論文

"What Are You Going to Do?"

An in-depth analysis of a roleplaying game EFL class

Magnus Kuwahara Magnusson[1]

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I. Introduction

In this article, I explain how I used roleplaying games in two language classes. Firstly, I describe in brief my use of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* to teach Japanese to high school students in Iceland (RPG Class A). Secondly, I describe in depth how I used the roleplaying game *Dark Heresy* to teach English to first-year students in a university in Japan (RPG Class B). My description of RPG Class B, includes a description of the classroom setup, various problems posed by the setting of *Dark Heresy* and its system, and a detailed analysis of the language used in the lessons, both input from the teacher and student's output using transcripts of my recordings of the classes. The analysis also describes how I responded to students' errors, using reformulation[1] to teach and elicit correct forms of their utterances.

My reason for deciding to use Roleplaying games (RPGs) to teach English stems from my experience playing RPGs from the age of 14. My mother tongue is Icelandic, and when I was growing up in the 80s, English language classes began at the age of 12. Yet, after a year of playing RPGs with my friends, my English ability far exceeded that of my peers. There were no RPGs in Icelandic in those days, so my group of friends used the English books available to us, and soon started speaking English alongside Icelandic during our games. Once I started studying English teaching in 2006, I realized the potential of RPGs for language learning. My early forays into researching this possibility was to interview Terry Gunnell (Magnusson, 2010), who had used *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* in one of his high school English classes for about 15 years. His experience of using RPGs convinced me I must try to use RPGs one day.

RPGs are a unique form of tabletop games, invented in 1974 (Peterson, 2012, p. 78) with the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The game is a sort of interactive, collaborative narrative, where the players take on the role of characters in a story that takes place through their described

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[1] Department of Language and Culture at Sanyo Gakuen University

actions. The game can be played by two or more players, usually no more than seven, with one of the players acting as the Game Master (GM). Thousands of RPGs have been published, each having detailed description of the game setting (e.g. a medieval fantasy world, a sci-fi world of space exploration, modern world with super heroes). Each game setting also has detailed rules of often hundreds of pages, describing how to make a realistic character living in the setting (the characters have abilities and skills of varying strengths and expertise represented by a numerical value). The rules also describe how to play adventures in the setting, how to resolve the results of the characters' actions (usually with dice, comparing the result with the characters' ability or skill statistic). Each player, except the GM, has one character to play, and together the player characters collaborate to achieve various goals depending on the setting. The Game Master's role in the game is to provide the adventure scenario for the game, describing whatever the characters see and experience in their navigating the game world, playing the roles of anyone the player characters meet, and arbitrating the results of actions of player characters and non-player characters and creatures they interact with during the game.

RPGs are mostly a speaking and listening activity, where nothing happens unless the players or GM describe the actions of characters and ever-changing situations. The players and GM also need to consult the rulebooks to understand how their many abilities work, so there is also considerable reading involved. The players write descriptions of their characters, and the GM often writes descriptions of non-player characters and area descriptions. Therefore, and RPG appears to be perfect to practice all four language skills. However, as this article shows, using RPGs in class is not necessarily straightforward and easy.

II. Literature Review

While numerous articles and books exist about RPGs, not much has been published about the usage of roleplaying games to teach English. The most detailed that could be found is *Role-Playing Games in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom* (Phillips, 1993). Phillips gives an excellent argument for the educational merits of using RPGs in EFL classes, describes the history of RPGs in general, gives examples of the plethora of RPGs extant at the time, and most importantly, relates several examples of teachers using RPGs in their EFL classes. In one of the classes described, the teacher chose to make his own simple-system game to teach his Czech students, and the setting was modern-day America, and the players enjoyed playing Americans as they were very interested in the culture (p. 9). Another example was a teacher using the sci-fi system *Traveller* to teach his Chinese students science vocabulary. Later employed the supernatural horror RPG, *Call of Cthulhu,* to teach Japanese students English in the US. Phillips also describes his own use of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* in one of his classes. He discusses the importance

of teaching the students the language of describing actions, otherwise the output becomes too simple (p. 17). Phillips concludes that RPGs "may not be appropriate for all EFL classes" (p. 18) but could be considered among useful techniques for some classes.

