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Small talk strategies card game for English language learners: Development and future directions

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KEY POINTS

Background: EFL contexts require instructors to create opportunities for natural or improvised communication which can reflect 'real world' conversations.

Aim: We aimed to improve on a small talk strategies non-game technique with a game-based technique for EFL contexts.

Methods: We developed and deployed a game-based technique using a playtesting approach.

Results: Positive findings (game affordances and pedagogical potential) are preliminary and descriptive in nature. Interaction constructs are proposed to guide future research.

Conclusion: Small talk strategies practice with a game-based technique shows promising pedagogical potential, but further verification is required.

Tweet Synopsis

We aimed to improve on a non-game technique to small talk strategies practice. A game-based technique was developed following a playtesting approach. Game affordances and pedagogical potential are highlighted with interaction constructs proposed to guide future research. #SmallTalk #GameBasedLearning #EFL #interaction

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1. Introduction

This project grew out of a perceived need to introduce more chances for learners to build communicative competence and practice spontaneously spoken speech (SSS) in an EFL learning context. EFL contexts are by definition isolated from the target language (TL) and as a result differ in many ways from ESL contexts that are inherently situated in an environment in which the TL is widely spoken. As a result, learners in EFL contexts may be comparatively lacking in terms of input and two-way interactions with target language speakers (Krashen, 1985; Lightbown & Spada, 2021), learner motivation (Dimitroff et al., 2018), and pragmatic competence (Wyner, 2014) all of which suggest a need for focused instruction that targets these areas. However, one of the challenges to this intervention is designing and implementing interactive tasks that emulate naturalistic two-way interactions, involve complex online processing (see Jegerski, 2021; Henry, 2022), and avoid the pitfalls of overpreparation and rehearsal.

This project initially addressed this need for interaction-based intervention in EFL contexts with a non-game technique that introduced small talk strategies practised in the classroom. However, limitations in this non-game technique were identified. Learners often attempted to overprepare, rehearse, recite speech, and overuse simple strategies. Ultimately, this undermined the nature of SSS-based practice as learners focused on presentational (planned/rehearsed) instead of interpersonal (spontaneous/interactive) speech. To address these limitations, 1) randomization and 2) constrained choice were explored as game-design elements. This exploration ultimately led to the development and playtesting of a small talk strategies card game.

Below, we provide a background of the core principles related to the development of the original non-game technique (communicative competence, small talk, interaction) as well as the subsequent game-based technique. We then detail the development of the game with a look at how early versions were iterated on and how playtesting contributed to further changes and additions. Finally, we look at the pedagogical potential that emerged through the deployment of the game in an EFL context for nearly a year and propose relevant interaction constructs that might guide future research.

Learners often attempted to overprepare, rehearse, recite speech, and overuse simple strategies. Ultimately, this undermined the nature of SSS-based practice

2. Background

2.1 Communicative Competence and Small Talk

This project sought to address communicative competence building through a usage-based approach utilizing small talk strategies as a point of focus for both instruction and practice. This focus on small talk was partly inspired by Yates and Springall's (2010) activities for teaching requests in which small talk was used to prepare speakers for request making and Carroll's (2011) activities for giving "conscious consideration" to managing turn-taking and "talk-in-interaction" (p. 91).

Communicative competence is an integral aspect of human communication. However, addressing the skills necessary for communicative competence building is not straightforward. Kanwit and Solon (2022) referenced the use/analysis dichotomy (see Celce-Murcia, 2013) suggesting that communicative competence based instruction and practice should include "meaningful language use rather than context-devoid repetition" and "more use of SSS than … written grammaticality judgments" (p. 4). In short, approaches and techniques need to be carefully selected for compatibility with communicative competence building.

Small talk plays a role in communication as a subset of communicative competence-based skills. Although small talk is often misunderstood as unimportant or frivolous talk, it plays an important role in human communication. Coupland (2014) compiled a number of case studies that question the "smallness" of small talk by investigating specific communicative contexts (i.e., government departments, service industry, telephone calls). These case studies suggest that small talk is not just meaningless or insignificant discourse on the periphery but rather discourse that plays a primary role

in human interaction. Candlin (2014) defined the core discursive purpose of small talk as *relational* (relating to relationships and rapport) and *transactional* (relating to the means-to-ends, task-oriented, or instrumental). This communicative utility positions small talk in a unique position that we see as potentially overlooked.

To clarify what this means in context, we looked at Holmes' (2014) case study of small talk in the workplace. Small talk is positioned on one end of a continuum. Social talk and phatic communion (personal bonds & companionship) *include small talk* while on the other end core business talk and work related talk *exclude small talk* (see Figure 1).

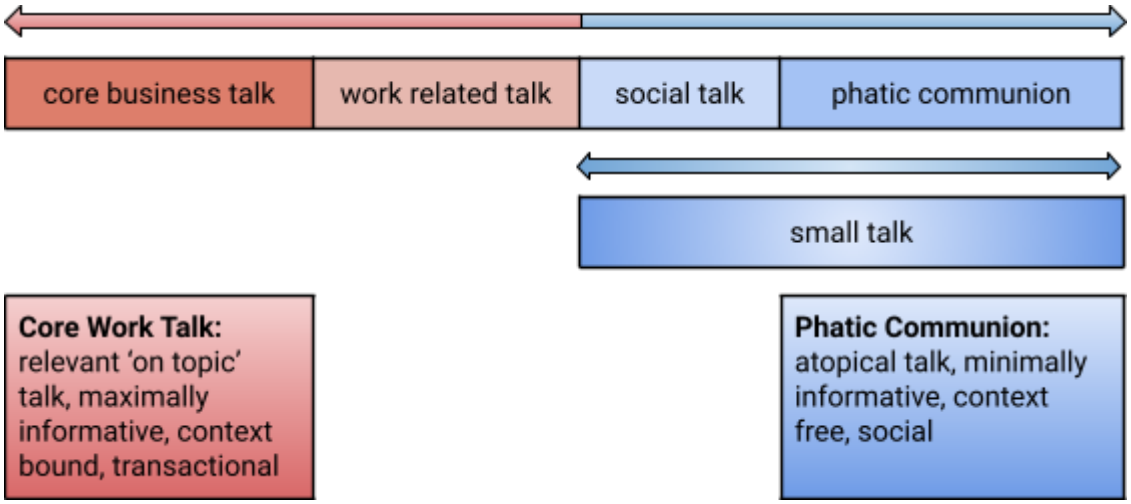

Figure 1 *Adaptation of Holmes' (2014) continuum of small talk in the workplace*

To frame small talk within the scope of this project we looked at how Holmes' (2014) positioned small talk in language use according to the following:

1. "Talk is inherently multifunctional" which means that even with a strict continuum of core talk and small talk, there are a variety of mixed functions in human communication that are rarely completely isolated (p. 33);
2. Small talk in the workplace "serves interpersonal goals" (related to relationships and rapport) (p. 57).
3. Small talk, "a fundamentally social kind of talk, can serve transactional as well as interpersonal goals" (p. 57). In other words, although small talk is identified on the continuum as social talk and phatic communion (related to interpersonal goals), it can lead to transactional talk (task oriented or instrumental).

