction with the system is provided by the use of students' personal Smartphones that are connected to a private Wi-Fi that only allows them to play the game. In this way, they have no possibility to distract themselves by surfing on the Internet or using social networks.
The class follows the story-narration on an IWB provided by the school, and at the same time on their Smartphones. So, they can look at their scores and see the general flow of the class.

4. Conclusions

Role-playing games seem to be a good way to foster SLA, especially that of linguistic constructions usually difficult for beginning learners. At the same time, they offer students the possibility to acquire new vocabulary and enhance their language fluency by focusing both on the general meaning and on the linguistic features due to text, images, voice-over, music and sounds.

Through *Phrasal-Quest* students not only are exposed to the typical expressions of the English language, but also they can exercise and reinforce their knowledge of different grammatical structures. In addition, this game has the power to engage students due to a motivating story-narration and construction that make them feel as active participants, thus stimulating independent comprehension and assimilation of the topics, collaboration and social inclusion.

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