In *Interactive Pynchon: Teaching Thomas Pynchon's Crying of Lot 49 with Roleplaying Games*, Phillips (2011) describes in detail how to adapt a literary work into a roleplaying game that could then be played in class.

Other articles of note are Armann Halldorsson's *Teaching English through Role Playing Games* (Halldorsson, 2012), which includes a brief description of his using an RPG in an English class at a high school in Iceland. Halldorsson didn't use a particular system, which he regretted. He introduced character sheets to the students, divided them into groups and "had them play a free form adventure in any way they pleased" (p. 22). The activity was of mixed success, with some students enjoying it while others were confused, probably as a result of the lack of rules or specific adventure to play.

Finally, the source that inspired me early on to try and use RPGs in EFL classes, is Terry Gunnell's detailed description of the merits of using *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* as homework activity biannually for 15 years at another high school in Iceland (Magnusson, 2010). The students formed groups and played in their homes every other week for three hours. Gunnell felt this was a success, and that it helped them to become more fluent in speaking. Getting Icelandic teenage boys to talk in English in class is difficult, but in this activity they spoke freely, probably because they were speaking in the role of a different person.

III. RPG Class A

The first time I used a roleplaying game in language teaching was in 2007 in Iceland. The participants were four of my former students of Japanese in high school. I invited the students to my home to try to play an RPG using some Japanese. My Japanese was not very good at the time, I had co-taught the Japanese classes with my Japanese wife, who prepared all the material, so the Japanese language part of the RPG activity was limited. Most of the participants were interested in games or fantasy, and I chose to use the game *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, which I knew very well, in this experimental language-learning activity.

The participants generated their characters well before the actual game started. The character sheets were in English, as the Japanese-translated character sheet was much too difficult to use for both the students and myself. I acted as Game Master throughout the four 3-4 hour sessions, and we played a store-bought scenario called *Ashes of Middenheim* (2005). The adventure was also in English, and the language used by the students and myself was mostly Icelandic and English. The Japanese content came from a list of phrases I thought were likely to

be used frequently used in the game, such as "Roll your dice", "I shoot with my bow", etc. These phrases were used mostly during combat scenes, and there was about one combat scene per lesson, taking about an hour each.

While the students enjoyed the activity, the focus was on the game and not on the language. However, they got the opportunity to use some Japanese words and simple phrases in entertaining situations. As this was simply an experiment, it was successful in achieving its limited goal of practicing the set phrases. What the experiment showed was that, in predictable language situations, such as combat, phrases can be prepared beforehand and used when needed in a meaningful way. Therefore, simple and short RPG scenarios, mostly revolving around combat, could be used for beginners in a foreign language as an entertaining way to speak the language.

IV. RPG Class B

The second time I had the opportunity to use RPGs in the classroom was in a Japanese university in 2010. The participants were two first-year English major students who were preparing to go to study abroad for six months and a year, respectively, at an English-speaking college abroad the year after. In order to prepare them for the long-term study abroad, they had been enrolled in all the English classes available to them, as well as three different TOEIC preparation classes, one of which I taught. Three TOEIC classes was considered a little too much by the teachers, so it was decided that I would do something different and motivational with the students in my class, especially since they were the only ones enrolled in my class. With my background in RPGs I couldn't think of anything more different from their usual classes, so I decided to spend six out of fifteen 90-minute classes playing a roleplaying game. I recorded the audio of lessons two to six, regretfully forgetting to turn on the recorder in the first lesson.

