

# How I taught with a game in junior high school EFL classes

Spano, F.\*

International Christian University, Tokyo

---

## ARTICLE INFO

**Article history:**

Received: 2021/03/05  
Revised: 2021/05/03  
Accepted: 2021/08/09  
Published: 2021/08/13

**Keywords:**

CEFR  
CEFR-J  
GBT  
Kotoba Rollers  
LLP  
TBLT

**Peer reviewers:**

Brandon Essary  
Niall McFadyen  
Casey Nedry

---

## KEY POINTS

**Background:** In the Japanese junior high school where I taught English for three years, thanks to the soon-to-come introduction of the new *action-oriented* (or task-based) curriculum, the CEFR-J (Japanese adaptation of the European CEFR) I could introduce a game as a task-based language teaching tool.

**Aim:** Show a practical example of how ludic resources can be adopted as pedagogical solutions and indirectly used to reach/attain curriculum goals, in my case, national curriculum goals: the CEFR-J descriptors.

**Teaching methods:** Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) with frequent teacher mediation.

**Research method:** Evaluation, based on qualitative data.

**Results:** Students' fluency with in-game lingo and their communication skills improved. Also, thanks to the TBLT structure and the cooperative nature of the game, students felt like they gained better interpersonal skills.

**Conclusion:** The in-game language range of the chosen game appears to be limited, but the practice and the experience with it paves the way for more language and context-rich games. Also this study shows how, with a lot of work from the teacher, social deduction games can be successfully implemented into an *action-oriented* curriculum while also fostering social skills useful even outside the classroom.

---

## Tweet synopsis

This study shows how, with a lot of work from the teacher, social deduction games can be successfully implemented into an *action-oriented* curriculum while also incorporating textbooks' content. #TBLT #LLP #CEFR #CEFR-J

---

---

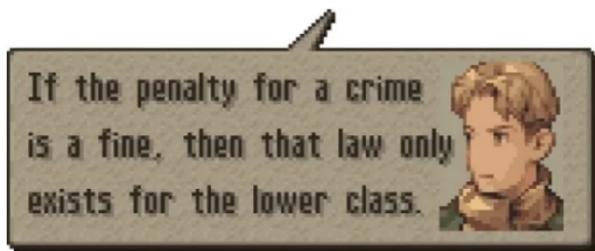
\* Corresponding author. Email address: [fabio.spanox@gmail.com](mailto:fabio.spanox@gmail.com) (Fabio Spano)

## Background

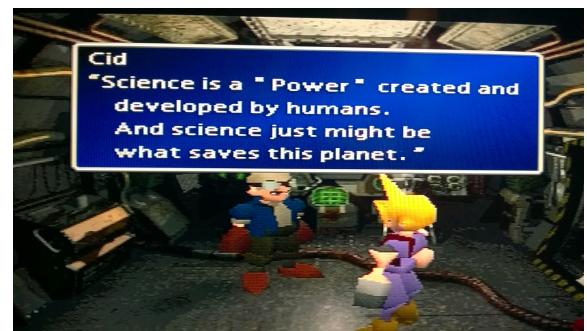
### Who are you?

I am an Italian native speaker English teacher. My English education started in elementary school but flourished at home, while playing video games. I have never stopped playing games in English and I recognize it as one of my main hobbies.

When I was 9-10 years old, my lack of interest in topics that often ruled conversations with my family and peers, like football and politics, pushed me into finding a way to pass time that could be done on my own. That is when I started playing video-games intensively. At that time the video-game market in Italy was not as extensive as it is today, so Italian translations were not yet provided and games were available only in English. Video-games' stories and gameplay, the quick evolution of their graphics, the notions and content coming from Japan and the USA, was what captivated me the most at that time, and the reason why I tried hard to understand the content of, among the many kinds I played, story-rich role playing games (RPGs). I spent hours staring at lines of complex English text looking for familiar words in order to understand the context of the game, the situation of their fictional worlds, or simply where my character should go next (*Figure 1* and *2*).



**Figure 1** Conversation excerpt from Final Fantasy Tactics, by Squaresoft 1998



**Figure 2** Conversation excerpt from Final Fantasy VII, by Squaresoft 1997

I played the games in *Figure 1* and *2* in junior high school.

Later on, around the time I was in high school, I noticed that despite being a below-average student in most of the subjects, getting high scores in English classes was extremely easy for me. During tests I could find the right answers not by applying the rules but by guessing the right form of the verb, the appropriate adjective, or the right position of articles and prepositions. I often chose the correct options because the others just did not sound right.

After getting my bachelor's degree, I started working as an English conversation teacher and translator in Italy. My career path took me to Japan, to the junior high school where I taught English for 3 years. The first-hand experience of achieving English proficiency by playing video-games motivated me into looking for related research. My goal was to find ways to emulate the way I learned English with students. The field that shares my same goals is Game-Based Teaching (Molin, 2017; Hanghøj & Brund, 2010) which explores the ways games can be used by teachers in a classroom. Game-based Teaching is now my field of research and in order to contribute to its expansion and progression I started an MA in Education and Psychology at the International Christian University in Tokyo, with the following tentative research topic: *Designing a game-based class: A framework to make game-based teaching more accessible*.

This walkthrough could be seen as my first attempt at using a GBT framework in order to teach English with games in a formal educational environment prior to starting the MA research.

## Where did you teach?

In a junior high school in Nagano prefecture (Japan), from October 2020 I started incorporating a game during the English L2 lessons with three ninth grade classes. Except for a couple of occasions, I had roughly 30 minutes of the 50 minutes long English lesson, 2-3 times a month, with each class. In these classes I taught the rules and helped the students play the card game *Two Rooms and a BOOM*<sup>1</sup> in English.

In this school, during English lessons, the three ninth grade classes are split in half, so the three class groups of 24 to 28 students became six 12 to 15 students' ones.

At first, the project was unfortunately given least priority in the English curriculum at my school. For example this project was considered an extra activity that was allowed to be carried on if and only when the textbook-based curriculum goals were reached. For this reason the bi-weekly schedule suffered from other events such as school test preparations; it was also the first activity to be "sacrificed" when adjustment to the regular schedule had to be made.

On a positive note, being a teaching assistant to the English teaching team, even if I had lessons with the same class only once a week, I taught English to all the classes and all the students in the whole school. In ninth grade, a total of 78 students experienced this ludic intervention. I managed to have the same lesson and gather data from a total of six different classroom environments.

Furthermore, the game-based activity quickly became popular among students and teachers. From the beginning, none of the English teaching staff (a total of five teachers including myself), or anyone else in the school, showed prejudice towards the word "game" applied in a formal education environment. In fact, during the third week, teachers started to come to me to confirm the project schedule adding comments such as: "*the students are waiting for the game class*", suggesting that talks about the game happened even when I was not present; this happened more than once. Slowly I started getting more time for the game; on some occasions the whole 50 minutes long English class was spent on this project.

From the beginning, none of the English teaching staff (a total of five teachers including myself), or anyone else in the school, showed prejudice towards the word "game" applied in a formal education environment.

One of the other teachers also took an active part in the "game" class experience by giving me suggestions and having brief after-class brainstorming sessions. Another teacher, new to GBT approaches and to games in general, noticed how the students' motivation rapidly increased and in order to better understand the players' perspective and what kind of language could be used in in-game situations, decided to join the game as a player. I perceived her decision to play as a proactive move, done in order to find ways to be more helpful to her students during the GBT interventions and to learn more about GBT teaching methods.

The English level in this junior high school can be considered low. Only two students passed *EIKEN pre-2*, which is, according to the official website, comparable to the level A2 of the CEFR or to a TOEFL *iBT* score of 20/120<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the low level, the students in this school, 9th graders in particular, always displayed a positive attitude towards English activities that moved beyond the regular textbook practice. In the three years there, I had the chance to test and observe this tendency/behaviour with various competition-driven small language games. Knowing about this predisposition and to what extent I could challenge it was, to me, a determinative factor in deciding to play a game in English during class.

<sup>1</sup> By Tuesday Knight Games: <https://www.tuesdayknightgames.com/tworoomsandaboom>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/grades/grade\\_p2/](https://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/grades/grade_p2/)

## What literature, ideas or experiences influenced or inspired you?

The language learning processes I experienced as a kid are explained and researched in the Game-Based Language Learning (GBLL) field's literature. For example, Peterson (2012) shows how Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* (among the games I played a lot) function as motivational enhancers thanks to the various contextualized intercultural communication opportunities they create and showed benefits in regards to literacy, vocabulary, and grammar. Gee (2011) explains how video-games and collectable card games (*Pokémon*, *Yu-Gi Oh*) enhance language learning and development in young people compared to traditional learning by facilitating *situated understandings* (an understanding that implies the ability to use the word or understand the concept in ways that are customizable to different specific situations), supporting earlier cognitive learning theoretical studies that argue that play-like activities promote intrinsic motivation, which enables deep and engaged learning (Bruner, 1962; Piaget, 1951).

When it comes to my early objective of emulating such processes in a classroom, there are implications. The way I learned, described in the GBL literature, was driven and made possible by an interest and passion for games. I played those games for fun, without any educational purpose. However, students do not necessarily like games and, even if they do to a certain degree it does not necessarily mean that they would react positively to games when asked to play by a teacher in a school. To me the most important duty of a teacher is to support the students' learning needs, that is why I drifted away from the idea of reproducing my own learning experience to move towards an approach that focused on the pedagogy of teaching with games, GBT.

The main difference between GBT and GBL is that the latter analyses the learning effect that games have on players when they play without guidance, while in the former the ways a game is used for the purpose of teaching is the main element of study.

Studies on GBT show how teachers can actively incorporate games in the teaching process, and devise learning goals and outcomes based on the game. However, I still had a hard time imagining how to adapt the content of those studies to my unique situation since the GBT papers that explore teachers' reasoning and perspective when implementing games in a classroom or explain how to support students during game play are hard to find (Bourgonjon & Hæghøj, 2011; Chee et al., 2014; Magnussen, 2007; Berg Marklund & Taylor, 2015; Shah & Foster, 2015; Molin, 2017).

While looking for GBT solutions adaptable to my teaching situation I was lucky enough to exchange emails with Professor deHaan of the University of Shizuoka who introduced me to the Ludic Language Pedagogy (LLP) journal, of which he is one of two editors, and to its online community of teachers and researchers who, like me, are enthusiastic about exploring the untapped educational potential that we believe games carry. In particular, deHaan's 2019 paper helped me realize that, more than the game itself, the way teachers use it could be what makes the difference: "*What teachers can do with games can be broader than what students can do on their own*" (p. 40). Reading about a more active teacher role while teaching with games made it easier to conceptualize an adaptation of a game that could make it accessible to lower-level speakers.

Reading about a more active teacher role while teaching with games made it easier to conceptualize an adaptation of a game that could make it accessible to low-level speakers.

Fellow LLP editor, James York's article about his GBT framework called *Kotoba Rollers* (KR) (2019a), along with his book of teaching activities with various simple card and board games (2019b), provide examples of teaching with games that can be exported in a junior high school. Differently from what is offered by other studies, the KR framework presents more than one game and it focuses on a teaching process and activities that are realizable with many different games. This feature of being able to choose a game took down the technological and cost barriers that I, as a junior high school teacher with no extra funds, had. In fact, the technological limitations of the school and the absence of funds to buy games, along with the challenges that adapting a game present, were the hardest issues to overcome when imagining how to "import" other researchers' solutions in the specific pedagogical context in which this study took place.