Furthermore, the idea that small talk hold important communicative utility is based on two main functions. On one hand, sometimes small talk is just small talk. This is not to say it is trite or unimportant talk – it holds an important social function (e.g., someone at the bus stop starts to talk about the weather but they might end up being your coworker or boss). On the other hand, as Figure 2 shows, sometimes small talk is used as a means of starting communication that leads to transactional/goal oriented talk (e.g., starting a conversation with your mother to ask if you can borrow her car over the weekend).

Small talk as small talk (social talk)	Small talk as multifunctional (social talk - task oriented talk)	Communicative functions
Context: Bus stop (passing time)	Context: At home (rapport building before a request)	
A: Nice weather, huh? B: Yeah, seriously. It's been like this for a few days now, huh? A: Out of nowhere too. I was hoping to go hiking, but doesn't look like it... B: No kidding. Hiking in this? A: Thank god for Netflix. B: Haha, same. Have you seen that...	A: Hey, mom. Busy week? B: Unbelievably. Looking forward to relaxing this weekend. A: I bet. You've seemed really busy. Any plans this weekend? B: Was thinking of visiting the neighbors, and just relaxing. Jannis is having a small BBQ. A: Sounds perfect. By the way, if you're staying around here... My friends and I want to visit the new tennis courts. If the car's free, could I borrow it?	Small talk start ⇩ Topic shift ⇩ Task oriented talk (request)

Figure 2 *Example of small talk's social function and multifunction*

This project thus operationalizes small talk as not as strictly "on topic" as core talk but yet not simply meaningless or trite talk. One utility of small talk is that it can help start casual/social conversation that leads to task oriented and instrumental talk as suggested by Yates and Springall (2010) and Holmes (2014) as seen in Figure 3. The development of such skills benefit learners in a symbiotic way. As linguistic skills and a repertoire of skill utilities develop, socializing becomes easier and more opportunities for practice through socialization arise which subsequently leads to more skill development. The core constructs of small talk that we identified for this project are (a) asking questions, (b) sharing information, (c) shifting topic, and (d) basic speech acts.

2.2 Interaction

This project thus aimed to develop an approach-informed novel technique to help learners develop small talk strategies based on interaction constructs. *Approach*, in this case, refers to the background informing the pedagogy (interaction) while the *technique* is the actual activity being deployed (a small talk card game) (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Interaction is a core concept in language education praxis and is a core utility of language skills (Lynch, 2001; Behney & Gass, 2021; Loewen & Sato, 2018; Mackey, 2020). Early pedagogy focused work such as Di Pietro's (1987) *Strategic Interaction* and Rivers' (1987) *Interactive Language Teaching* describe interaction as situated language use and summarize that "communication derives essentially from interaction" respectively (p. xvi). More recently Brown & Lee's (2015) *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* points to interaction's relationship to principles of awareness, autonomy, authenticity, collaboration, and negotiation.

García-Mayo (2013) credited the early inception of the Interaction Hypothesis (IH) to Hatch's (1978) work on the connection between conversation, interaction, and learning opportunities and Krashen's (1985) and Long's (1983; 1985; 1996) work on input, conversational and linguistic adjustment, and cognitive processes like attention, negative feedback, and negotiation. The interaction approach thus takes into account the core benefits that interaction provides to learners and the core constructs of interaction-based research – developmental opportunities, conditions, and processes along the core constructs of input, negotiation, output, feedback, and attention (Behney & Gass, 2021; Mackey & Goo, 2012).

Interaction constructs are relevant to communicative competence building and, as will be seen, synthesize well with game-based techniques. Here, however, we present a brief summary of interaction constructs and their relation to the language learning process. Essentially, spoken language skill building involves systematic stages that when in balance provides learning opportunities. First, learners rely on *input* that they can comprehend as *intake*. Learners, through *negotiation of meaning* or *(corrective) feedback*, can *notice* positive or negative evidence and continue with *(modified) output*. For the learner to make use of feedback and correct erroneous language,

attention/awareness must be maintained. Interaction constructs are thus well suited to describe the learning process involved in communicative competence building let alone small talk strategies.

2.3 Teaching Communication Skills in Institutional Settings

The development of this project led to two initial questions:

1. Where can instructors approach communicative competence-based intervention?
2. How can they do so?

Developing, playtesting, and ultimately implementing our game-based technique was conducted in both university extra-curricular and classroom-based settings. In both contexts, an instructor familiar with the target skills and knowledgeable about the game mechanics was present for either light feedback and guidance or complete direction in game implementation as part of a classroom-based lesson plan. The following summarizes literature relevant to these two questions in light of the contexts and techniques relevant to the development of this project.

Where?

There are a range of ways language instructors can approach small talk and SSS in the classroom. One way is through extra-curricular means such as self-access centers and clubs (i.e., conversation spaces). Self-access centers and clubs are places outside of the classroom, are primarily voluntary, and focused on language learning in a non-formal environment (Benson, 2011). Another way is through courses or classes whether in coordinated programs or classes more open to curricular freedom.

Upton, Shibata, and Hill (2023) showed that self-access centers (SACs) are places where teacher support, peer support, games, and language support tools can be utilized to support student learning. However, it was found that self-access centers faced barriers due to the challenges associated with institutional recognition leading to often short lived programs. Clubs alternatively have been shown to offer potential as an out-of-class option when available (see Benson, 2011).

Johnson (2021) and Schneider (2023) both highlighted interaction and communicative approaches in clubs as out-of-the-classroom settings with tabletop role playing games (TRPGs) in Korean university settings. Johnson (2021) deployed TRPGs to promote TL output in clubs based on the perception that in an EFL learning context learners rarely have opportunities to use TL outside of the classroom. Schneider (2023) used his experience using TRPGs in clubs to explore the similarities between games and TBLT – an area also covered in Vegel (2018). Although this research is largely experimental and exploratory in nature, it shows examples of successful club-based implementation of games in EFL contexts.

This use of games for communicative competence building has been extended into classroom contexts as well. Bradford et al. (2021) and York (2020) reported on the use of analog games while de Castell et al. (2023) and York (2014) reported on the use of digital games in EFL and ESL language learning classroom context.

How?

Liddicoat & Crozet (2001) detailed specific techniques to approach communicative competence in the classroom. Framing L2 as “a vehicle for communication in cultural contexts” (p. 1), they explored intercultural competence in language teaching for French language learners. They found that focusing on the macro aspects or content (e.g., question leads, directly to talk, detail, opinions/feelings, lively/dramatic, knowing) proved more fruitful than a focus on the micro aspects or form (e.g., feedback, repetition, overlap). Hunter (2012) also offered a unique classroom-based perspective similar to Liddicoat and Crozet (2001) that looked at reflections of interaction in small talk sessions and focused on similar macro elements. Hunter (2012) handled feedback and debrief in a systematic way – using a computerized database to record, tag, and manage errors and corrections.

Exploring ways to utilize games along pedagogical lines like those described above, deHaan (2022), Poole (2021), York (2019), and York (2020) outlined approaches for deploying games in classroom contexts. All emphasized a focus on the teacher’s role in game-based teaching. Although this might seem obvious in a project focused on classroom-based language learning, there is a sentiment that

game-based refers to simply *automated learning* (i.e., sit down, play, learn). In contrast to this sentiment, what is shared among these articles is that teachers should base their approaches around sound teaching ideas, be a mediator between the students and the game, reflect on play and performance, and connect the game to their students' lives.