V. Classroom Set Up

The classroom was small, as I only had two students. The tables were arranged so that the students sat across from me, with about a meter and a half between us, with ample table space to the sides. On the table to my right, I had a projector connected to my laptop. Being quick at typing, as I talked (describing areas, encounters, and situations) I typed a lot of what I said. I did this to help them identify new vocabulary in context, and the written form, to look up the words in their electric dictionaries. I also typed vocabulary, phrases and expressions, sentences I wanted them to repeat and remember, especially English equivalents of words they used in Japanese and corrections of their grammar errors. As in a normal roleplaying game, I had a wide but low screen (28 by 84,5 cm) between me and the students to hide my dice rolls, as well as creature/villain statistics. Normally, the Game Master's screen has rules from the rulebook useful for the GM

during the game, however, the screen I had was actually from another game, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, so it only served to keep secret information hidden. The students had each their character sheet, dice, and electric dictionaries. When describing locations, I drew a rough map of the area on a sheet of paper placed between me and the students. The maps contained rough images of important features, such as doors, windows, and locations of the characters and any opponents they encountered.

VI. Problems with the Setting and System

What became apparent to me in the first lesson, was that the setting of the game I had chosen, *Dark Heresy*, was completely alien to my students. There were many concepts that they had not encountered even in Japanese. Therefore, just to describe the setting and help the students' understand their characters' place in it, and purpose took about half of the lesson, character generation the rest. A short summary of the setting should explain how difficult it was for the students to grasp what this was all about: *Dark Heresy* is a game that takes place in a distant post-technological future, where the "major scientific advances . . . come from the rediscovery of forgotten secrets from the Dark Age of Technology" (*Dark Heresy*, p. 19). It is a mixed genre of horror, sci-fi, and fantasy, with fanatical Inquisitors seeking out heretics worshiping dark gods from the corrupting dimension of Chaos. Looking back, I could have dispensed with explaining the setting in detail, because the scenario was a simple break-in into a corrupt politicians home to find condemning information on him. Eventually they would find the evidence they needed and fight some of the villain's minions. Had the RPG activity extended to full 15 lessons, a deeper understanding of the world the characters lived in would have been needed for the students to enjoy the game more, but in this case it was unnecessary. In any case, choosing a setting that was familiar to the students would have been better.

The game system also presented some problems. While the game mechanics were not complicated compared to many other game systems, the characters had an overabundance of choices of abilities and weapons. To an experienced gamer, this would be interesting, and I expected it would also be so to the students, but to them, it was a burden. Too much time was spent explaining the rules of new weapons they found during the game, or new abilities they bought with their experience points. Almost the entire fourth lesson went into spending experience points they gained in the first two lessons and understanding how they could use them in the final two lessons. Furthermore, one of the character, an 'Imperial Psyker' (a person able to use psychic powers), found his abilities entirely useless in lessons two and three; the powers were weak, and he had little chance in succeeding using them. After increasing their power in the fourth lesson, however, he could finally use his psychic abilities, and gained some more useful ones. This could have been

avoided by having the characters start more powerful from the beginning, so more time could have been spent on playing the game.

VII. The Language of Descriptions

Descriptions of locations, people or other creatures, as well as constantly changing situations, are the most important input the students are exposed to during an RPG. Every area their characters are currently in is described verbally by the teacher. Examples of areas described in these lessons included the house they meant to break into; the rooms inside, including objects and furniture, and one scary-looking villain; the underground complex below the house had several rooms they explored, including one with captive civilians in cages; and the macabre grand finale, a fight with some skeletons, took place in a ritual sacrifice chamber to the forbidden god of blood and war, Khorne.

Each location was described in detail, and every detail was potentially important to the characters' mission or survival. For instance, in lessons two and three, they were exploring the house of the possibly corrupted politician. On opening a door to a room, the teacher described the room beyond as an office. The office had an opulent desk with some papers on it, a filing cabinet, a painting on the wall, and a rug on the floor. The students could decide to have their characters interact with the objects in any way they wanted. One of characters examined the desk and saw that it had drawers in it. Picking the lock in the drawer revealed some papers which they took. One of them looked behind the painting and found a safe in the wall. Using his Security skill, he managed to open the lock of the safe finding a dataslate inside (a tablet computer), which contained the damning information they needed against the corrupted politician. However, on opening the safe, a silent alarm went off, causing all the doors and windows in the house to be shuttered and a poisonous gas to issue from vents in the ceiling. With but moments to act, they found a trapdoor underneath the rug, and after opening the trapdoor they could go down to the basement by descending a ladder, thus evading the deadly gas.

