

Goethe-Universität, Fachbereich 10
Institut für England- und Amerikastudien
Abt. Sprachlehrforschung / Didaktik der englischen Sprache
“Methoden zur Entwicklung von sprachlichen Fertigkeiten”
Subin Nijhawan
14. Fachsemester, L3 (Kunst, Englisch)
Kleine Hausarbeit
WiSe 2014/15

Game Design in the EFL classroom

Expanding vocabulary with Task-based language learning

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Table of contents

1	Introduction	1
2	A short overview on task-based teaching	1
3	Game design as the task's content	5
4	Achieving the learning aim: vocabulary acquisition	7
5	Conclusion.....	12
6	Suggestions for further reading	13
7	References	14

1 Introduction

The integration of new technologies in education has become necessary in the 21st century, including handling hardware and software, as well as working with web-based content. The way students process information has changed and digitalization has also influenced their interests. Reacting to these changes challenges teachers (Figueroa 2015: 42). They are asked to include modern, authentic materials and to offer their learners strategies to acquire vocabulary on their own when meeting unknown contents.

In this paper, it is stated that English is the lingua franca of computing, what has to be taken into consideration when making curricular decisions. Game design can serve as meaningful topic in the EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom, since it is related to the students' interests and reality. Methods such as task-based language learning and teaching will be presented, as well as theories concerning vocabulary acquisition and learning strategies. Throughout the paper, those methods and theories will be connected to the topic of game design and combined with ideas for the implementation in the EFL classroom. Finally, three websites offering game creators are suggested, along with recommendations for further research. This paper is aiming at giving inspiration and an overview for educators who wish to implement innovative teaching methods to encourage their students to a more self-determined learning attitude.

2 A short overview on task-based teaching

The idea of task-based language teaching derived from the Communicative Approach¹ and is consequently settled in the foreign language classroom, although the principle of teaching through tasks related to real life situations adapted for a particular learner group could also be realized in other classes. Before designing a task or a lesson

¹ The Communicative Approach, also called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), include the following principles: "1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in target language. 2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation. 3. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning. 4. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom" (Malone 2012, as cited in: Figueroa 2015: 36).

row, teachers need to make some decisions concerning the learning aim. For example, the kind of English that should be taught needs to be defined and can vary from ‘everyday’ English to English for specific purposes (academic or non-academic) or English for social purposes to English for transactional purposes (e.g. for obtaining goods and services); however, these purposes are often interwoven in authentic communication (Nunan 2004: 43). Compared to other language activities, the structure of TBT is similar, since it usually consists of a pre-, while- and post-task (Dodge 1995: Siekmann 2008: 144f.) and “can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes” (Ellis 2003: 16).

Subsequently, I will go on by explaining how an integration into the EFL classroom can be realized and what elements should be taken into consideration. I concentrated mainly on Nunan’s research, however, there are numerous other researchers whose insights and definitions can be recommended for further reading².

Developing a task-based lesson row means developing “a framework for transforming [...] real-world tasks into pedagogical tasks” (Nunan 2004: 38). According to Prabhu (1987), Nunan claims that this real-world task asks the learner to fill a gap, which can be an information gap (e.g. asking someone for the way or researching information about a place), a reasoning gap (e.g. designing a computer game with a specific software), or an opinion gap (e.g. talking about favorite artists) (ibid. 2004: 57). The gap needed to be filled corresponds to the tasks’ content. In order to be able to work with the content, learners need materials, such as texts, audio, or computers, and a clearly defined goal. The goal is not to be confused with the actual learning aim of the task, which will be explained in more detail in the following paragraph. During the lesson, the learners will work on diverse activities, including the material, leading them to the achievement of the teacher’s intended goals. These activities offer the possibility of differentiation, since the students’ abilities, needs and interests, as well as the class’ special needs as a whole need to be considered (in some classes group work might work better than in others) (Nunan 204: 40).

