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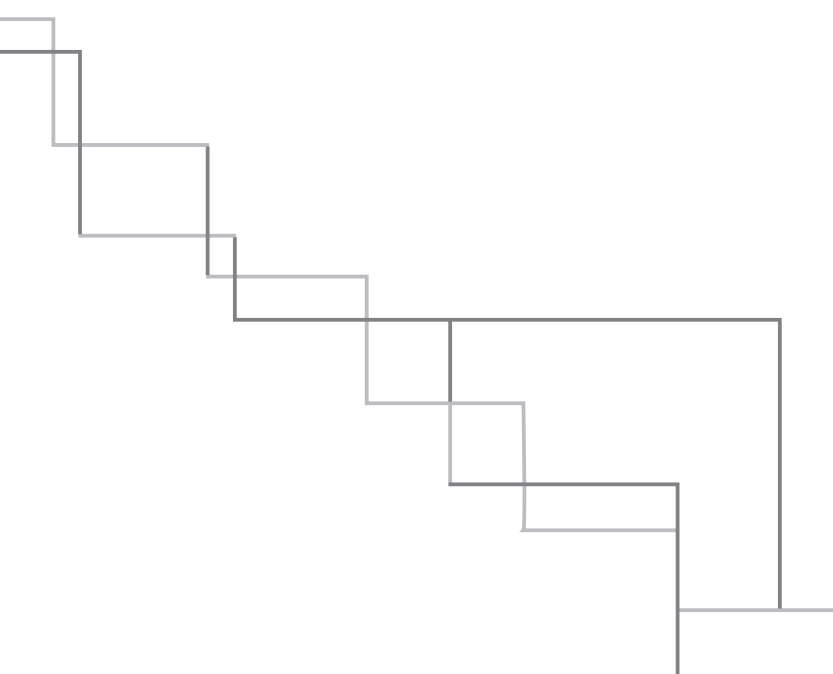
Utilizing Role-playing to Practice English

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【実践研究・実践報告】

英語を練習するためのロールプレイングの活用

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Utilizing Role-playing to Practice English

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Abstract

This study explores the use of table-top role-playing games (TTRPGs) in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context. It explains what a TTRPG is and discusses the pedagogical benefits that they can have when used in language learning classrooms. Furthermore, this study provides instructions on how teachers can utilize TTRPGs in their classroom and gives examples of language learning activities and assessments that can be given with TTRPGs. Finally, this study reports the findings from teacher observations and questionnaires given to students at the university level that participated in courses that implemented TTRPGs.

Key words

Role-playing, gamification, TTRPG, critical thinking, communicative competence

1 Background

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is providing students with enough opportunity to use English in an authentic way. In order to provide students with these opportunities, EFL instructors often utilize debates, role plays, and discussions. A method that has received less attention is the use of role-playing (RP).

1.1 Role Plays Versus Role-playing

Before continuing this discussion, it is best to define the term role-playing, especially in contrast with role plays. For the purpose of this study it is important to understand that RP is fundamentally different than a traditional classroom role play (Philips, 1994). Role plays are performance oriented in that students are given a role that they must act out. Role plays are also often highly structured, with students receiving set phrases and situations, and sometimes even a script to guide them. They are very useful for drilling target

languages phrases and structure, but are limited in their ability to provide students with authentic communicative practice. They are essentially simulations of authentic conversations assigned by the teacher (Zalka, 2012).

Role-playing, in contrast, happens when a group that comes together to create a story through impersonating character in it. It is important to note here that “impersonating” does not necessarily mean “acting.” While RP can, and often does, involve a performance it is not necessary to act out one’s character, only to express what the character’s actions or thoughts are (Zalka, 2012). In RP players are not given a script or guideline and must respond naturally to external input. This could be a reaction to a story event or a response to a question by another player. The players may also be internally motivated to interact due to personal or in-character needs or desires and thereby become the catalyst for a conversation or action by another player. In short, RP requires the players to engage in highly authentic and unscripted conversations

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and reactions in order to continue a shared narrative.

2 Table-top Role-playing Games

The most common way to implement RP is through a table-top role-playing game (TTRPG) such as Dungeons and Dragons. A TTRPG is a game played by a group of players divided into two categories, game masters (GMs) and player characters (PCs). A typical game has only one GM and several PCs. Traditionally the game is played around a table with pencils, paper, and often dice. Recently, online applications and websites have also been developed to play the TTRPGs remotely as well.

In a TTRPG the PCs drive the story by deciding what they want to do or say and communicating their desires to the group. They have full control over the actions of their character. The GM, on the other hand, is responsible for building the world and creating the overall plot for the story. They also work as a referee, enforcing agreed upon rules for the story and game. The GM also controls all the non-player characters (NPCs) in the world, from shop owners to world leaders and everything in between. It is the GMs responsibility to explain the results of a PCs actions and how the world reacts to it, giving feedback to the PCs for the choices they make.

