Developing Speaking Proficiency in Online Courses Through Tabletop Role-Playing Games

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Abstract Games can be an effective tool in the language-learning classroom to motivate learners, to build rapport, and especially to encourage learners to practice the target language. This chapter explores the types of games used in language instruction, describes the linguistic and communicative benefits of game play, and highlights some potential problems with the use of games for language learning. The author offers recommendations on how game-based approaches to language learning can be adapted to online English language teaching and learning contexts such that they draw from the benefits of games and avoid the potential pitfalls. The author then details an investigation comparing tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) with Intermediate and Advanced level speaking functions of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines. The author explains how TTRPGs can be adapted to online language learning contexts to help learners practice target ACTFL speaking functions.

Keywords Game-based learning · Task-based language teaching · Role-playing · Speaking · Tabletop games

1 Games and their Use in Language Learning

Motivation in the language classroom is often a concern, which is amplified in an online environment where interaction and friendship between students can be more challenging given the lack of physical proximity between participants. This paper is divided into two parts. The first part offers an overview of potential of games for language learning and ends with an examination of the potential of tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) as a tool for increasing student motivation and fostering

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language development in online courses. Not only do games, such as TTRPGs, motivate learners to participate in class discussions, but also TTRPGs are ideally designed to help learners develop oral fluency. The second part of this paper investigates the degree to which the common tasks of TTRPGs align with the speaking functions of the Intermediate and Advanced levels of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Guidelines (2012). By aligning TTRPG gameplay with ACTFL oral proficiency functions, teachers can design curricula that help online language learners engage in motivating group discussions that improve learners' speaking skills.

1.1 Games as a Tool for Building Motivation

Language learning can be a challenging endeavor. It requires a great deal of practice with the language, and learners need to feel comfortable and confident enough to experiment with speaking and writing in the language knowing that they will inevitably make mistakes as they work towards improved proficiency. As a result, language teachers face many challenges motivating their students to practice the language sufficiently so that learners will develop the target proficiency. The use of games for language learning can be one effective way to help learners overcome their inhibitions and lack of motivation so that they spend time exercising their language skills in a fun and meaningful way. This study examines the role of games in the language-learning classroom—both in-person and online, and discusses various levels of game use in the curriculum. An analysis of both the benefits and potential pitfalls of gaming are examined along with general suggestions for integrating games into the language classroom. Following this examination, I explain how a specific type of game, tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) can be adapted to online language learning contexts and how TTRPGs can help online learners develop proficiency in the functions of Intermediate and Advanced levels of the ACTFL Guidelines.

Feeling motivated and confident to practice the target language is an important psychological component to successful language learning. Goldman and Chen (2013) explored the role of motivation in relation to an interactive computer game that was built to help native Portuguese players learn and practice the target language of English. In this game, players were presented with a series of pirate-themed quests, presented to players by an in-game character. Using listening and reading input, players had to use clues to navigate the virtual environment and solve the quests. The game provided many opportunities for students to practice reading and listening skills while learning new vocabulary and grammar implicitly. The researchers concluded that in addition the linguistic benefits of the game, players developed "a burgeoning sense of competence and confidence that comes with the knowledge that they can teach themselves" (p. 407). According to Goldman and Chen, players discovered that language learning can be fun and motivating when contextualized into an experience, such as a game. Butler et al. (2014) report similar

findings that games can help language learners focus their attention on the target language, thereby increasing both their motivation and confidence to learn.

1.2   Games as a Tool for Developing Linguistic and Communicative Skills

Of course, games do not only increase motivation and confidence in language learning. Numerous studies have shown that games can help learners improve their linguistic skills, as well. For example, Bado and Franklin (2014) report that cooperative gaming helped learners improve their vocabulary and writing skills, Kaylor (2017) states that collaborative storytelling games encouraged teens to improve their literacy skills, and Cornillie et al. (2012) found that a computer game that offered language accuracy feedback helped players pay attention to and learn grammatical forms. In his experimental study involving Croatian learners of English who played role-playing games in the target language, Farkas (2018) found a significant difference in the improvement of the experimental group's listening and speaking skills compared with the control group. These are just a handful of studies, from a large body of emerging research, that build an argument that games are useful for helping learners improve their language proficiency.