In summary, to answer the question of *where*, although there appear to be some limitations to the use of SACs (i.e., recognition of value added), literature on the use of clubs and classrooms to support game-based techniques appears positive. To answer the question of *how*, the reviewed literature points to a focus on the macro elements of communicative competence and a systematic handling of debrief as well as a teacher-led approach and a use of games when pedagogical. These findings bode well with the design of our card game which focuses on the macro elements of small talk (questions, sharing, topic shift), features a systematic approach to feedback and debrief (cards as physical evidence for debrief), and utilizes a game-based technique. Additionally, in terms of the use of games for learning purposes, there are now experience-based perspectives to turn to that emphasize strategies well in line with this project.

3. Games and Language Education

3.1 Background

The use of games in education is not a new trend. Analog games have been used throughout history to teach military strategy, for example *Chaturanga*, one of the earliest forms of chess, and *Kriegsspiel*, a map-based board game developed in the 19th century (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2005). Digital games were introduced in classrooms in the 1990s (i.e., games developed by the Learning Company like the *Super Solvers* games, *Treasure Mountain* and *Treasure Cove*). However, currently, there are a range of terms used in literature relating to the use of games for educational purposes: *gamification*, *game-based language teaching* (GBLT), *gameful learning* Fishman & Hayward, 2021; Hayward et al., 2021; Reinhardt, 2019) and *ludic language pedagogy* (LLP) (deHaan, 2022; Poole, 2021; York et al., 2021).

The use of game elements in non-game contexts has been predominantly referred to as gamification (Deterding et al., 2011; Kuhn, 2019; Landers, 2015). However, Hufnagel (2019) points out that beyond studies focused on badges, levels/leaderboards, achievements/awards, and points (BLAP), gamification as a uniform concept has never been fully explored. York (2022) further questions the very nature of the gamification's relation to games given its very limited use of what is vaguely termed "game elements."

GBLT may be considered an umbrella term for any study or practice related to the use of games, language, teaching, and learning. deHaan's (2022) investigation of GBLT studies found a marked "lack of interest in teachers and teaching practices" (p. 115) and deHaan (2021) calls for a "pedagogy-first approach with games" (p. 270). Gameful learning and LLP have grown with similar goals as both point to a praxis based approach to games, learning, and teaching. LLP specifically takes influence from interaction rooted in TBLT in terms of the teacher's role in the framework/approach. York, Poole, and deHaan (2021) clarify this point by exploring the ways teachers can influence learning with games (similar to task stages) such as choices, design, before, during, and after gameplay while also pointing to what could be termed "LLP studies" should include: a teacher, ludic materials, language learning goals, and pedagogical underpinnings.

3.2 Digital vs Analog

Although much of the early game-based learning literature has focused on digital games (Peterson, 2013; Prensky, 2007; Gee, 2003, 2013), there are cases of analog games deployed for educational purposes especially in terms of language learning (highlighted in previous sections). Furthermore, it is important to point out that despite the growing area of research and practice related to digital games and language learning, there are clear barriers to use. Complex games and even video games (despite holding language learning potential) can be difficult to implement – especially commercial off the shelf games (COTS) originally designed for entertainment (Peterson & Jabbari, 2023). However, this is not to say that they are not worth exploring. In fact there is a growing area of research detailing their implementation and pedagogical potential such as the use of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* to teach Spanish (Al-Khanfar, 2023), *Wario: Get it Together* to increase social and linguistic interaction between ELLs and other classmates (de Castell et al., 2023), *Keep Talking & Nobody Explodes* to

promote information exchange and problem solving language (Dormer et al., 2017), and *Minecraft* to teach Japanese in a social, online context (York, 2014).

However, analog games based around simple design principles (i.e., balancing skill and randomization) are arguably easier to implement especially when developed with specific skills, learner needs, and learning context in mind. Although analog games may seem to ignore the potential of CALL's technocentric focus, they are far more easily playtested and iterated on. Pozzi and Zimmerman (2015) pointed out that it is better to "playtest your ugly prototype than to wait and playtest a more polished version" (p. 178). Peterson (2013) touched on these points as well as he explained that a purely tech-centric focus often leads to a "false dawn" phenomenon – the collective belief that a paradigm-shifting change has occurred when in reality the changes are only minor in nature. Peterson (2013) also pointed to the fact that software development is a time-consuming process that relies on a (currently) small population of experts. This easily leads to design limitations and gaps between game creators, educators, and the target context. In summary, although digital games hold incredible potential, analog games should not be discounted especially in terms of their core game affordances, approachability, and adaptability in learning contexts.

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3.3 Why Games?

Research fields associated with language, learning, and literacy have looked to games from both *use* (games for learning) and *inspiration* (game design to inform pedagogy) perspectives. The *use perspective* uses either COTS games or games specifically designed for education in the classroom for pedagogical purposes. The *inspiration side* makes compelling arguments about the educational potential of the design elements of good games and how game communities interact. Ultimately, games are seen as compelling because they are inherently well-designed learning systems (Gee, 2013). Gee (2003) identifies 36 learning principles in good games. An example of some of these learning principles can be seen in an analysis of the first level of *Super Mario Bros.* World 1-1 in Image 1 (see Vegel, 2022).

