

Playing Online Video Games as a Learning Strategy to Enhance EFL Learners' Speaking Skill

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Abstract:

The present article discloses the results of a research that investigated the English Foreign Language (EFL) learners' use of playing online digital videogames as a learning strategy to enhance their speaking skill. The study fits with the new teaching approach labelled edutainment. The research was quantitative distributing a questionnaire online to Algerian university learners belonging to different departments of English language and literature. Two hundred and ten learners whose level ranges from first year undergraduate to master two participated in the survey. The discussion of the results showed that learners do not play videogames for learning purposes, but they agreed with their positive impact on increasing vocabulary acquisition, enhancing pronunciation, lowering anxiety, and raising motivation which affects their speaking skill positively and unconsciously.

Keywords: *online video games, language learning strategies, speaking skill, unconscious, edutainment.*

1. Introduction

The issue of learners' inability to speak English spontaneously in class sparked concern among researchers to investigate the major difficulties they face, and to explore new methodologies in the hope of finding suitable ways and techniques to help learners enhance their speaking skill. Nowadays, intensive technologies are introduced to the world coupled with a rapidly growing number of internet users. Consequently, EFL learners are constantly exposed to knowledge from various sources other than that of the teaching institutions, on the one hand, and enthused

about entertainment devices, on the other. In this sense, linking education and entertainment, the word 'edutainment' was coined to be used in situations like the use of playing videogame in education.

The present article seeks to investigate the extent to which Algerian university learners resort to edutainment, more particularly playing online videogames, as a learning strategy to develop their speaking ability. It begins with a presentation of the speaking skill, to move to focus on Computer assisted language learning (CALL) pedagogy as an umbrella term that covers many educational practices among which

is edutainment. The latter, as well, embeds various tools but the focus here is on online digital videogames. The second part of the article summarises the aim, methodology and findings of the study.

2. Literature Review:

2.1. The Speaking Skill:

Speaking can be defined as “a process during which speakers rely on all the available information (background and linguistic) to create messages that will be understandable and meaningful to the intended audience” (Drozdial-Szelest, 2011, p. 132). Hence, it stands for the ability of learners to implement the already acquired and internalized knowledge of the language in a vocalized form. Therefore, success in speaking, for EFL learners, is considered to be a criterion and a measure for the success of the whole learning process. In this vein, Richards (2008) claimed that “learners often evaluate their success in the language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency” (p. 19).

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, the participants, and the purposes of speaking (Burns & Joyce, 1997). It is considered to be a complex and an important interactive skill which speakers rely on to convey different meanings and various viewpoints fluently and accurately. Hence, learners should be trained in all the

five interrelated elements that the speaking skill comprises; namely pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (Harris, 1969), together with the appropriate ways to use language to communicate in various situations, with a specification of the fact that a spoken language is widely different from the written one .

According to Heriansyah (2012), the difficulties faced by learners while speaking a foreign language can be divided into two; linguistic problems and non-linguistic problems. The former refers to those problems that are related to difficulties in the use of formal language aspects i.e., grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The lack of this type of knowledge is considered to be a major obstacle when speaking the language. The latter, or non-linguistic problems, refers to some psychological difficulties; they imbed inhibition, anxiety, fear of criticism or losing face, and shyness (Ur, 1991).

To overcome these difficulties, researchers (e.g. Oxford 1990) discussed a set of language learning strategies which can be used by learners to help them develop their language proficiency in general and specific skills in particular. However, new ways and techniques could be recognized in the learners' life due to the constantly changing nature of life. Hence, various researchers in the field of language teaching/ learning have been seeking different methods, techniques and strategies, as they have investigated the application and the implementation of the continuously emerging technologies in an attempt to help learners overcome the

different difficulties they face while speaking.

2.2. Computer Assisted Language

Learning Pedagogy:

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) can be broadly defined as “any process in which a learner uses a computer and, as a result, improves his or her language.” (Beatty, 2010 p.07). It refers to “the broad range of activities associated with technology and language learning” (Chappelle, 2005 p.743). Specifically, it is a wide field “that includes the use of Internet [...]; communication tools[...]; software and applications designed specifically for language learning, the authoring and publication of web, digital audio and video materials, etc.” (Brett & González Lloret, 2009 p. 351). It was at the beginning marginal, but later on gained the interest of researchers..

