Fitting the Pieces together 🧩: People, Stories, and Games

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Short summary: This is a reflective snapshot, or a cross-sectional view, of one of my courses. I will discuss how I am moving towards incorporating meaningful and relevant ludic practices into my curriculum, fitting together learners' interests, needs, and my own passion for stories into the context of my institutional requirements.

Slides:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1LkpaTXJMbrY7XRHmwn9qtXlnS85Gg
sE5ZpcswUtrVyo/edit?usp=sharing

Your constraints plus the who and what of your teaching context

Context (Where do you work? What kind of institution? What is your role? etc.)	I teach mandatory first year English conversation courses. I have four sections of the course, that is four different groups of students meeting at different times but following the same curriculum. It is a national university and I am a part-time lecturer.
Students (goals, wants, needs, knowledge, skills, hobbies, hates, worries)	Students differ tremendously, mostly based on department, but are mostly similar in terms of demographic: 18-19 year old Japanese students matriculating through Japanese education. Their levels are not assessed before the course, but based on personal observation they run the gamut from false-beginners (those who have studied for a considerable length of time but display beginner level proficiency) to near native speakers of English, from hating English and everything surrounding it to being deeply engaged in English personally, academically, and prospectively for their careers.
How much freedom do you have? (What can you do? What can't you do? Why? Who do you need to ask? What will they say?)	I have great freedom in terms of curriculum, methods, and materials. I will be reprimanded if I am too lenient in grading, and I am required to use an in-house small-group conversation grading rubric for the final exam.
Language (goals) (the goals of your course or curriculum, what you must teach, what you want to teach, what students need to know, etc.)	I try to align the goals with the grading rubric (see Table 1) so as to give the students as much opportunity to score highly as possible on its extremely strict absolute scale. I want to teach how to use English to express themselves and their experiences and to connect with society both locally and globally. ● Develop communication skills and confidence ● Develop autonomous and collaborative language learning skills ● Connect with their classmates

	● Connect with other English users by sharing their interests through English on the internet

Table 1 Grading Rubric (originally adapted from Nunn, 2000)

Scoring Area	Score	Descriptors
Keep Going	0-1	Not classifiable.
	2-3	Has (almost) no ability to keep a conversation going. Without constant help, the conversation is always likely to break down.
	4-5	Rarely self selects, but responds minimally to other speakers and sometimes supports their contributions. Negotiates rarely and/or only with a very limited repertoire. Communication sometimes breaks down without support.
	6-7	Responds fully when nominated, supports other speakers and sometimes self-selects. Has an adequate repertoire for negotiation. Communication almost never breaks down.
	8-9	Is able to take initiatives, self-selecting and negotiating whenever necessary drawing on a wide repertoire of expressions and techniques. Helps other participants to join in and interrupts politely when appropriate.
	10	Native speaker (or near native speaker) ability to manage a conversation in English.
Content	0-1	Not classifiable.
	2-3	Has almost no ability to communicate even basic information such as age, price, etc.
	4-5	Can only communicate the most basic information, and cannot really express ideas or feelings on anything but the most basic everyday topics.
	6-7	Can communicate information on a reasonable range of topics and can express opinions, feelings and ideas to a certain degree on a more limited range of topics.
	8-9	Has a sound ability to communicate information, and express feelings, opinions, and ideas on a variety of topics.
	10	Native speaker (or near native speaker) ability to contribute ideas, opinions and information in English.
Intelligibility: Pronunciation	0-1	Not classifiable.
	2-3	The speaker is almost impossible to understand.
	4-5	Inadequate use of prominence and poor pronunciation of individual sounds makes the speaker very difficult to follow without compensation.
	6-7	A reasonable pronunciation of individual sounds; some attempt is made to make important syllables prominent. The message is intelligible, although there are occasional lapses.
	8-9	Good use of prominence and accurate pronunciation of individual sounds makes the speaker easy to follow. Intelligibility is almost never impeded by wrong sounds, insufficient or misplaced prominence.

