Playtesting tabletop roleplaying with first and second year Korean EFL university students

Paul Thomas Johnson

University of St Andrews, Scotland
Woosong University, South Korea

🔖 Item Details

🔑 Key points

- **What is this?** This is an explanation, summary, and reflection on my use of tabletop roleplaying games with my first and second year EFL university students.
- **Why did you make it?** Tired of disinterested students who have grown exhausted from boring textbooks, and despite my best efforts at motivating them, I realized that what was needed for some was not only a change in teaching technique, but a change in place. So I decided to take my students on a journey.
- **Who is it for?** This is for language teachers of students of all ages who are looking to provide their students with an organic, interesting, and fun way of engaging in their L2.

Tweet synopsis

How can EFL students, who rarely get the chance to use their L2 outside of the classroom, prepare for the unpredictable environment that is real-life language use? Dice, of course! Use tabletop roleplaying games to take your students on an adventure.
#tabletoproleplaying

View at the LLP Playground: https://www.llpjournal.org/2021/05/14/p-johnson-rpg-korea.html

Background

1. What did I do?

I'd like to share with you my experience of using tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), as part of an extracurricular gaming club, with first and second year Korean university students.

I created a simplified version of "Dungeons and Dragons," inspired by an article appearing in Wired Magazine, "Simplifying D&D (you know, for kids?)" (Wired Staff, 2012), and Mcdaldno's (2017) "Simple World: A streamlined, generic hack of Apocalypse World. Use at your own risk."

I ran two separate gaming groups through the same scenario. Each group consisted of four people. We met for four sessions and played an hour each time. The first session was dedicated almost entirely to character creation and introduction. We played in my office, and all of the sessions were filmed (with student's written permission). Group A met on Wednesday nights and Group B met on Thursday nights. Attendance was voluntary.

> The more students who showed up, the more excited they were to play, and the inverse was also true.

I wanted to keep things relaxed, and help introduce them to TTRPG culture, so the first session included plenty of soda and snacks. This really worked. Communal eating is a big part of Korean culture (and TTRPG culture!), so as soon as soda was poured and bags of snacks were cracked open, the students really seemed to relax, and to forget about the camera (for the most part anyway). And the final session had soda and pizza (A classic TTRPG combo).

2. Why did I do it?

The distinction between English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is an important one, and for those of us teaching EFL, living in countries in which English is not the native language, an extremely relevant one. Students do not always have the opportunity to use English outside of class, and it is not always through lack of trying. The opportunities just aren't there. I teach EFL in South Korea, and outside of a few neighborhoods in Seoul, there are almost no opportunities to speak English in a natural setting. I suggest that TTRPGs may help with this by putting students in a game setting where language is more natural than in the classroom setting.

> ⟟⟟⊡ **TEACHING TIP**
> One of the safest assumptions in all of EFL is that students almost never use English outside of class (Johnson, 2020).

3. What was I looking for?

My main interests were in student-to-student language assistance, organic grammar practice, vocabulary increase, narrative uncertainty and its effects on language acquisition, and developing intrinsic motivation in students.

What do I mean by "Playtesting?" Playtesting is a term used from game development, where a closed group of people play through a game to try and figure out what works, what doesn't, and how it can be improved (Techopedia, n.d.). In the research context, this means that what follows isn't a fully formed research study; rather, it is a first go, some preliminary thoughts, and recommendations for further research, including a research proposal.

Character creation & game mechanics

Let's talk about their character creation (see Johnson, 2019). The simplified character sheet that I developed and used is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Example Character Sheet

Note that the backstory and description sections require that the student use the past, present, and future tenses, as well as descriptive adjectives. The character sheet is filled out from top to bottom, left to right. The text in Tables 1 and 2 is lifted straight from their character sheets, with some periods added for clarification.

Table 1 Group B Backstories

Group B	Student 1A 3	Student 2A 2	Student 3A 4	Student 4A 1
Name:	(Woman) Pink Pilot	(Woman) spring mandoo "cleric"	(Woman) orange "archer"	(Woman) Blue "wizard"
***(Backtory):* Past:**	Past: Her job was the musician.	She was an ordinary farmer's daughter.	Orange has 2 sister.	Blue has wizard parent.
Present:	She is rich.	Mandoo became a cleric.	Orange is archer.	She is famous wizard.
Future:	She will marry	She will make a happy living in a quiet village.	Orange to be teacher.	She want marry with king.
Description:	Pink is very tall. She is thin body. She looks manly. She has pink hair.	Mandoo has long sliver hair and white face. She has red eyes. She wear a long black dress.	Orange is pretty. Orange has orange hair. Orange is tall. Orange is thin.	Blue is very tall. Blue has short blue hair. She has blue eyes.