Accordingly, CALL pedagogy implies the use of a variety of activities and applications to suit a range of learning and teaching styles. Materials for CALL may include those which are purpose-made for language learning and those which adapt existing computer-based materials, video and other materials. Hence, the use of multiple technological devices resulted in the emergence of a variety of teaching and learning methods and approaches, one of which is ‘edutainment’. The latter is a combination of two words; education and entertainment. Zorica (2014) claimed that there are two directions of edutainment; the first goes for the educational usage of the elements of entertainment, such as the

use of videos, songs, games and movies as authentic materials to support educational contents, while the second aims to integrate the educational elements in entertainment, such as training learners how to speak fluently through the use of digital video games (VGs).

2.3. Digital Video Games

The term digital video games refers to the set of games being played using electronic devices including computers, mobile phones and gaming consoles like Xbox and Play-stations. Winter (2005) manifested that digital video games are part of computer software meant to entertain the users by presenting some challenges to overcome, or some problems to solve.

Digital video games were classified based on various aspects including (1) the type of the game platform such as phone, computers or consoles, (2) whether the game is individual or it is a multiplayer game and (3) the game content. Vince (2018) classified video games into nine categories; action games (e.g. Call of Duty, Half-Life, Counter Strike Global Offensive (CSGO), and Assassin’s Creed IIV), action adventure games (e.g. The Legend of Zelda), adventure games (e.g. Criminal Case Looks), role playing games (e.g. Grand Theft Auto (GTA) and Final Fantasy), simulation games (e.g. Sim city), strategy games (e.g. Age Of Wonders),

sport games (e.g. Forza Horizon, Moto GP, Ultimate Fighting Championship), puzzle games (e.g. Trivia games), and idle games . Within each category, further subcategories could be found.

Online Digital video games are considered to be a genre of digital games that provides players with real life interaction with other players (Alamr, 2019); gamers are involved in playing a game connected to the internet. In this regard, recent studies have shown that almost all digital games have been assembled with the mode of online gaming (Thorne, 2008). Although some online games, like FIFA or Tekken, permit to play against real life people instead of playing against the computer, these games lack the feature of interaction between the players; this feature rather appears in most of other game genres as a means for cooperation and teamwork such as PUBG, CSGO and Call of Duty.

Accordingly, Digital Games Based Language Learning (DGBLL) is defined as "any initiative that combines or mixes video games and education" (Tsai & Fan, 2013 p. 115). It is originated from the field of CALL; it focuses on digital games as a medium for language learning to create new learning opportunities (Hung, Chang, & Yeh, 2016). Within this sense, two main types of digital video games can be

distinguished; those designed specifically to support EFL learning, and those that are not designed for EFL learning (Alamr, 2018, p.36).

The relationship between digital video games and language has appeared decades ago, and researchers agreed that most games have extended the potential for gamers to interact using foreign languages. Digital games require the use of a significant amount of reading and writing so that the players can access to the games. Besides, they offer learners an enjoyable environment that is attractive for language-learning (Aldrich, 2003). Moreover, Video games brought some major skills to be developed including problem solving, concentration, autonomy, memory, self-expression and collaboration (Deen, 2015). In addition to cultural awareness, and increased computing proficiency (Prensky, 2005).

Empirical research have similarly shown that playing digital video games helps learners to develop communication skills (Zheng, Newgarden and Young, 2012; Chen and Haung, 2010). The secret behind the success that digital video games attained is interactivity; this means of communication helped non-native speakers to develop their proficiency in English (Postic , 2018). Prensky (2005) argued that besides other skills, increasing

vocabulary acquisition and developing the speaking skill are the most developed skills.

However, Due to the time spent using video games, parents and teachers try to convince learners to avoid playing video games excessively at school and home for not causing isolation or aggressive behaviours (Platoni, 2009). Besides, the exposure of some games contents such as violence, politics and religion may cause a cultural shock or cultural misunderstanding to young learners. Furthermore, Harris and William 's (1985) study showed that high school students who spent more time playing video games had poor grades in English classes; mainly due to procrastination..

3. The Study:

Speaking spontaneously and effectively is among the main objectives of EFL learners/teachers. However, a considerable number of Algerian EFL learners are passive in class; they refrain from oral conversations, and engage in discussions only when pointed by the teachers. This passiveness resulted in a poor speaking proficiency revealed in the learners' lack of vocabulary and self-confidence, and difficulty to express thoughts in meaningful sentences. These speaking problems could be due to the cultural context which does not favour the use of English as a means of communication outside class; instead language practice is limited to class .