The goal, as mentioned above, is also an important element in Ellis’ research, but he uses the term “outcome” instead (2003). The main aim of TBLT is about encouraging learners to use the target language in an authentic context and by doing

² see Eckerth 2008: 13; Ellis 2003: 16; Siekmann 2008; Sykes & Reinhardt 2013: 142

so, language competence will be improved. Depending on the task, the focus can differ from concentrating on written or spoken communication, grammar or vocabulary, skills such as reading or listening, and the like. The chosen learning aim will be achieved during various activities, independent from the success concerning the outcome. Ellis puts it as followed:

They [the teachers] need to convince learners that what matters is the outcome. Otherwise, there is a danger that the learners will subvert the aim of the task by displaying rather than using language. However, the real purpose of the task is not that learners should arrive at a successful outcome but that they should use language in ways that will promote language learning. In fact, the actual outcome of a task may be of no real pedagogical importance. (ibid.: 8)

The danger Ellis mentions, is also taken up by other researchers, who claim that the outcome may vary in such a significant way from what the teacher intended that it should not even be listed as a relevant element of TBLT (Nunan 2004: 40). However, it is a motivational element for students, if they can work towards a goal, outcome or product. One way of dealing with the possibility that the learners' outcome might not be identical with the teacher's intention is offering a variety of tasks and communicating the flexibility of the outcome beforehand. Sykes and Reinhardt recommend "to give in-depth consideration to the various experiences learners have" and consequently, to provide "flexible assessment measures that evaluate each individual learner's experience" (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013: 18). When designing a digital game, students can be offered patterns that serve as base. However, completing the creation of a game does not have to be the goal; writing a tutorial about, for instance, adding sound to the game or preparing a presentation of what they would have created if they had the opportunity to realize whatever they aimed at, can serve as equivalent goals.

By describing all the relevant elements of TBT, namely content, material, goal, activities, students as individuals, and the class as a whole, it pervaded that learning aim and success rely on the general task design itself. From what has been presented so far, it can be stated that one central component of appropriate tasks is authenticity, concerning a correspondence "to some real-world activity, i.e. [to] achieve situational authenticity" (Ellis 2003: 6). The degree of authenticity may vary as well as the elements it affects. For example, learners can work with authentic materials, such as magazines or news shows, or work with simplified materials to be prepared for an authentic activity, such as interviewing tourists at the airport. In both cases, the target

language will appear in an authentic context, forcing students to “use whatever language they already have in the process of completing a task” (CDC 1999: 41, as cited in: Nunan 2004: 14). With game design, authentic materials can be tutorials (videos as well as texts) or manuals, which can be simplified by the teacher. Preparing questions with students to ask for help in a forum also enhances authentic communication skills. The other central component besides authenticity is relevance. If the task’s content or activities are not connected to the learners’ needs and interests, they will not be motivated to complete the task. Finally, the task should offer the learners enough space to “choose the linguistic and non-linguistic resources needed” (Ellis 2003: 10). Working in a group or pair work is not necessarily part of TBL, however, it usually makes sense to arrange at least some activities in this way, since TBL aims at making learners talk to each other. One positive aspect of pair work compared to group work is the increased activation of each single learner. Nevertheless, both forms can be combined as described by Kagan and Kagan: “Students work in pairs to create or master content. They consult with partners from other teams [...] [and] share their products or understanding with the other partner pair” (ibid. 1999: 124). Learners will improve their presentation and communication skills and get used to concept development, additionally to the actual learning aim of the task (ibd.).