Differently from what is offered by other studies, the KR framework presents more than one game and it focuses on a teaching process and activities that are realizable with many different games

KR is also based on the TBLT approach, which is similar to the *action-oriented* methodology chosen for the second language education curriculum of the whole European Union, and is a solid part of the second language teacher training I received during my bachelor studies, and the teaching methodology I have more experience with and prefer. TBLT effectiveness in game-based education is also supported by Sykes who, while talking about digital games learning, describes a task as a “*real-world, authentic activity which prepares learners for, and engages learners with, meaningful language use. In other words, tasks require learners to move beyond practice exercises towards the engagement in actual interaction.*” (2014, p.152)

Being able to choose a game took down the technological and cost barriers that I, as a junior high school teacher with no extra funds, had.

## Design

The ludic intervention described in this paper was ultimately based on James York's *Kotoba Rollers* (KR) framework (York, 2019a) mentioned above. Simply put, the KR framework is a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that exploits the goal-oriented features of games with plenty of activities devoted to analyzing games and gameplay, supported by teacher mediation-dense tasks. My familiarity and experience with TBLT made the adaptation of this framework to my situation easier.

KR follows a pre-task, task, post-task structure that cycles research about the game, playing the game, and analysing gameplay. The KR cycle, roughly, looks like this:

**Learn** → Lesson 1      **Play** → Lesson 2      **Analyze** → Lesson 3      **Replay** → Lesson 4      **Reanalyze** → Lesson 5      **Report** → Lesson 6

For this project I adapted the KR-based material involving *Two Rooms and a BOOM* from York's book “*English at Play*” (York, 2019). York's slides, presentations, and worksheets, originally created for university students, along with their language and information load, were adapted in order to match the level of JHS 9th graders in a school in the countryside of Nagano prefecture.

The main adaptations involved simplifying language (the details of which will be explained in the following pages), a reduced amount of rules during the first sessions, extra presentations and drills for language practice, and an extended playing phase in the cycle. This last adaptation was decided based on the longer time needed by junior high school students to overcome the initial nervousness towards this new approach and understand the game and its rules.

The progression, in reference to the KR cycle, resulted in two extra play lessons before reaching the analyzing phase. Also, as a last step instead of reporting findings, students had to reflect on their ludic experience:

Lesson 1 [Learn]	Lesson 2 [Play 1]	Lesson 3 [Play 2]	Lesson 4 [Play 3]	Lesson 5 [Analyze]	<b>Lesson 6</b> [Replay 1]	<b>Lesson 7</b> [Replay 2] [Reflection]
---------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	-----------------------	-------------------------------	---

In this walkthrough I will explain the various steps of the game-based experience, and report mostly interpretative analysis of the qualitative data collected with reflection sheets, filled-out worksheets, teachers' notes, and transcriptions from recordings. My personal interpretations of the students' production and performance are colored by my conscious understanding of the students' individual

levels, struggles with the English language, character, and general attitude towards school and classes. In other words, for example, a remarkable English production or positive attitude has been noted only if it came from a student that usually does not display such language level or enthusiasm.

### The game: "Two rooms and a boom"

*Two rooms and a BOOM* is a hidden role, social deduction card game by *Tuesday Knight Games*<sup>3</sup>. It involves two teams, a red and a blue team, and two rooms. Players are first split into the two rooms, then they are given a face-down card. Among them there will be a *President* and a *Bomber* card. Players will appoint a room leader who will be able to choose one or two hostages that, at the end of a timed round, will be sent to the other room. During the rounds, players have to talk to each other in order to find out other people's colors and who the *Bomber* and the *President* are. There are three rounds and hostages will be exchanged between the two rooms at the end of each of them.

After exchanging the hostages at the end of the third round, the *Bomber* detonates, "killing" everyone who is in his same room.

If when the *Bomber* detonates, the *President* is in the same room: **The red team wins**.

If when the *Bomber* detonates, the *President* is in a different room: **The blue team wins**.

The version of the game I used during the intervention was the free Print-n-Play version which is available on its official website<sup>4</sup>.

### Why a game?

Academic papers helped my personal insights and feelings about the pedagogical potential of games reaching new depths, by connecting games to educational theories and showing how game experiences can be adapted in order to match curriculum goals.

After reading (and getting excited) about situated understanding (Gee, 2011) and cognitive learning (Bruner, 1962; Piaget, 1951), I started looking with more attention to the English learning environment in the school noticing how:

1. Students produced utterances in English almost only when they were directly asked to say something specific by the teachers.
2. There was no communication freedom in class and every task was explicitly connected to a specific language practice.
3. Students, despite having studied English for 9 years, had trouble freely using and understanding 5W1H<sup>5</sup> questions.

Hence, the decision to try a question-based ludic TBLT approach that embedded the language *inside* the task, **without being the task itself**. My intention was to engage students in a ludic activity where they used the L2 implicitly (Poole, 2020); that is, a language production or interaction that occurs because learners are willing to achieve a task, and not because they were asked to speak.

Games are also the best TBLT tools I know: tasks in games are goal-oriented, justified, and their achievement is rewarded. The interactions that happen in *Two rooms and a BOOM* in order to achieve

<sup>3</sup> *Tuesday Knight Games* website: <https://www.tuesdayknightgames.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tuesdayknightgames.com/tworoomsandaboom>

<sup>5</sup> 5W1H questions: What, when, why, who, which, how



Figure 3 The game Two rooms and a BOOM

its main goal are good examples of what Sykes (2014) calls meaningful language usage as they seem to match the TBLT and SLA principles that Sykes, in the same paper, reports (p.153). In Table 1, those principles are summarized and projected onto *Two rooms and a BOOM* gameplay.

The best TBLT tools I know are games: tasks in games are goal-oriented, justified, and their achievement is rewarded.

**Table 1** *TBLT principles reflected in Two rooms and a BOOM*

<b>SLA and TBLT principles (according to Sykes)</b>	<b><i>Two rooms and a BOOM</i> gameplay projection</b>
Goal oriented; learning by doing.	The goal is to save or kill the president, language practice is consequential.
Have scaffolded learning tasks and subtasks.	Players first have the subtask to find the color of the card of as many players as they can, trying to reveal their card only to teammates.
Collaborative use of language; negotiation for learning; learner autonomy.	Collaboration and communication with team members is necessary to create winning conditions.
Provision of feedback; scaffolded feedback.	Winning or losing as a feedback (losing often means that something could have been done better).
Authentication by learners, not task creators or instructors.	Only the players can influence the game outcome, no external influence.
Scaffolded feedback; task repetition allows for the incorporation of feedback.	Playing more times allows players to incorporate what they learned from the previous gaming experience.

Furthermore, social deduction games' goals require students to achieve CEFR-J descriptors. The CEFR-J is an *action-oriented* English curriculum, adapted from the European CEFR, for EFL learners in Japan. It has started to be implemented in public elementary schools from the Academic Year 2020-21, will start in junior high schools from the AY 2021-2022, and in high schools from the AY 2022-2023.

In the CEFR-J, English learners' language proficiency is defined by a sort of can-do list which levels range from *pre-A1* (beginner) to *C2* (fluent).

The main difference between CEFR and CEFR-J is that the latter has a *pre-A1* level and many in-between descriptors (Table 2).

**Table 2** Some of the CEFR and CEFR-J levels compared

CEFR	CEFR-J
A1	Pre-A1; A.1.1; A1.2
A2	A2.1; A2.2
B1	B1.1; B1.2

Japanese JHS students, from AY 2021-22, will have the goal of reaching the level **B1.2** by 9th grade.

In reference to the CEFR-J, ninth grade students in the JHS school (subjects of this intervention), have a **speaking** level that falls between **A1.2** and (rarely) **B1.1**.

**Examples of spoken interaction descriptors from CEFR-J<sup>6</sup>:**

- **A2.1:** I can get across basic information and exchange simple opinions, using pictures or objects to help me
- **A2.2:** I can exchange opinions and feelings, express agreement and disagreement, and compare things and people using simple English
- **B1.1:** I can express opinions and exchange information about familiar topics, using a wide range of simple English.

In Table 3 I framed some of the students' productions while playing *Two rooms and a BOOM* in terms of the CEFR-J descriptor levels explained above.

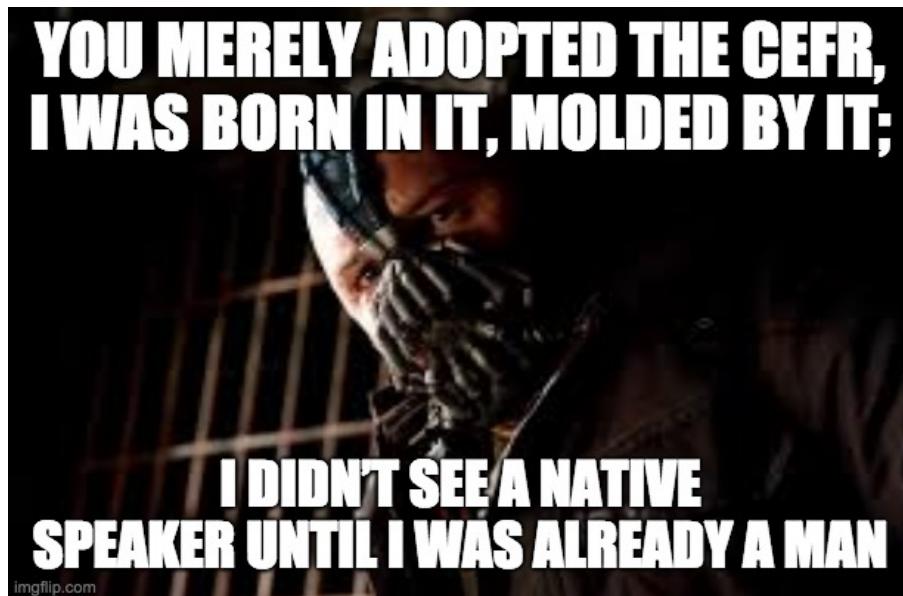
**Table 3** Overheard interactions framed in CEFR-J

CEFR-J levels	A2.1	A2.2	B1.1
<b>Spoken interactions with <i>Two rooms and a BOOM</i></b>	P1: "Is he the Bomber?"  P2: "I don't know, but he red team"	P1: "I think he Bomber, he suspicious"  P2: "Yes he suspicious, but blue team. Not the Bomber"	P1: "K leader in that room, he not send the President"  P2: "K likes be leader. Let's change the leader, then send the Bomber to other room!"

The CEFR has been used as the reference for second language teaching and learning in the European Union since its first publication by the Council of Europe in 2001.

<sup>6</sup> All the CEFR-J descriptors can be found at this link: <https://tufspods.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/cefr-j-english-version.pdf>

I have a personal quote related to CEFR, to its recent adoption in Japan, and to the fact that it has been, with games, a strong part of my English education (Figure 4).



**Figure 4** My personal and truthful adaptation of Bane's famous line from the Batman movie The Dark Knight Rises<sup>7</sup> memefied.

The game *Two rooms and a BOOM* was chosen among other games described in York's book (2019) for two more reasons:

- In *Two Rooms and a BOOM* every student plays at the same time, from the beginning to the end, there is no down time for any of the participants (in opposition to other social-deduction games where participants get gradually eliminated, such as *Ultimate Werewolf*).
- When played in an L2, speakers of any level can potentially take active parts in the game.