Oxford (1990) together with various researchers depicted multiple language learning strategies that can be used by learners to develop the speaking skill both inside and outside class. However, the pervasive growth of technology, and more particularly the entertainment industry, attracted students' attention, and made it a necessity to investigate the new strategies that the net generation learners use to improve the speaking skill.

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to investigate the extent to which Algerian EFL learners resort to playing online videogames as a learning strategy to enhance the speaking skill. It is assumed that playing digital video games is one of the strategies that learners use when seeking opportunities of language practice outside class; they communicate with other speakers of English through using computers or mobile phones. Hence, the study is directed by the following research questions:

- Do EFL learners use digital video games to practise language ?
- Do EFL learners practise language through digital video games unconsciously ?
- To what extent do digital games help to improve EFL learners speaking skill?.

3.1.Methodology:

The present study is conducted through a descriptive quantitative method; therefore, a questionnaire was designed for EFL students at the departments of English in Algeria. The questionnaire is divided into two sections; section one is meant to

investigate the presence of the online videogames in the students' life, while the second explores the relation between playing VGs and the speaking skill with a total of seventeen questions.

From the targeted population, a sample of two hundred and ten Algerian university learners answered the questionnaire. Their level of education ranges from first year undergraduate to master two i.e. all levels are represented in the sample.

Considering the Covid-19 pandemic situation, the questionnaire was shared on Facebook pages through an online link with the help of Google Forms software. It was distributed during spring 2020.

3.2. Summary of the Results:

The analysis of the results revealed that the majority of the participants (80%) are familiar with playing online videogames. The most used devices are smartphones (61%), followed by computers (19%), PlayStation (11%), and Xbox (7%). Only 2% of the participants have said that they play games in other systems, such as Nintendo Switch. For the frequency of playing, learners divided into those who play online videogames half an hour per day (31%), one hour (25%), 2 hours (21%), and for more than 3 hours (23%). They play different types of games including Action games (20%), Adventure games (19%), Strategy games (11%), Sport games (24%), Role Playing Game (8%), Fantasy games (8%), Simulation games (7%), and other types (3%). While playing, more than a half of the participants (60%) claimed that they have talks with the persons they play with. However, this talk is not always in English; the results showed that 43%

always use English, 37% use it sometimes, while 14% and 6% use it rarely or never respectively. The results further demonstrated that the reasons for playing VGs vary; 32% of the participants play games to kill boredom, 25% are incited by the storyline of the games, while 23% play games to create new social connections, and only 19% find in games opportunities to learn. Most of them are incidental gamers; they do not give it much time and importance .

Putting the speaking skill under scrutiny, most of the students rated their speaking level to be average. 78% of the students agreed with the view that VGs help in language learning, 18% stand neutral, and 4% & 1% either disagree or strongly disagree respectively. When relating the matter to the speaking skill, 82% of the participants concurred that VGs help in enhancing the speaking skill. According to the respondents' answers, the most influenced aspects of the language are pronunciation, and vocabulary followed by fluency, formality, accuracy and grammar. Besides the various elements of the speaking skill, 77% of the participants accepted that VGs help them overcome anxiety and shyness while speaking in public because VGs give them the chance to build social connections, to express their ideas without being criticized in case of mistakes which increases their self-confidence. The same positive pose was noticed with the role of VGs in motivating students.

Taking the unconscious nature of language learning strategies into consideration, results gained from questions 6, 7, 8, and 9

in the second section of the questionnaire revealed that learners (89%) agreed that they learn new vocabulary from VGs and use it later unconsciously in communication. Similarly, they (91%) agreed that interactions in VGs help them get the correct pronunciation of words, and 71% accepted that VGs have a positive impact on acquiring new structures.

3.3. Discussion of the Findings:

After a detailed examination of the results, it can be claimed that most of the participants are not frequent gamers; most of them play VGs incidentally either to relieve boredom or to build social connections. Despite that, they responded positively towards the role of VGs in language learning, in general, and in developing the speaking skill, in particular. Vocabulary and pronunciation are the most influenced aspects by gaming, this is due to interactions with native speaker gamers which teach students correct pronunciation of words, besides, the variety of games (e.g. instructions, descriptions, stories...) are rich in new vocabulary .

In this vein, although students confessed that they do not tend to play VGs for educational purposes, they showed that they continuously acquire new vocabulary, correct pronunciation and grammar, and use them in communication unconsciously. In other words, VGs help them unconsciously enhance the speaking skill with its different aspects, besides increasing motivation to learn English since they embed both entertainment and foreign language learning, and surmounting shyness and public speaking anxiety.