In addition to helping learners develop linguistic skills, studies suggest that games also help with communication skills. In his account of teaching English in Korea, Seller (2012) describes how the use of role-playing games with his students helped them develop empathy, collaboration, and decision-making skills. Likewise, Daniau (2016) claims that role-playing games enhance the learning environment through cooperation, empathy, and negotiation. Daniau also purports that, because games require players to come to a consensus about rules and purpose, they help create a sense of community and belonging; players use the game structure to develop creativity skills, communication skills, and explore different identities that help learners develop empathy. As such, Daniau suggests that games can become a transformative experience for players, helping them become stronger and better communicators.

1.3   Types of Games for Language Learning

It is clear that there are many benefits to games and that they can contribute to better language learning and stronger language learners. Yet gaming takes many forms, and not all forms of games are equal. Games for language learning can be categorized into three forms of integration: games in the classroom, game-based learning, and gamification. Because there are no absolute criteria to separate each concept, it

is more helpful to think of these categories as anchor points on a continuum rather than as strict distinctions.

Games in the Classroom The first category, games in the classroom, involves using games to make learning more interesting. In such contexts, a game is used to break up the monotony of language teaching and learning. Of course, such games should have a pedagogical function, and they are most effective when they relate the language tasks and forms that learners are already practicing. However, they are usually optional and non-essential to the curriculum. In their edited collection of language games, Nurmukhamedov and Sadler ([2020]) state that most games in language learning "enrich classrooms" (p. ix). The use of *enrich* is indicative of the role of games in this first category; they are supplemental and mostly used to lighten the learning atmosphere and give students and teachers a break from "normal" classroom learning. This level of game integration is the easiest to align with a curriculum and requires the least planning.

One example of a game in the classroom is the use of a spelling game. As part of the regular course curriculum, teachers may introduce new words to their students who are expected to study and learn these words on their own after a basic introduction to the vocabulary in a class lesson. However, teachers could use a game to supplement students' learning of the target words. A simple spelling game would involve splitting the class into teams, and each team has a rotating representative who is responsible for correctly and quickly spelling whichever word the teacher announces. The team whose representative correctly spells the word first wins a point. Although this type of game is engaging for many students and is relevant to the language that the students are learning, it is not an essential component of the curriculum.

Another example of a game in the classroom is an information gap game. As part of the course curriculum, students may be learning to ask simple Yes/No questions. To help students practice this skill, instructors might use an information gap activity using cards containing images of vocabulary words that students have already learned in the target language. In this game, students work in pairs to identify the image contained on their partner's card. The student without the card asks a series of Yes/No questions, such as, "Is it an animal?" The partner with the card answers accordingly, and once the mystery image is correctly guessed, partners swap roles. For a more competitive game, student pairs could race to see which partnership completes their assigned stack of cards before the other groups. As with the spelling game, this information gap game is not an integral component to the lesson. Instead, it is an optional and engaging activity that both motivates learners and helps them practice the linguistic objectives of the curriculum. These are key features of games in the classroom: fun and supplemental but definitely non-essential.

Game-Based Learning The second category of integration is game-based learning. At this level, games become the primary tool for learning, rather than a supplemental diversion. Some researchers refer to this category as serious games because they are games with a clear purpose beyond simple enjoyment and that learners