In order to facilitate the students' understanding of the rules I decided to go S L O W (York, 2020), and before trying a real L2 playing situation, an entire 50-minute lesson was employed with each class to explain the rules, build students' familiarity with the game, and have a play-test in the students native language, Japanese. The study took a total of seven lessons which were often 30 but sometimes 50 minutes long.

deHaan's examination of research reports (2020) which presents a list of what good GBT papers should include, helped me decide what specific criteria to use and what kind of insight to report.

## Lesson 1: Learning rules and play-testing in Japanese

Lesson 1 [Learn]	Lesson 2 [Play 1]	Lesson 3 [Play 2]	Lesson 4 [Play 3]	Lesson 5 [Analyze]	Lesson 6 [Replay 1]	Lesson 7 [Replay 2] [Reflection]
---------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	-----------------------	------------------------	--

The first class, in order to facilitate the experience, was divided into four parts: rules explanation, confirming rules, play-test in Japanese, and reflection.

<sup>7</sup> Actual line from Bane: "You merely adopted dark, I was born in it, molded by it; I didn't see the light until I was already a man". The Dark Knight Rises (2012).

## The rules explanation

The rules explanation happened twice.

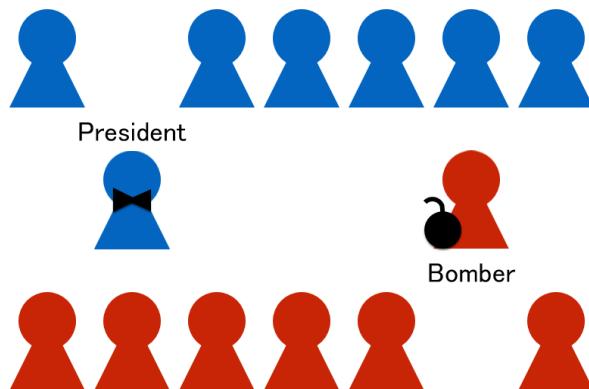
- First: while referring to the simplified rulebook ([Appendix 1](#)), the students had to read two rules at a time, and after each pair of rules I checked and confirmed the meaning with a brief explanation in English. Rules were also numbered and compressed, staying as close as possible to simple subject-verb-object (SVO) sentences.

Ex:

Rule 1: There are two teams. A red team and a blue team.

Rule 2: The red team has a bomber. The blue team has a president.

- Second: Following the first rules' drill, with York's presentation from his book, I explained the same rules again, this time providing visual aids. *Figure 5* visually represents rules one and two written above.



**Figure 5** Visual representation of rules 1 and 2 from York's presentation.

**Suggestion to teachers:** To make explanations more student-centered, you can ask students questions. Here are some questions I asked students at this stage.

Q: "After reading the rules, do you know any other similar game?"

- Students thought about Ultimate Werewolf and discussed the difference between the two games (in Japanese).

Q: "How many presidents do you know? Does Japan have a president?"

- Trump and Obama were the first two names to come up.

Q: "Have you heard the word bomber before?"

- Students mentioned the game Bomberman and jokingly asked if we would play real life Bomberman. I answered "Yes".

Students mentioned the game Bomberman and jokingly asked if we would play real life Bomberman. I answered "Yes".

## Confirming the rules

This was the last step before the play-test to confirm the rules. The students, in pairs, answered a set of simple written questions regarding the rules; the questions worksheet can be found in the rulebook ([Appendix 1](#)), page 4.

Ex:

- Q: What team is the president in?
- Q: How does the blue team win?

All six classes showed a positive response and most of the students, in pairs, were able to answer all nine questions in five to six minutes. While trying to answer the questions, students started discussing the rules in Japanese outside the pre-assigned pairs and after having finished answering the question.

## Play test in Japanese

During the play test the teachers and I spoke only in English, and each of us took charge of one of the two rooms. Once the first of the three rounds started, in almost every class, regardless of the students' attitude or characters, there was a 40-50 seconds silent phase. Students did not know how to start playing. Seeing a silent phase happening even during the play-test I remembered York's first advice: "*have them play in Japanese first*" and in my head I thanked him for it. I wondered how long the silent phase would have stretched if we had the play-test in English instead of in the student native language.

I wondered how long the silent phase would have stretched if we had the play-test in English instead of in the student native language.

Students knew the goal and how to win but genuinely did not know how to start. In order to get the game rolling I took on the in-game role of facilitator (Molin, 2017; Hæghøj & Brund, 2010) by acting as a *promoter*. That is, encouraging the students into asking each other questions by repeating the two team goals and promoting speculation and doubts. I used phrases such as: "*Do you know her color? No? Ask her, ask her*", "*Guys 2 minutes left! Do you know the color of everyone in this room?*", "*He said he is red, do you believe him?*". Students reacted well to this playful encouragement and started talking and experimenting with approaches.

To my surprise some students started using English even if not required to do so. The best example being:

- "*If you show me your card, I will show you my card.*"

In the second and third round there was no silent phase.

After announcing the winner, students cheered and commented as follows (translated from Japanese):

- "*that was fun*"
- while laughing "*I had no idea*"
- "*I knew it*"
- "*I want to be the bomber*"

## Post-task and Reflection:

Using, again, one of York's pre-play worksheets ([Appendix 1](#), pg 5) students wrote down the phrases they used in Japanese and attempted to translate them in English. Students who didn't speak much were asked to write what phrases their friend used and what expression they think would be useful to use in this game (Image 1). The only adaptation this worksheet had regards the translation of 'should'

in Japanese: in my version, 'should' was translated in order to match the translation in the students' textbooks.

Students who didn't speak much were asked to write what phrases their friend used and what expression they think would be useful to use in this game.

Japanese sentence	Example sentence/grammar	Example sentence/grammar
そこに行くべきです	You should... [move there]	
カード見せて	Show me your card. (O)	
あなたは赤チームだと思う	I think you are <sup>in the</sup> red team.	
あなたは赤チームですか？	Are you <sup>in the</sup> red team?	
向こうに行って	Go over there. (i)	
あなたは怪しいと思います。	I think you are suspicious.	
うそをついています。	You're lying. (O)	
私のカードを見せてあげます	I'll show you my card. (O)	
それは本当だと思う	I think it's true. (O)	
私には分からぬ	I don't understand. (O) can't	

**Image 1** Worksheet with Japanese expressions used during gameplay and their tentative translations.

I collected these last worksheets in order to create a drill activity before lesson 2.

#### A problem:

In more than one class, students checked only the color of their card. In three out of six classes the students with the president card were not aware of having it, a clear signal that the explanation and presentation needed more stress on the importance of reading the card content.

#### Lesson 2: Review, drills, and playing in English

Lesson 1 [Learn]	Lesson 2 [Play 1]	Lesson 3 [Play 2]	Lesson 4 [Play 3]	Lesson 5 [Analyze]	Lesson 6 [Replay 1]	Lesson 7 [Replay 2] [Reflection]
---------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	-----------------------	------------------------	--

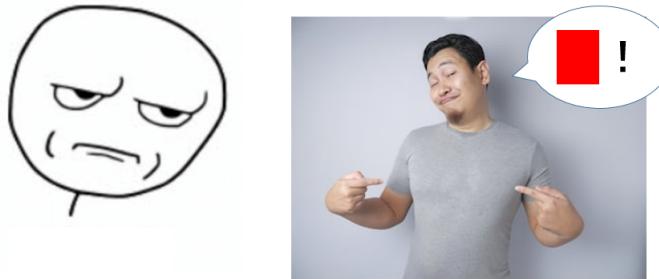
Two weeks after lesson one, students cheered when they found out we were about to play *Two rooms and a BOOM* again.

#### Review:

We started by reviewing the rules. Students had to answer the same questions from lesson 1 but this time, instead of reading the question and writing the answer, they had to answer in pairs direct questions asked by the teacher. They had to raise their hands to get the privilege to answer, receiving points in return. Students in all six classes were quite fast, they understood the rules well but had trouble finding a way to successfully explain them in English.

## Drill:

I gave them back the reflection sheet they wrote in class one. On the worksheets I wrote translations of the useful expressions they wrote in Japanese, and corrected the phrases they tried to translate by themselves. I selected the 14 expressions that appeared more often in the 78 worksheets I checked, and created a presentation (Figure 6 and Figure 7) and a new worksheet ([Appendix 2](#), drill worksheet). The presentation had no written language in it, students had to look at a picture that had a *Two rooms and a BOOM* common situation in it, and understand what English interaction would match it.



**Figure 6**  
Example of in-game interaction:

A: "I'm red" "I'm in the red team"

B: "Really?" "I don't believe you!"



**Figure 7**  
Example of in-game interaction:

A: "Who is the bomber?"

After the presentation, we drilled with the new worksheet. Students received the new worksheet after the presentation. The images on the presentation matched the phrases in the new worksheet and were in the same order.

## Playing in English

During this first experience in English, students were allowed to keep the drill worksheet. While playing, they thought about what they wanted to say and looked for a correspondence in English on the worksheet; I was afraid this process of looking for what to say would slow them down, but it didn't. They knew what phrase they were looking for and were quite fast in finding it.

## What was good:

Four out of six classes were very productive and students used a high number of phrases we drilled, the top three being:

- "What color are you?"
- "Show me your card!"
- "You are suspicious."

They enjoyed calling each other 'suspicious'.

Along with the drilled phrases they tried to use other English expressions they knew:

- “I want to know your card.”

Students showed the need for more language compared to the play-test in Japanese. They felt the need to express speculation in English (Image 2) and in their reflection worksheet they requested translation of phrases such as “I think that the other room will send the bomber here”.

本当にですか。	Is that true?	○
[blue team]と [red team] 手をあげて下さい。	( ) raise your hand.	
今からかい。	I'm not sure.	
彼は 読めない。	I can't read him.	

**Image 2** Same worksheet as image 1, filled out with new expressions.

Also, the need for language to use around the game became clear; they needed expressions to comment when the winning team was announced. I took a note to make sure to include expressions such as: “I knew it”, “as I thought”, “I can't read him/her”, “that was close!” in future drills.

#### What was bad:

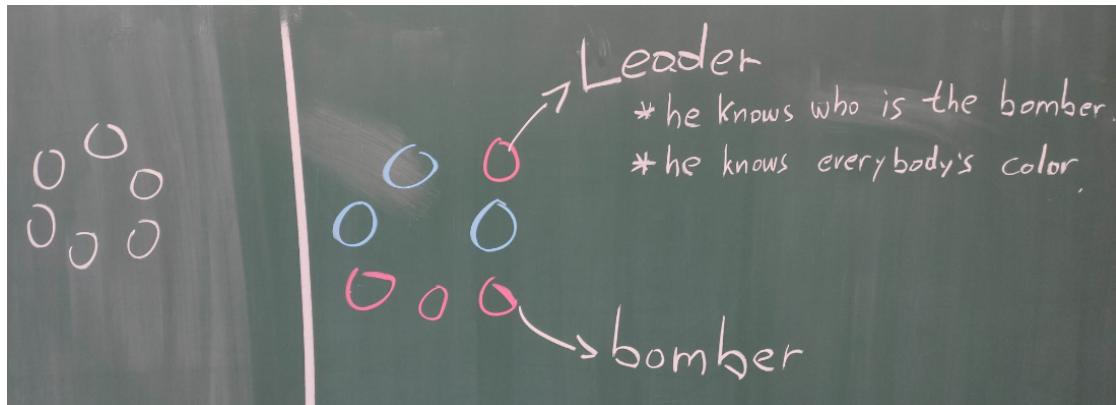
In two out of six classes the English production was, to my personal judgement, not satisfactory: Most of the students did not use the vocabulary and phrases we drilled and lacked the motivation to try any approach to the game. Some of the most active and outgoing students are in these classes mixed with a relatively high number of students that never participate, not even during regular, non GBT, lessons. I had the impression that the most productive students, even if they could interact with each-other quite well during gameplay, did not try to force the communication with the quieter ones, resulting in just a few moments of verbal production and long silences.