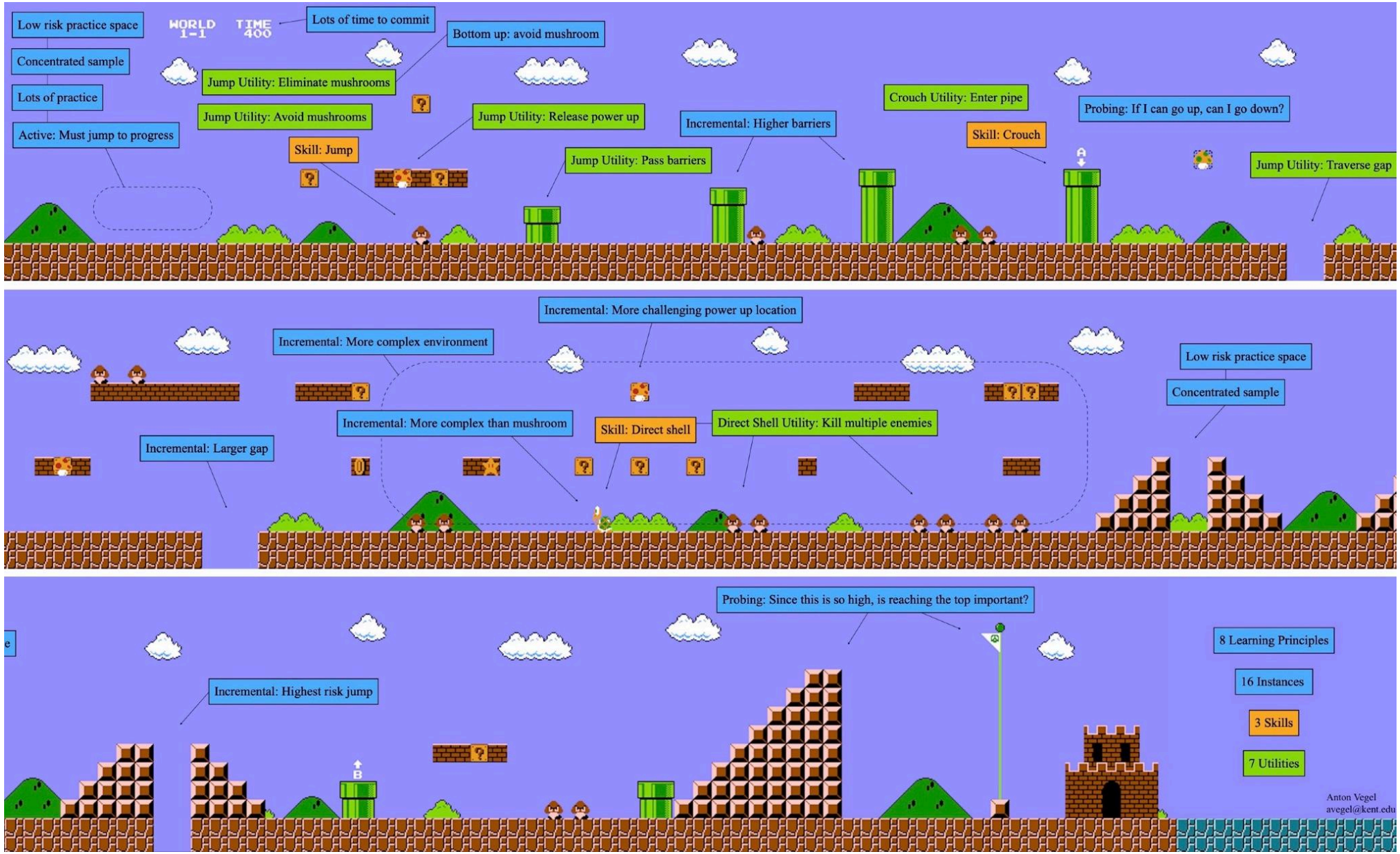

Image 1 *Analysis of learning principles, skills, and skill utilities in Super Mario Bros. (World 1-1) as described in Vegel (2022)*

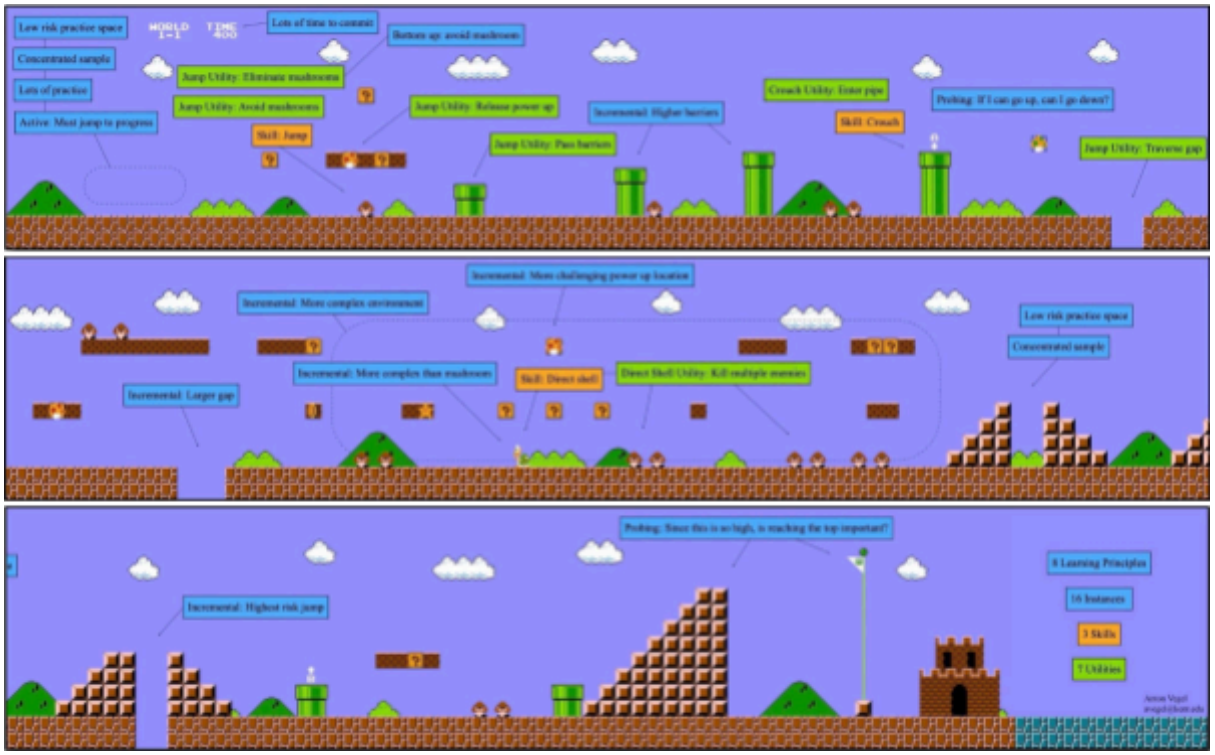

Image 1 *Analysis of learning principles, skills, and skill utilities in Super Mario Bros. (World 1-1) as described in Vegel (2022)*

Although there are several learning principles found in good games that can be applied to the classroom, there are also simple game design ideas that can be considered such as a balance of skill and randomization. Although some games have little to no randomization like *chess*, *checkers*, or *Go* and instead rely on the skills and strategies of the players, others rely on randomization as a core element of their design. *Dungeons & Dragons* uses complex dice conventions (e.g., 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 20-sided dice each with their own purpose/function) to offset players' choices against the narrative elements (see Fine, 1983). *Snakes and Ladders* use dice to randomize movement and augment the board design. For example, reaching the “Finish” space requires an exact roll, and the final stretch (the last 10 of 100 spaces) is also the most chaotic with the highest density of chutes (moving the player back 20 spaces). *The Game of Life* also employs a similar chaotic final stretch that relies on randomization to offset and equalize player choice and game outcomes (see Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). Lastly, card games also rely on randomization in the form of shuffled decks and specifically rely on randomization to remain replayable and fun.

Considering these different use cases of randomization in game design, it is then no surprise that introducing randomization meaningfully into the classroom can be challenging. The core point of this design element is emergence and a hope that the intended outcome emerges. In terms of this project, designing a game-based technique was created in light of the limitations identified from implementing a non-game technique to small talk and SSS (see Figure 8). Balancing skills and randomization in this case not only increases novel practice opportunities due to the randomized deck but also limits and constrains learner choice via the cards in their hand. Learners thus must rely on strategies they may normally avoid and pair topics and strategies that they had not before.

4. Small Talk Strategies Card Game

4.1 Development

This project follows the suggestions summarized in York et al. (2021) for using games in the classroom: teacher’s role (development, playtesting, and deployment), ludic materials (cards, game competition, and game design elements), language learning goals (small talk and SSS), and pedagogical underpinnings (interaction and TBLT). Additionally, a “design process” box (see Figure 3)

is included to summarize our design process and the principles that were necessary for this project to move from development to deployment: problem-based (identify a problem, i.e., non-game technique), iterative (make iterations of initially simple design ideas), and playtested (test out the design, get feedback from others, and refine the design). The following summarizes the development (non-game to game technique) and covers notes about deployment as well as the playtesting process.