develop transferable skills that help them outside of the gaming context. Game-based learning also differs from games in the classroom because these games often require greater integration into the curriculum and more preparation on the part of the instructor. McGonigal (2010) offers an example of game-based learning, or serious games, through her game Superstruct, in which players use real data to collaborate on solving a global resource scarcity scenario. Game-based learning requires instructors to carefully select games, or even create them, so that the gameplay relates directly to the course learning outcomes. Such games are integral to the learning experience and are not an occasional diversion but rather a core component of the learning experience. When students are engaged in gamed-based learning, playing the game is the learning experience; the game may be the primary method for teaching and learning the course content, and, in a language course, the game may be the primary tool that allows learners to meet the course outcomes, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In game-based learning, a game is far more integrated into the teaching and learning experience than it is with the games in the classroom category (deHaan, 2011). For example, a language course could have some pragmatics-based outcomes that focus on levels of politeness and appropriateness in email interactions. To help students develop proficiency in these outcomes, students could be asked to participate in a simulation in which they write (or select pre-written) email messages to send to imagined interlocutors. Based on their choice of email compositions, students could earn points and receive particular responses to their messages. At the end of the simulation, students would evaluate their effectiveness based on their total points or based on the final outcome of their email exchanges. To further extend the value of the game, the course instructor might review choices with students to help them evaluate their choices and predict the impact of those choices on the interlocutor. This simulation game is more elaborate than a game in the classroom. The simulation requires more time and preparation than a simple game, and it is more closely tailored to the course outcomes. And not only does the action of playing the game support the course outcomes, but many of the outcomes would be difficult for students to achieve without the game. These are defining elements common to game-based learning: the integration of outcomes and gameplay are much closer, and playing the game is an important part of the lesson or curriculum. Often, game-based learning involves a game that is not completed in one session, but rather it is a repeated or complex game that extends across classroom meetings.

Gamification The final category is gamification, which refers to the use of game-like elements in a non-game context (Marczewski, 2015). For example, many corporate marketing campaigns use gamification strategies to entice consumers to share posts on social media to be rewarded with game points, or users of a fitness app may earn badges for completing certain exercise goals. The idea of gamification is that gaming elements can be added to a non-gaming context to make the experience more motivating to participants. Gamification can also help guide users towards meaningful goals. In this way, language education can be gamified.

Critics warn against gamification for a couple reasons. First, gamification strategies may be applied in a superficial or misaligned manner, thus distracting from the learning outcomes rather than complementing them. This most often happens when creators decide to gamify an experience without a careful consideration of the learning goals and which gaming elements are best suited to the participants, the content, and the learning outcomes. Second, gamification can be used to make an experience enticing to players even when that experience is not in the best interest of the players or possibly even at the expense of players. For an example of this, consider the previously mentioned gamified marketing campaign. What benefit (beyond game points) do players get from sharing social media posts from a corporation's marketing team? And what detriment might such a game pose to players if the gamification system requires them to share personal data with the corporation?

With these warnings in mind, if gamification is used for language learning, creators need to ensure that the gaming elements contribute to the learning goals and that the game is ethical and beneficial to learners. For example, one common gamification element is the use of leaderboards, a list or chart that shows which players are excelling in a game according to a ranked list of all participants. Although some students are highly competitive and enjoy the challenge of a leaderboard, other learners are turned off by such competition and may even refuse to play a game that is tied to a leaderboard. Some players may be demotivated to practice the language if they are competitive but not successful at climbing the leaderboard. In such a situation, the gamification element could become more important to students than the learning objective, and gamification could supplant learning and replace internal motivation with an external reward.

Badges are another form of gamification. A badge is a microcredential, or evidence of an achievement, in a particular skill or disposition (Homer et al., 2018). Badges are popular in some educational contexts in which learners who complete a series of related objectives earn a badge to show their competency in the target domain. Although the concept of a physical badge is a long-standing tradition in many youth programs, such as scouting, educators have adopted badges as a means of motivating learners in the classroom. When a badge is tied to a curricular outcome, the process of completing badge requirements can help students attain course objectives (Ady et al., 2015). A badge system can be a helpful gamification component to a course because it provides choice and short-term goals for students (Boyer, 2018). However, just as with leaderboards and other gamification elements, instructors need to choose and integrate badges carefully so that they are appealing to students and appropriate for the course's outcomes (Hirvela & Pierson, 2000). Gamification is less about using a game to practice learning outcomes and more about turning the classroom into a game by using a variety of game-like elements to motivate learners to engage in course materials and objectives.