This situation helped me notice an issue when playing this game in a school: students don't have to produce verbal language, they could play by simply nodding or shaking their heads while showing their card to those who ask for it. I selected this game by virtue of the numerous ways of possible active participation for students of all levels. However, this wide range of active participation backfired, allowing passive students to play the game without speaking a single word in the target language. In order to tackle this issue I added an extra task to the game with the goal of having all the students participating somehow. The new task, given to every student, was the following: “Find the color of at least five other students”.

The new task seemed to work. Taking away the possibility of freely choosing to stay quiet by giving an in-game speaking task that HAS TO be achieved, seemed to leverage on the sense of duty of some of the students that up until that moment were quiet. Also, students knew I was going to ask them if they achieved the task once the game was over. Another good point of the new task was that it created a new, more consistent flow of information that animated the game.

#### Post task and Reflection:

During gameplay I noticed the lack of strategies and decided to spend a couple of minutes at the end of the lesson working on it. On the blackboard I depicted a situation that happened during one class's gameplay and asked the students to come up with a strategic answer (Image 3). Students, now familiar with the game rules, seemed keen to think about deeper in-game situations and most of them could strategically justify their answers in Japanese.



**Image 3** Strategy Problem: "End of round three. Whom should the leader send to the other room?"

The importance of sharing information between team members was also discussed.

Students, in the last 5 minutes, wrote what they wanted to say but couldn't express in English, continuing the worksheet in the rulebook on page 5 or getting a new, identical worksheet. I collected the worksheets, and I used them to create the next drilling activities.

### Lesson 3: Review, drills, and playing in English (second time)

Lesson 1  
[Learn]

Lesson 2  
[Play 1]

**Lesson 3**  
[Play 2]

Lesson 4  
[Play 3]

Lesson 5  
[Analyze]

Lesson 6  
[Replay 1]

Lesson 7  
[Replay 2]  
[Reflection]

More than half of the ninth graders did not have the game class for more than two weeks because some of the teachers decided to cancel the game class in order to do preparation for an upcoming test. Afraid that students might have forgotten some of the rules, when we had the GBT class again, I decided to not give new vocabulary but repeat Lesson 2; the only changes being the review speed and one review activity.

#### Review:

The rule review happened in the same way as in lesson 2 but with a quicker rhythm.

#### Drill:

After going through the drill presentation again (and, again, with a faster rhythm compared to lesson 2) students, using the drill worksheet, instead of repeating the expressions after the teachers, worked in pairs by questioning each other on the meaning of the various English expressions listed.

The worksheet did not change from lesson 2.

Once the drill was over we played again in English.

#### Playing in English, 2nd time

During the playing phase, students kept on using the drilling worksheet.

#### What was good:

In the "good" classes (four out of six) the flow of production of the drilled phrases continued to be consistent. There were hardly any silent moments during the three rounds. The students looked involved, engaged, and eager to win. Also students started to use new, original, expressions to convey their feelings and intentions:

- S1 (blue team): "I want to go to the other room"
- S2 (red team room leader): "Why?"
- S1: "because I want to win"

Student 1, who struggles in English class because of shyness and a general lack of confidence, tricked Student 2 into thinking he was the president. The trick did not influence the outcome but it was, to me, a remarkable never-seen-before attempt.

Another student decided to save time by addressing the whole class saying:

- "I want to know all people's colors".

For a student with a severe learning impairment who is unable to read or produce any word in English, and usually, during English classes, is incapable of doing anything until a teacher works with her individually, I selected three of the fourteen expressions in this class drill worksheet, I explained to her their meanings in Japanese, and helped her memorize them. During gameplay she managed to remember the three key phrases and used them appropriately, smiling during the in-game interactions with her peers. I felt that she enjoyed an English lesson for the first time in her three years in junior high school.

#### **What was bad:**

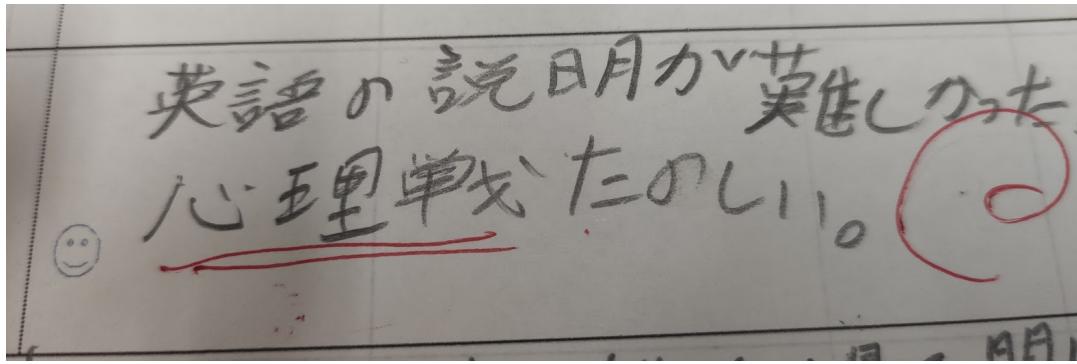
In the playing phase I tried to enforce the extra rule I added in the previous lesson "try to find the color of the card of at least five other students", but the unsatisfactory communication in the classes with low in-game verbal production (two out of six classes) did not improve this time. In one of the rooms of one class the silent time surpassed the speaking time by a wide margin:

1:47 minutes of speaking VS 3:13 minutes of silence.

The other English teacher reassured me that the other room had a better production ratio thanks to a proactive leader, but the silence in the room I was observing made me think that something had to be done to improve engagement and production.

Notwithstanding the new expressions improvised by some students, during this third playing phase, with every class, I started feeling that the communication patterns were getting too repetitive as most of the students focused on 3-4 expressions and repeated them for the whole game, while I hoped to hear more variety in the verbal production. I felt, for the first time, that the game did not require much variety and the pre-task activities did not provide the students with enough choices for their in-game verbal interactions to justify the time spent playing.

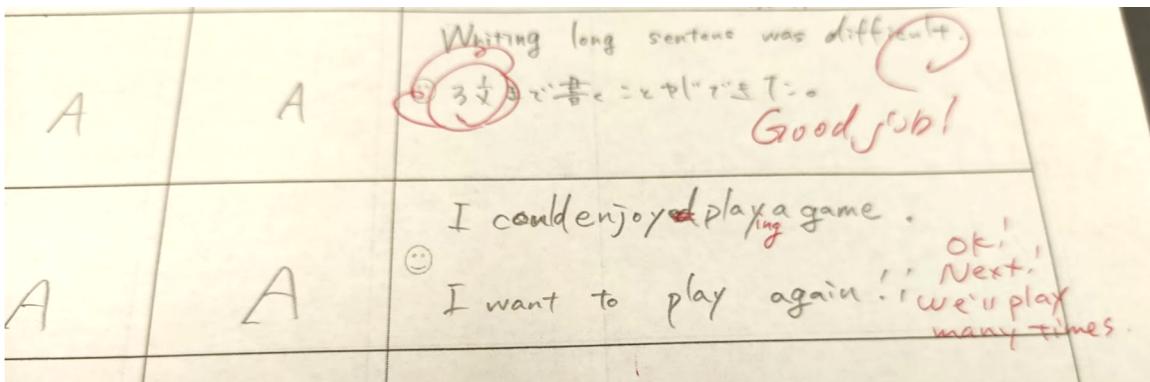
After talking with the other teachers, we agreed that the students might just need more play time. Judging from what they said in English and from what they wrote on their reflection sheets (they used words such as 心理戦 'shinrisen' which can be translated in 'psychological warfare') (Image 4), it seems that they understood the game better, were thinking more strategically about what to say and what to do, and, therefore, needed more time before producing.



**Image 4** Reflection sheet can be translated to "The explanation in English was difficult. Psychological warfare is fun."

My initial thought of taking it S L O W<sup>8</sup> came back to me. In the following class I decided to keep the drill to a minimum and try to play two times in a lesson, trying to have a mid-class evaluation in between games.

This idea of giving more playing time was also backed by some of the reflection sheets the students wrote, since students that, to me, did not look engaged during gameplay often expressed the desire to play more or mentioned how they enjoyed playing. As in other lessons, I might have mistaken quietness for lack of engagement while maybe it was just a necessary phase before better production (Image 5).



**Image 5** A student reflection sheet after lesson 3

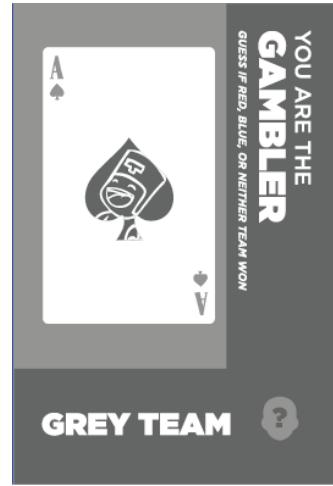
#### Lesson 4: Introducing the gambler and playing in English (third and fourth times)

Lesson 1 [Learn]	Lesson 2 [Play 1]	Lesson 3 [Play 2]	<b>Lesson 4 [Play 3]</b>	Lesson 5 [Analyze]	Lesson 6 [Replay 1]	Lesson 7 [Replay 2] [Reflection]
---------------------	----------------------	----------------------	------------------------------	-----------------------	------------------------	--

##### Introducing a new rule:

In lesson four, considering the decision of not drilling or giving new expressions, I decided to take the chance to implement a role I had ignored until now: The Gambler (Figure 8).

<sup>8</sup> <https://llpjournals.org/2020/06/24/york-teaching-with-games-vaporwave.html>



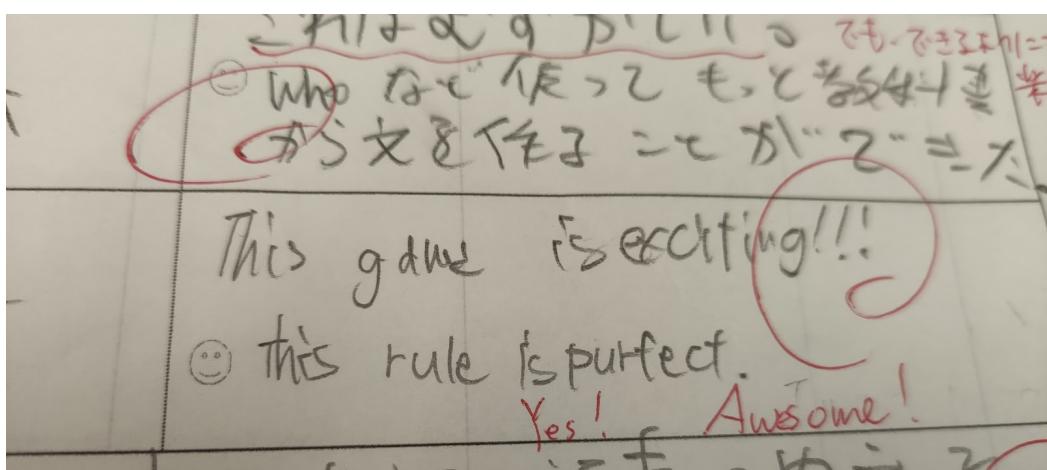
**Figure 8** The gambler card

The gambler is an extra role that exists to literally even the odds when there is an odd number of players. The gambler is neutral until the end of the last round, when, before announcing who the bomber and the president are, he decides which side to join.