These results echo the claim of researchers in the field of language learning strategies (LLS) who explained that LLS can be conscious or unconscious i.e. learners may use and benefit from some LLS without being aware of such a use. However, raising learners' awareness about LLS would give better results. Moreover, a close examination of VGs as a LLS would reveal that it can be regarded as an umbrella strategy within which other strategies mentioned in Oxford's taxonomy (1990) could appear. These strategies may include: memory strategies (e.g. placing new words into a context), cognitive strategies (e.g. practicing, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning), compensation strategies (guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking and writing), metacognitive strategies (e.g. seeking practice opportunities), in addition to other affective and social strategies. Albeit these strategies are not used at the same time as they vary from one learner to the other, playing VGs may provide learners with opportunities to practice these LLS since strategy training is not common in our classes due to the overloaded syllabi.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, one can come to answer the research questions claiming that EFL learners use digital video games for various reasons, but not to practise language, however, they practise English outside class unconsciously while playing VGs. As a result, participants responded in favour of the positive impact that VGs may have on EFL learners' speaking skill, mainly pronunciation and vocabulary acquisition.

3.4. Recommendations:

In light of the findings of the present study, the following recommendations and suggestions are made:

-Teachers (and why not parents) should raise learners' awareness towards the use of unconscious strategies, among which is playing online VGs, to help them benefit more. However, this consciousness raising should be twined with a direction towards the appropriate use of this strategy because excessive gaming would result in adverse behaviours such as procrastination .

-Teachers may introduce gaming to classes of Oral Expression to raise learners' motivation and engagement and to endorse interaction and social constructivism.

4. Conclusion:

The present study examined the use of playing digital online video games by learners to promote their speaking skill. Data collected was quantitative; it was gathered through the use of an online distributed questionnaire. The analysis and the discussion of the results revealed that learners do not opt for playing videogames to seek opportunities of language practice or language learning, however, they noticed a positive impact of these VGs linked to increasing vocabulary acquisition, enhancing pronunciation, lowering anxiety, and raising motivation which affect their speaking skill positively. Hence, it was concluded that playing VGs helps learners promote their speaking skill while they are unconscious of its use for learning. Therefore, raising learners' consciousness about the use of playing VGs would help

them benefit more, and would be an implementation of edutainment. r.

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Appendix: Student Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a research work which investigates the use of online videogames to develop EFL learners' speaking skill. You are kindly requested to answer it; your answers are very important for the validity of this research .

Section 1: Students and Videogames

1. Do you play online Video Games?

Yes No

2. Which Device do you use while playing?

•Smartphone

•PlayStation

•Xbox

•Computer/Laptop

•Other

3. How many hours do you spend playing video games per day?

30 •minutes

1 •hour

2 •hours

3 •hours or more

4. What genre of video games do you play most? (You can tick more than one box(

•Action

•Adventure

•Strategy

•Sports

•Role Playing Game

•Fantasy

•Simulation

•Other

5. Do you have a talk with people you play with or against?

Yes No

6. How often do you use English while playing?

Always

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

7. Why do you play video games ?

Yes

No

- I play for the story and narrative of game.
- I play for educational purposes.
- I play because of boredom.
- I play to build social relationships.

If yes, what are the most influenced aspects among these?

Pronunciation

Formality

8. What type of gamer are you?

Accuracy

Fluency

Grammar

Vocabulary

.1 •Power gamer (that who learns the rules of a game inside and out to perfection in order to become the best at that game.(

.2 •Incidental gamer (plays rarely just to pass time mainly out of boredom.(

.3 •Dormant gamer (plays occasionally due to occupations and duties.(

.4 •Cyber-athlete (professional player that earns money from games.(

4. Does playing video games help in overcoming fear of speaking in public (shyness?{(

Yes

No

How?

.....
.....
.....

Section 2: Gameplay and the Speaking Skill

1. Do you rate your English-speaking level as:

- Poor
- Average
- Good
- Excellent

5. Does playing video games help in motivating you to learn English ?

Yes

No

How ?

.....
.....
.....

2. Video games help in Language Learning. Do you:

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. Some of the words/ utterances learned in games have unconsciously sneaked into your talks

Agree

Strongly agree

3. Do you think that playing video games helps you enhance your speaking skill?

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

7. The amount of vocabulary acquired from video games helps you in your communication

Agree

Strongly agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

8. Having a talk with foreign gamers helps you to get the correct pronunciation of words

Agree

Strongly agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree

9. Gaming helps learners to get correct word order and verb tenses

Agree

Strongly agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly disagree