So, unlike a description in a story, where the author decides what the characters do, the students have total freedom to do what is within their characters capabilities. Every object in the room could be important, so they have to decide whether to examine it, how to examine it and what to do with it (a few examples of the characters' interactions with objects are in the transcript excerpts below). The students need to rely on their imagination and common sense to decide what to do. Because the students feel they are actually *there*, the descriptions are as real as they could be in a classroom language activity. Compare this with the usual way college conversational textbooks teach location and room descriptions. Some of the books try to find a way for the students to interact with the objects in the images, but usually the students simply take turns looking at a

picture of a room and describing to the other student where things are. In my opinion, this is not a very interesting activity, and it is not *real* in any sense of the word. In RPGs, on the other hand, the descriptions of the characters' immediate surroundings are of great interest to the students. Everything they see is "real" and can be taken and used, opened, or even broken. Descriptions in RPGs thus have a high likelihood to stay in the students' memory, as they need that information for a real purpose.

Regretfully, not all the descriptions were interesting to the students. In the fifth lesson, there was a long description of the ritual chamber where the grand finale would take place. The description was intended to evoke feelings of horror, with quite heavy vocabulary. One of the students almost fell asleep while looking up the vocabulary of the room description. Also, understanding the description was a waste of time, as much of the heavy vocabulary was not used again in the following lesson. The description would have been interesting to higher level students, but for these students, it was simply too much.

VIII. Students' Language Production and Humor

Because of the simplicity of the scenario, the students' expected language use was the use of the future tense to explain what their characters were going to do; sentences along the lines of: "I'm going to pick the lock of the door"; "I'm going to look into the room"; "I'm going to shoot the mutant with my gun." However, I had no sentences prepared for my students, and their language ability was unexpectedly low. This was my first teaching job at college in Japan, and they apparently were the top freshman English students in the school. Consequently, I overestimated their productive ability. What follows is a summary of their language production, and humorous exchanges during five lessons of gameplay. The excerpts are from the second to sixth lessons. In the excerpts from the transcripts, T stands for teacher, and the students are A and B. In the excerpts and my discussions about them, I use 'the teacher' to refer to myself.

The following excerpt is from the characters' fight against a villain, in insane mutant brute, early in the second lesson. The characters had several weapons that had different damage potential, but for the better weapons (e.g. autopistol and shotgun) they had a limited amount of ammunition, which explains Student A's choice of using his brass knuckles. Later in the lesson, the teacher decided to give them more ammunition for their firearms, otherwise their characters would not have a chance to survive the scenario. Before this exchange, the teacher gave an explanation of the pros and cons of the weapons. Refer to note[2] for an explanation of the transcription symbols used in the excerpts.

Excerpt 1 – Lesson 2

T:　OK. Are you gonna shoot him? ((Student A had a choice of weapons to defend against the villain))

A: No, no, no . . .

T: No?

A: Brass knuckles ((his choice of weapons due to few bullets for his gun))

B: He? He? ((Japanese expression of surprise and disbelief))

T: ((Again explains the merits of the more powerful weapons, as their opponent appeared quite formidable))

B: ((Whispers advice to A in Japanese))

A: Autopistol.

At first the teacher didn't correct these single-word utterances, focusing instead on moving on. What followed were short exchanges regarding Student A's dice rolls and rules that applied to them. The student continued to use single words or short phrases without subject or auxiliary verbs to state his action when given a choice by the teacher (for example: "Dodge!"). When it came to Student B's turn, his production was also limited to short phrases, but a natural response to the question.

Excerpt 2 – Lesson 2

T: What are you gonna do?

B: Sssshoot him!

