USING BOARD GAMES AS A MEDIUM FOR COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING (CLT)

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ABSTRACT

There are many different types of pedagogic methods that are currently used in ESL and EFL contexts. Several of these contexts still use traditional methods which are heavily teacher centered, such as the audiolingual method. Fortunately, many institutes have started to transition from more traditional methods of teaching to communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL), both of which focus more on student centered learning. One process in which to foster student-centered learning is using materials in the class that provide students a task they must complete through active communication with each other. Thus, the research laid out in this paper used the collaborative board game Forbidden Island as a task-based learning tool. The participants played the game, in which communication was the key to winning. After playing, they filled out a questionnaire eliciting their perception on whether this game had any impact on their English language skills. Results from the data found that the students believed Forbidden Island was a useful tool in improving listening, reading, and especially speaking skills. In addition, the participants also stated that they perceive board games to be beneficial for increasing their English skills and would like to see more materials like this in the classroom

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on communicative language teaching (CLT) and how task-based learning (TBL), can be applied to foster CLT through the board game Forbidden Island. CLT provides students with an opportunity to practice and improve communication skills such as speaking through collaboration, while TBL focuses on motivating students to participate by giving tasks and goals to complete. It should be noted that CLT has been referred to in literature alternatively as a method, pedagogy, and/or approach, however for the purposes of this paper it is defined as a approach. Game mechanics suit the CLT and TBL approaches by providing common group goals and tasks. Some types of communication that occur during the course of playing a game are: negotiation, future predictions, planning moves, and convincing other players to take a particular series of maneuvers. The aims of this study are to investigate student perception about which communication skills increased through playing a board game, and whether they are beneficial for practicing communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nunan (1999) claims that, in traditional ESL education systems students are taught about the rules and 'proper' use of language, rather than how to communicate and interact naturally with others. Hall (2011) defines CLT as a method that "emphasizes meaning and 'genuine' communication in the classroom" (p. 94). CLT teaches students the mechanics of communication and conversation, not just memorized forms of grammatical sentence structures (Hu, 2002). The approach gives students free rein to practice with each other, learn from trial and error (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), and experiment with language without losing the teacher's assistance, the structure of the class, or the students' motivation (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). It is language teaching through interaction and "task-based and goal-oriented activities" (Wang, 2010, p. 130), which can then be applied to 'real life' language use.

CLT has been referred to as an overarching pedagogy (Ellis, 2003), of which TBL is one method. TBL consists of giving the students a task that can only be completed through communication. There are different interpretations of what 'task' in TBL means (Nunan, 1991). Nunan (2004) separates the word "task" into two categories: target tasks which involve language use outside the classroom, and in-class pedagogical tasks (p. 1). These in-class tasks are "a bridge between the classroom and the real world" (Brandl, 2007, p. 9). They are important because "language learning does not depend only on what specific pieces of language the learner encounters," but also on whether students can take what they learned in the classroom and apply it to situations they find outside of it (Littlewood, 1981, p. 44).

Similarly to China (Rao, 2002), Taiwan (Wang, 2010) and South Korea (Li, 1998), the standard English curriculum in Japan incorporates predominantly traditional methods (Nishino, 2008), such as audiolingual or grammar-translation (Hall, 2011) in the classroom. The current project expands on traditional teaching by incorporating a pedagogical task-based board game into a CLT classroom to facilitate the development of language proficiency. Since completing a game is a task, almost any game can fit into the category of task-based materials. CLT allows students to discuss freely using real language (Li, 1984), which has the benefit of giving them practice for facing real life experiences. TBL materials that can be used in the context of CLT are necessary, and games like Forbidden Island can fulfill this role by helping classrooms become places of spontaneous interaction.

Breen (1987) defines a task as being something that facilitates language learning by having "a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes" (p. 23). Most games have a particular objective or goal (Kapp, 2012), a specified working procedure in the form of instructions and moving options, and a range of possible outcomes depending on the moves that the players make. Games become a communicative

language activity because the students must use language in order to complete it. Emphasizing this, McGrath (2002) lists four language learning requirements: exposure, opportunity, motivation, and feedback. Games give the students wide exposure to language, provide opportunities to practice in the form of in-game negotiation, enhance motivation through concrete goals, and can even provide feedback in the form of instant guidance through the game or co-players. These positive aspects of using games to learn a language support the interpretation of Wilkins' (1972, 1976) functional-notional approach that states "any device that helps the learners is accepted" (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983, p. 91).