Teacher's influence on learning with games		LLP studies should include	
Choices	card levels, implementation	A teacher	Developed and playtested by teachers in the classroom and in extracurricular contexts
Design	designed by teachers, adaptable for different use cases, leveled difficulty, feedback by design	Ludic materials	card game, competition, a winner, uses game design elements
Before gameplay	pre-teaching, adapting to student level/needs, non-game small talk before game-based small talk	Language learning goals	small talk, SSS
During gameplay	observe, help, participate	Pedagogical underpinnings	interaction, TBLT
After gameplay	debrief cards put down (how many and what kind), debrief cards still held (cards that were difficult to use), highlight notable examples	Design process	problem-based, iterative, playtested

Figure 3 *LLP Studies adapted from York, Poole, and deHaan (2021) with "design process"*

In the initial non-game technique the basic elements of small talk were identified as asking for information, sharing information, and shifting the topic. This idea was implemented in the classroom and shared with the Japanese language teaching community. This technique was presented first in 2018 at a Nanzan University faculty development session and included in the Nanzan University 2019 teachers' handbook. It was then presented again with honorarium at the Winter 2019 Nagoya JALT meeting. The feedback received from these sessions was invaluable and led to further development and brainstorming about how to solve issues related to the technique and how to implement more advanced small talk strategies.

This initial non-game technique was used in university teaching settings for around 5 years. The technique involved learners sharing a journal about their life (or from a topic prompt), asking a question to their group related to their journal topic, and then attempting to continue small talk for 1-2 minutes (or more) following small talk strategies presented and reviewed before the session. A few notable takeaways were identified:

1. *lower levels* were best introduced with basic strategies and skills first (questions and pace of turn-taking),
2. *higher levels* were best fully introduced to all strategies with a focus on more advanced small talk skills (sharing and topic shift),

Overall the technique succeeded at pushing output and raising awareness to small talk strategies thus improving communicative competence through SSS. However, as noted previously, a few limitations were identified with this non-game approach. The biggest limitations were learners attempting to over-prepare for practice and learners choosing only basic strategies (or only strategies they had already mastered) ignoring more advanced strategies (i.e., lots of simple questions and overusing "How about you?"). Ideas for how to constrain choice and randomize strategies seemed like an obvious solution (see Figure 4).

The biggest limitations were identified as learners attempting to over-prepare for practice and choosing only basic strategies or only strategies they had already mastered ignoring more advanced strategies.

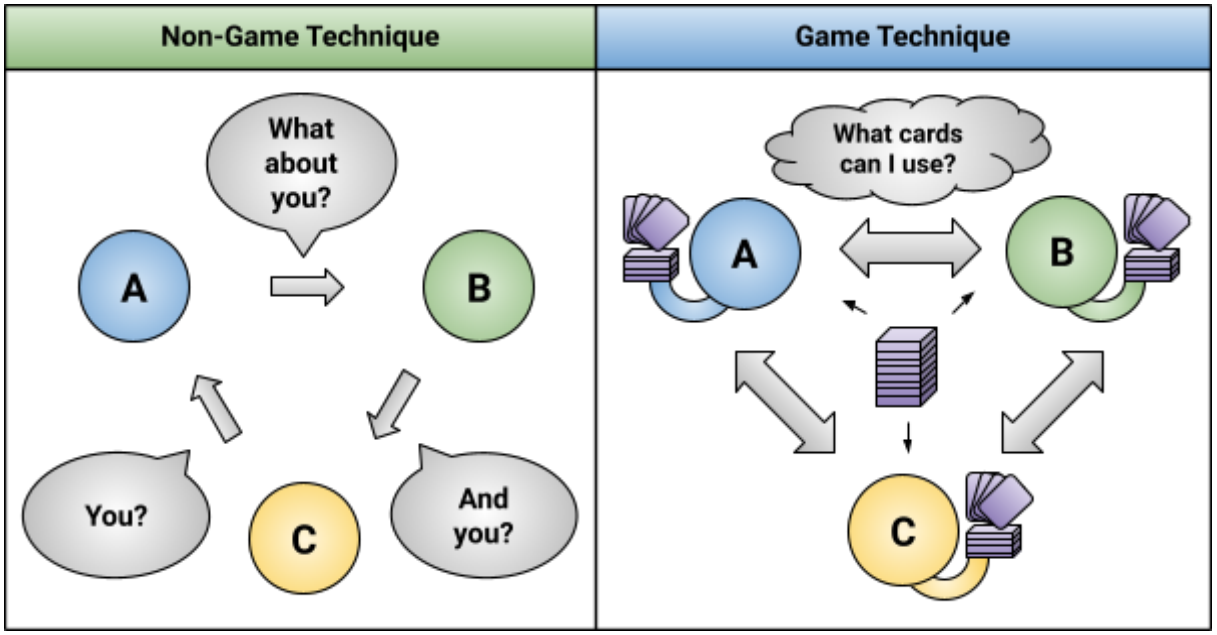

Figure 4 *Small talk strategies practice (non-game technique vs game-based technique)*

Game design ideas were explored initially starting with sketches of the small talk strategies in a card game-like organization. These were handwritten on scrap paper and playtested. Once the basic working structure was identified, a text document was created to record ideas and make both production and iteration easier (see Figure 5). We then discovered two additional (but small) physical design requirements. Because card games rely on shuffling to maintain their quality of randomness, cards had to be laminated to make shuffling practical. Additionally, to help organization and distribution (especially for prospective playtesters), a box had to be designed that fit the cards which then required the card corners to be rounded. Once these steps were taken and a usable deck was created, it was shared with interested colleagues for feedback. The most consistent feedback we received was to expand the Question cards to include y/n questions and include more challenging elements. Although these had both been ideas in the initial design phase, neither had been implemented yet.