	10	Native speaker (or near native speaker) proficiency in English pronunciation.
Intelligibility: Grammar and Vocabulary	0-1	Not classifiable.
	2-3	Poor structure and/or inadequate and inappropriate use of vocabulary make it (almost) impossible to understand.
	4-5	Barely adequate use of structure and limited vocabulary make it difficult to follow without compensation.
	6-7	Vocabulary and structure are normally adequate for the task. Fairly frequent errors do not seriously impede comprehension.
	8-9	Good use of structure and vocabulary make the speaker easy to understand. Only a few errors which do not impede comprehension at all.
	10	Native speaker (or near native speaker) command of English grammar and vocabulary.

How do you create SPACE in the methods, materials and mediation of your teaching and learning playground?

	Methods 💯Assessment, 📋Curriculum, 💦Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)	Materials 🖥️Digital shared docs, 🛠️Learner-made, ✅Learner-chosen	Mediation 🔪Flexible language, 🤔Self-assessment, 👥Peer-feedback,
Safe: learning from failure, inclusive, competence, supportive	◎ Positive assessment No 減点 (deducted points) only 加点 (added points) ◎ Cyclical syllabus The same process repeated 3 times, gradually introducing scoring areas of the grading rubric used in the final exam (Table 1).	○ Free, digital learning materials Accessibility options like high contrast, magnification, and screen-reading	◎ Flexible language policy My department pushes an all English approach, but I adopt a flexible approach based on the needs and abilities of each cohort.
Participation: society, community, choice, self-direction, culture	◎ Participation-based assessment Coming, talking, and listening counts for their grade.	○ Shared docs For brainstorming & reporting ○ Anonymous peer feedback through Google forms	◎ Peer interaction and feedback Starting with an awareness survey and an intervention following Sato (2013)

Agency: autonomy, freedom, dialogue, interaction	○ Free(ish) conversation At the start of most lessons: general guiding topic, followed by reflection	◎ Learner-made materials Planetes (Caviglia and Zamboni, 2024): maps, culture, personas	and Sato and Ballinger (2012) ◎ Self assessment Based on the same scoring criteria I use for summative assessment (Table 1)
Critical: challenge, reflective, interdisciplinary, purposeful	◎ TBLT inspired Task sequence includes pre-task planning, text mining, and post-task reflection	◎ Audio recordings Reflect on own unscripted, improvised speaking	◎ Attention and awareness raising Teacher feedback followed by group feedback discussion/consultations
Experiences: relatedness, identity, relevant, meaningful	○ Autobiographical curriculum content Sharing own experiences, Discussing own interests, Planning own future	○ Youtube, etc. as input Bringing student interests into discussion through student choice of Youtube video as homework.	○ Role model I share my own language learning experience (En->Jp)
Key: ◎ Major factor in SPACE for play in learning and teaching ○ Minor factor in SPACE for play in learning and teaching			

The teaching and learning, as high definition as you can share:

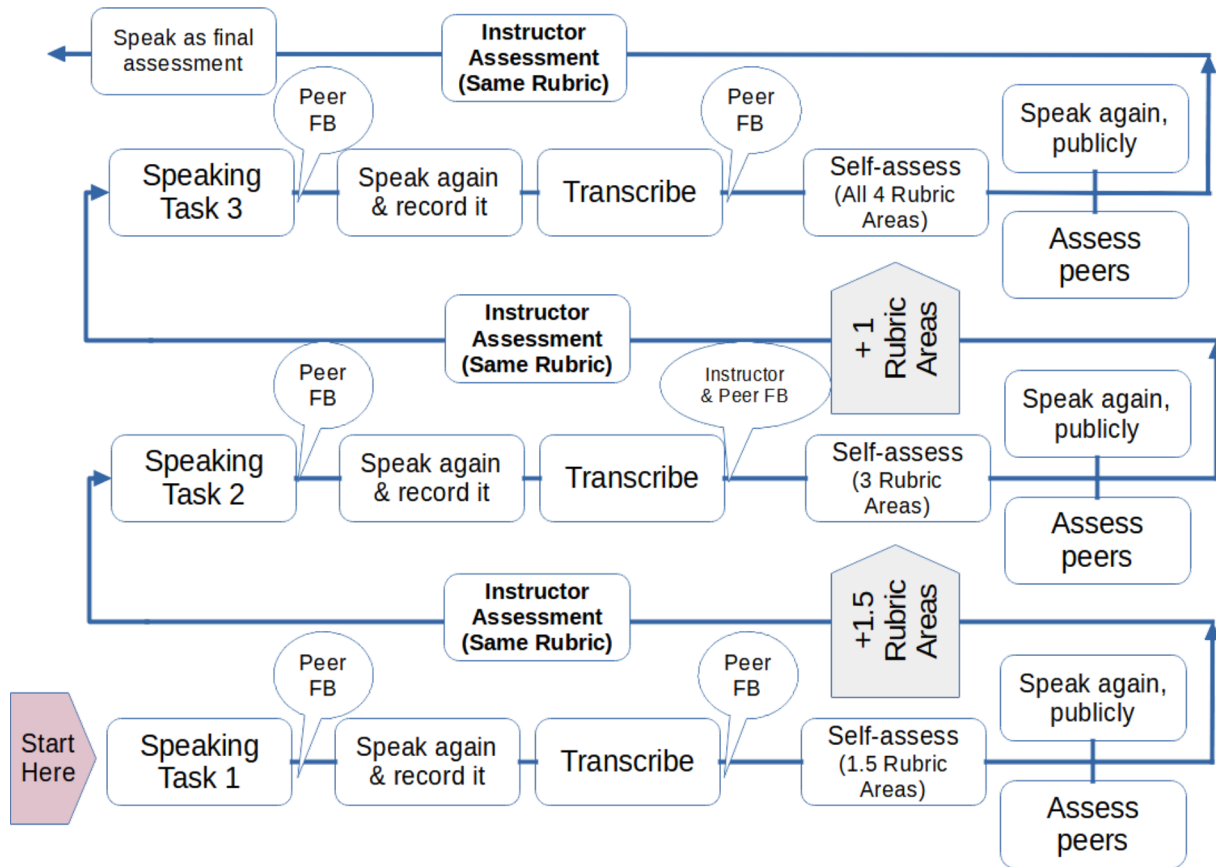Figure 1 Primary Task Cycle (adapted from Johnson, 2025)

Table 2 English Conversation II Course Outline

Course Sections	English Conversation II - Post Elementary (3 sections)	English Conversation II - Lower Intermediate (1 Section)
Unit 1	Talking about people and places around you	
Lesson 1	Orientation	
Lesson 2	Self-introductions and peer feedback	
Lesson 3	Spyfall	
Lesson 4	Now and then & Self-assessment	
Lesson 5	Self-introduction Performance Graded using the Intelligibility: Grammar and Vocabulary and the information component of the Content area (see Table 1).	

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Unit 2	Talking about the past, experiences, and stories	
Lesson 6	Travel Stories	
Lesson 7	Have you ever & Story Structure	
Lesson 8	Collaborative Storytelling with Rory's Story Cubes and similar games	Collaborative Storytelling with Planetes
Lesson 9	Storywork and Retelling	Planetes Phase 2 and 3
Lesson 10	Storytelling Performance Graded using the Intelligibility: Grammar and Vocabulary, Intelligibility: Pronunciation, and Content areas.	
Unit 3	Talking about the future, plans, and hopes	
Lesson 11	Plan a vacation	
Lesson 12	Ideal life in 15 years	
Lesson 13	Talk show Performance Graded using all four areas of the grading rubric.	
Lesson 14	Final Exam preparation Graded using all four areas of the grading rubric.	
Final Exam Week 1		
Final Exam Week 2		

What we do (teaching and learning)

I. Course Content / Tasks
The general course outline is given above in Table 2 showing similarities and differences between the different sections of the course. In terms of language content, the three unit-initial speaking tasks represent the topical focus well:
Speaking Task 1 was to introduce oneself.
Speaking Task 2 was to share a personal experience.
Speaking Task 3 was to discuss future plans.

The speaking tasks were initially framed as the topic of a ten minute group conversation at the beginning of the first class of each unit, to elicit the students ability to speak on these topics as is, following a TBLT approach. They were prefaced by an attendance question used to simultaneously check attendance and prime students' thinking toward the following speaking task. For example, the attendance question for the first lesson of Unit 2 was, "Where did you go for your school trips?". Immediately following this, the students were directed to begin Speaking Task 2, as described in the lesson materials extract below:
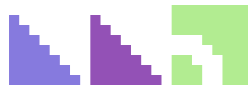
Materials Extract 1 Speaking Task 1 Written Instructions

10 minute chat 🗣️
Make groups with new friends 👫
Theme: Talk about your school trips.
Try to <u>keep talking</u> for ten minutes ⏱️
Remember to:
- 👣 Ask <u>follow-up questions</u>.
- 🤔 Ask <u>for clarification</u>, if you don't understand.