1.4 Criticism of Games for Language Learning

Even if games are used in an ethical and purposeful manner, not all instructors are convinced that games for language learning is a fruitful pursuit. In his survey of foreign language faculty in Japan, Franciosi (2016) found that many faculty were skeptical of the contributions that games could make on students' proficiency. Faculty also believed that the effort required to facilitate gameplay was not worth any potential benefits. Farkas (2018) agrees that faculty need to evaluate the time cost-benefit of introducing games into classroom learning; if a game is rich in language and can be easily taught or learned, then its utility as a language-learning tool is far greater than a fun but mostly irrelevant game. Moffitt (2016) reports that despite the motivational value of incorporating games into the classroom, the language learning benefits may be modest, depending on the game structure. This criticism is shared by deHaan (2005) who argues that many games require little use of language and cannot be considered a valuable resource for classroom language teaching nor as an effective tool for independent language learning.

Recognizing that games for language learning can have remarkable benefits as well as potential problems, educators should be judicious in their choice of games and how well they relate to curricular goals. The following advice may be helpful. First, games should be selected for their language learning potential. Games that require appropriate amounts of reading, writing, listening, or speaking are ideal, as are games that focus players' attention on grammar or vocabulary forms (deHaan, 2005). Second, as Farkas (2018) points out, not all games appeal to all players, so instructors should look for games that have themes that are most likely to appeal to their students. Third, games should match both the course outcomes as well as the proficiency level of the learners; games that do not match the course objectives will waste class time and games that do not match learners' ability range will be frustrating. Fourth, instructors should consider the amount of preparation required for a successful gaming experience; games that require copious preparation on the part of instructors or students may not yield adequate linguistic and motivational benefits to justify their use (Franciosi, 2016). If these points of advice are heeded, instructors and learners are far more likely to have a fruitful and enjoyable experience with games in the language learning classroom.

Games for language learning encompass not only a variety of games but also a range of curricular integration including supplemental activities, deeper games that are core to curricular goals, and gamification elements that transform the learning experience into a game. If language learning games are carefully and thoughtfully selected, they can improve learner motivation, linguistic proficiency, and interpersonal communication skills. As such, games can greatly enhance the language learning experience.

1.5 Adapting Games for Online Language Learning

Games have long played a role in language learning classrooms, and as language learning expands into online contexts, teachers should consider the impact that online environments have on games. First, physical game components, such as cards and dice, will need to be replaced with virtual components. In many ways, this is one benefit of online environments since an unlimited number of students can play with digital materials so long as enough devices can access the appropriate website or app with the virtual replacements (Arnseth, 2006; Nicholson, 2010).

Second, the online classroom frees students from a physical gathering place, so students can form gaming groups with classmates from any location, including those who live in different countries or time zones (Nicholson, 2010). However, because students living in widely separated time zones may not be available to participate in live games at the same time, teachers should consider games that can be played asynchronously. In asynchronous games, a player takes a turn and then waits for all other participants to contribute to the game before taking the next turn; as a result, an asynchronous game could take days to complete if each player only makes one or two moves per day. The ability to play asynchronously may be an advantage for certain games, and the possibility of collaborating with classmates from around the world can add to the diversity of the classroom and to the richness of the gaming experience.

Third, due to the nature of online environments, players may be able to obscure their identities from one another. This could be advantageous for certain games, but if clear identities are important, teachers should consider organizing games through the course's learning management system or asking students to ensure that they identity themselves clearly to other game participants in live video conference meeting rooms or other platforms.

Fourth, online gaming may provide an advantage for teachers to monitor small group interactions and offer feedback to players. For example, if students play a live game via a video conferencing breakout room, an instructor may be able to drop into the meeting room temporarily to answer questions or observe gameplay before visiting another group. Other gaming platforms, including many platforms for asynchronous gameplay, keep a record of each player's actions so that a teacher could review the students' participation in the game. The nature of online gaming can facilitate a teacher's ability to monitor and interact with players (deHaan, 2005).

1.6 Tabletop Role-Playing Games in Online Language Learning Contexts

Recognizing that games for language learning can have remarkable benefits as well as potential problems, educators should be judicious in their choice of games and how well they relate to course and program curricular goals. Instructors should

select games that offer plenty of linguistic development (deHaan, 2005; Moffitt, 2016), target the proficiency level and interests of their learners (Farkas, 2018), and minimize instructor preparation (Franciosi, 2016). With this in mind, tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Mearls & Crawford, 2014) or *Kids on Brooms* (Gilmour et al., 2020), are a potential tool for online language learning.