METHODS

This paper investigates task-based learning outcomes through the use of questionnaires. The research differs from current literature in that it focuses on student perceptions, specifically how they believe their language skills improved through playing the game *Forbidden Island*.

The Game: *Forbidden Island*

How to Play
Figure 1a shows the suggested setup for *Forbidden Island*. Due to the size of the playing area, the setup was adjusted (Figure 1b), with the Treasure deck and Flood deck (Figures 7 & 8) placed face-down on another desk. After setting up the board (Figure 1b), six cards from the Flood deck (Figure 8) are chosen randomly, and the corresponding tiles are flipped (Figure 2). The six cards go into a discard pile, until a Water Rise card (Figure 7) is drawn later in the game, at which time the discarded Flood cards are shuffled back into the Flood deck.

Participants are randomly given player role cards (Figure 9), and their corresponding pawns are placed on designated tiles (Figure 4). At the start of the game, players are given two cards from the Treasure deck (Figure 7). The water meter (Figure 11) will rise up one tick whenever a Water Rise card is drawn. After each player's turn, they draw two cards from the Treasure deck and as many Flood cards as there are ticks on the water meter. For example, if the tick is on 3 then the player draws three Flood cards. If a tile is already flooded, and its card is drawn again from the Flood deck, that tile and its corresponding card, are removed from the game.

Actions
Each player has three actions (Figure 10) during their turn.
- **Move** – Players can move to adjacent tiles only, except for the Explorer, who can move diagonally.
- **Shore Up** – Players can flip a flooded tile back to its original non-flooded state.

- **Give a Treasure Card** – If the current player is on the same tile as another player, they can give their Treasure cards to them; however, the Messenger can give their cards to anyone, regardless of their location.
- **Capture a Treasure** – When a player collects four of the same Treasure cards (Figure 7) they go to a Treasure tile (Figure 5) and collect a treasure (Figure 12).

Forbidden Island was chosen because it is a game that contains inherent tasks, such as collecting treasure (Figure 12), exchanging cards needed to collect the treasure (Figure 7), and making sure the tiles needed to get the treasure (Figure 5) and the helipad, Fool's Landing (Figure 6) do not sink. To win the game, players need to collect all four treasures (Figure 12), get to Fool's Landing (Figure 6) and fly off using a Helicopter Lift card (Figure 7). The players lose the game if Treasure tiles sink before the players retrieve the corresponding treasure, if Fool's Landing disappears, if the water meter hits the skull and crossbones limit (Figure 11), or if a tile a player is on sinks and there are no adjacent tiles to swim to (Figure 3). The game encourages collaboration among the players by requiring participants to communicate with each other in order to win the game (Linderoth, 2011), thus making it a suitable medium for CLT.

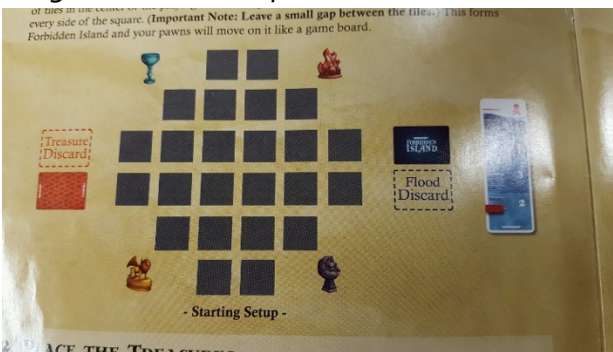*Image 1a. Game setup in the instruction manual.*

Image 1b. *Setup of the board.*

Image 2. *Prior to the start of the game, six tiles must be turned over to indicate a flooded state.*

Image 3. *If there are no tiles adjacent to their current position to "swim" to, the player "dies" and everyone loses the game.*

Image 4. *Starting point of pawns.*

Image 5. *Tiles where players trade Treasure Deck cards for the corresponding treasure, all are needed to win the game.*

Image 6. *At the end of the game, everyone must reach this tile to get off the island.*

Image 7. *Treasure Deck cards - Waters Rise card, Treasure cards, Sandbag to unflood a tile, and a Helicopter Lift card to fly anywhere, anytime and off the island.*

Image 8. *The Flood Deck.*

Image 9. *Adventurer Cards - Roles with special abilities given.*

Image 10. *Order of Play and Actions.*

Image 11. *Water Meter - determines how many "Flood Deck" cards and tiles need to be flipped. The game is over when it reaches the Skull and Crossbones. The marker goes up for every "Water Rise" card drawn from the "Treasure Deck."*

Image 12. *Treasures. Need to get all four are needed to win the game.*

Participants and Procedures

Participants
All participants were from Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). There were a total of 20 Japanese freshman students: three males and 17 females between the ages of 17 and 19 years old. The members were part of the author's English class.