A major part of the course design was also on developing positive attitudes and behaviors conducive to <u>constructive peer interaction</u> and feedback. This was introduced beginning from the first orientation lesson using a survey adapted from Brown's (2007) learning styles checklist, followed by class discussion about the results and then through instruction and reflection throughout the course.

II. Games Used
Three analog games were incorporated across the four sections of the course, the latter two were differentiated by language level: Spyfall (Ushan, 2015), Planétes (Caviglia and Zamboni, 2024) with lower-intermediate section, and Rory's Story Cubes (O'Connor, 2005) with post-elementary sections.

a. Spyfall (See representative learner reflections <u>below</u>)

Spyfall was integrated into the task cycle following Speaking Task 1 and filled <u>one 90 minute lesson</u> (Lesson 3 in Table 2 above). The game encouraged the use of various question forms useful for asking follow-up questions or requesting clarification. The game participants used English to play the game and experience the usefulness of different questions, but they also partnered with a classmate who took an observational role. By pairing players with these peer monitors who focused entirely on their partner's language use, collaborative peer-feedback behaviors were also encouraged in the relatively non-threatening context of a game. The directions given to the players in both roles are shown in Materials Extract 2 below. The seating arrangement of the activity was very similar to a closed fishbowl discussion format (for more in depth exploration of this format in EFL see Tsai, 2025), where the primary participants are seated facing each other in the center and each peer monitor is seated behind their partner, both facing inwards.

Materials Extract 2 Spyfall Learning Activity Instructions

Play and Learn
Playing a game in English can be hard! 😅
So, we will work in pairs 👫
One person is the player 🕺
The other is the observer 👀

The player will
- 👾 play the game
- 🔤 use as much English as they can

The observer will:
- 👂Listen to their partner's English.
- 👂Listen to how the other players react to their partner's English
- ✏️Write down what their partner said.
- ✏️Write notes, thoughts, and feedback on their partner's English vocabulary and expressions.

Transcription (My partner said ~)	Notes, thoughts, feedback
(empty rows redacted)	

After the round you will give feedback to your partner and your group 🤔

After the first round, the player and observer switch roles 👊👉

Then play again 🔄

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b. Storytelling games

My driving interest in language and linguistics is oral narrative. I have incorporated interventions for eliciting and scaffolding students' sharing of their personal experiences (discussed in some detail in Johnson, 2025), but I have also been exploring the usefulness and ways of implementing creative oral storytelling in the language classroom. Storytelling games provide structure, inspiration, and constraints for such tasks, however many storytelling games are much too difficult (e.g. Once Upon a Time), complicated (e.g. Dungeons and Dragons and similar roleplaying games), or time-consuming (see previous example) to incorporate within a 14 week university language course. Rory's Story Cubes is simple enough that it can be implemented with little modification and Planétes was developed specifically with this context in mind.

III. Playing in my space

The exploration of the games in this presentation is a manifestation of my own play as a researcher-practitioner using the SPACE I have in my teaching context to play and explore. Since I have very few constraints (just the grading rubric, potential for grading review, and the desire to do a decent job) my teaching is very exploratory. Furthermore, since I teach four sections of the same course I also have many opportunities to tweak things in a small way and try again. I feel rewarded when my students give me explicit positive feedback, but also when I see learning happening and students making connections, both with each other and the content of the course.

I have only recently, since beginning my own graduate studies in TESOL in 2023, taken the research side of things seriously. Realizing that games provide a fertile ground for research has encouraged me to use them in a more calculated way that can be accounted for, as I have tried to do here. This perspective has thus given me more tools to play with in my context.

The results documented here are from my first experimentation with using each of these games. I will thus share my critical reflections and considerations for future iterations.

What is the result (learning/outcomes/actions)

The following data was gathered from the transcriptions, self-assessments in Figure 1 above as well as student reflections on their learning following particular activities and at the end of each the three units (more or less corresponding to each speaking task and what followed it on each row of Figure 1). This study was done during a larger and broader research project in which I used reflexive thematic analysis to investigate numerous aspects of my course. As an inductive study, the following data were not found to be relevant to the broader study, and the resultant themes from the reflexive thematic analysis are not relevant to the current paper. This research context was provided at the request of the reviewers, but will not be discussed in greater detail.