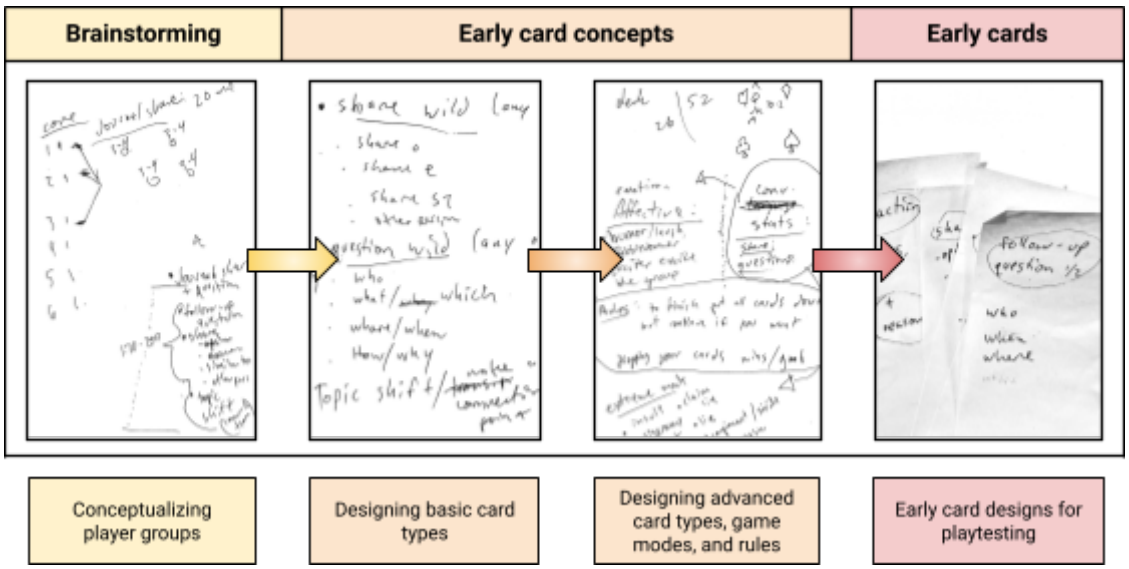

Figure 5 *Examples of early concept development and testing stages*

Challenge cards were added based on Indiana University's pragmatics, discourse, and speech act resources (Felix-Brasdefer, n.d.). Our playtesting showed that although the speech act cards were (correctly) more challenging and required some pre-teaching for lower-level students, they were positive additions. Add cards were then developed to cover areas not yet included in the deck: cause/effect relationships, argumentative style, and character taking. These areas were given coverage by making reason, result, counterpoint, and specific example (or quote, imitation, impersonation) cards. The small talk strategies implemented in the non-game technique and game-based technique are outlined in Figure 6 with examples of basic strategies (Question cards and Share cards) as well as advanced strategies (Challenge cards and Add cards) in Figure 7. What is notable is that with the game-based technique, because strategies are limited, constrained, and randomized with cards, more strategies can be included. With the game-based technique, learners never hold all possible options in their hands at one time and can only choose from a small set of options. This limits the learner's full view of the strategies, helps them focus on only a small set at a time, and thus potentially reduces cognitive load letting learners focus on the task at hand (small talk).

Non-game	Game-based
Question: Who, what, when, where, why, how, yes/no	Question: Who, what, when, where, why, how, yes/no, wild
Share: Opinion, experience, similar topic, other person	Share: Opinion, experience, similar topic, other person, wild
Topic Shift: Change the topic/make a connection point	Topic Shift: Change the topic/make a connection point
	Challenge (based on speech acts): Promise, threat, request, refusal, advice, complaint, complement, invitation/disinvitation,
	Add: Reason, result, counterpoint, specific example (or quote, imitation, impersonation)

Figure 6 *Small talk strategies deployed (non-game technique vs game-based technique)*

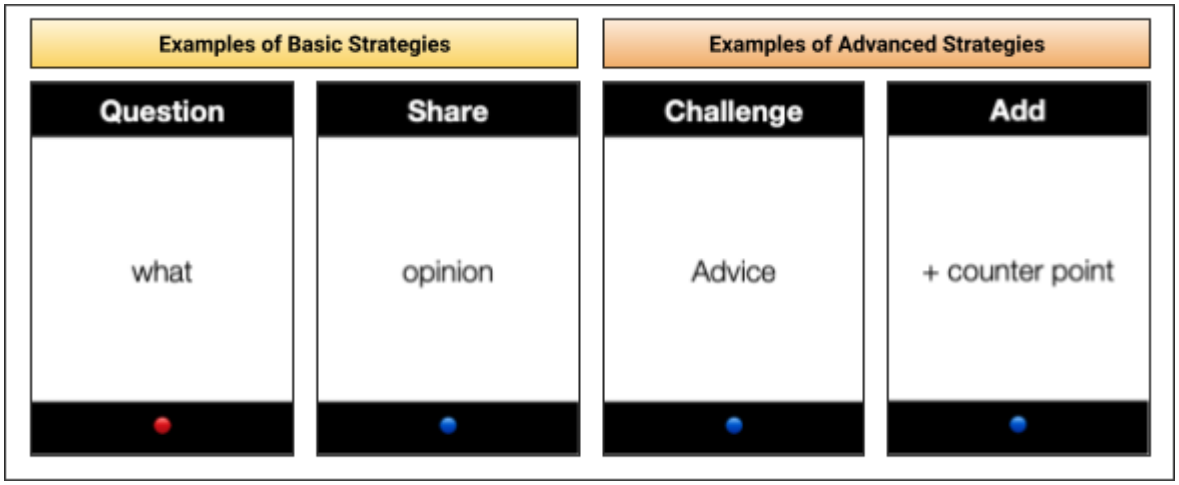

Figure 7 *Examples of basic strategies and advanced strategies cards*

4.2 Playtest

The development of this game used a playtesting approach. Playtesting is a way to test a game while it is in development and can help developers identify the core design concept, identify new ideas that can be implemented in the original design, iterate on the design, and diversify feedback as playtesters do not always have insider knowledge about the project. Pozzi and Zimmerman (2015) summarized playtesting as

> a methodology borrowed from game design where unfinished projects are tested on an audience. A playtest happens when people come together to try out a work in progress. The next steps for changing the project are based on the results of the playtest (p. 177).

Although this approach may seem redundant in education-based research in light of ideas like reflective practice (Schön, 1983), we believed playtesting offers a more robust method for our game-based use case – the development and design of a learning system (in our case a game) with special consideration to 2nd order design questions (emergence). Although game-based implementation for pedagogical purposes should include some kind of instructional mediation, the game should also be able to work without extensive guidance and explanation. In other words, the game should be able to be picked up, played, and worked as intended. Playtesting provides a framework for problem-solving through "iteration and collaboration" (p. 177). Playtesting's focus on iteration (designing, testing, and re-designing) and collaboration (getting feedback from different learning contexts and teachers with different teaching philosophies) played a key role in the development of our game-based technique. We summarize the process below based on Pozzi and Zimmerman's (2015) playtesting guide. Although these "rules" are originally organized in stages, we felt the notes related to game development produced enough overlap to include them in groups relevant to our use case.

Playtesting's focus on iteration (designing, testing, and re-designing) and collaboration (getting feedback from different learning contexts and teachers with different teaching philosophies) played key roles in the development of this project.

Playtest before you think you are ready. This project started as a brainstorm. Ideas were initially discussed, written out, and developed into a rough working model. Handwritten "cards" helped us quickly test ideas, verify the potential of the game concept, and iterate.

> It is much better to playtest your ugly prototype than to wait and playtest a more polished project (p. 178).

Strategize for early playtesting & prepare variations. We created a core working model for the game early on. Slowly we worked through the logistical challenges of including everything that we wanted to include (from basic small talk strategies to ambitious new game ideas like adding tokens, card types, and different game modes.

> Can you make a paper prototype of a digital project? Can you scale down a work meant for 100 participants to something you can playtest with a dozen? (p. 178).

Be grateful to your playtesters; **blame yourself, not your playtesters; & be selfish.** Not only did we extensively trial early versions ourselves, but we also asked willing and interested teachers to try it out for us. We emphasized that we would accept any feedback and that although the game was tested and working, it was still in an experimental phase. The feedback from playtesters was invaluable and led to the final inclusion of new card types we had either initially rejected, thought of as redundant, or completely overlooked such as y/n Question cards, Challenge cards, and the further development of Add cards. Feedback from playtesters gave us numerous "ah-ha" moments like this.

> The purpose of your playtest is not for your playtesters to have fun. It is for you to learn what does and does not work about your project (p. 180).
>
> Don't be afraid to show your playtesters something broken and half-finished (p. 180).