Ethics
All students played the game and completed the questionnaire. The project was deemed low risk in terms of ethical implications, and the participants were given consent forms. The consent form offered participants the choice of having their data omitted from the research project and publication.

Design of Data Collection
At the end of each gaming session, the participants answered questions (see Appendix) that elicited their perception of whether certain language skills improved through playing the game. The questionnaire used a Likert-scale (Hirschel, Yamamoto, & Lee, 2012; Peterson, 2011), open ended questions (Chen & Yang, 2013), and closed questions. A Likert-scale was used because it "uses fewer statistical assumptions and ...no judges are required." (Karavas-Doukas, 1996). Open-ended and closed questions were also included in order to get detailed feedback on students' perception of themselves. Having the quantitative Likert scale results to compare with the qualitative open-ended opinions offered insights into the relationship between different aspects of the results.

The questionnaire contents were created to elicit responses that could directly answer the research questions:
1. What English language skills do students believe are increased through playing collaborative games?
2. Do students perceive games as beneficial for practicing English language skills?

Procedures for Observation
Video recordings were the tool for gathering observational data of game play, rather than audio recordings or field notes. The videos were necessary for transcribing the dialogue between students and using information from the video for future reference.

Procedures for Data Collection
Students first learned the game mechanics before playing it with their group members. The participants played the game twice on different days, for sessions ranging from 30 to 40 minutes,

and video recordings were made of the sessions. After each session, the participants filled out a questionnaire (see Appendix).

The students filled out the questionnaire while they watched recordings of themselves playing the game. The videos provided students the opportunity to observe and self-reflect. Watching the video can help them remember what types of communication and interactions transpired during the game play (Hirschel, Yamamoto & Lee, 2012). Lastly, video recordings were necessary for contextualizing the interactions and responses of the participant's questionnaire answers in relation to particular aspects of the games that were played.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The student responses in this section are copied verbatim from the worksheets and have not been corrected for syntactic or semantic mistakes. Students are distinguished individually (S+#) and by group (G+#).

Research Question 1

Some prior research into game-assisted learning of English has failed to find evidence for the effectiveness of games on developing speaking skills. For instance, while Chen & Yang (2013) showed that the game their students played was helpful in improving other English abilities, such as vocabulary knowledge, their results did not indicate that speaking was facilitated. This may be due to a specific game's failure to provide adequate opportunities for students to speak. *Forbidden Island*, on the other hand, provided ample speaking opportunities for the participants. In fact, students in this research project seemed to believe that their speaking skills, and to some extent their listening skills, had improved (Tables 1 and 2). Students mentioned they had to communicate with each other when discussing and collaborating in order to explain their ideas and decide which plan would help them complete their task of winning the game. The quantitative data in Table 1 supports these comments.

Table 1. *Number of student responses identifying which skill they feel improved (question 2)*

	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Other
Number of Students*	0	5	12	3 (Listening & Speaking)

Table 2. *Sample of student responses to question 3*

Questionnaire Question 3: Do you think your communication skills in one of the four areas below increased while playing the game? A. Reading B. Listening C. Speaking D. Others Why do you think so? Please provide at least 2 examples and explain.

Speaking:
G3S1: Forbidden Island is a game which cannot be cleared if notice cooperation with my team members, so I have to speak what I will do.... If I don't speak my opinion our team can't win the game. I think FORBIDDEN ISLAND's most important thing is communicate with other people.

G1S2: Because we have to win the game together so if I think my idea is better than someone, I have to tell them even can't speak English. I need to tell. When I was playing the board game, I didn't scary and worry to speak English, so to playing game is very good for improving speaking skill.

Listening:
G4S3: Speaking is important to communicate with others. But I think listening is important, too. For example, if someone can speak well and she or he cannot listening [sic] well, the conversation won't continue or become heated.

