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Game-Based Methods to Encourage EFL Learners to Transition to Autonomous Learning

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This paper describes a work in progress in which we aim to encourage EFL students to take their learning beyond the classroom in order to experience English in different ways. Inspired by what is being done at the Quest to Learn middle and high school in New York City and ChicagoQuest (Institute of Play, 2014b) our idea involves conducting an action research project in order to find out if game-like learning techniques, modified and adapted to the needs of university-aged EFL learners in Ecuador will help to increase motivation and independent learning for our students.

Game-Like Learning

The Institute of Play's Quest to Learn curriculum design pack (Institute of Play, 2014a) defines the seven principles of game-like learning thus (bullets added by the author):

- "everyone is a participant
- challenge is constant;
- learning happens by doing;
- feedback is immediate and ongoing;
- failure is reframed as iteration;
- everything is interconnected;
- and it kind of feels like play"

We believe that if students are taught EFL according to these principles, the leap to truly autonomous learning can begin to take place.

The Project

Our idea involves redesigning English class into what we are calling 'quests' and 'missions' which we hope will help the students to become more autonomous learners by encouraging them to take English out of the classroom and into the local community and the online world. Although the students are expected to use class time to complete the work, much of this work is meant to be done independently or with

peers, in the classroom if they wish, or in the computer lab, the café, on the campus green, or even outside the university. The role of the teacher is to encourage, guide and provide on-the-spot help and tutoring as and when needed during independent work; during group activities and games, the teacher then serves as facilitator.

The 'quests' are scaffolding tasks designed to help students improve their reading, writing, speaking and listening abilities, and with them, their grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Having been greatly inspired by recent trends in game-based learning (e.g. Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Steinkuehler, Squire, & Barab, 2014; Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011) we have included both online games as well as pair and group games designed or adapted by our lead researcher to increase motivation and active participation on the part of the learners. We have also included many activities, both online and off, which may be done independently or with peers.

The 'missions' and 'quests' for each unit follow a theme around an issue of social and global importance. Though we are loosely matching our topics to those found in the NorthStar reading and writing series (Miller & Cohen, 2009) which we are currently using as a textbook, we are modifying them to be somewhat "edgier" and more controversial to appeal to our students' interests. The 'mission', then, is a final, creative, communicative assignment meant to encourage the students to delve more deeply into the subject.

The Students and Teachers

We are a group of nine teachers who work at Universidad de los Hemisferios, a small university in Quito, Ecuador with approximately 180 EFL learners ranging from the A1 to the B2 level Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2011). Our students are mostly middle to upper-middle class, Spanish-speaking Ecuadorians between the ages of 17 and 25. Most have been educated in private schools and have studied English since primary or even pre-school. The classes were usually teacher-led lessons, and Ecuadorian culture is not generally oriented toward independent learning. For this reason, our project is meant as a bridge between 'traditional' classes and autonomous study.

Our lowest level is called 'nivelación' which serves to bring students up to the A1 level; these students are not included in our research project. The rest of our students are from the A1-B2 levels and are divided into six groups: Intermediate I, Intermediate II, Intermediate III, Advanced I, Advanced II and Advanced III.

Each level lasts one semester for a duration of 64 hours divided into four hours weekly. These hours may be taken during the week (Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday) from 11-12 or on Saturdays from 9-1. Students are encouraged to work independently, at their own pace, alone or in small groups on their quests and missions, except for agreed-upon times when the teacher brings the class together for the speaking games, group tutorials and other activities.

The Research Question

Our research question is: "Will the game-like framework of quests and missions motivate EFL students to learn more autonomously?" Since motivation is quite difficult to measure we have been gathering data on how the students feel about the course using journals, surveys, and individual and group interviews. Our questions have focused on what motivates students to learn, as opposed to what makes them feel bored or stressed.