I introduced the new rule and the role of the gambler in English with no visual aid. Once I reached the end of the explanation, in all classes, almost all my students nodded, clearly showing they understood how the new card worked and their interest in it. What was interesting about this smooth reception of the gambler's role is that the other English teachers did not understand the new rules, explained in English, as well as their students. After class, with the other teachers, we discussed the surprising issue and we reached the conclusion that playing the game gave the students a better understanding of the in-game context and balance since as players, by wanting to win, they experienced what Piaget (1951) called intrinsic motivation, which helped them achieve a deeper learning. The teachers and I thought that the observation of the gameplay would have provided them, who never played *Two Rooms and a BOOM*, the same level of context and rules understanding of the players/students, but we were wrong. It was after this realization that, as I mentioned earlier, one of the teachers asked me to join the game as a player.

Many students were excited about the new role and wanted to be the gambler.

A student commented on this new rule in his reflection sheet defining it "purfect" (Image 6).



**Image 6** Reflection sheet after introducing "the gambler."

## Playing in English, 3rd and 4th times

### What was good:

English production improved in every class. In this round there was no class with a level of production I would consider unsatisfactory. Students started bargaining with interactions such as the following:

- S1: "You are the bomber"
- S2: "Why do you think so?"

Or:

- S1: "If you show me your card, I will show you my card"
- S2: \*after thinking "Only color OK?"

These two interactions present a drilled expression by student 1, that led to a free production as a response by student 2. The strategic thinking behind student 2's answer represents the early stage of the kind of communication I am trying to foster by playing social deduction games, that is, communication that involves, other than language, cognitive processes such as lying, speculation, and persuasion.

This also happened with the student with severe learning impairment, mentioned in lesson three's report (S2):

- S1: "Show me your card"
- S2: "Color"

Students at this stage understand the game and its balance. They are now able to predict the outcome and picture the necessary condition to achieve victory. After the end of the second and third round, when they see who has been sent to their room, they either cheer or act disappointed, since they are aware of what it means for the game result. This enhanced understanding, I believe, is attributable to the more time spent playing but also to better and more frequent communication. Now, after being sent to the other room, students look for their teammates and share information:

- S: "I think Y (in the other room) is bomber"

During this third and fourth play session I noticed that the most articulated productions happened when I, still acting as a facilitator, asked the students the reason why they were saying or doing something.

Example of teacher student in-game interaction:

- S1 "He is suspicious"
- T: "Why is he suspicious?"
- S1: "He don't show card"
- T: "He.....?" hinting that something was not correct
- S1: "He.... doesn't show..... his card"
- T: "Yeah, that is suspicious!"

In order to preserve the authenticity of the students' productions, I kept these interventions to a minimum, correcting only students that I knew were able to produce L2 with higher accuracy.

In the class that in lesson two had 1:47 minutes of speaking versus 3:13 minutes of silence the speaking time during the fourth play session went up to 4:27 minutes. This considerable improvement clearly showed that students in classes whose previous production I marked as 'unsatisfactory' just needed more playing time.

Students continued to think about strategies. In their worksheets and reflection sheets they showed the need for more English expressions in order to be able to talk and comment about strategic issues, for example planning together what to do next or changing the leader (Images 7 and 8). The discussion topic was often about what was going on in the other room since they realized that understanding the other room situation is a mandatory condition to win:

- S1: "That room leader is K"
- S2: "Leader K, bomber come.. No!"
- S1: "K is leader, like!"

S1 and S2, members of the blue team, know that the leader in the other room is K, who is playing on their same team, and they know that K will not send them the bomber.

Another example of interaction regarding the other room:

- S1: "that room five blue one red, this room one blue"
- S2: (realizing that means they will probably lose) "aaaaaahhh"

The new interest in the other room situation was also reflected in their worksheets (Image 9).

Japanese sentence/grammar	Example sentence/grammar
そこに行くべきです	You should... [move there]
作戦を立てる	Let's plan a strategy
カードを全部みせる	We should open all cards

**Image 7** Worksheet for useful phrases 2 - lesson 4.

ターンすべきです	You should... [move there]
リーダーを変えるべきです。We should change leader.	
罠！	It's a trap!

**Image 8** Worksheet for useful phrases 2 - lesson 4.

そこに行くべきです	You should... [move there]
他の部屋に大富豪はいる？	Why you don't show me your card?
他の部屋の1-9-1はボーナスを送ってくると思う	I think other room's lead <sup>will</sup> sends Bonnabr.

**Image 9 Worksheet for useful phrases 2- lesson 4**

Note: In the first line the student is trying to say "Why are you not showing me your card?"

### What was bad:

In one class, a student who has social anxiety received "the gambler" card. In his reflection sheet, after playing, he wrote only one word: "panic". While randomly giving out the game cards, aware of his condition, I was hoping he would not receive any special card (bomber, president, gambler) but during lesson four he received the freshly explained new role of gambler. While playing I noticed he was nervous in his interactions with the other students and wondered if I should restrict, even a little, the role's assignment, by making sure that students with his condition do not receive roles that have just been explained.

### Lesson 5: The play-less game class. Analyze and expand.

Lesson 1 [Learn]	Lesson 2 [Play 1]	Lesson 3 [Play 2]	Lesson 4 [Play 3]	<b>Lesson 5 [Analyze]</b>	Lesson 6 [Replay 1]	Lesson 7 [Replay 2] [Reflection]
---------------------	----------------------	----------------------	----------------------	-------------------------------	------------------------	--

### Analyze

In York's KR framework (2019) an analysis class takes place between playing sessions. In this class York's students analyse their own performance with activities such as:

- Find errors in their transcriptions
- Compare their performance with online videos
- Consider their gameplay performance

These activities were, unfortunately, quite difficult to emulate in my context. Students are not allowed to carry smartphones in school so the videos consisted of a few gaming sessions from one of the two rooms involved and were taken with my smartphone, the microphone of which is not good enough to capture the audio of all the students speaking in the room. Also, the online videos of native speakers playing *Two rooms and a BOOM*, when available, are of a level and speed that, to my judgement, was way above my students' listening ability.

Nevertheless, reflection on and analysis of the game (or task) is a core part of the KR framework and a kind of activity that I believe should be central in any game-based TBLT practice. That is why, while adapting this phase to my classes, even if I had to give up the analysis of their own performances, I tried to keep the reflections on the gameplay by challenging the students with gameplay puzzles (Figure 9).

The 14-15 student classes were divided into 3 groups of 4-5 students. Every group had the task to find the best move for two in-game problems and justify their answer. In *Problem 1* they could justify their answer orally, for the second problem they had to individually write down their reason for choosing a certain move.

Using puzzles is an idea that came from the successful strategy discussion that happened during the last minutes of [lesson 2](#) and from the chess puzzles format. Chess puzzles, which sometimes I enjoy doing, are designed in order to challenge the knowledge one has of the game. Knowing how the pieces

move is not enough with these puzzles, they require time and focus to be completed and eventually lead to improvements of the players' in-game strategy.

The students that experienced this ludic intervention showed, especially in lesson 5, how they could now predict the game outcomes in the last round based on how many cards' colors or roles they knew. I thought they were not beginners anymore and could benefit from an in-game challenge. Differently from chess puzzles, the ones I presented the students with, did not have a pre-set winning move as a solution. They had an optimal move and a limited number of other options that, if justified, could still be considered a possible strategy.

The justification of their answer, rather than the answer itself, was what I used to evaluate the students' performance with the worksheet.

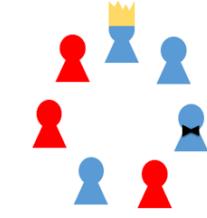
Let's think about a **strategy!** (作戦)

Problem 1

**Room A**



**Room B**



**INFORMATION**

- 1: You are the leader of room A.
- 2: You know that the bomber is in this room.
- 3: You know that the president is in the other room.
- 4: It is the end of the second round.

Question:

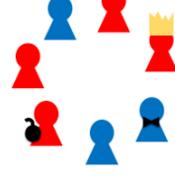
Whom should you send to the other room?

A: \_\_\_\_\_

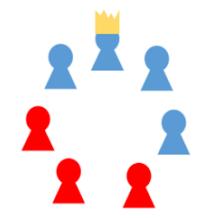
  

Problem 2

**Room A**



**Room B**



**INFORMATION**

- 1: You are the leader of room B.
- 2: You know that the bomber is in the other room.
- 3: You know that the president is in the other room.
- 4: It is the end of the second round.

Questions:

Whom should you send to the other room?

A: \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

A: \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 9** Worksheet from the strategy class ([Appendix 3](#), strategy worksheet)

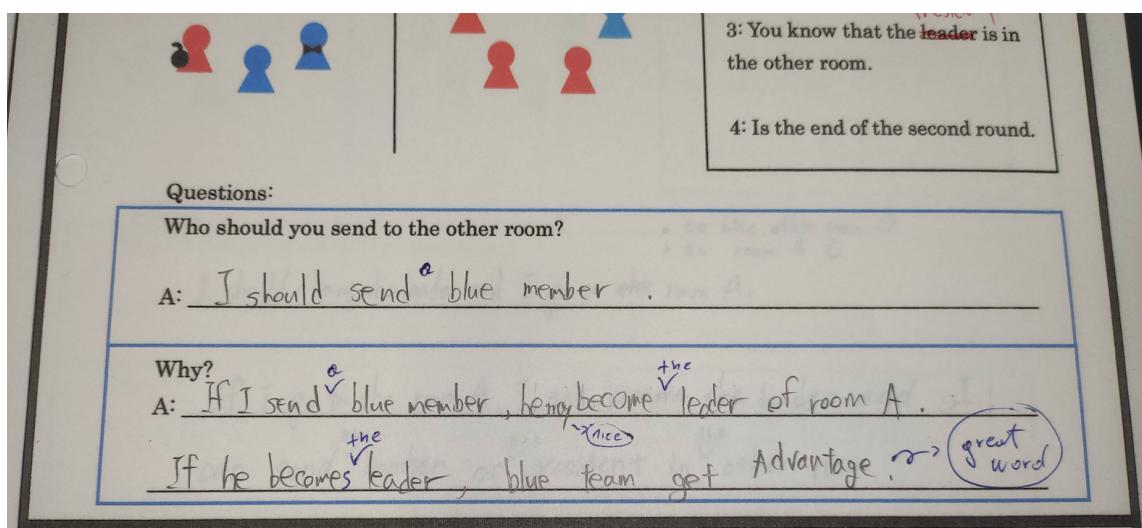
The question format was chosen based on some of the grammar the students have studied this year: 'should' and 'if'.