TTRPGs fit under the wider umbrella of role-playing games (RPGs). In an RPG, a player assumes the role of a character that participates in a narrative (Bowman, 2010). The narrative is guided by a game master, a storyteller, who presents the players with challenges that their characters must overcome (Cover, 2010). The TTRPG label is used to distinguish this subset of RPGs from computerized RPGs, or CRPGs. In a CPRG, the position of game master is provided by the software, and a single player can engage in the narrative without interacting with other players. In contrast, TTRPGs typically involves a human game master and several players who work together as a team. TTRPG gameplay is a linguistically and socially interactive experience in which the game master and players gather around a physical table and manipulate game dice to simulate the randomized unpredictable outcomes of their characters' choices in the narrative.

Some TTRPGs are rules heavy, which means that the game master and players must carefully consult and learn the game rules to play the game correctly. For those who play these types of games, accuracy to the game ruleset is part of the game's enjoyment and challenge. For a game used in a language course, teachers may insist that students read and learn a complicated ruleset as part of the language learning experience. However, many teachers may prefer a rules light TTRPG for their course. A rules light TTRPG is one that focuses on player interaction and collaborative storytelling. Although there is a set of rules to guide gameplay in such a TTRPG, the rules can be quickly learned and strict adherence to the rules is not as important as having fun, communicating together, and building a shared narrative. Most language learning classes will probably want to use rules light TTRPGs or at least give players the freedom to flexibly adapt the rules of the selected TTRPG to suit their needs and interests.

Although TTRPGs are usually played in-person with a group of friends, technology has facilitated TTRPG play in online environments. Unlike CRPGs, which are also playable in online contexts, online TTRPGs are focused around player and game master interactions. In the early 2000s, virtual spaces, such as the *Second Life* platform, and asynchronous message boards were used by TTRPG players to connect online and provide an alternative to in-person TTRPG gatherings (Bowman, 2010; Cover, 2010). However, improvements in video technology and faster and more reliable internet connections have enabled TTRPG groups to share asynchronous video or to meet via video conferencing software that allows for live conversations. As such, online TTRPG gameplay offers many of the benefits of in-person gameplay with some additional advantages, such as the flexibility of asynchronous video recordings, as well as screen sharing and written chat options during synchronous video meetings.

As a result, instructors of online language courses have many useful tools to facilitate TTRPG gameplay for their students. The value of TTRPGs is not weakened by the online context. In fact, particular aspects of TTRPG play function even better in online environments and offer greater language learning opportunities, such as the ability of players to review classmates' interactions, the ability to share communication through both oral and written mediums, and the possibility of connecting players from multiple locations.

Some researchers (Farkas, 2018; Seller, 2012) have explored the use of TTRPGs for language learning and have found that such games are effective at motivating students, helping them develop interpersonal skills, and offering a context for language practice. Farkas (2018) suggests that the use of role-playing games (RPGs) in language courses is a prime example of game-based learning because:

> …RPGs are, first and foremost, language dependent […] everything that happens in an RPG must first be heard, then mentally processed, and then verbally expressed for the game to function. This means that the two base skills used in a language—listening and speaking, are the main tools players use to participate in the game. Additionally, because these games have no elements that can be rote learned and re-used to achieve success, the players need to constantly communicate in order to be successful. […] As such, it lends itself to the idea that learning about the world, creatures, items, and events they encounter in this imaginary world is a crucial part of playing the game. If one can attach linguistic elements to the "success" parameters of the games, since learning is a significant part of the activity, it is possible to make language learning an integral part of the gameplay process and mechanics. (p. 25)

Farkas shares some important considerations for online language instructors. TTRPGs are excellent opportunities for practicing language because the entire gaming experience is created through oral (or written) communication; the game master and players must describe everything in the game, including all characters and environments. They also have to accurately describe the interactions that players encounter during gameplay, which often involves questioning to clarify details. The success of the game, regardless of whether the characters succeed in individual challenges as part of the narrative, depends on the players' ability to communicate well as a group in the target language.

