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## CHAPTER 13

# Conversational Gamers: Developing Language Skills and Connections through Games

*Michelle Goodridge*

## Introduction

The English language is considered to be a “global language” as many people around the world are interested in acquiring English proficiency or are even required to do so.<sup>1</sup> English has been widely adopted in non-English speaking countries; Khamkhien notes that many non-native English-speaking countries are introducing English as a compulsory subject due to its pervasiveness in business, government, and academia.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this perceived demand, increasing numbers of international students are choosing to attend post-secondary education in predominantly English-speaking countries and currently make up a significant portion of the total student body at many of these institutions.<sup>3</sup> One of the main reasons students say they want to study in an English-speaking country is to improve their English-speaking competency.<sup>4</sup> In response to the increase in international students, pre-sessional

programs for acquiring academic-level English skills are offered at many English-speaking institutions that target students who did not meet the English language proficiency requirements for admission.<sup>5</sup> These programs are growing in popularity as many institutions are looking to attract international students and are willing to accept students who have language standards below the recommended level as outlined by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).<sup>6</sup>

As the number of international students entering English-speaking universities grows, there is an increasing need to develop programs that help with the transition to a new community. Chang and Strauss discuss this concept as “language shock,” a feeling of not having the adequate language skills needed to live in a new country.<sup>7</sup> International students are transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education while simultaneously entering a new country and culture<sup>8</sup> and may struggle with making connections with their domestic peers.<sup>9</sup> Studies have shown that international students have better overall satisfaction if they are able to develop the meaningful and intimate connections often found in friendships.<sup>10,11</sup> If students are able to develop these meaningful relationships, they have stronger language skills, lower levels of stress, and increased academic performance.<sup>12-14</sup> There are also benefits for domestic students in establishing friendships with international students. Domestic students receive a more culturally informed academic experience and are provided opportunities to learn and interact with peers of different cultures and ethnicities.<sup>15</sup> It is mutually beneficial to foster relationships between domestic and international students while recognizing and addressing the inherent challenges in doing so.

This discussion is meant to contextualize the research that supports using games for learning and to illustrate the ways in which one might appropriate these games to programming and teaching at their institution. Furthermore, this discussion will use role-play, digital, and board games to illustrate how games can be used to facilitate language learning and inspire creativity when choosing to design a game from scratch or use commercially available games as well as game platform or mode of delivery.

## **Relationship Between Domestic and International Students**

The challenges with connecting domestic and international student groups are clearly identified in the Canadian Bureau for International Education research report entitled, “The Integration Challenge: Connecting

International Students with their Canadian Peers.” A 2014 survey of more than 3,000 Canadian international students from more than twenty-five different institutions found that 56 percent had no Canadian students as friends.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, an American study found that almost 40 percent of international students in the United States have no American friends and actively want to rectify this.<sup>17</sup> This global trend is increasingly recognized across institutions, but best practices to address concerns remain only partially identified.<sup>18</sup> Elisabeth Gareis identified three main factors influencing intercultural friendship: cultural similarity, communication competence, and personality and identity. Gareis also noted that international students who come from predominantly English-speaking countries do not have as much trouble forming friendships with domestic students.<sup>19</sup>

This chapter suggests that developing game-based library programming can help to mitigate some of these challenges and improve the experience and performance of both international and domestic students. The library, as the cultural hub of campus and host to a wide range of resources and services, could be a good place to facilitate the building of cross-cultural relationships. The enjoyment of playing games is a cross-cultural experience and helps break down perceived barriers between international and domestic students as they enjoy a mutually pleasurable experience of gaming.<sup>20</sup> Sharon Willoughby has noted that some students refused to answer questions in traditional classroom settings unless they were confident in the correctness of their answer, as they feared “losing face” if they were incorrect. However, they were more likely to contribute their answers in class when playing a grammar-based card game.<sup>21</sup> Programs targeting international students are not new but may need further examination to understand why there are still challenges in bringing together domestic and international students.

## Language Learning with Games

Using games to augment or assist with language learning is not a new concept. When examining the literature, there are two main fields of study or focus: the study of games in learning and the study of games in language learning. The focus of this section is a discussion regarding the use of games for second-language learning with some crossover regarding the benefit of using games for educational purposes and developing a sense of agency for second-language learners.