Table 2 Group A Backstories

Group A	Student 1B	Student 2B	Student 3B	Student 4B
Name:	basketball boy	Rapunzel	Huron	Everoul
(Backtory): Past:	He was a Normal Student. Someday he wanted to play with other person. . . .He was a beginner.	Rapunzel lived in the castle.	He was poor when he was young.	This can't remember.
Present:	He play with other person.	She is happy.	He is optimistic.	This is wandering (aimlessly)
Future:	He will play intelligent person.	She will live happily with the prince.	Huron will marry the princess.	This is want to find identity.
Description:	He is Normal man. He has short hair. [He has] brown eyes His hair Color is Yellow.	a long blond hair. a big khaki eyes. yellowish skin. a lean, slender figure.	He is handsome. His hair is dark gray. He is tall. His eyes are green. He is stupid.	This is spirit. Looks like fog. This is indifference.

> It's important to give your students plenty of time to develop their characters. You don't want their initial experience to be that of being rushed and stressed out.

One can see ample opportunity for addressing the kinds of grammar points one would normally cover in a university textbook (subject/verb agreement, articles, plurals, capitalization, descriptive adjectives, etc.), but in a more fun and interesting setting (Or so I think!).

After the students made their characters, I had them flip over their character sheets and write their character's secret, to be revealed at a time and place of their choosing. I don't remember where I got this idea, but I don't think I came up with it, just picked it up somewhere out there in the tabletop gaming universe. The students seemed to really enjoy this aspect of character creation.

Following the Wired article (Wired Staff, 2012), there were only three abilities on the player's character sheet: Dexterity, Intelligence, and Strength. It wasn't hard to classify any action a player took under one of those three categories. The students were given three numbers to assign to their abilities: 30, 60, and 90. These represent the percentage that they will succeed. For example, if a player chooses the following: Dexterity 60, Intelligence 90, and Strength 30, this means that they will have a 60% chance of succeeding on actions that have to do with Dexterity, a 90% chance on those having to do with Intelligence, and a 30% chance on actions relating to Strength (see Figure 2).
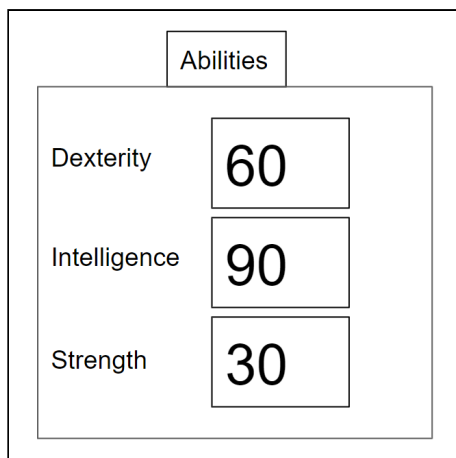
Figure 2 Ability Modifiers

So, what would this look like during a game? Here's an example of how it might work:

Instructor:	"You come across a huge vat of paint. You can see the door that you want to use is on the other side. What do you do?"
Student:	"Can I go around it?"
Instructor:	"There is no way around it."
Student:	"I try and jump over the vat of paint."
Instructor:	"Okay. Go ahead and roll the dice."
Student:	"I rolled a 60 (strength)."
Instructor:	"You didn't make it! Describe what happened."
Student:	"Oh no! . . . My character ran up to the vat, jumped, and fell in the paint!"
Instructor:	"How does your character feel?"
Student:	"My character wanted to make it over to the other side, but I fell in. Now I am covered in paint. But it's funny."

What happened here is that the student wanted to jump over the vat, which uses strength, so they rolled percentile dice.[1] They only had a 30% chance of success (they chose 30 for their strength), but they rolled a 60 (anything over 30 is a failure), so they fell in.

Background

1. The scenario

Here is the scene I used with my students:

The Scenario
You are part of a group of adventures that have been paid to transport a load of expensive spices across a sea that is known for tumultuous waters. Your journey is expected to take five days. It's midafternoon on day three when the clouds quickly change to a deep purple, the water grows increasingly choppy, the storm has arrived. Loud "cracks" can be heard. You're unsure if it's just the sails snapping in the wind, or the ship breaking apart. It's both. You scream at your fellow sailors to steer the ship towards an island which has just appeared out of the rain. You're not going to make the sale, but you may escape with your life (This was graded in real time for group level).