Despite the many benefits of TTPRGs for language learners, little research exists on the relationship between TTRPG gameplay discussion and the oral language tasks representative of intermediate and advanced level language course outcomes. What follows is a brief account of a study that compares the common tasks in TTRPG gameplay with the speaking functions of the Intermediate and Advanced levels of the widely recognized American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012) and helps instructors of online language courses determine whether TTRPGs are a viable tool for their courses. The goal of this study is to provide evidence toward the linguistic justification for TTRPGs in the language classroom. The guiding research questions are (1) From a theoretical sense, how well does speech in TTRPG gameplay match the speaking functions of ACTFL Intermediate and Advanced levels? and (2) From a practical sense, do the speaking functions of ACTFL Intermediate and Advanced levels occur

in actual TTRPG sessions? By showing that TTRPG gameplay naturally targets the functions of Intermediate and Advanced level language, the argument for using TTRPGs in the online classroom is stronger.

2   Method

Exploring the relationship between Intermediate and Advanced level speaking functions of the ACTFL Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012) and TTRPG gameplay involves two steps: (1) a theoretical comparison of the essential ACTFL functions at these target levels with the common tasks in TTRPGs and (2) a practical investigation of actual language use during sample TTRPG gameplay by language learners.

The theoretical comparison was achieved by listing all of the ACTFL speaking functions for the relevant proficiency levels and attempting to associate each with a common task from TTRPG gameplay, where appropriate. The ACTFL speaking functions are found in the ACTFL Guidelines (ACTFL, 2012). The common tasks from TTRPG gameplay have been described, in its most basic terms, as "describe, decide, roll," referring to the typical cycle of describing characters, locations, and situations, followed by a discussion of the players' plan of action, and then a dice roll to determine the outcome (Maza & Barton, 2018). Other researchers have described TTRPG speaking tasks as describe people and places; ask questions, clarify, and request clarification; engage in dialogue, in-character, with other players; narrate actions; make plans, negotiate, and resolve problems (Bowman, 2010; Cover, 2010). To achieve the comparison, the ACTFL functions and the TTRPG speaking tasks were listed and compared to identify similarities between the uses of language in both lists.

The practical investigation of actual language use during TTRPG gameplay was accomplished using transcripts of TTRPG gameplay in an online English for Academic Purposes course. Participants for this study were recruited from pre-matriculated students in a university online intensive English program. All students were EFL learners from Peru studying online with a US university. Although both the students' country and the host university's country are nations that purportedly embrace multilingualism, particularly due to both indigenous and immigrant populations, both countries are heavily dominated by a single colonial language: Spanish in the case of the students' home country and English in the case of the host university's country. The host university had established its online intensive English program prior to the pandemic, but the widespread use of video conferencing software during the pandemic likely contributed to students' comfort using online learning management systems and video conferencing software. All of the students in the study had used these technologies as part of their high school education during the pandemic. At the time of the study, the students were concurrently enrolled in their high school in Peru while completing the online intensive English program with the US university.

A group of six students in the Intermediate-High to Advanced-Low range on the ACTFL scale were recorded while playing a TTRPG during four sessions or a one-month period: game location description, player character description, rescue planning, and creature encounter. The first two sessions involved world building in which the students created and then described locations and characters at a fictional magic school where the TTRPG narrative would unfold. The third session required students to work as a group to develop a plan in response to a problem presented by the session's game master, the teaching assistant for the course. In the fourth session, students again worked as a team to generate a story describing their characters' response to a danger presented by the game master, this time played by the course instructor.

Data were collected from students' asynchronous individual speaking recordings (the first and second sessions) and synchronous small group recordings on video conferencing software (the third and fourth sessions). Recordings were transcribed to allow for a more detailed analysis of participants' speaking functions during game play. Examples of the ACTFL functions in these recordings were identified and compared with the list of TTRPG speaking tasks.

3   Results

The theoretical comparison of ACTFL functions at the Intermediate and Advanced levels with TTRPG common tasks shows a great deal of overlap. Table 1 lists the ACTFL functions on the left with TTRPG common tasks on the right. This suggests that all ACTFL Intermediate and Advanced level speaking tasks are likely to occur during typical TTRPG gameplay.