The traditional model of teaching second-language skills is immersive, typically involving lecture-style instruction along with repetition and memorization. However, this method has been challenged by scholars and practitioners, resulting in a move away from the aforementioned approach.<sup>22</sup>

In many instances, native English teachers (NSTs) are teaching English to English as a second language (ESL) students, as well as to English as a foreign language (EFL) students.<sup>23</sup> Brookes and Moseley draw comparisons between language learners and apprentices, noting that for years apprentices were placed alongside skilled persons in the trades to learn in a hands-on manner, a largely successful practice that translates well to teaching English.<sup>24</sup> While this appears to be an easily understood analogy, there exists little research that directly examines the effectiveness of different teaching methods used to teach second-language learners.<sup>25</sup> In many instances, students show a willingness to learn but lack the experience to initiate and maintain conversations, as they have been largely practicing simple questions and answers rather than immersing themselves in the language. Learners should be encouraged to actively engage with the language rather than use memory as the main means to instill language comprehension. One way to incorporate this methodology is by using games in the classroom. Eunice Kit-Lam notes that well-designed games require students to interact with others and directly apply what they have learned rather than answering questions mechanically as they might do in a typical classroom setting.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Garris, Ahlers, and Driskell suggest that a well-designed game engages students and encourages the practice of targeting skills through repetitive and decision-based tasks.<sup>27,28</sup> Studies on game-play among second-language learners clearly demonstrate a motivation to master the language, as it gives learners an advantage and increases the likelihood of achievement or winning.<sup>29</sup> Games that rely on repetition and chance rather than agency and skill are inadequate for allowing for experiential learning as they mimic the aforementioned traditional teaching methods. Taking short turns with limited options does not help students learn how to produce longer phrases or more dynamic narratives.<sup>30</sup>

Penny Ur describes why using games could be successful for teaching and learning as games create “pleasurable tension” through motivation. This tension also encourages participants to complete a clearly defined task with the added challenge of constraints (such as time) that drive competition.<sup>31</sup> The students are empowered through this student-centered activity and learn and grow together by participating in cooperative learning. In the article “Engaging Students in the Library Through Tabletop Gaming,” Vivian Alvarez provides justification for libraries to partake in game-based programming. Alvarez encourages the selection of games that rely on agency rather than luck as “students leave the table strategizing better outcomes and looking forward to the next challenge,” which leads to recurring engagement rather than “one-time” experiences.<sup>32</sup> The need to facilitate agency can be transferred to second-language learning as it correlates with the aforementioned literature; if the participants are challenged and have agency, they are going to gain more from the experience and have greater vested interest. Using games,

particularly simulation and role-play-based games, for ESL and EFL learning helps to reinforce new knowledge and/or expand emerging knowledge and skills. Simulation and role-play games require the use of imagination, critical thinking, problem-solving, and command of the language used in play in order for the participants to be successful. Reese and Wells note that “games and simulations, in addition to motivating students, offer the opportunity for experiential learning, which entails active and reflective engagement with the material on the part of the student.”<sup>33</sup>

Catherine Collier cautions that there are two major problems with using games as interactive learning strategies. The first is the negative effect of poorly developed exercises that do not adhere to logic and constraint, and the second is the inconsistent use of the term “simulation” that can send mixed messages.<sup>34</sup> Games need to make sense to the players. They need well-developed game mechanics and an overall purpose; otherwise, participants will not stay engaged. Games that are designed solely for education are less likely to pique interest, whereas games that have embedded educational or learning outcomes are more likely to keep players’ interest as the games have a “purpose beyond play.”<sup>35</sup> Another challenge, noted by Reese and Wells, is that speakers at a low-level of proficiency become frustrated with classmates who have a greater mastery of the language when playing games together. This difference in mastery led to participants requesting placement in groups of similar skill and also resulted in limiting the cards that could be played in the game to make it easier to understand.<sup>36</sup> If these known challenges are kept in mind when implementing games into teaching and learning, the outcome will be more successful. Finally, the composition of a traditional foreign language classroom can pose a challenge to mastery of a second language. If classrooms are mono-cultural—that is, if students come from just one culture and speak the same native language—they lend themselves to a collective preference to speak in one’s native language over practicing the language they are there to learn.<sup>37</sup> Selecting immersive games that are in English can help alleviate this potential issue.

Along with allowing learners the opportunity to actively learn and explore a new language, games help remove some perceived barriers to learning. Saha and Singh note that games can alleviate the anxiety and shyness of ESL students and allow students to practice all skills required to master a language, including listening and speaking.<sup>38</sup> This works especially well if the students who are playing a particular game are all starting with a similar base knowledge of the language. They will also feel more comfortable making mistakes, thus avoiding previously mentioned concerns over different skill levels within the group. Similarly, Halleck, Moder, and Damron note that using simulation-based games in a second-language learning environment has a positive motivational effect.<sup>39</sup> This positive motivational effect will be

explained in greater detail later using Newgarden and Dongping's work with Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG).