---

[1] A player rolls two percentile dice, one tracking the tens slot and the other the ones slot, resulting in a number from 1-100.

2. Plot synopsis by session

Plot Synopsis by Session	
Session 1:	The Storm: "The ship is sinking! What are you going to do?" Make it to the land, and what's in that scary cave?
Session 2:	Survival: Our adventurers, alone and without resources, must survive their first night on the deserted island.
Session 3:	Battle and an Unexpected Encounter: Taking the ominous path through the jungle, they encounter their first battle. A huge monster stands in their way. After defeating it, they realize they are not alone, nor are they the first to shipwreck on this island. A wizened old survivor tells them that the only way home is to help him defeat the Kraken, and escape through the tunnels at the back of its lair.
Session 4:	Defeat the Kraken! Our adventurers defeat the Kraken and take the tunnels back to the mainland.

What did I learn?

1. The eye test

The sports journalist Bill Simmons (Simmons, n.d.) often talks about the difference between what he calls "The Eye Test" vs Sports Advanced Analytics. The Eye Test is this: We know that Lebron James is great at basketball just from watching the games. We don't need the stat nerds to tell us what his advanced analytics numbers are, his *WAR* (wins over replacement), *PER* (player efficiency rating), or *TSA* (true shooting average). We can just watch a game and know right away. The problem is that The Eye Test is famously unreliable. It falls prey to a whole host of problems, the most obvious are implicit and explicit biases (like confirmation bias), overvaluing the wrong things, and undervaluing the important things. Now, that's not to say that The Eye Test is worthless, we can still use it as the reason for beginning any inquiry, as well as being helpful in the "obvious cases" (however philosophically fraught that term may be).

So, did using TTRPGs for second language acquisition pass the eye test? Yes and no. Here's what I mean.

Remember what I was looking for: student-to-student language assistance, organic grammar practice, vocabulary increase, narrative uncertainty and its effects on language acquisition, and developing intrinsic motivation in students. Let's give my project a grade. Our three categories will be "Pass, "Fail," and "Retake Course." Let's see how our items stack up:

2. Eye test results

Pass	
Item	**Reason**
Organic Grammar Practice	Opportunities for organic grammar practice were plentiful. These came in both the character creation process, and in the actual gameplay itself. In addition to those noted above, when discussing character creation, narrative uncertainty also contributed a lot to this receiving a passing grade. I probably did not give as much feedback on grammar mistakes as I should have, because one of my biggest fears was taking them out of the game. I'll have to work on striking the right balance between gameplay and instruction, maybe through post-play activities.[2]
Narrative Uncertainty	Narrative uncertainty was everywhere, from the players' choices, to the rolling of the dice, to the turns of the plot, players always had interesting and unpredictable situations in which to practice unrehearsed and real time language. In particular, the students choices really contributed to this. For example, in session one, when the ship was sinking, the players from group B realized that they could do anything, most importantly for them, attack each other and do real damage! And one student from group B decided to go below deck and look for food. And upon finding some chicken that had been stowed away, proceeded to spend her turns blissfully eating, and intentionally paying no mind to the fact that the ship was breaking in two!

Fail	
Item	**Reason**
Student-to-Student Language Assistance	While lots of student-to-student language assistance took place, it was mainly in their L1, and mainly the highest level student in each group helping the lower level students. While this will still help the students in the game, and use of L1 can be an important asset, I was looking more for the assistance to take place in their L2, and for more students to be involved in the helping and speaking. I did not make this expectation clear to the students, and would definitely do this next time, perhaps by modeling the appropriate behavior.[3]

---

[2] Thanks to Blair Matthews for helping develop this idea.
[3] Thanks to Jonathan deHaan and Blair Matthews for this suggestion.

Retake Course	
Item	**Reason**
Developing Intrinsic Motivation in Students	While there were more student absences than I would have liked (two students dropped out from group A), students really seemed to enjoy playing, and therefore enjoyed practicing English. I doubt any of them had had the opportunity to practice their L2 in this style. Instruction in Korea is often top down, lecture heavy, and teacher centered instruction, where students have no say in how things go. In TTRPGs, students have a huge impact on how the game plays out. One day I was leaving campus, walking out of the main gate, when I heard someone yell, "Professor!" It was Student 2A. She ran up to me, out of breath, and asked, "When are we going to do another gaming club?!"
Vocabulary Increase	This gets a "Retake Course" because I didn't do a pre and post test, so I had no way of verifying that there was or wasn't an increase. I wanted to leave all testing out of this, because I wanted to focus on the students' enjoyment, but tests could help to get hard data.