The main aim of TBT results in an active “language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world” (Ellis 2003: 16). Tasks are therefore primary meaning focused and effect a pragmatic language use (Ellis 2003: 10), what “matches well with communicative language teaching” (Siekman 2008: 144). Nunan quoted the Hong Kong Ministry of Education, which sums up all relevant aspects of TBT presented in this chapter:

The task-based approach [...] aims at providing opportunities for learners to experiment with and explore spoken and written language through learning activities that are designed to engage learners in the authentic, practical and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Learners are encouraged to activate and use whatever language they already have in the process of completing a task. The use of tasks will also give a clear and purposeful context for the teaching and learning of grammar and other language features [such as vocabulary] as well as skills. [...] All in all, the role of task-based language learning is to stimulate a natural desire in learners to improve their language competence by challenging them to complete meaningful tasks. (CDC 1999: 41, as cited in: Nunan 2004: 14)

3 Game design as the task's content

The idea of using technology in order to offer modern learning experiences is not new; several approaches arose, starting with integrative computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the 1990's. This approach is based on a "socio-cognitive view and a focus on the use of language in authentic social contexts [...] [and] opened the door for a more diverse student centered use of technology in L2 [...] [, including] task based projects, project based approaches, and content based approaches" (Figueroa 2015: 38). Gamification is one aspect of CALL, dealing with educational games as well as with Game Design or the integration of game elements in the EFL classroom, such as competition, earning rewards, or the like. Since students are usually motivated to play games, Sykes and Reinhardt took a look at the principles underlying games to be able to name the motivational elements in detail. They concluded that goal orientation, interactivity and feedback mechanisms lead to engagement and flow, and argue that these two key concepts are not just relevant for a motivating play, but can in the same way be adopted to create a motivating learning environment (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013: 95). It is the game designer's or, in the other case, the teacher's responsibility to estimate the right level of difficulty concerning the activities and to give direct and individualized feedback. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) also add the "paradox of having control in an uncertain situation" as an essential feature motivating the player or learner (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013: 97).

By integrating digital games into the EFL classroom, the teacher "is able to create meaningful experiences that will move away from just a game thinking mentality to a techno-constructivist mentality" (Figueroa 2015: 50). When students change the way they see games, manipulate them and learn to apply them as helpful tools, they gain game literacy. Sykes and Reinhardt define this term as "the ability to play, learn through, and understand games" (ibid. 2013: 138) and add a variety of other skills enhanced by game literacy, such as visualization, abstract thinking, and critical awareness (ibid.). Additionally, the mentioned interactivity is not just a motivational feature, but can also serve as a trigger for communication. Interaction, defined as "reciprocal activity among interlocutors and/or resources in an environment" (ibid: 139), does not only appear between a game and a player, but also among players and can even be expanded to learner and a language, or among language learners (ibid.). Here again, it can be seen in how far the EFL classroom can profit from gamification

due to the similarities between game play and language learning. The success of games does not solely derive from the player's interactivity, which can be of cognitive, functional, explicit or cultural nature (ibid.: 41). The connection of the virtual and the 'real' world, of the world inside and outside the game, that is the game designer's, as well as the teacher's challenge. The teacher is asked to connect learning activities to authentic situations and the world inside the classroom to the one outside of it. Both need to "afford meaningful interactions on ideational, interpersonal, and textual levels" (ibid.: 40).

When creating a lesson plan including electronic tools, such as a computer or mobile devices, it is recommended to give students a non-digital frame to embed the content and keep control of the lesson, since they tend to forget about the teacher's role as the instructor and lose track of the actual task when looking at a digital surface for too long (Dudeny & Hockly 2007: 36). Like with a pre-, while- and post-task, Dudeny and Hockly claim that a unit including web-based content should always be introduced with a warmer and followed by the question "What next?" (ibid.: 35). This framework can easily be extended to include not just web, but new technologies in general. Moreover, they suggest that the introduction "is best done in the familiar environment of the classroom" (ibid.: 36) and that the concluding 'what next' part "should deal with the tasks set for the web part and then proceed with more familiar follow-up activities to round off the lesson" (ibid.). When working with games, the naturally upcoming reflection of the player after playing the game can be taken up for the concluding task, just like a post task wraps up the impressions of a novel after reading it. Figueroa explains this as followed:

Good game design is balanced and leaves the player with a feeling on how was the game experience overall. For example: Was it challenging? Was it hard? Was it easy? In addition, game design has an experiential aspect that involves the integration of current and novel approaches based on exploration and discovery that could be applied to Gamification and motivate the player. (ibid. 2015: 41)

In order to enhance oral communication and to "break down the 'computer as barrier' effect often prevalent in technology-based classes" (Dudeny & Hockly 2007: 42), students should work with a partner or in small groups. Finally, it is recommended to always have a backup plan when working with new technologies, since websites can be down or the school's computers might not work (ibid.). Concerning the concrete realization of gamified tasks, Sykes and Reinhardt suggest that certain activities should

be centered around particular aspects of language, such as vocabulary, grammar, or culture (ibid. 2013: 46). Concentrating on vocabulary, for instance, students could create a list of useful phrases needed for the specific unit, for example for playing (or designing) a game in the L2 (ibid.). Another idea would be to prepare students for a writing task at the end of the lesson row – this could be a game journal – by asking them to fill out a chart during the main task. This will help them to develop awareness and learn to reflect what they are doing while they are doing it (ibid.: 27). In the following chapter concrete ideas and materials are presented.

4 Achieving the learning aim: vocabulary acquisition

When creating a lesson or a lesson row around specific tasks, not just the content, but especially a learning goal must be defined, as mentioned before. In case of the presented lesson row on game design, students are meant to expand their vocabulary and focus on vocabulary acquisition. In order to create meaningful tasks leading to the achievement of this goal, a basic understanding of how learning and remembering works is needed and it has to be decided how vocabulary that is “worth being learned” can be chosen.

Knowing a word is a complex concern – not just in a foreign language – including for example knowledge of spelling and pronunciation, derivation forms and different shades of meaning (Thornbury 2002: 22) and is not something that can be described as an either-or situation. It rather must be imagined as a variable on a line, allowing merging nuances. In other words, it has to be distinguished between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, and comparable to this, vocabulary acquisition can be incidental or intentional. As Thornbury puts it, “we understand more words than we utter, and we usually understand them before we are capable of uttering them” (ibid.: 15). Usually, incidental learning aims at expanding students’ receptive vocabulary, whereas it is recommended to focus on intentional ways of learning when focusing on their productive skills (Kersten 2010). Last, the equation of vocabulary size and depth needs to be taken into account, since one aspect will be neglected in case of imbalance (Thornbury 2002: 22).

Many researchers, such as Thornbury, describe the storage of vocabulary in one's mind as a mental lexicon, where words are connected to each other in the kind of a network or a web, instead of being listed like in a dictionary (ibid.: 16). "We can think of the mental lexicon, therefore, as an overlapping system in which words are stored as 'double entries' – one entry containing information about meaning and the other about form" (ibid.: 17). Other areas of cognition – Thornbury mentions world knowledge and memory based on personal experiences as examples – are linked to this system, what leads to the uniqueness of the way each learner knows a word and a language, since this knowledge is "the sum total of all these connections – semantic, syntactic, phonological, orthographic, morphological, cognitive, cultural and autobiographical" (ibid.). Being conscious about this and not just accepting, but reacting to this diversity is a challenging, nonetheless necessary part of a successful task design. As a consequence of the different ways learners know a word, their learning needs vary. Additionally, there might be differences concerning the reasons for learning a foreign language. Not every learner will find the same use for the vocabulary offered in class. Along with individualized learning strategies, the only possible conclusion to be drawn is the fact that vocabulary learning and remembering is a very personal matter.