The practical investigation revealed that learners engaged in all of the TTRPG common tasks across the four sessions. As would be expected, learners described people and places during the location description and character description sessions

Table 1 ACTFL speaking functions by level compared with TTRPG common tasks

ACTFL functions	TTRPG common tasks
Intermediate level	
Create with language	All tasks
Initiate, maintain, and end conversations	Engage in dialogue with other players
Offer simple descriptions	Describe people and places
Ask and respond to simple questions	Ask questions, clarify, and request clarification
Advanced level	
Offer detailed descriptions	Describe people and places
Narrate in present	Narrate actions (in the present)
Narrate in past	Narrate actions (in the past)
Narrate in future	Make plans
Resolve a complication	Negotiate and resolve problems

with some students' asking and answering of questions during those sessions, particularly for clarification purposes about the details that their classmates provided during the recorded descriptions. A couple students, who had slightly higher general oral proficiency than their classmates did, voluntarily included some past narration as part of their descriptions of locations and characters. For example, one student described the history of a secret room on the magical school campus, and another student related a short story about how his character decided to join the magical school.

The last two sessions, which were live meetings, were more interactive. The rescue planning session consisted mostly of making plans and negotiating; students brainstormed solutions to the problem presented by the game master and then questioned one another's ideas and refined and restated their plans until consensus was reached. At the end of the rescue planning session, the game master asked the players to summarize their plan of action, which again led students to restate, revise, and clarify their plan. The fourth session, which involved the characters facing a potentially dangerous creature and narrating how their characters felt, spoke, and acted during the scenario, involved all of the common TTRPG tasks: description, questions and clarification, dialogue, present and past narration, making plans, and negotiation and problem resolution.

As an example of gameplay during the fourth session, in one early round during this session, the first player stated that his character wanted to look deep into a cave. He rolled a high number on his rolling of a virtual twenty-sided dice, and since a high number suggests a success, the game master described, at the back of the cave, a dark shadowy that resembled the creature the characters had been searching for. The same player rolled again, with a high number, on an attempt to cast a spell that would see into the mind of the creature. The game master described a vision for the character, and the player announced that his character described the vision to the other players' characters. The players briefly discussed what their characters would do with that information, and then the second player took his turn by stating that his character would like to fly his broom to the back of the cave. However, the player rolled low on the virtual dice, and the game master announced a failure, so the player described how his character tried to fly to the back of the cave but hit a large rock and tumbled in a heap to the floor of the cave. The third player was successful at an attempt to fly her character's broom, so her character flew to her fallen comrade to cast a healing spell. Gameplay for the round continued until each player had taken a turn during the round, after which the creature, controlled by the game master, took an action. Each round of gameplay continued in this interactive manner until the narrative was resolved by the players to the satisfaction of the game master. A wide variety of language functions were employed during the game session.

4 Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine whether participants in TTRPGs employed ACTFL Intermediate Level and Advanced Level speaking functions during gameplay. The investigation revealed that, both theoretically and practically, online TTRPG players are likely to perform numerous target functions during typical gameplay sessions, although introductory sessions, involving character and location creation, were more limited in the range of elicited functions. As noted in Table 1, all of the ACTFL Intermediate and Advanced level functions had a corresponding task in typical TTRPG gameplay. The analysis of the session transcripts showed that the introductory, world building, asynchronous sessions were effective at eliciting Intermediate level functions, specifically description and asking and answering questions. Advanced level functions appeared in the more interactive live sessions that required players to work together to create a plan and then to take action during an encounter between their characters and a potential narrative antagonist. These sessions involved making plans, negotiation, clarification, and extensive narration. Therefore, the earlier sessions evoked lower-level speaking functions, and the latter sessions elicited more complex speaking functions.