IIa. Spyfall Worksheets - Reflection Questions

Below I have attempted to illustrate the learning situation around the game with students' answers to the reflection questions. The answers are single data points but illustrate common or salient strands identified in the data and labeled with analytic codes, representing the data at an intermediate level of abstraction. The codes are playfully rendered below as hashtags, as one might see in microblogging.

1 How do you feel about your teamwork with your partner and your group?

"We built a good relationship. I was able to remember the name." #RelationshipFocus

"Our team was cooperative, but we were defeated by the spy." #GameOrientation

"I think good teamwork, because when I can't come up with ideas, she teaches me something." #CooperationOrientation

"I can remember what I said in the game by seeing sentences written by my partner." #EnablingReflection

"It is difficult for me to communicate with my group. I had difficulty hearing the English my partner was speaking." #Communication Difficulty

> How do you feel about your teamwork with your partner and your group?
>
> "I can remember what I said in the game by seeing sentences written by my partner." #EnablingReflection

2 Did your partner notice some mistakes in your English that you didn't?

"No" #No but also "Yes" #YES!

"Yes, and he was pointed out that I couldn't speak English the way I wanted. Also, he kindly pointed out the mistake." #KindFeedback
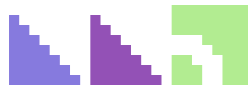
"Yes. I answered 'I want to dancing', but my partner told me You should better use 'dance'" #SpecificCorrectiveFeedback

"I didn't make any mistakes." #RemarkableConfidence

"I didn't notice. I can't keep up with the English" #MaybeDidNotUnderstandTheQuestion

3 Did you learn any useful or interesting English words or expressions? If so, please share.

"No" #No but also "Yes" #YES!

"If the question is a "yes" or "No" answer, we won't know you're a spy. My partner asked everyone What questions and they found out I was a spy. These are useful only in this game." #GameStrategyXLanguageFocus

"Submarine means 'sennsuikann'." #Lexis

"Yes, I did. I learned phrase 'I go there opening time'." #Woops

"To paraphrase difficult wards to easy wards." #CommunicationStrategy

"Yes, I did. I learned 'Maybe yes'. This word can hide my true thinking." #OMGWhatHaveITaughtThem

IIb. Storytelling Game Outcomes

Planétes ([Day 1 Worksheet](), [Day 2 Worksheet]())

In summary of learners' reflections gathered at the end of the 2nd unit (the row beginning with speaking task 2 in Figure 1), it afforded them:
1. A pleasurable creative outlet combining art and language,
2. Pride in their collective creations,
3. Simulated (inter)cultural exchange,
4. Opportunity to express their opinions

Critical reflections on playing with Planétes

Major hurdles were
1. Explaining the game rules succinctly and effectively (See my DeepL translation dump in Day 1?).
2. The game was intended to fit within a 60 minute lesson, but required two 90 minute lessons to complete.
3. 1 and 2 were largely a result of insufficient instructor preparation!

Next iteration will:
1. Use graphic visualizers (as I did with adapting [James York's Spyfall instructions]()) for teaching the rules (also see Day 2 worksheet, where I was more prepared).
2. Create more opportunities for repetition and focus on form through re-telling the tales of travel and development (i.e. expanding Phase 3 of the game).

Rory's Story Cubes (Lesson Worksheet)

Example with Rory's Story Cubes Voyages and transcripts of oral telling

Collaboratively Created Story (11:28)	Member A's Retelling (?)	Member B's Retelling (1:31)
Once upon a time there was a boy who was brave. (@0:33) He wanted to be a king. (@10:10) He ate rice to get power. (@2:11) First he climbed a dangerous mountain and he found a power up mushroom. (@7:03) He ate a power up mushroom and got a scoop. (@7:20) He found the King Octpath. (@4:48) The king octopus's weak point is light. (@8:20) He shines a light on the king octopus. (@8:52) The king octopus died. (@8:58) He became a king. (@9:00) Happily ever after. (@9:10)	Once upon a time, there was a boy who was brave. So he wanted to be a king. So he ate rice to get a power. He climbed the dangerous mountain. In there, he found a power up mushroom and ate it. So he get a scoop. So he found king octopath in the dangerous sea. So king octopath's weak point is light. So boy shine a light to king octopath. King octopath died. Happily ever after.	Once upon a time there was a boy who was brave. He wanted to be a king. He ate rice to get power. First he climbed a dangerous mountain and he found power up mushroom. He ate power up mushroom and got a scoop. He found the king octopath in the dangerous sea. King octopath dislike light. Brave boy shine light. So king octopath is died. He became king. ___

