

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Developing Language Proficiency in Online Courses through
Tabletop Role Playing Games**

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Abstract

This study explores the degree to which common tasks of tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) align with the speaking functions of the intermediate and advanced levels of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Guidelines. By aligning TTRPG gameplay with ACTFL oral proficiency functions, teachers may help online language learners engage in group discussions that improve their speaking skills.

Keywords: language, ESL, game-based learning

Introduction

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. This paper examines the potential of tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) as a tool for increasing student motivation and fostering 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. This research asks to what degree do 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. By aligning TTRPG gameplay with ACTFL oral proficiency functions, teachers may help online language learners engage in group discussions that improve their speaking skills.

Literature Review

Games can be a tool for building learning motivation and classroom rapport (Goldman & Chen, 2013; Butler, Someya, & Fukuhara, 2014; Franciosi, 2016) and for developing linguistic skills, such as oral fluency, vocabulary, grammar (Bado & Franklin, 2014; Cornillie, Clarebout & Desmet, 2012), and communicative skills, including teamwork skills, pragmatics, and intercultural competence (Daniau, 2016; Farkas, 2018; Sellar, 2012).

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, Levandowski & Starke, 2020), are - potential tools for online language learning.

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 and helping them develop interpersonal skills. However, little research exists on the relationship between TTRPG gameplay discussion and the oral language tasks representative of intermediate and advanced-level, language-course outcomes. This paper 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.

Methods

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 and the common tasks in TTRPGs and (2) a practical investigation of actual language use during TTRPG gameplay.

The theoretical comparison was achieved by listing all of the ACTFL speaking functions for the relevant proficiency levels and associating 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 their 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).

The practical investigation of actual language use during TTRPG gameplay was accomplished using transcripts of TTRPG classroom gameplay. Participants for this study were recruited from pre-matriculated students in a university, online, intensive English program. A group of six students in the intermediate-high to advanced-low ranges were recorded while playing a TTRPG during four sessions: location description, character description, rescue planning, and creature encounter. Data was collected from students’ asynchronous individual speaking recordings and synchronous small group recordings. Recordings were transcribed to allow for a more detailed analysis of the participants’ speaking functions during game play. Examples of the ACTFL functions in these recordings were analyzed and compared with the list of TTRPG speaking tasks.

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.

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

The practical investigation revealed that the learners were engaged in all of the TTRPG common tasks across the four sessions. As expected, the learners described people and places during the location description and character description sessions, with some asking and answering of questions, particularly for clarification purposes. The rescue planning session consisted mostly of making plans and negotiating. The fourth session, which involves the characters facing a potentially dangerous creature, involved all of the common TTRPG tasks: description, questions and clarification, dialogue, present and past narration, making plans, -as well as negotiation and problem resolution.

Discussion and Conclusion

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, 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.

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 students develop oral language skills at the intermediate and advanced levels of the ACTFL speaking guidelines. Learners who engage in foundational sessions, TTRPG sessions that establish characters and locations, are likely to engage in mostly intermediate functions; Advanced functions are more likely to emerge in later sessions that involve planning and problem solving. 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 can take place in-person or in online learning environs; however, more interactive tasks, such as negotiating and planning, may be easier to perform using synchronous communication modes, as opposed to asynchronous modes that seemed sufficient for description tasks and simple question-and-answer interactions.

Further research into this topic might explore the quality of speech production during TTRPG gameplay. Researchers and practitioners may also want to examine the use of other language skills (reading, listening, and writing) involved in TTRPG gameplay.

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