



Ludic Language Pedagogy Playground

#2 (2020)

<https://www.llpjournal.org/>

Are you bigger than an Xbox?: '20 Questions' used in a class delivered via video conferencing

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Item Details

History:

Submitted: 2020/04/29

Open peer reviewed: ✓

Published: 2020/06/07

Keywords:

Collaboration

COVID-19

Creative writing

Critical thinking

GBLT

Keep It Super Simple

Parlor games

Peer editing

Practice reflection

Video conferencing

Peer reviewers:

Evan Bostelmann

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Key points

- **What is this?** This is a short description of how I have recently started using '20 Questions', a classic parlor game, in my lessons delivered through video conferencing. It is also a brief exploration of my own Game-based Language Teaching (GBLT) practice stemming from this experience.
- **Why did you make it?** As a result of the COVID-19 social distancing measures, my class has been moved online. This is an example of how I have adapted my activities and teaching to fit the new context and constraints. It is also an example of GBLT using a simple game. As the questions that this experience raised were not so simple, I also made this piece to help me reflect on and explore my own GBLT practice.
- **Who is it for?** This is for teachers using video conferencing in their classes, especially with lower to lower-intermediate level students. This activity can be used as a simple warm up, a main class activity, and expanded to include collaboration, peer editing, creative writing, projects, and critical thinking activities (the expanded activities are highly recommended). The GBLT reflective practice questions are for all GBLT teachers, but *especially me!* They may help me/us avoid and escape GBLT-pitfalls.

Tweet synopsis

Using '20 Questions' in your lessons delivered via video conferencing can be a fun and effective way of supporting student spelling, writing, grammar awareness, collaboration, creative writing, and critical thinking. It may also help you to reflect on your own GBLT practice.

View at the LLP Playground:

<https://www.llpjournal.org/2020/06/07/dm-jones-20questions-class-video-conferencing>

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had a significant impact on schools, teaching, and learning (Viner et al., 2020). My school is no exception. Before the pandemic, I delivered my lessons to my lower to lower-intermediate level students in a physical classroom and I frequently used physical copies of tabletop games in my lessons. Now that my regular in-person classes have been moved online, I have had to adapt to delivering synchronous lessons using video conferencing. For the most part, I was able to make the shift without any major issues. That is, I was able to organize some very basic classes and deliver lessons to my students. However, this change in mode of lesson delivery presented some unique challenges and opportunities.

Though I often use tabletop games, I was a bit concerned about how I would implement game-based language teaching (GBLT) while using video conferencing. The shift to online teaching was quite sudden, so I found myself scrambling to adjust my lessons, my materials, and my teaching. As I was under time pressure and I was most comfortable with tabletop games, I decided to 'stick with what I know'. I selected a tabletop game with which I was already familiar and felt could be implemented with only a few modifications using the physical copy. I decided against using a digital tabletop gaming platform or digital game at this early stage as I was not sure how to implement it in class and best guide my students. The cautious approach seemed prudent given all of the sudden changes related to the online classes. However, using digital tabletop gaming platforms and digital games is something I would like to try in the future. The physical tabletop game that I had in mind is called Spyfall (Ushan, 2014). Spyfall is a social deduction conversation-based game where players take turns asking and answering questions to either uncover a spy or discover a secret location. It can be played by three to seven people and a regular game takes between ten and twenty minutes. It is fun and I thought my students would find the language component useful. I had noticed that my students have difficulty with some basic question structures, so this game would provide a space to practice some of these questions. Even before the pandemic, I had decided to use this game in my future classes for the reasons just mentioned. However, I also realized that my students would benefit from some scaffolding activities before they would be ready to play Spyfall. Knowing this, I identified some grammar and language targets (yes-no questions, object questions, subject questions, location vocabulary, deception-related language skills, etc.). I started introducing these to the students, and began thinking of supplemental skill-building and practice activities.

One of the practice activities that I decided to use was the game '20 Questions' ('Twenty Questions', n.d.). In '20 Questions', the 'answerer' secretly selects a word and the 'questioners' take turns asking questions in an effort to work together to correctly identify the secret word. Students ask yes-no questions to narrow down the possibilities. If the questioners can correctly guess the object that the 'answerer' selected in twenty questions or fewer, the 'questioners' win. If they can't guess the secret word in time, the 'answerer' wins. I realized that this game provided a simple and fun way for the students to practice yes-no questions and use deductive reasoning. Sure, it is a simple game, but that makes it a nice stepping-stone for the students.