Member C's Retelling (1:42)	Member D's Retelling (1:22)	Notes
Once upon a time.there was a brave boy. He want to be a king. He ate rice to get power. First he climbed a dangerous mountain and he found a power up mushroom.	Once upon a time, there was a boy who was a brave. He wanted to be a king. So he ate a rice to got power. First, he climbed a dangerous mountain and he found a power	- The dice are both inspiration and constraint. They both encourage and slow down the crafting of the story. The "power up mushroom" was a boost for them, but the sunrise (finally "light") was a big

He ate a power up mushroom and got a scoop. He found the King Octpath. It live in the sea. King octpath's weak point is a light. so he shine a light. Octpath died. He became a king. ___	up mushroom. He ate a power up mushroom and he got a scoop. He found the king octopus in the dangerous sea. The king octopus's week point is a light. So, he shiny a light to the king octopus. The king octopus died. He became a king! Happily ever after.	challenge. They took my idea for flexible interpretation of the images. - Decided to take a more translational/translanguaging approach around 3:30 - Retellings are remarkably similar, despite not writing the story down. Differences shown in bold and <u>underline</u>.

Critical reflections on playing with Rory's Story Cubes

Challenges to overcome
1. The creative process was hard to document with the recording set-up used (student smartphones in a noisy class).
2. Language errors in the group product were almost systematically reproduced in individual retellings.

Next iteration will:
1. Use multi-device synchronous recording via Teams video chat to produce a single recording with mics (embedded in smartphones or PCs) local to each group member.
2. Ensure a language focus or focus on form step between group product and individual retelling (This was planned but cut due to time constraints). The activity was primarily meaning focused with momentary switches of attention to language form during the collaborative co-construction of the story. After the groups put the narrative together they then went immediately to retelling what they made instead of analyzing it and considering improvements or revisions. Including such an intermediary analytical or revision stage aligns more closely with TBLT and might better support students' language development.

Course-end Survey Comments => Feeds into next iteration

🌟 What were the best parts of this course? (respondents n=93, some responses included >1 code)
Lower level code: 🥇 Storytelling n=16, 🥈 Variety of conversants n=13, 🥉 Future plans: 8
Higher level codes: 🥇 Socializing n=36, 🥈 Topics n=27, 🥉 Way of learning n=22, 4 Improvement n=16

5 key takeaways for other teachers. Share tips, materials, etc that others can use immediately.

|	Takeaway	Details
1	Don't hate, iterate!	Exploratory Practice and Reflective Teaching open windows and doors to new and interesting pedagogical options.
2	Use peer monitors for communicative games	Using Spyfall with peer monitors helped to cement the peer-interaction attitudes I aimed to foster. It let the players focus on communicative tasks and then created opportunities for reflective focus on form for one partner while priming the other for their turn to play.

Takeaway		Details
1	Don't hate, iterate!	Exploratory Practice and Reflective Teaching open windows and doors to new and interesting pedagogical options.
3	Retelling vs. Creative telling	Retelling one's own experiences or read/heard experiences or stories allows students to engage strong narrative memory. Creatively telling a story is much more cognitively demanding, especially when doing so in real time, without planning.
4	Game choice matters - Choose well	Not all games are created equal - fitting games to players and context requires critical ludic literacy.
5	Join LLP's Discord server	Communities of practice can provide curatorial support, suggestions for games and other materials, methods for using them in the classroom, and best practices for mediation of learning.

Using Spyfall with peer monitors helped to cement the peer-interaction attitudes I aimed to foster. It let the players focus on communicative tasks and then created opportunities for reflective focus on form for one partner while priming the other for their turn to play.

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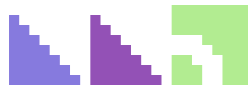
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