Although TTRPGs provide a lot of freedom to the PCs, there are certain rules or guidelines that govern what abilities they have and the actions they can take. Generally, each PC is given a sheet of paper that lists their character's skills and abilities. For example, one character might be good with technology and able to make useful tools or gadgets while another is more athletic and able to help with more physical problems. While a PC may attempt to perform an action outside of their skillset, their likelihood of success is far lower. This allows each PC to be unique and have a role to play in the group. It also forces PCs to cooperate with each other to solve problems or achieve their characters' goals.

3 Benefits of TTRPGs in the Classroom

TTRPGs are driven mainly through verbal exchange. Players express what they would like

their character to do and the other PCs or GM respond with their reactions. As such, they provide many opportunities to practice language skills. They also help build social and pragmatic awareness since PCs must cooperate with each other to further the narrative and continue the game. Finally, TTRPGs require PCs to use critical thinking skills because they must work together to overcome a variety of social and logical obstacles. These tasks can be as simple as shopping for a gift to as complex as arguing their innocence in a court. Their language learning potential is almost limitless.

Perhaps the most unique, and most important, element of TTRPGs for the purposes of EFL are their player-driven nature, which in the case of the classroom would translate to student-driven. Students are given full autonomy over the character they create, which allows them the opportunity to engage in very authentic situations and use the target language dynamically.

A good example of how much agency students have in a TTRPG stems from a campaign (a story arc) run during an intensive course in the fall of 2019, where the student players were given a task of uncovering the mystery of a 'living tree' in and nearby park and ended up trying to negotiate peace between two factions in order to prevent a war. The turn of events was entirely based upon the decisions of the students themselves.

Language usage in the beginning of the course focused on asking questions, gathering information, and sharing their findings. However, by the end of the course, students discussing history, engaging in debates, and attempting to mitigate misunderstandings. Students also had to learn how to socialize with different types of people in various situations, including individuals that were initially wary or mistrusting of them. This led to various lessons on pragmatics and socio-cultural awareness.

Another benefit of TTRPGs is that they help students become intrinsically motivated to both learn and use the target language. There are several factors that help to build this motivation. First is the act of creating their own character. The act of creation and the ownership can instill an emotional attachment to the character. This

ownership increases the player's desire to see their character succeed. Success is often based on how well they communicate their character's desires and actions, or how well their character communicates his or her ideas, thus motivating the students to improve their own language skills (Armstrong, 2016).

As opposed to many other types of games, TTRPGs are wholly cooperative as all players are part of the same team. Thus, success or failure is shared among all members of the group. This can help “establish a sense of communal cohesion” and “encourage collaborative creativity (Bowman, 2007).”

Finally, TTRPGs are inherently task-based and goal-oriented. Task-based learning (TBL) is a method of instruction in which learners are given a task that can only be completed through use of the target language (Brown, 2007). A task, according to Nunan (2004), a task is any activity in which learners utilize the target language in a way that focuses on “conveying meaning” rather than “manipulating form.” In a TTRPG, PCs in a story work together toward a shared goal. This could be solving a mystery, resolving a conflict, building a civilization, or an unlimited other number of goals. In addition to the overall goals, while the main plot of the story is usually set by the GM, players have a large amount of influence on how the plot is resolved. In addition, PCs often create their own short-term goals, which could be as simple as helping someone find a lost cat or as complex as solving a crime. These smaller goals may or not be related to the overall goal and are generally chosen by the players themselves.

4 Implementing TTRPGs in the EFL Classroom

4.1 Getting Started with TTRPGs

Now that some of the benefits of utilizing TTRPGs in the classroom have been discussed, the question remains of how to implement them. This paper hopes to address some of those concerns through advice and suggestions on how to use TTRPGs for teaching EFL. The advice is drawn from the experience and observations of two twice-a-week English courses and four 5-7 day intensive courses where TTRPGs were utilized as a method of

instruction at Chubu University.

There are multiple ways to run a TTRPG in the classroom. One method is to have the students create the basic plot together and then choose one student to be the GM while the others make characters. This can work well for students who are familiar with RPGs and have a higher aptitude for the target language, but can be difficult to implement as the instructor has little control over the content or flow of the game. This method has seen success as a small group activity during different courses (Phillips, 1994).

Another method is to have the instructor play the role of the GM and the students be PCs. This allows for more control over the gameplay and for easier planning of the course. Furthermore, it requires less in-class time explaining the rules and system, as the role of the PC is far simpler than that of the GM.

As the GM in this method, it is the responsibility of the instructor to choose the plot and setting for the campaign or session. The instructor can also choose to have a continuing campaign, where there is an overarching plot that is broken up into various sessions that continue one after another, or have short episodic stories that last only one or two sessions each. The GM also has control over the rules and the types of NPCs the PCs will interact with. This can be good for teaching or reinforcing pragmatic awareness in students through having them meet with characters at varying statuses in society.