Don't explain. Only basic information about the game was shared with playtesters. We pointed playtesters to the manual/instruction cards (How to Play, Modes & Goals, Kinds of Cards, For Teachers) in hopes that it would explain enough about the game to be implemented successfully without our intervention. This relatively "hands off" and "light on explanation" approach led to playtesters implementing the game in ways we had not anticipated. For example, one playtester used the game in a "cards optional" mode while our originally intended purpose of the cards was "cards required." Both modes worked, and this also led to more discussion about other possible game modes.

> Resist the temptation to explain the ideas and intentions behind your project to your playtesters. Instead, let them interact with the LEAST possible explanation from you in advance (p. 179-181).

Take notes, notice everything, & shut up. The importance of organizing notes during the playtesting process became immediately clear. Some playtesters wrote a summary of their feedback while others simply offered an oral report. Feedback included what card types worked best for certain language levels, problems or confusion about the game, and ideas for additional cards and more advanced challenges. One case included information about what cards at low levels worked best and how well students responded to being limited to the cards in their hands. Other notes were taken about the length of each round, what concepts needed more explanation, and what ideas should be included/excluded. Especially in terms of our playtesting, "Shut up and take notes" became a useful mantra. Guiding learners or responding to questions was sometimes necessary but ultimately the game had to work on its own.

> Notice everything [and] keep track of how long it took to run the playtest, which variations your testers preferred, and any other important information (p. 180-181).
>
> Mistakes and misunderstandings are extremely useful: you must let them explore the project on their own (p. 181).

See the big picture. The point of our game was not simply to deploy a game in a classroom, but rather to solve the problems of reliance on simple skills, preparation, and reciting in communicative tasks. However, we also wanted the game to introduce competition, playfulness, and fun challenges. It was easy to be ambitious when we developed, trialled, and playtested this game, but we frequently had to remind ourselves that the game had to work with language instructors and language learners.

> Try to see the human element at play. What are the emotional responses of your playtesters, what is their body language, how are they interacting with each other? (p. 181).

Hunger for failure & embrace the unexpected. Before this project started neither of us knew where it would go, but we knew the idea was compelling enough to try. We were willing to fail, and although we hoped to receive positive feedback, we were open to brutal criticism. Early feedback included criticism of the difficulty level (far too easy), a lack of yes/no question cards, and confusion about purpose and implementation. This feedback led to key changes for the better. You cannot test a system like a game without interacting with it and observing how others interact with it.

Initially, card types were used ambiguously among playtesters despite our attempts to clarify them (e.g., Can a Share card be used to ask a question? Who can I ask a question to? Do I answer the question myself? What's a Wild card?). Also, the importance of dividing the deck in half (to accommodate big classes) and the logistical nightmare that it required also became apparent (e.g., reprinting decks with a mark to indicate its half-deck group). Even one playtester's fear of "Will my students understand this game and see it as productive?" led to the idea of first introducing the "language game" concept with a simple dice game that another student group had previously co-created (i.e., letter dice and question dice as a language game). Playtesters misunderstanding card types, the necessity of half-deck markers, and first introducing the language game concept were not

things we initially expected to be necessary, but being open and approaching solutions led to better design and better play.

> One of the attitudes that helps with playtesting is to yearn for your project to fail. Of course we all want successful results, but unsuccessful moments are much more useful (p. 182).
>
> If things don't go as planned, you may be on to something better (p. 183).

Discuss what happened. The notes we took from our own playtests and the feedback we received from playtesters led discussions about the level of students, length of rounds, cards that were easy or difficult to put down, how to debrief after each round, how many cards were put down each round, differences between each round, card additions/changes, and student reactions. These discussions led to the creation of four manual cards that summarize how to play, the kinds of cards, modes and goals, and information for the teachers. This last section, "information for teachers," in part summarizes how to debrief and was developed directly out of playtesting notes and discussions. This debrief outline suggests reflecting on individual and group goals, asking "How many cards were put down in the round? and "What cards were easy/hard to use?" as a way to reflect on good strategy use and consider any teachable moments. Although we believe this advice is still limited, it summarizes the most useful strategies we have found so far.

> After the playtest, talk about the experience with your playtesters. Use your notes sheet to structure the conversation (p. 182).
>
> The more concrete your questions, the more useful answers you will get (p. 182).

The cruelly honest playtest. In addition to discussing the game with playtesters, we took feedback from students from direct elicitations and observations. Feedback was both cruel and honest. In one case learners admitted that they preferred a language-based COTS game to ours when given the choice. This was both cruel and honest. Another group became so competitive that others in the group were visibly put off. This was easily moderated, but it was a side of the game we had not seen after trialing for nearly a year.

> Talk about the experience … Use your notes sheet to structure the conversation … what was most difficult for them to understand about the project (p. 182).
>
> Playtests represent moments of truth (p. 183).
>
> In a playtest, you get to cruelly see whether or not your ideas actually work in practice. Face the truth of your playtest, even if it hurts (p. 183).

Throughout this playtesting experience, we received several invaluable suggestions from fellow teachers and students trialling the game (which are summarized above). Some of this feedback was brutal and cruel, but there were two notably positive cases from learner groups: 1. learners preferred the game-based technique over the non-game technique, and 2. learners identified performance improvements through the game-based technique (less linear turn-taking and less use of simple turn-taking strategies). One student group had practised with both the non-game technique for over a year and then proceeded with the game-based technique for over a year. After practising the game-based technique and being given the choice to return to the non-game technique, the group requested to continue using the card game. Another student group predominantly used the non-game technique but trialled the card game occasionally. When asked to reflect on and compare their language use between the non-game technique and the game-based technique, learners identified that the issues often highlighted in their non-game practice were improved on. This feedback often focused on artificial turn-taking strategies (i.e., linear "A, B, C, A, B, C" style) and an overreliance on "How about you?" questions. Although these positive cases of learner feedback are not meant to be in any way definitive, they do offer a glimpse into the learners' perspectives. These cases will be revisited below.

4.3 Pedagogical Potential, Game Affordances, & Future Research Directions

In our case, approaching small talk strategies with a non-game technique illuminated limitations – notably learners rely on simple strategies which results in unnatural small talk practice. The game-based technique not only limits and constrains choice ensuring learners use a range of strategies, but it also randomizes strategies with shuffled cards creating more nonlinear (and thus potentially more authentic) small talk practice. This is a point covered in Carroll's (2011) techniques for teaching turn-taking. We identified pedagogical potential related to the card game elements (deck, hand, and discard pile) and four main categories of pedagogical potential (choice/skill building, randomization, authenticity, feedback/debrief).

First, the game-based technique works differently than the non-game technique primarily due to the card game elements. Each element offers game affordances that then afford pedagogical potential (see Figure 8). The *deck* offers a balance of skill and randomization which randomizes strategies and ensures learners do not rely on simple strategies only. The *hand* limits and constrains choice makes the inclusion of more strategies feasible, and gives evidence for debriefing (i.e., strategies that were not able to be used – more negative feedback potential). The hand also allows more strategies to be included as learners only have a small sample of the deck at any one time. This potentially reduces cognitive load and helps learners focus on the task at hand. The *discard pile* also gives evidence for debriefing but in contrast to the *hand* offers more positive feedback potential (i.e., strategies used and turns taken).