## Program Examples

There exists an extensive body of work supporting the use of games to teach ESL skills to students of all ages and differing backgrounds. There are two distinct methods for utilizing games in the ESL classroom: using existing commercial games or creating from scratch a game for a specific purpose or class. As per the literature, most of the existing commercial games used in an ESL classroom setting are digital games, whereas most of the games created for a class are analog. The games discussed below, along with those mentioned throughout the chapter, serve as pertinent examples picked from a wide range of offerings.

Newgarden and Dongping wrote on using the Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) *World of Warcraft (WoW)* as an instrument for second language learning. MMOGs are online video games “which can be played by a very large number of people simultaneously.”<sup>40</sup> MMOGs require players to continually problem-solve and interact with other players in the game who may speak a variety of languages. In Newgarden and Dongping's study, students were placed into teams that brought together experienced and inexperienced *WoW* players with English-speaking teachers for weekly one-hour gaming campaigns in combination with Skype chat sessions. Interacting with other players using verbal or written communication methods gave added information for game-play and encouraged the players to seek out relationships with others and develop a sense of human value realization. The players noticed that planning their moves, actions, and strategies made them better players and better teammates and led to a more vested interest in learning the second language.<sup>41,42</sup>

Mentioned in Reese and Wells' work, the “conversation game” is a semester-length game of twelve ninety-minute lessons that teaches students different conversational skills. The instructor writes phrases on the front of cards, which prompt the student to begin a conversation. When answering, the students must use a different phrase, which is printed on a separate deck provided for the participants. This game was specifically designed to be student-centered and requires that the students grade not only their peers but also themselves. The game can be adjusted based on the participants' skill levels but is a limited, rigid, turn-based model that does not easily facilitate organic or fluid conversation.<sup>43,44</sup> Sharon Elinor Willoughby, in her practicum project, developed instructional materials including a game to teach Japanese students English. The students, who were attending an American community

college, had minimal English skills and low motivation to learn. Willoughby designed a grammar-based card game that focused on repetition of specific language structures in a controlled but interesting environment.<sup>45</sup> Although Willoughby's game is not commercially available, the author's article provides a detailed account, making it easy to replicate.

## Program at Wilfrid Laurier University

Throughout the spring and summer semesters of 2017, I developed a program at Wilfrid Laurier University (Laurier) to address obstacles that international students face in developing meaningful relationships with domestic students as well as assist with ESL skill development. The Laurier Library hired me in the newly created role of liaison librarian for the recently established Game Design and Development program; part of this role required the establishment of a game collection. Staff working with international students on campus, including those who focus on the pre-sessional program Laurier English and Academic Foundation (LEAF), identified a need to help international students form relationships with domestic students. Based on research (much of which is presented in this chapter), consultation with stakeholders, and the use of the conversational café model as a guide, the Conversational Gamers program began. Early in the process, the Brantford Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) expressed interest in joining the initiative as they wanted to become more integrated with the university and saw this type of collaboration as a way to diversify their offerings to youth and young adult newcomers. Most recently, the local community college, Conestoga College, has joined the partnership.

After running several game-based events that targeted international students, a number of transformative observations were made. Existing games selected to support the Game Design program tend to be more modern, incorporating complex language and mechanics and take longer to learn how to play (e.g., *Catan*, *Munchkin*, *Dominion*, *Blood Rage*, *Gloomhaven*, etc). These games require a higher mastery of the English language along with a certain level of game savvy; as such, they were not a good fit for international students as they became easily frustrated during gameplay. As a result, the choice was made to expand the collection with the purchase of some more common, simpler games to create a collection that could be used by the broader campus community. As these games did not support the Game Design and Development program curriculum for a variety of reasons, the case was made to purchase them to specifically support the Conversational Gamers program. Many of the games that North Americans would consider to be household staples are foreign to a large number of international students.



Games like Monopoly, Clue, and Scrabble were games the international students had never played but seemed like a good starting point as they are more approachable to someone learning a new language.

The library was a natural fit for hosting the events, given the space availability and proximity to the collection. The Conversational Gamer program required both staff and domestic student time. Depending on the player requirements for a particular game, students were divided up so that there was equal representation of international and domestic students playing each game. The domestic students acted as experts with knowledge of how the game worked, yet they encouraged the international students to read the instructions and try to understand the game mechanics on their own. In the future, a role reversal is planned so that the international students feel more comfortable and empowered as they are teaching their domestic counterparts how to play a game that is in their native language.