The main goals of the strategy worksheet were to:

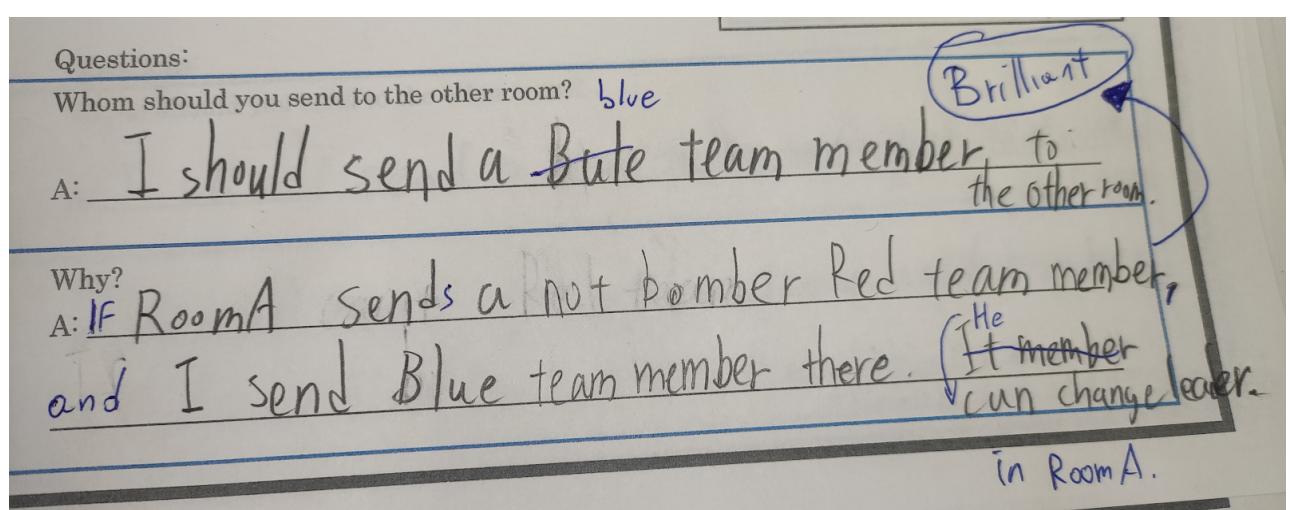
- Reflect on the gameplay and possible strategies.
- Reduce the gap between students strategy-wise.
- Enhance and evaluate language accuracy by performing a writing task.
- Practice textbook (hence, curriculum) grammar in a familiar context.
- Give them an example of advanced tactics that they could adopt in their games.
- Highlight the importance of teamwork and group discussions in solving issues.

In some classes, I presented the same two problems in an inverted order. Students needed time to be accustomed to the puzzle format and, in every class, every group was faster in solving the second puzzle they did, regardless of which of the two was more difficult.

It happened that some groups needed more time, and in those cases I extended the time limit by one minute (6 minutes in total) in order to allow everybody to answer. Not all the groups gave the optimal answer but every one could justify their idea, sometimes going the extra mile with new words straight from the dictionary (Image 10), extra winning conditions or extra details (Image 11 and 12).



**Image 10** Strategy worksheet, a student used the expression 'get advantage' to answer Problem 2.



**Image 11** Strategy worksheet, extra winning condition in the answer

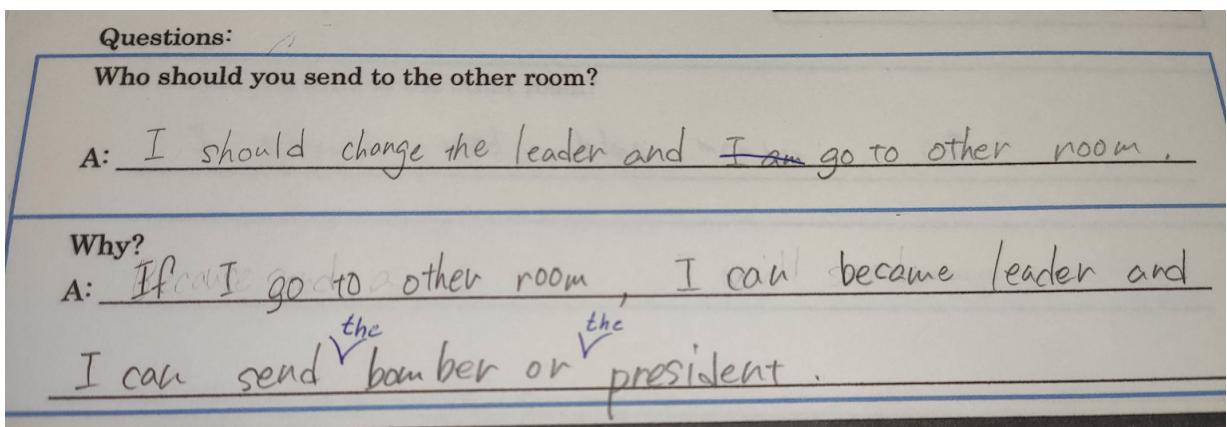


Image 12 Strategy worksheet, extra details.

After briefly explaining the shape of the problems and confirming the meanings of the information in the right column of the worksheet, I asked the students if they remembered the meaning of 'should' from the previous classes, and what was the grammatically correct way to answer the 'who should you send' questions.

Once the student gave their answer to *Problem 1*, I asked them to justify it. They were allowed to justify their answer in Japanese, but later, as a class, we brainstormed on how to turn what they said into English.

Eventually, at least one student in every class mentioned, 'if', the grammatical point I was hoping to review. I appointed 'if' as a viable answering form and asked the students to try using it when answering the second question of *Problem 2*.

The problems were both purposefully hard to solve, and students had 5 minutes to solve each problem. In most classes they spent the first two minutes (more or less) staring at the sheet in silence. I reassured them that the problems were supposed to be hard (adding my signature evil laugh to lighten up the spirits) and that it would be almost impossible to solve them by themselves, without teamwork. Students seemed to enjoy the challenge and looked happy to get the correct answer to the second problem much faster compared to the first one. They also realized that by themselves, solving these puzzles would have been much harder (*Image 13 and 14*).

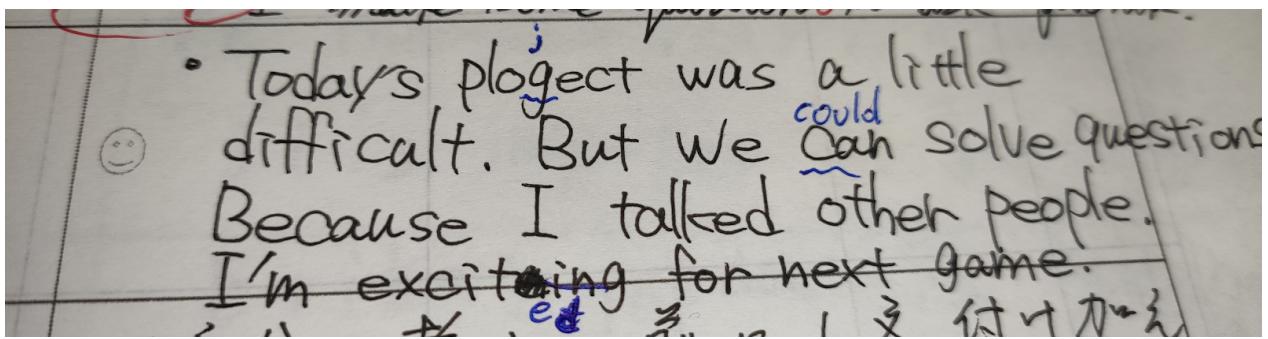
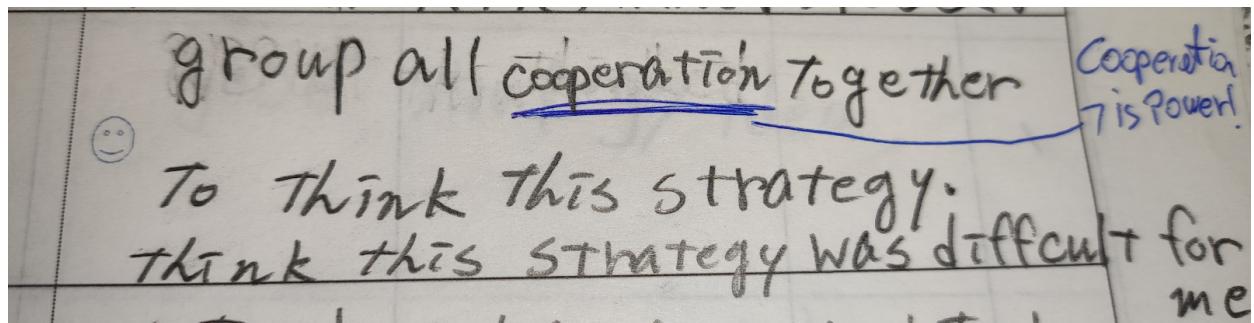


Image 13 A student reflection sheet after the strategy lesson



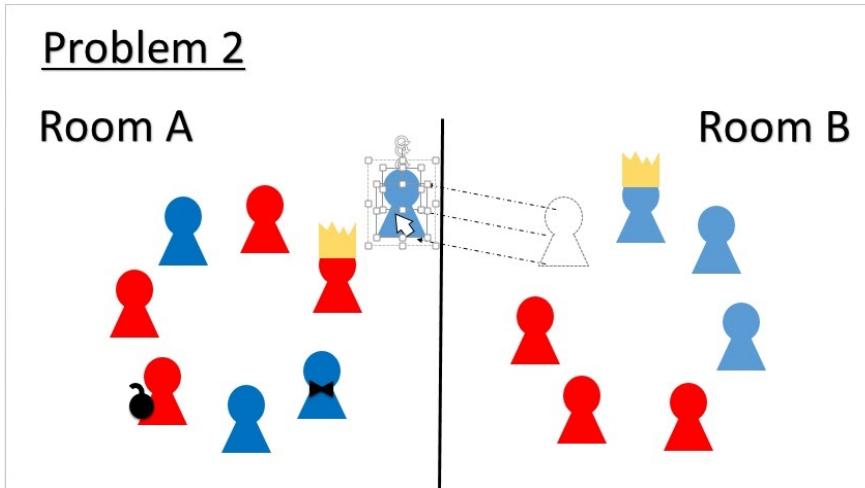
**Image 14** A student reflection sheet after the strategy lesson

Some groups were fast in finding a solution and actively discussed it in order to decide the better strategy. Some other groups needed my direct support. In helping them I did not give the answers but I tried to facilitate their task by giving little hints or simplifying the original question. For example, referring to *Problem 2* of the worksheet I helped some students by saying things like:

- T: "Not many options! Or red team member, or blue team member"
- T: "What if you send a blue team member? What happens?"

Students that had been quiet for the 5 minutes given them to solve the problem could successfully answer my direct approach and justify their answers. This happened to one group in almost every class.

While listening to their solution, in order to make sure every student understood the strategy, it helped having a PowerPoint version of the game situation of the two problems on a screen, and move the characters as every group explained their strategy (*Figure 10*).



**Figure 10** Moving the characters in the problem with a PowerPoint according to students directions.

Two classes, the ones that in this paper I have been defining as the ones with low in-game verbal production, had a simplified version of the puzzle. The two strategy problems presented in this section are quite hard and need active discussion with peers to be solved. The classes that have low production game-wise also have a higher number of students that are insecure and not as active in regular group discussions as other students. Aware of this situation, I decided to present them with problems easier to solve and to open the two hints I mentioned above to the whole class, writing them on the blackboard.

Noticing how, with hints and easier puzzles, they needed slightly more time than the other classes to solve the task, I concluded that the kind and amount of facilitation was on point.

## Expand

The second half of the strategy class was used to introduce new roles.

Originally, I thought that adding new roles would complicate the game in an unproductive manner considering the pedagogical goals and the level of English. However, after seeing the students progress in the gameplay and how much they enjoyed the *gambler* card, I decided to expand the game with new cards and to give the students the choice.

I made a voting sheet with an explanation of three new roles (again, simplified to be as close as possible to SVO sentences) with a box next to each of them. During the second part of the strategy class, students had to read, understand, and vote for their favorite role (Figure 11).

### The agents



- There are 2 agents in the game.
- One agent is in the **red team**, one agent is in the **blue team**.
- Agents can use the **"AGENT POWER"** on a player.
- If they use the **"AGENT POWER"** on a player, that player **MUST** show his card to the agent.
- An agent can use the **"AGENT POWER"** only once in each round.