Again this early utterance was left without feedback from the teacher, it wasn't incorrect in any case, and the game continued. However, while the incomplete form is acceptable in this context, when the students produced such partial phrases without the teacher asking, "What are you going to do?" then the phrases carried the meaning of an order or instruction. Because of this, the teacher usually emphasized the complete form. The following is the beginning of Student B's next turn:

Excerpt 3 – Lesson 2

T: Alright . . . Your turn. ((Addressing Student B))

B: Shooting.

T: ((Reformulates)) I'm going to shoot him.

B: I'm going to shooting hi-

T: =Shoot hi- er- er- shooting not shooting a-

B: SHOOT him.

As is often the case with partial reformulation, the student only repeated the part which had the error. Later in the lesson and in subsequent lessons, the students got used to the teacher's reformulations and usually repeated the full corrected sentence. After this, the usual dice throwing ensued along with exchanges discussing success or failure (mostly consisting of talking about dice results vs. his characters ability statistic) of his attempt to fire at the villain.

The fight continues in the next excerpt continues on Student B's next turn, after Student A completed his turn.

Excerpt 4 – Lesson 2

T:　What are you going to do?

B:　I'm going to shoot . . . him again.

Student B not only produces a full sentence, but after a pause, extends it further to include the repetition of his action. The teacher did not give feedback on the correct use, but continued to resolve the action. Little by little, the students began producing longer utterances without being prompted, but more often they used simple phrases or single words before the teacher's feedback and reformulation. The fight continues in Excerpt 4 below, which shows further examples of the teachers' reformulation, as well as examples of the high frequency of humor in the game.

Students B's dice roll to determine the success of his shooting (in Excerpt 3 above) failed badly, and the teacher explained that he could possible hit his friend, unless he spent a so-called 'Fate Point' (they only had three each) to reroll the dice. Student B nonchalantly declined:

Excerpt 5 – Lesson 2

B:　No, no, no.

A:　NN! ((Japanese: Shocked exclamation, objecting to his partner's decision))

B:　Don mato . . . don't matta, don't matter. ((Laughs hilariously))

T:　Are you SURE?

B:　M. ((Japanese 'yes')) Yeah, yeah, yeah. ((Casually))

A:　NO!=

B:　=DON'T WORRY! DON'T WORRY! ((Laughs hilariously))

((The subsequent exchanges were partly in Japanese as the students joked about the possibility of Student A's character accidentally killing Student B's character. Finally the action was resolved with a dice throw that didn't succeed in hitting their opponent))

T:　. . . 42? . . . how much did you need to get? . . . 39. Well you don't hit him ((the villain)),　but　you　don't hit *him* either ((indicating Student B))

((At this the students giggled loudly))

Such humorous exchanges often occurred between the students, which gave them opportunity to use language they would normally not have the chance to use in a normal class, like 'don't matter' and 'don't worry'. Usually the reason for them laughing and making humorous remarks, often in English, was due to either of them failing their dice throws, which often had negative, but funny results. Excerpt 6, late in the third lesson, is another example of this.

Prior to this exchange, the students' characters had set off a silent alarm, which resulted in all the exits being shuttered and poisonous gas beginning to emit from vents in the ceiling. They

searched desperately for a way out, and realizing the gas was slow to reach the floor Student A got an idea:

> **Excerpt 6 – Lesson 3**
>
> A: 'm going to . . . lie flat on the ground.

Without being prompted, Student A produced a full grammatically correct sentence, which was rare in the first lessons, but as mentioned above, the students increasingly produced complete utterances, though not always grammatically correct ones.

After some crawling about on the floor, and trying various things, Student B considered the description of the room they were in, and decided to look under the rug.

> **Excerpt 7 – Lesson 3**
>
> B: Turn rug. Turn rug.
>
> T: Lift the rug up.
>
> B: Lift the rug up.

This is another example of the teacher's reformulation, and exemplifies how the students have gotten used to repeat the reformulated sentence.