It can be challenging to find games that suit all of the needs of a conversational gamer program. While these needs are not necessarily conflicting, they can limit the choices that are available. The examples below illustrate a certain level of “trial and error” with trying to find the right titles for individual groups, which may change over time. As seen in the literature, selecting games that are engaging, require social interaction, are relatively easy to learn, and avoid excessive cultural references, while all the while avoiding a situation where ESL learners feel infantilized, is difficult but not insurmountable. Commercially available games require less time from a creation perspective but do require research and thought when considering introducing them to a program such as this. Furthermore, depending on the library system and typical patron base, these titles may or may not already be in the collection.

As previously mentioned, many games North Americans would consider household staples are not recognized by many international students, especially those that come from East Asia, as many Laurier students do. Two popular commercial games stand out as creating barriers for ESL learners despite the promising research surrounding games and language learning, with Apples to Apples having turned out to be one of these games. The premise of the game is to have players match “thing” cards with “description” cards, with the best match winning. The primary problem ESL students were faced with was the fact that this particular game contains many popular culture references or phrases they were not familiar with. The students generally had their thesaurus and translator mobile applications running while playing to assist them, but a lot of these cultural references were not in their apps. Similarly, Word Slam includes a category for popular culture references, so it was not used in the beginning until the students felt more comfortable with those words in order to avoid putting the team with the higher number of English speakers or those with a higher mastery of the English language at a significant

advantage. Another example of a game that proved unsuitable was *Coup*, a fast-paced card game that requires deceit and player elimination until only one player remains and wins. The ESL students understood the mechanics behind the game; however, many had trouble lying to each other or launching a “coup” against another player. The game ended up going on for far longer than intended with players being forced to launch coups against each other due to the game mechanic making it mandatory at some point in the gameplay. Most of the students would wait to get the required coins and use them to simply remove one of the other players rather than play strategically and with intent. In addition, *Coup* proved inadequate for facilitating discussion.

Not every game is going to be a good selection to bring to an English-language learning environment; however, we did have some success with a few commercially available games. *Exploding Kittens* and *Sushi Go* were very easy to learn; they have amusing graphics on the cards, and the students consistently asked to play them. These games require social interaction and create highly playable tension, which is why they continue to keep players engaged. *Funglish* and *Word Slam* are very similar to one another as they have one player who sees a word and uses other words available in the game (a controlled vocabulary) to describe their word while the other players have to guess. These games help with building language skills and have a friendly level of competition. Both games have set time limits to make guesses or play a turn, but this can be omitted in order to give the ESL students time to comprehend the language. To illustrate, many of the ESL students brought their cell phones to game night and used a translator application for words they did not understand. Another game that was popular was *Rory's Story Cubes*. For this game, the player first rolls a set of dice imprinted with images and subsequently uses these images to create a story beginning with “once upon a time...” The students appeared to enjoy the freedom this type of gameplay offered, as they could tell a story as long or as short as they liked. *Rory's Story Cubes* provided some structure but also encouraged the ESL students to be creative, which led to a lot of cross-cultural storytelling and sharing. The game also helped with sentence and narrative construction, and as the game progressed and the students gained more confidence, the stories became more complex. Finally, one game that turned out to be a surprise success was *Werewolf*. The game *Werewolf* involves lying and bluffing, so the assumption was made that the ESL students would not engage with it as it has a similar mechanic to *Coup*. However, it turned out there exists a similar game to *Werewolf* in China called *Killers*, which the students had previously played. *Werewolf* became part of the regular game rotation.

This portion of the chapter was not meant to present an exhaustive list of examples of commercially available games but rather to highlight some that were successful and others that were not. Game selection depends on

several variables, including cultural makeup, size, time constraints, and level of language mastery as well as the general interests of the participants. As the group matures and comfort levels increase (both with each other and with the mechanics of a particular game) other games can be introduced. For example, in the beginning, the ESL students asked to play Funglish because it was competitive, yet they were comfortable with it as it was one of the first games played as a group. As time went on a similar game, Word Slam, was introduced, and although the students were hesitant in the beginning, it soon became a favorite. After running the program for several months, the students now have a small library of games they can choose from.

**Sample Game List:** Sushi Go, Exploding Kittens, Funglish, Word Slam, Bananagrams, Werewolf, and Rory's Story Cubes

## Conclusion

This chapter summarizes aspects of research revolving around the relationships between international and domestic students and the use of games for language learning. It presents a case study on the implementation of a conversation partners program that pairs domestic and international students with board games to not only improve language skills but also bridge the gap between these two student groups. Research shows that learning through play is a highly successful endeavor. The literature largely focuses on using digital games in the classroom with limited current research on using board games or role-play games for a similar purpose. It is clear that using games for learning is a rewarding and beneficial approach and one that can be successfully implemented in library settings.

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