A need for acquiring a specific set of vocabulary can be derived from goals such as being able to have casual conversations, learn academic subject matter, communicate well in the business world, and the like (Gardner 2013). Applied linguistics refer to these specific sets of vocabulary as registers (ibid.). The students' motivation will be increased by focusing on registers, linked to English for specific purposes, offering "a great chance for identifying and teaching specialized words [...] together with the specific strategies that would be most beneficial for learning those words" (ibid.: 64). Game design and the corresponding software would make such a register and meeting the personal needs or not, it serves as an example of how to deal with specific vocabulary when, for instance, being asked to work with unfamiliar software in a job. English is the lingua franca of computing and everything dealing with digitalization. Therefore, it is recommended to include a register about anything that helps learners to get access to this specific language of digital media and to encourage an enthusiasm for vocabulary acquisition for their future lives. As mentioned before, learning strategies depend on the register. In the case of a register including digital media, the key to success is putting an emphasis on receptive

vocabulary and incidental learning. Since there are often no translations existing until the English term finds its way to the learners' L1 as an Anglicism, or translations are pointless because terms function as abstract derivations (take 'bug' and 'to debug sth.' as an example), it remains difficult to connect this new language system to an existing network. Through a high degree of incidental learning, a new network can be created.

But what are the concrete steps necessary to learn new words? Although the labels differ, most researchers agree on three steps, namely presenting, retrieving and producing (see Kersten 2010; Thornbury 2002). The presentation of new words does not have to be directly taken out by the teacher; noticing and identifying unknown words also makes a meaningful task for learners. In the next step, those new words can be explained, again, directly or indirectly due to decision-making task types, which ask the learner to match, sort, rank, sequence or categorize them (Thornbury 2002: 18, 93ff). Finally, production tasks and different opportunities for a creative use are required to transport new words from the working memory to the learners' long-term memory. In this last step, when words are put into context and associations are generated, networks are built, and as Thornbury emphasizes: "the more the better" (ibid.: 30). Concerning the relation of these two task types, it is recommended to give the creative usage a greater value than the practicing, or decision-making tasks. As discussed earlier, Thornbury also points out that the integration of the learners' mother tongue can be a potential block when focusing on network building:

Learners need to wean themselves off a reliance on direct translation from their mother tongue. Words need to be presented in their typical contexts, so that learners can get a feel for their meaning, their register, their collocations, and their syntactic environments. [...] Learners need to be actively involved in the learning of words. (ibid. 2002: 30)

This 'getting a felling' for a word is the essence of what is called incidental learning. By guessing the meaning from the situation, discourse or context, or the structure of the word itself, learners become actively involved and take responsibility for their vocabulary expansion (Hatch & Brown 1995). The teacher does not directly teach words, but supports the students' personal development by giving them ideas on how to learn (Thornbury 2002). In schools, usually a general core-vocabulary is presented and learned, however, learning strategy instruction is essential, because the number of non-core words is too large to handle (Gardner 2013). Choosing the register 'game design' offers students access to the core vocabulary of a new, learner-centered topic.

Sticking to the lesson row about game design, some ideas will be presented showing how to offer learners strategies for an independent and self-organized vocabulary acquisition. Gardner recommends starting by setting a good example when introducing the topic. The teacher may present unfamiliar words directly, or indirectly by asking them to identify such new words. In the following, those words may be written down on the board and their meaning can be explained through guessing based on contextual clues, discussing, a demonstration or with the help of a (monolingual) dictionary. Since the class should have access to a computer during the lesson row, introducing an online dictionary may be beneficial. Finally, the teacher directs the learners to materials and tools allowing them independent learning, for example flashcards, certain apps or websites (such as Quizlet or Memrise), or simple lists (Gardner 2013). Thornbury argues that “lists are an economic way of organizing vocabulary for learning [...]. It will help, though, if list learning activities are integrated into the lesson” (ibid. 2002: 51). He goes on by illustrating how such an activity can look like: “Ask learners to make their own list from the words that come up in the lesson [...] and to bring their lists to class for the next lesson. At the beginning of the following lesson, pair students up to test each other on their word lists” (ibid.: 34). During the whole lesson row, learners are meant to stick to this presented process, which needs to be checked by the teacher from time to time. Vocabulary learning requires hard work and consistent motivation. The method learners finally choose, does not seem to be as crucial as factors such as study time and continuity (Hatch & Brown 1995). Although this paper does not discuss the large research field of motivation, it needs to be pointed out that this factor “may ultimately make the difference between successful and unsuccessful outcomes” (Gardner 2013: 147).