Normally, when a character in an RPG tries to do something that is easily within his capabilities (like here, lifting up the rug), no dice rolls are needed as it is considered an automatic success. However, to add a little humor, the teacher jokingly pretended that this was a difficult task.

> **Excerpt 8 – Lesson 3**
>
> T: ((Speaking ominously)) CAN YOU LIFT THE RUG? ((Pretends to lift something heavy and makes sounds as if it is very difficult))
>
> J: ((Laughs loudly))
>
> T: ((Laughing)) Okay!
>
> J: ((Rolls dice for fun, knowing he didn't need to)) OH!
>
> T: A HUNDRED! ((A hundred on the dice is always a failure, usually having exceptionally bad consequences))
>
> J: ((Laughing))
>
> T: NO! YOU BREAK A FINGER!
>
> ((Everyone laughing))
>
> T: NO you lift the rug AND . . . there is a trapdoor.

Failing a dice throw that had negative consequences, (even in a situation that didn't actually take place, as above) usually resulted in laughter, shock, or both. In this excerpt, the students didn't produce any language, but it shows the light atmosphere during the game and the students' delight in the frequent dark humor.

The next excerpt, from the sixth lesson, shows more of the students' humorous interactions and willingness to communicate with each other in English. Prior to this, they had entered a room with quite an eerie description.

Excerpt 9 – Lesson 6

A: Hmm. I'm going- . . . I'm, I'm going to look over this closet. ((Pointing at the map))

T: Ok, A starts walking here. ((Pointing at the closet on the map)) What are you going to do?

A: Come on, come on. ((Waits for B to reply)) Come on!

B: I ((Long pause))

A: Follow: me: ((Both words drawn out as if trying to hypnotize B))

B: I'm going to go . . . with him

T: Okay.

A: Ooh, *mezurashii*! ((Japanese: That's unusual!))

T: ((Laughs)) Well, I don't think he wants to be alone. ((Laughs))

((Students laugh))

Considering the short sentences the students produced in the first lessons, this excerpt shows considerable improvement in the students' producing longer sentences. Furthermore, before they would usually talk to each other in Japanese (with some exceptions), but here Student A, speaking as his character, urges Student B's character to come with him. Until that point in the scenario, Student B had played his character as overly cautious, thus the teachers joke that it was actually his cowardice that drove him to follow Student A's character. Such in-character talk is expected in roleplaying games, but it took some time for the students to do so. The teacher could have encouraged it more, but it is noteworthy that they started doing so by themselves without being pushed.

IX. The Language of the Dice

Much of the talk during the game had to do with the rolling of dice to determine whether the students' characters succeeded in what they were attempting to do. Excerpt 10 from the third lesson is a short example of such talk. This exchange occurs when they players have just set off the silent alarm resulting in the exits being closed by steel doors and shutters.

Excerpt 10 – Lesson 3

T: Roll Perception again ((The students need to roll their dice and see if the result is equal or lower than their Perception skill))

A: Seventeen! ((A success))

T: You? ((Addressing Student B))

B: ((Rolls dice)) Twenty six.

T: Ok . . . did you succeed? . . . What's your Perception? How much do you have in Perception?

B: Thirty nine.

T: Okay. So you passed the test. Did you pass also? Did you pass the test ?

A: Thirty six. Hm?

T: You passed the test right? . . . Did you pass the test?

A: Yeah.

T: So, you can hear a sort of heavy thud, thud, thud, coming from SEVERAL PLACES in the house.

J: ((Speaking to himself)) *nani darou?* ((Japanese: What could it be?))