Very quickly after implementing '20 Questions', I was impressed by the fact that by sharing a screen during video conferencing we could work on spelling, writing, listening, and reading while we played. It worked really well and it suddenly started to dawn on me that the implementation of this simple game was more than just a stepping-stone. This was a powerful teaching opportunity for supporting my students. Actually, in some ways it was more powerful and a better fit for my students than my original plan of action! I called an audible and began exploring ways to squeeze more out of this serendipitous teaching opportunity. In the following sections I will introduce how I used '20 Questions' in my teaching. This is presented according to the different stages of my teaching practice through and around the game as 'levels' (generally alluding to video game levels).

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2. '20 Questions' Level 1

How do I first implement the game of '20 Questions' in my video conferencing classroom? I begin by modeling the activity expectations as the game's first 'answerer'. I do this by sharing my screen with the class and displaying a document where I can track their questions, type them up for all to see, and then type my responses. I type and display the questions that the students ask and give guided feedback about grammatical issues. Particular attention is given to the yes-no question structures that were previously taught, studied, and practiced. However, general feedback on spelling, other grammar, and question quality is also provided. Frequently, this is done on the spot by highlighting the text and inviting students to identify potential issues, suggest modifications, and/or support their suggestions. I also provide some limited pronunciation and listening feedback as needed. When the game comes to a conclusion, I save the document and name it. The students watch me perform this task on screen, and this helps to ensure they understand how to do this. There are varying degrees of digital literacy in my class, so this is an important step for ensuring that all students can engage in the activities that come later in the lesson. I then invite the students to think of a secret word of their own. There is something very engaging about this game that resonates with the students. They are really quite resourceful, and I am happy to report that they are usually able to hit the bullseye and guess my secret word before we reach twenty questions. In general, I try to recycle previously studied vocabulary, discussion content, or concepts when selecting my secret words. This adds a review element and it is common for students to flip through their notes when trying to narrow down the secret word. Rarely have they looked this excited when going through their notes!

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3. '20 Questions' Level 2

Next, I ask one of the students to become the new 'answerer'. This student shares her screen with the class and begins typing the questions asked by the other students as well as typing her own answers. I do not provide as much writing feedback during this portion of the activity, though the students provide significant feedback to each other! My more 'hands-off' role in this section of the lesson evolved as I noticed the benefits stemming from student collaboration, agency, and interaction. I mostly limit my feedback here to speaking, listening, and comprehension. Having said that, I do provide some specific text-based feedback when significant breakdowns occur. I have found this student-led collaboration to be a very rewarding, motivating, and interesting part of the lesson. The students appear to really delight in taking on the role of the 'answerer' and being in the driver's seat! I think they also enjoy the creative elements of the game (coming up with good questions, figuring out the secret word, and selecting interesting secret words). Additionally, having them type the questions and answers has added an authentic or semi-authentic space (or bubble within the class?) for writing output and feedback to occur (Poole, 2020) nested within the game space. Finally, I absolutely love the peer support and interaction that goes on during this section of the lesson. Students frequently debate specific spelling or grammar points and negotiate meaning together. As much as possible, I let them come to their own resolutions at this stage and I believe this has improved their confidence and language understanding. These amazing

them to identify the object. Fourth is a critical thinking and reflection task. The students must list three pros and three cons about the '20 Questions' activity. I explain that this could be about learning English or any other connection they care to make. It is my hope that this encourages the students to think about the value and benefits of this activity and also gives them an opportunity to highlight concerns that they may have. The feedback has been quite positive and thoughtful. Overall, I believe that the students appreciate having a voice through this activity. Finally, the students send the bolded and highlighted document back to the student who typed it up. Students are instructed to read the feedback that they have been given on their own document and discuss it with the instructor and other students as needed. I also check the corrections and troubleshoot potential problems. The homework is complete once the students have given the teacher a copy of the **bolded** and **highlighted** document and a copy of the homework handout with the third and fourth sections completed.

5. '20 Questions' Level 4

My use of '20 Questions' in my classroom is still developing. I am still grappling with how it fits with my practice and my lessons. Hell, I am still grappling with what my practice is and how it fits within the affordances and constraints of my context. Moreover, the use of '20 Questions' in my teaching has also sparked both reflection on and exploration of how I am teaching. Currently, I am considering various additional activities and tasks for my future classes. There are many different activities which can be used before, during, and after games to deepen the learning opportunities (deHaan, 2020). Some tweaks and shifts that I am looking at are:

- having the students identify subjects and/or verbs when they are doing the peer editing,
- having pairs work in break-out rooms during the peer editing,
- doing more student-led formal analysis of the edited texts as a class (or possibly as an asynchronous activity),
- doing more teacher-led formal analysis of the edited texts as a class (or possibly as an asynchronous activity),
- having students complete a recorded speaking activity based on a gameplay transcript (incorporating a speaking and pronunciation element),
- having students complete a listening activity based on individual student recordings of a gameplay transcript,
- having students give feedback on teacher-modified game texts,
- having students analyze the video closed captioning session script,
- having students watch and listen to recorded gameplay (themselves, other students, and/or native English speakers),
- having each student play '20 Questions' via email correspondence (with me or with other students),
- asking students to predict which questions and question strategies will efficiently uncover their secret word and why,
- having students write session reports with description and analysis,
- having students compile a 'best of book' of 'Twenty Questions' game transcripts with the 'secret words' listed in an index (this could be shared with friends and family or exchanged with other classes),
- having students give a report or 'play-by-play' analysis on a recorded game of '20 Questions',
- or having students repurpose the generated text for other creative writing tasks.

I have also thought about doing a version of this activity along the lines of the game show 'I've Got a Secret' ('I've Got a Secret', n.d.) or Lateral Thinking Puzzles to expand the range and types of questions that the students work with. This would allow the students to practice using the fuller range of question types I had originally intended. Finally, I have recently been thinking about inviting my students to research, suggest, and teach a parlor game of their own to the class. Maybe they will open my eyes to some new teaching and learning opportunities. There are many other directions in which I could take the teaching and learning. As I try to find a way forward, I think I should pay attention to the direct and indirect feedback that I am getting from the students. This will perhaps highlight specific value in particular approaches, implementations, and learning opportunities. However, I also need to think more

deeply about my teaching as a coordinated effort. What am I trying to do in my practice and in my classroom and why? Guiding my choices with these questions will help to focus my teaching.

What I want to avoid is treating games as an afterthought or random element in my classroom. I need to use and explore them in terms of the teaching and learning opportunities they provide to my students. How can I be mindful and purposeful in my GBLT practice, and more alert to the GBLT pitfalls before me? Having fallen into, and crawled out of, a few pits, I should already know the valuable role that critical questions can play in practice development and refinement (Jones, 2020). In this spirit, here are the 'GBLT-20 Questions' that I will try to continue asking myself as I go forward:

1. Am I selecting games for my students *mainly* because I like these games??!
2. Am I taking the time to consider the needs and goals of my students to inform game selection and support activity/task options?
3. Am I *throwing together* scaffolding activities and worksheets aimed simply at helping my students play a game??!
4. Am I carefully thinking about what the language needs and goals of my students are and supporting them with scaffolding, feedback, and reflection opportunities?
5. Am I controlling everything in the class and *micromanaging* things to make sure they go 'smoothly'??!
6. Am I giving the students enough independence, freedom, and time to develop their confidence and teach me new possibilities along the way?
7. Am I *cramming* my students ~~into an iron maiden~~ *into my lesson plan*??!
8. Am I providing opportunities and challenges for my students to succeed and fail in a low-stakes, goal-oriented, and supportive environment?
9. Am I stubbornly doing things only one way and am I *resistant to any changes* to that routine??!
10. Am I open to exploring new ways of doing things, adapting, and being alert to the teaching and learning possibilities that may appear in, and after, 'the moment'?
11. Am I *reducing and constraining* the learning outcomes to elements of language??!
12. Am I finding ways to promote general flourishing and growth opportunities for students by connecting to learning and topics 'outside' of language learning?
13. Am I *giving orders* and *seeking compliance*??!
14. Am I providing guidance, while also giving the students a voice, platform, diverse roles, and stake in the teaching and learning?
15. Am I looking at my constraints and *seeing only what I can't do*??!
16. Am I playing within the space I have and finding ways to unlock the next level?
17. Am I *mindlessly racing* through a maze of neverending hoops??!
18. Am I reflecting on my 'practice'; savouring successes, and learning from challenges?
19. Am I *focused on* the flash, the game hype, and the *externals*??!
20. Am I bigger than an Xbox by being focused on teaching and learning?