**Figure 11** Example of the new roles, full worksheet in the [Appendix 4](#): New roles voting sheet

In one of the two classes that demonstrated low verbal production and participation I decided not to introduce the new roles. This class is one of the quieter classes in school, and discussion and production are very low compared to other classes even if their grammar proficiency is at the same level, if not slightly higher.

The quiet classes, until now, are the ones that benefit the most from repeated playing sessions. They need more playing time to fully understand the game, overcome their insecurities, and produce linguistically. In this kind of environment, where more time is needed in order to reach an adequate level of production, and where every new element introduced needs more time to be absorbed, the other teacher and I concluded that introducing new roles would just increase the uncertainty that students have towards the game.

As I learned when I introduced the gambler, in lesson 4, students with social anxiety suffer from responsibilities dictated by special roles, even within a game. In classes where students with this kind of condition are in higher numbers, I believe it is better to keep the number of special roles low; at least until the base game is fully mastered.

**Suggestion to teachers:** Don't be stiff! Students' needs, feedback, and reactions (at any stage of the experience) are the best source of hints for modification or adaptation of not only the pedagogy but also the game you are using. Both interventions in Lesson 5 (the strategy and the new roles worksheets) are a consequence of the student's excellent reception to the limited exposure to similar experience: the short strategy discussion at the [end of Lesson 2](#) and the introduction of the gambler card in [Lesson 4](#).

Suggestion to teachers: Don't be stiff!

## Lesson 6-7: Replay and reflection.

Lesson 1  
[Learn]

Lesson 2  
[Play 1]

Lesson 3  
[Play 2]

Lesson 4  
[Play 3]

Lesson 5  
[Analyze]

**Lesson 6**  
**[Replay 1]**

**Lesson 7**  
**[Replay 2]**  
**[Reflection]**

### Replay

In lesson six we just played the game with the new roles, and students were allowed to use the worksheets as reference but nobody did. The new roles led to new speaking patterns and strategies by not only the students who got the new role cards but also by the students that needed to defend themselves from those roles, for example:

- S1: "S2 is red agent, dangerous! We should send her other room"

I felt that the new balance led to more fun, even if the final goal, of finding out who the bomber and the president were, got slightly harder.

We played for the last time in the first half of lesson seven. I recorded the gameplay and used it to evaluate this game project. To evaluate I focused on the spoken in-game interactions, in terms of speaking time, fluency, language complexity, and fun.

During this last gaming session I noticed an increase in response speed and fluency.

The common exchange:

- S1: "Show me your card!"
- S2: "No!"
- S1: "Why?"
- S2: "Because you are suspicious"

reached a communication speed that the students never displayed in any other L2 situation at school. The production time also increased and the longest silent phases, down to an average of 20 seconds during all 3 rounds, happened mostly in the last round, when big decisions had to be made. Students don't seem to need much thinking time before producing game-related language, and the interactions happened smoothly.

The language produced was mostly what had been drilled but it was not uncommon to hear grammar constructs that they had studied before such as "*I want....*" used in the unique game context ex: "*I want to know who the bomber is*". Less proficient students also participated actively, using a very small range of vocabulary but doing it constantly and confidently.

Strategy-wise, compared to the first gaming sessions where only the more confident students appeared to know what was going on, in this last session all the students seemed to interact on a similar level: during the first game sessions quiet students would show their card to whoever would have asked them and looked impasse when hostages were exchanged; in this last two games all

students were careful not to reveal their card to opponents and seemed more involved and responsive when exchanges happened.

## Reflection

The post-project reflection happened twice. The first time, right after the last gaming session by answering this question: *"If you compare your performance during today's gaming session to the first time we played, how do you feel?"* in their reflection sheet.

Students were allowed to answer this question in their native language.

As expected, all of the students felt an improvement in their in-game language ability. This is due not only to the gaming experience but also to the fact that, compared to the first time they played, they, at the time of the survey, had had 4 additional months of English education.

In their answers students mentioned:

- improvement in production speed
- wider range of vocabulary and grammar
- better understanding of their peers' English
- ease in question asking

Some students also expressed the will to become able to ask even more questions and to play more.

One great connection, made by many students, was between language ability and fun. They noticed the more they spoke, the more fun they had while playing, and wrote it as an answer to the above question.

One great connection, made by many students, was between language ability and fun. They noticed the more they spoke, the more fun they had while playing.

The second reflection happened via questionnaire. One week after lesson 7, students completed an online questionnaire with multiple choice and open questions about the gaming experience. I used the result of this questionnaire to draw my conclusions in the following section.

## Evaluation

The listening (understanding the rules, peers' in-game language, and teachers' explanations), reading (rulebook, strategy worksheet, and new roles guides), and writing (new expressions and strategy worksheets) activities involved a wide range of grammar and vocabulary, and the English teachers and I judged the level and variety of the language involving these three skills as satisfactory. When it comes to speaking, though, the language used in the spoken interactions, even if it could match the CEFR-J B1.1 descriptors, was redundant and the speaking patterns limited as nothing changes (not the goals nor the character cards) between rounds and sessions in the base version and students could "get away with" repeating one question form and replying with single words.

Students indicated listening as the skill they felt they had the most improvement with during this project, since not everybody spoke a lot, but every student was able to listen and understand their peers' language and the game rules explanation. In the final questionnaire students were asked to self-evaluate what skills they felt they had learned, marking a list of language skills from zero to five (Table 4) where zero meant "didn't learn at all" and five meant "learned a lot." Among the 78 students, most of them recognized improvements in every skill. I believe that the possibility itself to recognize such a development was given by the repetitions, so to the fact that students could play many times (a total of six times) and use their new skill level in the, now familiar, game context.

**Table 4** Average and standard deviation on English skills self-evaluation

English Skill	Average	Standard Deviation
Speaking	4.21	0.90
Listening	4.40	0.71
Reading	3.92	0.96
Writing	3.90	0.97

Students self-evaluated with what kind of English speaking skill they improved the most (Table 5). Students did not seem to consider their production fluent even if improvement in fluency were, to me, some of the most noticeable. They, though, noticed how, differently from test-prep and textbook practice, this project presented them with a non-linguistic goal to achieve. This helped them focus on fluency more than accuracy during the spoken interaction which increased the language production. In regular classes it is common to have students not speaking unless sure to produce perfect language, in the game classes this slowly stopped from happening. Students used similar expressions but, in the last playing sessions, continued speaking, communicating, and collaborating in English for the whole six minutes of the game, without the teacher needing to intervene.

**Table 5** Average and standard deviation on English Speaking skills self-evaluation

Speaking Skill	Average	Standard Deviation
Usage (occurrence)	4.10	0.96
Fluency	3.69	1.09
Game words knowledge	4.29	0.96
Cooperation	4.40	0.84

Not worrying about perfect grammar but focusing on getting their message across and understanding others in order to win the game helped students who defined themselves (in the questionnaire) as “*bad in English*” in gaining the confidence needed to have a continued interaction. This trend of putting cooperation and conveying and understanding feelings above target L2 production and accuracy is reflected in the answers to the open questions. Some of the answers to those questions, translated from Japanese, follow here.

This trend of putting cooperation and conveying and understanding feelings above target L2 production and accuracy is reflected in the answers to the open questions.

Q: "What do you think you learned the most during the game classes?".

- A: "How to cooperate"
- A: "To convey what I think"
- A: "How to convey my feelings"
- A: "Being able to somehow answer when asked something is more important than sticking on strict grammar"
- A: "In order to win, it is important to convey your thoughts to everyone and discuss a lot"
- A: "It's important to have fun"
- A: "I thought it was important to speak positively because if I didn't do that I would not become the leader and I would probably lose."
- A: "How to listen after asking a question"
- A: "I think I learned the ability to observe people and understand who is good at lying and who is not"
- A: "I think is important to deceive other players and cooperate with teammates"
- A: "Think while cheating"

## Implications and conclusion, what's next?

This walkthrough could have benefited from numbers and quantitative data on students' language acquisition. The students' L2 improvement (or lack of it) has not been tracked, as it could have been in a study of this kind, by comparing results of pre-tests and post-tests; such a comparison would have provided more traceable data on the students' progress. Hence, its success or failure is up to my and the reader's judgement based on the students' reflections.

Regarding the CEFR-J descriptors reported in the first pages of this walkthrough, this project had the students working on all four skills (L, S, R, W) around level B1.1. However, considering the Japanese JHS goal to reach B1.2 in 9th grade, it might have been more appropriate to play *Two Rooms and a BOOM* (the way I did in this paper) in 8th grade.

Students did not have the chance to work much on accuracy. More reflection and analysing activities, (like the transcription of game recording activities in York, 2019) would have been helpful in this regard, and I regret not having had the time or the resources to implement them.

One of the limits of this project lies in the game chosen. The vocabulary and grammar range of *Two Rooms and a BOOM* is quite limited and, even if we focus the attention on the students' cognitive progression, it is hard not to notice a redundancy in the speaking patterns. This game could work as a pre-task for more complicated and vocabulary dense social-deduction hidden-role games but, as a stand-alone experience, might be hard to successfully incorporate it as a functioning part of a curriculum, especially in terms of explicitly connecting to learning outcomes. I do believe, though, that after reading this walkthrough, by spending more time in class and planning, it is possible to find ways to raise the pedagogical potential of this game.

*Two Rooms and a BOOM* is not a linguistically-demanding game, just a few words can be used to play. Being able to improve communicative and collaborative skills with not too much of a linguistic struggle, I believe, helped the students get ready for games with a more complex linguistic content. This last conclusion is supported by students' reflections on the improvement of their communicative and cooperative skills, which are key in social-deduction games.

The next step for a class that had this experience could be playing *Spyfall*, another hidden-role game

also taken from York's book "*English at play*" (2019). *Spyfall* also gives great linguistic freedom in terms of difficulty and variety and, compared to *Two Rooms and a BOOM*, also presents a context where players can use their original ideas and get creative<sup>9</sup>.

Finding other, gradually more language-demanding, games whose content connects to what students/players learned with the previous ones (like *Two Rooms and a BOOM* and *Spyfall*) could allow teachers to design GBT interventions that spread through more semesters, and constantly foster students' language and cognitive skills while keeping up engagement and motivation.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

I received no financial support for the research, authorship or publication of this article

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have happened if my dear friend Benjamin Thanyawatpokin didn't involve me in his world and work, and introduce me to the Ludic Language Pedagogy journal's editors James and Jonathan and the rest of the LLP community. Nor would it have been possible if I didn't have the full support and trust of my company and my school, the English teaching team in particular.

I am a lucky teacher.