Generally, the results of this study offer further evidence towards the value of games for language teaching and learning. More specifically, the results suggest the value of TTRPGs in helping online students develop oral language skills at the Intermediate and Advanced levels of the ACTFL speaking guidelines. Learners who engage in foundational, world-building TTRPG sessions that establish characters and locations are likely to engage in mostly Intermediate level functions; Advanced level functions are more likely to emerge in later sessions that involve planning, problem solving, and live narration. Teachers who desire a motivating way to engage their students in Intermediate and Advanced speaking functions should consider integrating TTRPG gameplay into their courses. Such gameplay is rich in language practice that targets the goals of Intermediate and Advanced level learners. These sessions can take place in-person or in online learning environments; however, more interactive tasks, such as negotiating and planning, may be easier to perform using synchronous communication modes (such as in-person sessions or live video conference meetings), as opposed to asynchronous modes that seemed sufficient for description tasks or simple question and answer interactions between classmates.

This study suggests the relative ease and limited preparation time required of instructors to integrate TTRPGs into their online language learning courses. Although some TTRPG gameplay can require large amounts of preparation for the game master, a rules light TTRPG, such as Kids on Brooms, shares the creation of the imaginary world among the players, with the game master, or teacher, serving primarily as a guide during the describe location and describe character sessions. Cover (2010) explains that in many TTRPGs, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Mearls & Crawford, 2014), the game master serves as the narrative director with

players as actors. However, in other TTRPGs, such as Kids on Brooms (Gilmour et al., 2020), players more actively participate in both creating and driving the story. Although, in this study, the early descriptive sessions were conducted asynchronously using video recordings that all classmates could watch and comment on, a synchronous session may also have worked. In such a case, a teacher may want to consider whether to assign students to small breakout rooms in which students describe their character or location and then field questions from group members, or whether the class is sufficiently small that such sharing can be conducted as a whole group without any students becoming distracted or disengaged.

The two latter sessions were conducted using live video conferencing. The synchronous nature of these sessions were conducive to the interactive nature of the negotiation and collaborative story-telling tasks that players engaged in. It would be possible to conduct these sessions asynchronously, with each player describing making a choice, rolling the dice, and describing an action, followed by the next player who could do the same after watching the previous player's recording. However, this would drastically increase the length of time required to complete a session, given that each round could last an entire day depending on the players' time zones and their access to the recordings. In contrast, the live session consisting of over five rounds was completed in less than 1 h.

Even in these live sessions, the only preparation of the game masters (consisting of the course teaching assistant in one session and the course instructor in the other session) was a prompt that explained the narrative context and an explanation of the task that the players were required to complete during the session. The game masters in the rescue planning session only participated to occasionally ask questions to get players to clarify their ideas or to restate ideas that players had shared. In the creature encounter session, the game master took a more active role by refereeing the rounds (ensuring that players took turns in order), by encouraging players to describe their choices and the results of dice rolls, and by describing what actions the creature took during its turn. As such, these interactive sessions of TTRPG play can also be relatively easy for a teacher to prepare, so long as the game master remembers that the goal is to encourage students to communicate and collaborative, creating a story of their choice rather than following a specific narrative outcome that the game master has in mind.

Further research into TTRPGs for language learning might explore the quality of speech production during TTRPG gameplay. For example, how well is the quality of pronunciation and grammar of the players, and whether the quality of the language differs depending on the types of TTRPG tasks in which players engage. Researchers and practitioners may also want to examine the use of other languages skills (reading, listening, and writing) involved in TTRPG gameplay and their connection to ACTFL proficiency guidelines.

5 Conclusion

This chapter summarized the main benefits of game-based learning in the language classroom. The value of games for language learning include student motivation as well as potential increases in learners' interpersonal communication skills and linguistic proficiency. There are also some challenges to using games in the language learning classroom, so instructors should be prepared to mitigate these issues by selecting games that are best suited to the learners, the curriculum, and the environment of their classrooms.

The benefits of game-based learning extend to online contexts where some games are even better suited to virtual participation, such as TTRPGs. These games involve collaborative storytelling among small groups of players with minimal game materials beyond dice. As such, TTRPGs are heavily language-dependent, making them an excellent medium for language learning practice. The current study conducted with an online English for academic purposes course revealed that, during TTRPG gameplay, learners used a variety of Intermediate and Advanced level speaking functions as defined by the ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines (2012). Online instructors who want to help students target these speaking functions should consider integrating TTRPGs into their course curriculum. Such gameplay may have positive influences on students' motivation, collaborative skills, and language proficiency.

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