In the table below three game creators are presented and compared in terms of suggested proficiency levels, which are referred to as grades. Additionally, a list of vocabulary is given as example of what can be presented by the teacher to introduce a vocabulary list. As mentioned before, it is recommended to start the lesson row in the familiar environment of the classroom – without computers. For example, a screenshot of the user interface showing all the tools and buttons can be printed out to introduce the most important functions and terms.

	Gamestar Mechanic³	Scratch⁴	Construct 2⁵
Grade⁶	5-7	7-10	9-13
Examples for vocabulary presented by the teacher	to register badges newbie build publish sprite to earn tool	to point edge to set size to ... key pressed to switch sprite to repeat arrow keys	boundaries sprite properties behaviors layer opacity density angle

Gamestar Mechanic is a combination of game design and game play. The story mode designed as graphic novel leads students through the tutorial and games present new objects, that can be added the self-created game later on. Scratch and Construct 2 introduce basic coding principles and thus offer more opportunities. All three creators are limited to two-dimensional games and work in a browser, therefore no software has to be installed. While working, students can be given tasks, such as negotiating for meaning of specific words given by the teacher. They can also be asked to create mindmaps presenting new terms with sub-divisions such as *player*, *sprite*, *layout*, *keys*, and the like. Finally, productive tasks can be added to include those new words. For example, students can play each other's games and give feedback (oral or written) or try out their classmate's created tutorials. Sykes and Reinhardt developed a questionnaire leading students through their game project (ibid. 2013) and asking them to write short texts including the new vocabulary. Some of these questions are:

1. "Basic information
 - a. [...]
 - b. What type of game is it (e.g., simulation, adventure)?
 - c. What is the object of the game (what a player does to win)?

³ www.gamestarmechanic.com

⁴ www.scratch.mit.edu

⁵ www.scirra.com. A new version of the software, Construct 3, is already available.

⁶ In the German school system, grade 5-7 refers to A1-A2, grade 7-10 refers to A2-B1 and grade 9-13 refers to B1-C1 of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

- d. What is the context of the game (setting, characters, etc.)?
2. Tasks
 - a. What sorts of activities and tasks can a player do in your game?
 - b. [...]
 - c. What rewards does completing the task give the player? [...]
3. Storyboard: Create a storyboard in which you illustrate the experience the player has while doing one or more of the tasks you described.” (ibid.: 30)

As mentioned earlier, it is also possible to finish the project with a written review of a game, for instance, a game they used to play before the lesson row. In this case the presented questions can also serve as leading questions for such an essay.

5 Conclusion

This paper has argued that game-based learning including game design goes well together with the principles of task-based language learning and offers great opportunities to enhance students’ vocabulary acquisition and learning strategies. Tasks that are authentic combine the real-world with the foreign language classroom. Since English is the main language especially in the digital environment, students need to practice strategies enabling them to communicate well in this environment and to handle, for instance, unknown software. Although designing a digital game is a motivational factor for most learners, the real purpose of this topic is to engage learners in the authentic, practical and functional use of the target language and to encourage interest for future self-organized vocabulary acquisition. A lesson row on game design is dependent on the variety of tasks and differentiations and can therefore be challenging for the educator. However, receptive vocabulary and incidental learning are fostered due to utilizing web-based contents as sources of linguistically and culturally authentic materials. Finally, students who grew up in times of digitalization will welcome the chance to share their interests within the foreign language classroom and to include knowledge about a topic, they are already familiar with. As this paper can only serve an insight and offer some inspiration, a list of recommended readings is added.

6 Suggestions for further reading

Although not mentioned in this paper, the following texts are highly recommended for further research concerning games, gamification and game design in the EFL classroom.

Caponetto, I, Earp, J. & Ott, M. (2014). *Gamification and Education: A Literature Review*. Retrieved 15. December 2017 from:
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