## References

- Bruner, J. S. (1962). The conditions of creativity. In H. E. Gruber, G. Terrell, & M. Wertheimer (Eds.), *The Atherton Press behavioral science series. Contemporary approaches to creative thinking: A symposium held at the University of Colorado* (p. 1–30).
- Bourgonjon, J. & Hanghøj, T. (2011). What does it mean to be a game literate teacher? Interviews with teachers who translate games into educational practice. *Proceedings of the European Conference on Games-based Learning*. 2011. 67-73.
- Chee, Y. & Mehrotra, S. & Ong, J. C. (2015). Professional development for scaling pedagogical innovation in the context of game-based learning: Teacher identity as cornerstone in "shifting" practice. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*. 43. 423–437.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gee, J. (2011). Reading, Language Development, Video Games, and Learning in the Twenty-first Century. *Counterpoints*, 387. CHAPTER FIVE, 101-127.
- Gerding, A. & McCoy, S. (2013). *Two rooms and a BOOM*. Published by Tuesday Knight Games.
- deHaan, J. (2019). Teaching language and literacy with games: What? How? Why? *Ludic Language Pedagogy* (1), 1-57.
- deHaan, J. (2020). Game-based language teaching is vaporware (Part 1 of 2): Examination of research reports. *Ludic Language Pedagogy* (2), 115-139.
- Hanghøj, T. & Brund, C.E.. (2010). Teacher roles and positionings in relation to educational games. In *Proceedings of the 4th European conference on games based learning*, 116-122.
- Magnussen, R. (2007). Teacher roles in learning games-When games become situated in schools.
- Marklund, B. & Alklind T. (2015). Teachers' Many Roles in Game-Based Learning Projects.
- Molin, G. (2017). The role of the teacher in game-based learning: A review and outlook. In M. Ma, & A. Oikonomou (Eds.), *Serious Games and Edutainment Applications: Volume II* (pp. 649-674).
- Peterson, M. (2012). Language learner interaction in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). In H. Reinders (Ed.), *Computer Games in Language Teaching and Learning* (pp.70-92). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>9</sup> <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/166384/spyfall>

- Piaget, J. (1951). Principal factors determining intellectual evolution from childhood to adult life. In *D. Rapaport, Organization and pathology of thought: Selected sources* (p. 154–175). Columbia University Press.
- Poole, F. (2020). Exploring authentic language use in the classroom. *Ludic Language Pedagogy* (2)
- Shah, M. & Foster, A. (2015). Developing and assessing teachers' knowledge of game-based learning. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 23 (2), 241-267.
- Sykes, J. (2014). TBLT and synthetic immersive environments. In M. González-Lloret & L. Ortega (Eds.), *Technology-mediated TBLT: researching technology and tasks* (Vol.6). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Ushan, A. (2014). *Spyfall*. Published by Hobby World.
- Tono, Y. (2019). *CEFR-J*. Retrieved from <http://www.cefr-j.org/>
- York, J. (2019a). "Kotoba Rollers" walkthrough: Board games, TBLT, and player progression in a university EFL classroom. *Ludic Language Pedagogy* (1), 58-114.
- York, J. (2019b). *English at Play*. Tokyo Denki University Press, Tokyo, Japan.
- York, J. (2020). It's your mooooove: Why teaching with games should be like vaporwave (and not nightcore). *Ludic Language Pedagogy*, 2, 104-114.

**Appendix 1: Simplified rulebook (5 pages)** adapted from York's original material on two rooms and a BOOM in his book (2019)

\*printable as a pamphlet on an A3

# English Project

Learning English with games

Name \_\_\_\_\_

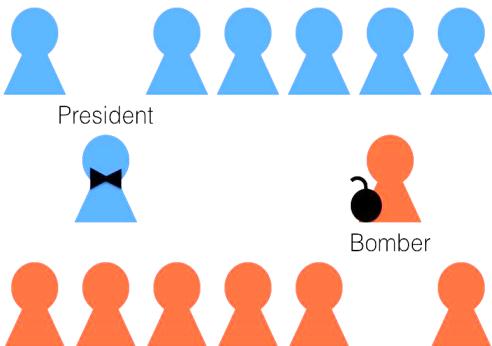
Class and Number \_\_\_\_\_

Two Rooms and a Boom



## Part 1: Learn the rules (Reading)

Please underline difficult words.



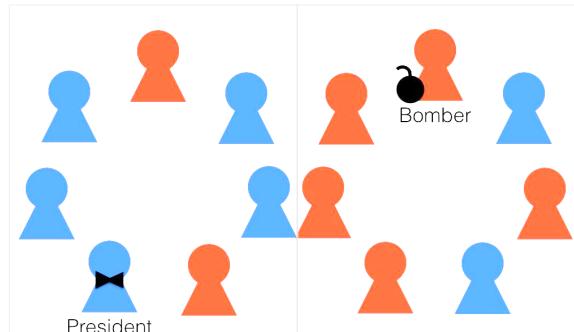
1: There are two teams: The **Red Team** and the **Blue Team**.

2: The **Blue Team** has a *President*. The **Red Team** has a *Bomber*

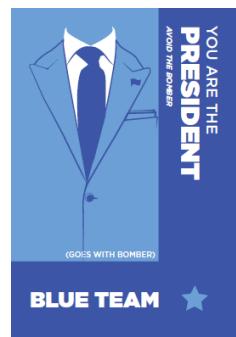
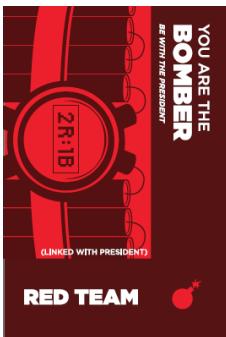
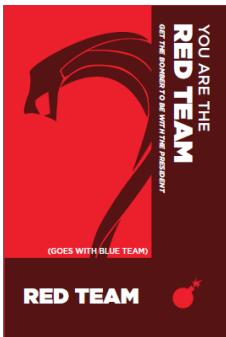
3: Players will split in two different rooms

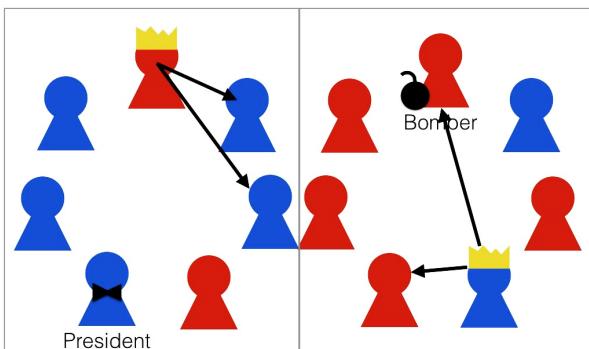
4: Players will receive a random card.

5: Players don't know other players' cards!!!



These are the cards





6: Every room has a leader.

7: Players choose the leader.

8: The game has 3 timed rounds.

9: When a round finishes, leaders choose two players.  
Those two players change rooms.

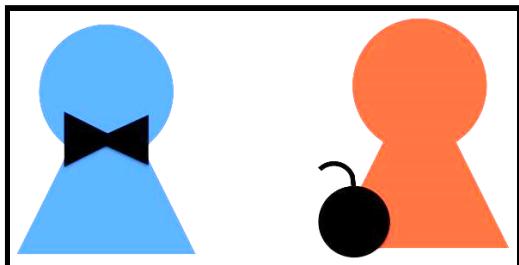


Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
3 minutes	2 minutes	1 minute

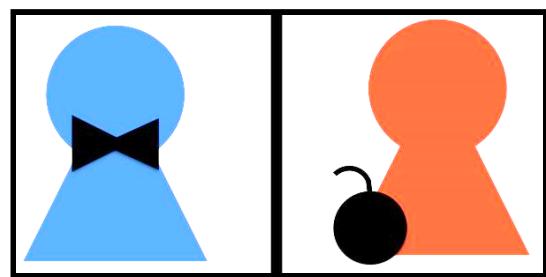
#### At the end of the third round:

If the **Red Team's Bomber** is in the same room as the **President**, then the **Red Team** wins.

If the **Red Team's Bomber** is NOT in the same room as the **President**, then the **Blue Team** wins.



RED TEAM WINS



BLUE TEAM WINS

#### 4 Important rules!!!!

1. You have to stay in your room.
2. You can't talk with the other room.
3. You can't change your cards.
4. You can show your card!

## Part 2: See a presentation of this game

Look at the presentation from Mr. Spano

## Part 3: Questions about the rules

In pairs, please answer the following 9 questions about this game

1. What are the two team colors?

---

2. What is 大統領 in English?

---

3. The *President* is a member of which team?

---

4. What color is the *Bomber*?

---

5. How many rounds are played in this game?

---

6. How does the red team win?

If \_\_\_\_\_

---

7. How does the blue team win?

If \_\_\_\_\_

---

8. What can the leader do?

---

9. What can I do with my card?

---

## Playing in English, Lesson 4

### Useful phrases!

Write what you said or heard in Japanese! Can you say it in English???

Japanese Example sentence/grammar	Example sentence/grammar
そこに行くべきです	<i>You should... [move there]</i>

**-Give this sheet to Mr. Spano-**

## English Project - Drill 1

### Two Rooms and a BOOM

Useful expressions

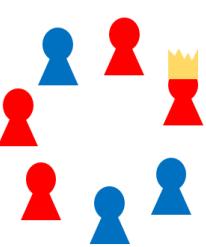
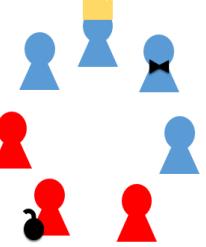


1. What color are you? / What color is your card?
2. Are you the president? / Are you the bomber?
3. Who is the president? / Who is the bomber?
4. Tell me what team you are in!
5. I'm Blue! / I'm red! / I'm the bomber! / I'm the president
6. I'm not blue/ I'm not red. / I'm not the president. / I'm not the bomber.
7. Who will go to the other room?
8. Is that true? / Really?
9. I believe you! / I don't believe you!
10. Let me see your card. / Show me your card!
11. We are in the same team!
12. He is suspicious. / He looks suspicious. / You are suspicious.
13. If you show me your card, I will show you my card.
14. Do you want to share colors?

### Appendix 3: Strategy worksheet (1 page)

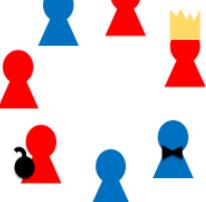
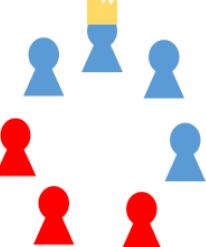
## Let's think about a **strategy!** (作戦)

### Problem 1

		INFORMATION
Room A		
Room B		
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1: You are the leader of room B.</li><li>2: You know that the bomber is in this room.</li><li>3: You know that the president is in this room.</li><li>4: It is the end of the second round.</li></ol>
		<b>Question:</b> Whom should you send to the other room?

A: \_\_\_\_\_

### Problem 2

		INFORMATION
Room A		
Room B		
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1: You are the leader of room B.</li><li>2: You know that the bomber is in the other room.</li><li>3: You know that the president is in the other room.</li><li>4: It is the end of the second round.</li></ol>
		<b>Question:</b> Whom should you send to the other room?

A: \_\_\_\_\_

Why?

A: \_\_\_\_\_

# Two rooms and a BOOM

## New Roles!!!



Last month, you voted for the students' [president](#).

Now, you will vote for the [new roles](#).

- 1) Read the roles' description.
- 2) Check the box next to the cards you like.
- 3) Next time, we will play with the new cards!

## The agents



If you like the "agents", check this box

- There are 2 agents in the game.
- One agent is in the **red team**, one agent is in the **blue team**.
- Agents can use the "**AGENT POWER**" on a player.
- If they use the "**AGENT POWER**" on a player, that player **MUST** show his card to the agent.
- An agent can use the "**AGENT POWER**" only once in each round.

## The Demon and the Angel



If you like the **Demon** and the **angel**, check this box

- There are two Demons and two Angels in the game.
- One Demon and one Angel are in the **blue team**, one team and one Angel are in the red team.
- The demons always LIE, the angels always say the truth.

## The clowns



If you like the clowns, check this box

- There are two clowns in the game. One in the **blue team** and one in the **red team**.
- The clowns MUST always smile.