Another important step in implementing TTRPGs in the classroom is choosing what ruleset to use. There are many different TTRPGs, each with their own unique settings and rule systems. Some, like *Rifts: Role-playing Game*, have a very complex and detailed rules system, while others, such as *Our Last Best Hope* are extremely simple. Some good middle of the way rulesets that can be adjusted for complexity are *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition (D&D5e)* or *D20 Modern*.

It is also important to think about setting. Do you wish to have your players play in a fantasy, science fiction, historical, or modern setting? How realistic do you want the world to be? What kinds of stories do you wish to tell? D&D5e has a medieval fantasy setting that is rich in lore and magic. PCs

are typically adventurers or heroes out to save princesses or stop evil monsters and villains. *Call of Cthulhu* is set in the early 20th century and focuses on horror and mystery where the PCs are investigators that are trying to uncover supernatural secrets or stop evil people or creatures from ending the world. *D20 Modern* is set in contemporary times and has several different settings that can be played. PCs often take the role of special agents or investigators out to stop terrorists or solve crimes.

Finally, there is the option to create your own setting and rules. This is not recommended for people who are inexperienced with TTRPGs, but allows for more flexibility in balancing both complexity and the setting. I have utilized both *D&D5e* and my own home-made ruleset (heavily based on *D20 Modern*) and found both to work quite well.

Once the ruleset and setting are established, the story, or campaign, must be created. This is where I recommend *D&D5e* or *Call of Cthulhu* over many other rulesets. While some may find it very enjoyable to create their own worlds and stories, many may find it difficult and time-consuming. The more popular published TTRPG have prewritten modules that can be purchased and are written in a way for GMs to easily follow.

After choosing the method, ruleset, and story, it is simply a matter of planning sessions within the course plan. A good, small session for an EFL class should run from 45 minutes to an hour. Longer sessions are, of course, possible as the typical playing session for many when playing TTRPGs for leisure can run anywhere from 1-4 hours.

4.2 Using TTRPGs for Language Learning

A major roadblock to implementing RP or TTRPGs in the classroom is a lack of knowledge on how to utilize them for language learning. While language use and practice happens naturally during the course of a game, it can be a bit daunting for instructors to develop language learning activities that can accommodate the dynamic changes that can happen during a TTRPG campaign. This is because the student players have a lot of control over the direction of the story and the language points that will be needed. However,

there are many opportunities for language learning no matter what the students do.

It is important to have lessons that focus on more direct language learning when using TTRPGs in the course. The entire course should not simply be language practice through role-playing. Time should be balanced between language learning lessons and RP. This balance should be adjusted according to the needs of the students in the class. In general, lower-aptitude classes will require more direct language instruction and less RP. Thus, the overall plot for the TTRPG should be short and simple. On the other hand, more advanced students will likely require less instruction and can handle more complex plots and longer RP sessions.

Also, it is important to think about the type of language you wish to teach before beginning the TTRPG. If you wish to teach students business English, it is better to have a story setting that revolves around trade, business, and sales. A fantasy or science fiction setting would likely be less useful. For general English classes, there is a lot of flexibility in the types of stories that can be used. Know what the story requires of the students and plan language lessons around the skills that will likely be necessary.

Moreover, instructors should be observant of students and stay alert for learning opportunities. It is sometimes important to interrupt the role-playing for a teaching moment. For example, during a role-playing session in a listening and speaking English course taught in the fall of 2019, student players found themselves in a situation where they were going to be interrogated by a governor. Before the interrogation, the instructor stopped the RP session and had students have a discussion about what questions they believed would be asked and how they should respond. A short lesson was planned for the next class on formal language and reporting.

There are also language learning opportunities that are nearly always relevant or useful when playing TTRPGs. Before any TTRPG story begins, students often must make characters. In order to do so, students will need to use descriptions of appearance and personality. They may also need to learn about motivations and goals. This is also a great opportunity to discuss narrative language by

having students write a small background story for their character or give a short oral presentation introducing their character.

Note-taking is also extremely important for TTRPGs. PCs are unlikely to remember all the NPCs and places that they visit. Moreover, smaller details in the descriptions could contain hints for solving a problem or uncovering a secret. Students should be encouraged to not only take notes, but to summarize each RP session in the form of a report or a character journal.

In relation to note-taking, both summarizing and reporting are also essential skills required for any TTRPG. Players may be required to explain actions they or others took to each other or to an NPC in authority, such as a police officer or their boss. They also may be witness to an event that they need to relay to another person or institution. This can take the form of formal reports or casual conversations. Instructors should make sure their students are capable of doing these things in the target language. In addition, teachers can have students craft a memo or e-mail as an activity related to the RP session as extra practice or for assessment.