Overall responses from students seem to indicate that although they have difficulty managing their time without a great deal of guidance, they do enjoy having the freedom to work where, when and with whom they choose. Many also report enjoying the different quests and missions because they find the topics and the tasks both interesting and challenging. An earlier version of this project gave the students more independence to choose their assignments but the students seemed uncomfortable with that level of freedom. They did mention enjoying the fact that they are assessed by means of the quests and missions instead of regular exams.

Teachers are saying that they enjoy having the freedom to move among the students rather than being front and center. However, echoing the students' complaint regarding time-management, the teachers too are claiming that the students do not manage their time effectively and often hand everything in at the last minute.

In the spirit of action research, we have been analyzing this data and modifying our 'quests and missions' method accordingly. The speaking and the listening quests, for example, are now being done as a whole class; while the other assignments are being given draft deadlines.

In addition, in response to what we feel are vital 21st century skills, we are beginning to include more use of technology, from the use of group Facebook pages to the creation of multimedia stories. Students have also reported enjoying the "games" aspect of the method, and so we are including more online and offline games.

Examples of Quests and Missions

Intermediate I

Theme: Gender relations (relates to NorthStar 3, unit 4)

Introductory Game: Students make a list of complements and insults that lovers say to each other. They then work in pairs to go through each sentence and score it as a negative or positive comment using a -3,-2,-1,0,+1,+2,+3 rubric. Afterward, they add up their score and discuss if their results were different. (Example sentence: "You look fat in that outfit". Female students may think that is a -3, while males may give it a -1 or a 0.)

Listening quest: Students watch a video of Kramer's views on marriage from the television show Seinfeld (David & Ackerman, 1995) and list Kramer's arguments against marriage. Then divide the class by gender and have them write a woman's version.

Reading quest: Students take the "healthy relationship quiz" (Interface: Children and Family Services, 2014). If they are not currently in a relationship, they can think about a friend or family member who is. Then they write a journal entry about what they learned.

Writing quest: Students write a contrast paragraph comparing abusive and healthy relationships. They post their essays on Facebook once they have been corrected, and comment on ideas they disagree with in their classmates' essays.

Mission: Play "Toxic Love": Students prepare and conduct a survey on what is considered normal, as opposed to abusive behavior in a relationship. They then hold a game show similar to Family Feud to see if their classmates reach the same answers. (Example: "Is it normal for a man to hit his girlfriend?" If the contestant says "no", the host announces "95% of students at this university agree with you so you get 95 points!")

Advanced II

Theme: Addiction (relates to NorthStar 5, unit 1)

Introductory game: Students will keep an alternate reality journal for several days in which they will imagine that, although they appear to be normal students, they have an addiction that no-one knows about. They will share their journals once they have been corrected. (Example: "Today I had trouble waking up because I had a

hangover. I spent 10 minutes brushing my teeth before I came to class so I wouldn't smell of alcohol.")

Listening and reading quests: Students will post songs about addiction on the class Facebook page, along with the lyrics and their own summary of the song. Then they read each other's posts and find links to interviews with the bands mentioned and post them in the comments section along with their own summary of the interview.

Research and speaking quests: Students will give creative presentations on different kinds of addictions.

Writing quest: Students will write a fictional autobiographical narrative in the style of an Alcoholics Anonymous "confession". They will read it to classmates who will role play the speaker's friends and family.

Mission: Students will watch a "choose your path" video, (for example see NIDA for Teens, 2014) and then make their own.

Conclusions

Both teacher and student responses to the project over the past year have been encouraging, and we are enjoying the process of developing the project as a team. We feel that our 'quests and missions' method can serve as a useful transition from teacher-led classrooms to more independent, student-oriented learning.

Notes on the contributor

Janine Berger, originally from Canada, has taught English in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, and currently teaches EFL and trains EFL teachers at Universidad de los Hemisferios in Ecuador. She is enrolled in a Masters of Educational Research at the University of London and her current research is focused on game-like learning.

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