For me, 'GBLT-20 Questions', as a practice reflection effort (Watanabe, 2017), needs to be a never-ending 'game'. I hope to continue playing it with myself and also with the broader community of GBLT practitioners. Afterall, as I mentioned previously, I am rather prone to falling into pits. 'Pits' refers to breakdowns or missteps in my teaching practice. These can be quite discouraging, though they also present significant learning opportunities. Taking you on a short pit-tour of my own practice, here are two of my early GBLT pitfalls. The first pit-iful example is when I made my own very boring and very bad 'educational games'. This led to some rather uninspiring lessons and learning experiences. The second pit-erific example that comes to mind is when I used a game without pre-game scaffolding activities and was shocked to find that the students had difficulty producing the language needed to play the game. Fortunately, I reflected on this problematic teaching and learning experience and avoided doing this again. There were more pits in my practice, but hopefully this short pit-tour will suffice. Hopefully, my GBLT practice questions will continue to improve over time, I will fall into fewer pits, the GBLT community will throw me a rescue rope or two, and I will discover the secrets of my own unfolding practice.

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6. Final Thoughts

This game has been a wonderful addition to my class, my teaching repertoire, and practice. I have used '20 Questions' numerous times now in my classroom, with some slight modifications. It continues to provide fruitful, dynamic, and fun learning opportunities. I have found it particularly useful to 'slow things down' in my lessons (York, 2020) and avoid treating the game as something disconnected from my broader teaching goals or randomly given to the students simply as a treat. To unpack this a bit more, one-off or isolated game implementations are not wrong, however, this kind of utilization alone doesn't align with my broader view of how I want to use games in my teaching. Moreover, this less robust type of utilization has fewer pedagogical benefits and affordances when compared to more robust approaches (Jones 2020b). If I am using games based on a claim to the long list of frequently cited game-based language teaching affordances, I really need to stop to consider how many of those pedagogical affordances are actually coming through in my teaching and my classroom. As a teacher and researcher who believes in the power of GBLT, it is crucial that I am being honest with myself about my own practice, intentional and focused in my choices, and reflective on the results and outcomes.

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This experience has taught me to increase my attention to what is bringing value to my students. In this case, the value wasn't found in a game/gaming system with high production values or esteem within the gaming hobby. It was found in the way a very simple game fit with the needs of the learners and supported teaching and learning opportunities. I think there are a number of things that contributed to the success of this experience with '20 Questions.' First, the language used in the game suited the language abilities and the needs of the students. Second, the manner of implementation presented opportunities for rich peer collaboration, feedback on writing, and student autonomy. Third, I was able to extend learning to numerous post-game activities and a broad range of learning outcomes. Fourth, the students enjoyed the game and understood how the activities supported and connected to learning. Finally, I approached the teaching experience with curiosity, flexibility, openness, and a spirit of experimentation. This allowed me to react to the feedback I got during the lessons and make iterative adjustments. The simplicity of the game itself may have helped me to focus more directly on student learning rather than the game and the gameplay.

On a final note regarding teaching, I would like to invite you to please share any 'video conferencing-friendly' GBLT activities, games, resources, suggestions, and approaches. I am keen to find more opportunities like this and I suspect a lot of teachers would find support and guidance in the area quite helpful during these strange times. This could include single-class and multi-class implementation frameworks, support materials, game suggestions, and technical/logistical suggestions. Support for both non-specialist and specialist GBLT practitioners is welcome.

This experience has taught me to increase my attention to what is bringing value to my students and how. In this case, value wasn't brought by a game/gaming system with high production values or esteem within the gaming hobby.

I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the LLP peer reviewers and contributors. Their feedback significantly improved this playground piece and helped me deepen my understanding of my own practice. They offered many fantastic and insightful comments and suggestions. Here are just a few of the highlights. Frederick Poole provided expertise and suggestions related to authenticity in the classroom, GBLT curriculum opportunities stemming from the '20 Questions' experience described, and online lesson design wisdom. Niall McFadyen drew my attention to the need for better framing of specific elements in this paper's structure and more precise discussion of my teaching itself. Evan Bostelmann made suggestions about some excellent teaching cycle additions and highlighted a few specific areas of the article that needed rewriting (de-cringing). Finally, Jonathan deHaan provided acknowledgement of specific strengths in the initial draft and areas which required further unpacking and revision. All of this feedback helped me immensely. Finally, thank you to all LLP community members (readers, listeners, followers, contributors, reviewers, and editors). This is a truly wonderful GBLT community of teachers and researchers.



"Ooo-wee! This playground piece raises way more than just twenty questions."

The drawing above was created by my lovely wife Lara. I asked her if she might be willing to make a GBLT-inspired version of this character. She obliged, and I am happy to share the result of her effort in my LLP playground item. Thank you Lara! The character, Mr. Poopybutthole, is from the show Rick and Morty. He is well-known for his upbeat attitude, his zany antics, and for breaking the fourth wall by speaking directly to the audience. Images of a different character, Rick C-137, from the same show were used to obscure the faces of my students in the picture of them playing '20 Questions' in class.

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