There are many other lesson plans and activities that can be implemented alongside of RP sessions, far too many to list in one paper. Some examples from the author's experiences include various grammatical lessons, writing letters of apology, a research paper on the history of creatures from folklore, formal problem-solution presentations addressing issues such as agriculture, foreign relations, and criminal justice, debates on ethics and human rights, and many other language learning activities.

Finally, while it is important to plan for certain activities through the direction of the plot or story events, there will be many opportunities for the instructor to discover where their students are weak and address specific needs through observing them during their role-play. So, teachers should remain flexible and be willing to adjust their plans to accommodate the language needs of the students.

5 Student feedback and conclusion

Thus far this study has focused on the teacher, discussing why and how to implement RP in the

language classroom. However, it is also important to consider how well students respond to this method of instruction. Data was collected from 14 students that took courses that utilized a TTRPG at Chubu University and answered a questionnaire. Some also responded to a short answer interview.

Table 1 Student Opinions on TTRPG Usage

Question	Average Score
I feel the roleplaying game was very enjoyable.	4.4
Playing this game helped improve my <u>listening</u> skills in English.	4.7
Playing this game helped improve my <u>speaking</u> skills in English.	4.5
This game was easy to play.	2.8
I was motivated to do the writing assignments because they were connected to my character.	4.1
This game was difficult to play.	3.5
Playing this game encouraged me to take notes in class.	4.3
I feel the writing assignments in this class were useful.	4.4
I feel this game helped me improve my note-taking skills.	4.4
I want to take more English classes that use a game like this.	4.2
I feel this game is good for improving my English skills.	4.4
The writing assignments in this class were more interesting than in other English classes I have taken.	4.2
I was comfortable speaking as a character in this game.	3.9

Table 1 shows the responses of the 14 students to questions on a Likert scale of 1-5 with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree.” Overall students were very receptive to the usage of TTRPGs in the classroom. The focus of the course was listening and speaking, in which students overwhelmingly reported that they felt had improved. Furthermore, students found the writing assignments to be useful and also reported that their note-taking skills had improved during the course. This data is supported by the difference in the general quality of the notes submitted at the

beginning and at the end of the course.

The largest complaint about the TTRPG was the difficulty students found in playing the game. This difficulty was expected, as the experience was completely new for nearly every participant. The lower 3.9 score on the question on comfort speaking as a character was the result of a 2 by two different students. One student found the game to be very enjoyable (score of 4) and reported that they felt their English skills improved (score of 5), but was a bit intimidated by the rules. The other student did not enjoy the course because he felt the fantastic elements were “not realistic” and he wanted a class more focused on debate and negotiation instead. He was hoping for more arguments and debates and expressed concern over the lack of more serious subject matter. Still, most students in the course expressed a desire to take another class that utilizes a TTRPG (86% of students).

The majority of students also found the TTRPG to be both beneficial and motivating. Several students reported that they enjoy speaking with the other players and sharing information. Most students highly enjoyed trying to solve the mystery in the story they played in the game. Some students also reported that they felt that although grammar was not a strong focus of the class, it had improved. One student reported that yes their English “speaking and grammar (tense, article)” improved and that they were “careful not to miss these grammar [rules].” Another student said “I was weak in tense part, now I think I have improved in that part.”

In general, the data collected supports other research that suggests TTRPGs are beneficial for both motivating students and improving their language skills. Students tended to enjoy the critical thinking aspects of the game (problem solving activities) the most and seemed to find assignments in the course to be both interesting and useful. Notes from teacher observations also suggest that students were very motivated to communicate with each other and the instructors NPCs, especially when they were trying to solve a problem or gain information they felt was important for reaching their characters' in-game

goals.

Finally, although this method can be very effective, it is important to keep in mind that, just like any other method, is not recommended for every instructor. Utilizing TTRPGs in the classroom requires instructors to be both flexible and creative. When first attempting to use them, it can be time-consuming. However, TTRPGs can be very rewarding for students by helping to motivate them to practice their English and giving them unique opportunities to use authentic English in real conversations that can otherwise be very difficult to simulate in the EFL context.

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英語を練習するためのロールプレイングの活用

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要 旨

この研究では、英語を外国語として学んでいる(EFL)状況の下で、テーブルトップ・ロールプレイングゲーム(TTRPG)の使用について検討した。TTRPGとは何かを説明し、言語学習の教室で使用した場合に得られる教育的な利点について説明した。さらに、この調査では、講師が教室でTTRPGをどのように利用できるかについての指示を提供し、TTRPGを使った言語学習活動と評価の仕方の例を示した。最後に、TTRPGを利用したコースについて、教師の観察からの発見と受講した大学生へのアンケートを報告した。

キーワード

ロールプレイング、ゲーミフィケーション、TTRPG、批判的思考、コミュニケーション能力