Since rolling dice to determine the outcome of the characters' actions is one of the main elements of most roleplaying games, such exchanges were very frequent. During these exchanges the students simply told the teacher their dice results and were asked to check their skill statistic on their character sheets to see if they succeeded. As a speaking activity, this appears quite limited at first glance. Phillips (1993) criticized such exchanges between his RPG class students as "not very promising" (p. 17), insisting his students use more descriptions. However, first and second year students at university, and other high beginner, low intermediate students in Japan, usually have difficulty with numbers. Probably they don't practice numbers much in high school, at least not producing them verbally. They especially have difficulty with knowing the difference between the '-teen' numbers and the '-ty' numbers (such as thirteen and thirty), they pronounce them incorrectly, as well as being not sure which they heard during listening exercises. Practicing numbers during RPGs, both speaking and listening, is likely to help with this basic but important skill. As the numerical value of skills in *Dark Heresy* ranges from 1 to 100, and the players generate random numbers between 1 and 100 with two ten-sided dice, they get excellent practice in the first hundred numbers which is useful in various daily conversations. The practice is also meaningful to the students, as they need the information for the purposes of the game, and the results are almost always exciting.

In addition, the language used during dice rolls was richer in these lessons than how they appeared to be in Phillips's class mentioned above. Other frequently used phrases when talking about the dice rolls were for example: If you get over/higher than x, then (you fail); You must/have to get lower than/below/under x to (succeed); How much did you need to get?; and other related phrases. Also, depending on the difficulty of the action (determined by the teacher) the students were asked to add to their skill statistic, or subtract, 10, 20, or 30. So, while rolling dice is mostly about numbers, the students get repeatedly exposed to other language in connection with the rolls. Another example of this is below, an excerpt from the sixth and final lesson.

The characters had a final fighting encounter with some skeletons in the underground ritual sacrifice chamber. The large room they found themselves in, had some horrifying scenes

which had the chance of causing the characters to freeze from fear or worse. The teacher instructed them to roll their dice and refer to their Will Power score. Will Power represents e.g. the characters' mental resilience.

Excerpt 11 – Lesson 6

B: ((rolls)) OH MY GOD!

A: *Ore sanjuyon desu* ((Japanese: I got 34))

T: How much . . . did you fail by? Very little? . . . You failed?

B: *Purasu ni!* ((Japanese: Plus 2!))

T: So, you failed by two.

B: Failed by two.

A: ((Rolls, then lets out a breath of shock))

T: You failed as well?

A: Failed by seven.

This part is a good example how quickly the students picked up and used a new expression by listening to both the teacher and the other student. The students had not used 'failed by' before, and not knowing how to say it in English, Student B says it in Japanese. The teacher gives him the English equivalent, and Student B immediately repeats it. Following that, after his roll, Student A also uses the new expression correctly.

In sum, the language of dice rolls can include a lot of useful expressions. Phillips's (2010) class had the students take on the role of GMs (p. 15), so the language use was entirely in in their hands, although Phillips encouraged them to use more descriptive language (p.17). However, since rolling dice and resolving the results is very frequent during RPGs, giving the students a list of useful phrases, such as the ones mentioned above, would help them produce more varied language during the inevitable rolling of dice.

Furthermore, talking about numbers was not the only skill promoted in these exchanges. Before and after rolling their dice, the students always needed to refer to their character sheets and scan for the relevant skill. Scanning for information on a form is an important reading skill, but as a class activity, it is usually not interesting to students. During roleplaying games, scanning for information is a part of the game, not the main activity, and there is a real need to find the information. Therefore, during RPG classes, scanning for information is as authentic an activity as the speaking.

X. Increased Use of Exclamations in English

During the lessons, the students often relied on Japanese when expressing surprise, joy, shock, and other emotions. Gradually, they used English expressions more often to convey their emotions.

Among these were exclamation like 'Yay!', 'Wow!', 'No!', 'Yes!', 'Good job!', 'Very bad!', 'Good!', 'Oh my god!', etc., as can be seen in some of the excerpts above.

RPGs are activities of high emotion and action, and they offer many opportunities for such language. Conventional English classes rarely contain such high emotional material, so in RPG classes, the students get to practice exclamations that they have learned in the past but perhaps never had the chance to use them in appropriate contexts.