Research Question 2

In the past, games were not taken seriously as tools for language learning and were often thought of as fillers, rewards or entertainment (Krashen & Terrell, 1992; Anderson, 1993). Students in traditional classrooms would often rather use the English class to study grammar for standardized tests (Rao, 2002; Lee, 2012) instead of practicing speaking skills. This does not mean students do not like playing games, but rather they have other priorities. The questionnaire asked the participants if they thought games were useful "devices" (Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983) for practicing English skills, and which language skill they practiced the most. The results (Table 3) showed that the gaming experience was perceived as a useful tool for language acquisition in the areas of speaking and listening specifically. The results from this question show that according to the participants, a game like Forbidden Island can provide communicative opportunities for students.

Table 3. *Student questionnaire responses to question 17*

Questionnaire Question #17: Do you think board games are useful for practicing English skills? Which skills do you think you practice? Why?

G2S4: Yes I do. I think board games are useful for practicing English. There are rules we should discuss. When we need to speak English, people speak English. I think I practiced speaking skill. Speaking is most important to tell them my ideas. If we don't have enough speaking skill, we cannot do anything. But we don't have to stick on practicing speaking skill too much. We can use English with having fun and relaxing. That's why I think playing game in English is useful for practicing English and we can practice speaking skill effectively.

G4S2: Yes, I do. I do think board games are useful for practicing English skills so much. If we do play board game, we can improve our English speaking skills and English listening skills at the same time. And also we can enjoy while we playing. The most important thing for English learner is enjoying I think. We must not feel boring for English learning because we cannot improve English skills if we feel it is boring.

CONCLUSION

This study examined whether students viewed the collaborative board game *Forbidden Island* as a beneficial TBL tool for improving communicative language skills. Games assist in language acquisition and practice and are conducive to learning because they can promote motivation (Julkunen, 2001) while preventing anxiety, which are necessary to create a low filter for students to foster language acquisition (Krashen & Terrell, 1992) (see Table 3). Though there are some limitations to this study, one in particular needs addressing. Asking respondents *what* improved, rather than *did anything* improve, could be seen as a leading question. There were no options for the participants to say that no skills improved, only options for them to choose communicative skills which they felt had improved. Nonetheless, it seems that students perceived *Forbidden Island* as a beneficial tool overall for improving their communicative skills, specifically speaking. This shows that a collaborative game that makes use of TBL and CLT methodology has the potential to be a useful communicative language tool.

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APPENDIX

Forbidden Island **After-Game Questions**
Directions: After watching your recording, please answer the questions below. Please write at least 5 sentences for each question (if possible).
Do you like playing board games where you have to collaborate with other players? Why?

On a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 is the highest and 1 is the lowest, how much did you enjoy playing *Forbidden Island?*

   1   2   3   4

Do you think your communication skills in one of the four areas below increased while playing the game?

Reading   Listening   Speaking   Other

Why do you think so? Please provide at least 2 examples and explain.

Look at this table: order the items from 1-3 (1 being the first choice). Which activity helped you understand the game the most?

Check box	Choices
	Reading the explanations in the game (ex. event cards)
	Discussing, negotiating, and speaking with other team members.
	Listening to other team members.

Give reasons for your choice(s)

How did your group members react to your suggestions and opinions, did they agree or disagree with you? Please give at least 2 examples and explain.

How did you feel about their reaction to your suggestions and opinions in the 2 examples you provided above?

From your first example choose from the list below which you felt when you gave your suggestion:	From your second example choose from the list below which you felt when you gave your suggestion:
a. There was an agreement b. There was a disagreement c. Other: In my reaction to their response I felt: I think that the best way to respond would have been to:	a. There was an agreement b. There was a disagreement c. Other: In my reaction to their response I felt: I think that the best way to respond would have been to:

Did you feel you had enough opportunities to say what you wanted? Or not enough? Please explain.

Out of all the problems you faced today in the game or with other players, what was the most difficult?

How did you solve it?

What was difficult about learning to play the game for the first time?

Before the game, did you like to work in groups?

During the game, how did you feel about working with others?

In what ways was playing the game with others helpful to you?

After this game, has your opinion about working in groups changed?

What language skills do you think you need in order to collaborate better with other players? Why?

Do you think board games are useful for practicing English skills? Which skills do you think you practice? Why?

Does having a task or goal help motivate you to want to play?

Does completing a task or goal give you confidence and motivation?

Would you like to play board games in your class? Why?