Card game	Visual	Game affordance	Pedagogical potential
Deck		skill/randomization balance	Randomizes strategies (shuffling), ensures learners don't rely on simply strategies only
Hand		limited choice	Limits and constrains choice, makes the inclusion of more strategies feasible, gives evidence for debrief (-)
Discard pile		feedback	Gives evidence to debrief (+), records strategies used and turns taken

Figure 8 *Card game elements and pedagogical potential*

Secondly, four main categories of pedagogical potential were identified (choice/skill building, randomization, authenticity, feedback/debriefing). These categories are summarized in Figure 9 and compare the non-game technique to the game-based technique with relevant interaction constructs proposed to guide future research.

Topic	Non-game	Game-based	Interaction constructs
Choice/Skill Building	• Learners default to simple strategies. • All choices are available all the time. • Teacher points to more advanced strategies being neglected.	• Adv. strategies and simple strategies are constrained, limited, and randomized by cards. • Choice is limited and constrained by design. • Student's decide what strategies to use from their hand.	• negotiation for meaning • noticing • attention/ awareness
Randomization	• Choice is not randomized by design, can be repeated or overused • All strategies are open to be used and repeated regardless of level or need.	• Choices are randomized with shuffled deck. • Each round is randomized and reuse of strategies is limited (new hand & deck).	
Authenticity	• Output is often linear. • With no randomizing element, students attempt to prepare and recite.	• Output is often naturally nonlinear. • Learners cannot prepare due to randomized nature and must interact in terms of constrained choice.	• input • (modified) output, • negotiation for meaning • noticing • attention/awareness
Feedback/ Debrief	• Feedback ideas in memory or notes.	• Feedback physically found in personal discard pile and cards still held at the end of each round.	• (corrective) feedback • (modified) output • intake • noticing • attention/awareness

Figure 9 *Summary of pedagogical takeaways (game affordances and interaction constructs)*

Choice/Skill Building. In the non-game technique, learners default to simple strategies, all choices are available all the time, and teachers have to point to more advanced strategies when neglected. In the game-based technique, advanced strategies are randomized by the *deck*, constrained and limited by the *hand* (thus choice is limited by design), and students can autonomously decide what strategies to use from their hand as multiple rounds balance choices are available. In short, constraining choice offers more skill-building opportunities (i.e., more strategies can be practised in comparison to the non-game technique). Possible interaction constructs relevant to this category include *negotiation for meaning*, *noticing*, and *attention/awareness*. Because advanced strategies can be more feasibly deployed before mastery in the game-based technique, learners may be more apt to negotiate meaning, notice the appropriate use of strategies, and thus lead to higher levels of attention and awareness.

Randomization. In the non-game technique, choice is not randomized by design, strategies can be repeated or overused, and all strategies are open regardless of level or need. In the game-based technique, choices are randomized via the (shuffled) *deck* each round creating more diverse practice opportunities.

Authenticity. In the non-game technique, output is often linear (unnatural turn-taking), and learners often attempt to prepare and recite due to the absence of a randomization element. In the game-based technique, output is more often nonlinear (more natural turn-taking), and learners cannot prepare or recite due to the randomized nature of the card games. In short, although it might seem counterintuitive to turn to randomization to increase authenticity, freedom of choice results in linear turn-taking and overprepared/recited talk. Relevant interaction constructs include *input*, *(modified) output*, *negotiation for meaning*, *noticing*, and *attention/awareness*. Because of the more authentic nature of the game-based technique (less linear turn-taking and less preparation/reciting), learners

have potentially better input, more chances to notice not-yet mastered strategies, and thus more chances to improve output through modification. Additionally, because practice is more spontaneous and improvised, there should be more chances to negotiate meaning requiring higher levels of attention and awareness. It is, however, important to note that game-based techniques do not simply result in more authentic practice although they may increase aspects of authenticity like those highlighted above.

Feedback/Debriefing. In the non-game technique, feedback must be noted by the instructor or kept in memory to present to learners after a practice session. In the game-based technique, feedback is physically present at the end of each round with the number of turns and strategies recorded in the player/learner's *discard pile* (i.e., generally positive feedback) and strategies not used in the player/learner's *hand* (i.e., generally negative feedback). This does not negate the need for teacher mediation and careful attention, but it does offer a potentially higher resolution look into what strategies learners use, what strategies learners struggle with, and the number of turns taken by each learner. This offers a far more particular approach to debriefing and feedback than the non-game technique. Possible interaction constructs relevant to this category include *(corrective) feedback*, *(modified) output*, *intake*, *noticing*, and *attention/awareness*. As mentioned, detailed feedback can be based on two game elements at the end of each round: the *hand* and the *discard pile*. The *hand*, which includes cards/strategies not used in the round, offers the most obvious data for negative or corrective feedback. Although strategies found used in the *discard pile* will likely have been used appropriately offering potential data for positive feedback, there may be cases in which they have not been and additional negative or corrective feedback may be appropriate. Opportunities for learners to receive relevant *(corrective) feedback* thus lead to opportunities for *(modified) output*, *intake*, *noticing*, and higher *attention/awareness* of strategies in later rounds. Learners thus have more opportunities to receive accurate feedback, reflect on performance, and master difficult strategies in the game-based technique. Examples of this feedback and debriefing in a classroom setting from our implementation include:

1. Learners increasing turn-taking after comparing discard piles after a round,
2. Learners asking their instructor for help on an unknown strategy card in their hand followed up with the use of that strategy card, and
3. Teacher debriefs to identify underused strategies (cards remaining in learners' hands) and overused strategies (cards in learners' discard pile) to inform intervention.

We hope this summary of the game affordances pedagogical potential identified in the game-based technique helps illuminate the power of even simple game-design ideas. Additionally, we hope the proposed interaction constructs may lead to further research that might help verify the differences between the non-game and game-based techniques such as authenticity or feedback/debriefing.

5. Conclusion

We presented the development of a non-game technique and a game-based technique to approach small talk strategies and promote SSS in EFL contexts with a focus on playtesting for game-based development. We highlighted the importance of interaction in the language acquisition process and the relevance of small talk in communication. We also provided a background of the use of games in education with a highlight of both analog and digital games used in language learning contexts. We further echoed the need for more education-related game-based research to include the needs of learning contexts (a teacher, ludic materials, language learning goals, and pedagogical underpinnings) as suggested for LLP studies. Finally, we summarized the game affordances and pedagogical potential identified in the game-based technique in light of the non-game technique and proposed relevant interaction constructs that might aid future research and verification.

In short, when learners engage in SSS that is improvised (not prepared or rehearsed), the quality of interaction should increase and in turn lead to higher-quality practice. Because cards create constrained yet randomized choices, learners should be more apt to choose strategies they are unfamiliar with or have not yet mastered, potentially creating more opportunities for negotiation of meaning and noticing while increasing attention/awareness. The use of cards should also increase chances for (corrective) feedback, intake, and (modified) output as unused cards are kept in a learner/player's hand and used cards are put in a learner/player's drop deck. This evidence of used

and unused strategies as well as the number of turns taken offers opportunities to guide learners in subsequent rounds to develop mastery of both strategies and skills.

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