XI. Reviewing the Lesson Before

At the beginning of each lesson, the teacher reviewed what happened in the lesson before. This activity included going over the notes that he had projected on screen in the lesson before, and consulting the map of their current location. The teacher didn't just remind them of everything that happened, but tried to get them to describe what had happened, as in Excerpts 12 and 13 below.

Excerpt 12 – Lesson Five

T: Do you remember what you saw?

B: Wo:ru ((Japanese pronunciation of 'wall', such pronunciation occurred only occasionally))

T: Yeah something with the walls.

A: There are . . . There is . . . blood on the wall.

T: Yeah, good.

T: Do you remember what you heard? *Kiita koto no wa oboeteiru*? Do you remember what you heard? …

Koko kara ((Pointing at a room on the map. Japanese: From here.)) Do you remember?

A: ((Moans thinking))

B: Screaming voice.

T: Yeah!

A: Yeah.

T: Something like that, moaning and stuff.

A: Moaning.

Reviewing what happened before is usually done in normal RPGs, and review is doubly important in RPG English classes. Not only were the events reviewed, but also the language associated with them. During the review, the teacher also went over language notes from the lesson before, sometimes asking the students to repeat new words and phrases. Of course, review at the beginning of each lesson takes time from the game, but this is a language class, so it is prudent to review the language as well as the events.

XII. Conclusion

RPG Class A showed that beginner-level students can play an RPG using simple set phrases to practice a foreign language in an entertaining way. RPG Class B, on the other hand, was mostly conducted in English, the language to be studied, and had no such set phrases. In this class, the students both improved their fluency and accuracy in speaking over five lessons. The type of language they were required to use was not extensive (describing their characters' intended actions), so repeated drilling could probably produce the same result, however, without the fun. Additionally, the students didn't just improve their fluency and accuracy in describing their characters' actions, but also produced a lot of spontaneous language, e.g. exclamations in English, and gradually began talking to each other in English in the role of their characters without being told to do so. Humor and laughter was very frequent during the lessons, and learning a foreign language while having fun is likely to produce better results.

The language of the dice, as I choose to call it, has been underestimated as being of limited use to students, but during these lessons, the students were exposed to and produced a lot of useful expressions that are needed to talk about numbers. Being fluent in talking about numbers, is quite useful in many daily conversations, such as when making plans, shopping, and travelling.

The setting was difficult for the students to comprehend, so choosing a setting which is familiar to the students would be better, especially when the lessons are few. With more lessons, an unfamiliar setting could be justified, with more time spent on getting to know the new world. Also, the descriptions of locations sometimes contained too much heavy vocabulary, forcing the students to rely heavily on their dictionaries to be able to imagine the scene. More care should have been given in choosing language that was appropriate to the students' level.

With few lessons as in this RPG class, complex RPG systems with a lot of choices seem to be too much for the students. Simpler systems would be better in classes like these. However, with longer, whole-semester RPG classes, complex systems could possibly be used, and the choices available appreciated by the students.

Overall, RPG Class B was an immensely enjoyable experience for the students and teacher, and the students showed marked improvement in fluency and listening ability over the short span of five lessons.

Notes

[1] In this article, I use 'reformulation' to describe instances when a student has produced a grammatically wrong sentence, and I repeat the sentence in correct form. Furthermore, after a reformulation, I pause, prompting the speaker to repeat the reformulated sentence.

[2] The transcription symbols used to transcribe conversations used in this article were originally developed by Gail Jefferson but were adopted from Psathas's (1995) list (pp. 70-78). Most of the symbols are the same as in Psathas, but some are simplified or altered slightly.

= Is used to show when one utterance overlaps or interrupts another.

- Is used to show when a speaker abruptly stops in the middle of a word.

. . . Marks a pause in the speech of the speaker.

(( )) Double parenthesis are used for various descriptions related to the excerpts.

Utterances in capital letters mark utterances that are of louder volume than normal speech.

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In the two methods are being used because roleplaying games usually do not have a single author identified, but a large staff contributing on the design and writing. Therefore, in the entries with roleplaying games, the title of the game comes first.

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