2. Analysis of "The Eye Test" results

While "Organic Grammar Practice" and "Narrative Uncertainty" passed The Eye Test, they still need to pass the analytics test. Sure, there were plenty of opportunities for students to practice them, but did they result in language acquisition? We don't know for sure.

And while I felt "Student-to-Student Language Assistance" was a clear fail, multiple reviewers have objected to this judgment,[4] with one reviewer pointing out that I can't prove in this case that L2 assistance would be better than L1. I thought about trying to mitigate L1 in future sessions by implementing a game based mechanic which penalizes L1 use. However, this runs the risk of failing to take advantage of the scaffolding nature of L2 language use (York, 2020), and I do not want students developing negative associations with their L1. Maybe the students can come up with their own rules regarding L1 and L2 usage.[5]

While "Developing Intrinsic Motivation" in students was unclear, "Vocabulary Increase" lacked the data to come to conclusions.

While I did record the sessions, with the permission of the students, because I didn't formulate what I was going for from the start, and didn't formulate research questions, it lacks the proper parameters for drawing better conclusions. That's right, when it comes to finding demostrable results, we didn't really pass the course, but we didn't fail it either. We're going to have to do it again, but this time, with the help of the stat nerds.

So, what do we need to do going forward? How can the stat nerds help us? Here are some ideas for a framework for moving forward.

The analytics will be used to take the next steps: A research proposal

1. Better formulation of research questions

Possible research questions could include:
- Do opportunities for organic grammar practice encountered during gameplay result in better grammar acquisition?

---

[4] Thanks to Jacob Reed and James York for this observation.
[5] Thanks to James York for this suggestion.

- Does the natural flow of conversation experienced during gameplay result in better vocabulary acquisition, and what is the role of the instructor in facilitating it?[6]
- Does the narrative uncertainty experienced during gameplay better prepare students for the unpredictable nature of conversational language?
- Does gameplay result in higher motivation in language learners?

The best methodology for answering these questions seems to be a mixed-methods approach (see Dörnyei, 2007).

2. Quantitative approach

A quantitative approach will help us move past The Eye Test and give us real numbers to crunch. How might we go about doing this?
- Pre and post tests of target vocabulary.
- Pre and post tests of target grammar.
- Noting and comparing the number of times students assist each other vs the number of times the instructor assists the students, which students are doing the assisting, and in which language assistance is taking place.
- A pre and post test Likert scale survey looking into such issues as: student comfort levels when speaking, attitudes towards TTRPGs, motivation, and confidence in L2 use in unexpected circumstances.

3. Qualitative approach

A strictly quantitative approach doesn't seem to quite cover all of the aspects we are interested in, in particular, organic grammar practice, narrative uncertainty, and developing intrinsic student motivation. To better understand what the students are thinking about these issues, we'll have to ask them directly.

Because most of the students I worked with are quite low level, the pre and post interviews would best be done in a written, email, take-home style form. This would give the students plenty of time to think about how they feel, as well as provide them with ample time to use translation apps and formulate responses. Student answers would then have to be coded and analyzed for information.

A problem with this could be that students might feel pressure to give me the sort of responses they think I am looking for. So another option would be taking a more ethnographic approach, where I describe gameplay, adding comments to sections that seem particularly interesting.[7]

Brief reflections on in class use

There are two other contexts in which I have used TTRPGs in the language classroom: (1) In class, with first and second year Korean university students, and (2) with older, adult learners, as part of a free community class my university offers during semester breaks. One might think that an instructor couldn't use these sorts of games in the formal language classroom, but as York (2020) notes, "Even if you are enslaved to the use of an institution-wide textbook, the textbook itself does not predefine a teaching strategy, only the content of instruction" (p.109). This could be done either by integrating games into regular classroom practice, or by getting a week or so (not hard to do with traditional textbooks) and spending some time playing games. The students certainly don't seem to mind the mid-semester respite from those compulsory textbooks. I was concerned that those participating in the community class would not enjoy this type of game based learning; however, student feedback forms indicated they enjoyed our gaming sessions and wanted more.

---

[6] Thanks to James York for noting the importance of the instructor's facilitation.
[7] Thanks to Jonathan deHaan for this suggestion.

During the gaming club sessions, one student developed and controlled one character. This could not be done during classroom gameplay, because there were too many students. So, multiple students controlled one character. While perhaps not ideal, an advantage of this is that they must discuss all of their choices and actions with each other, an opportunity for more L2 practice, or more L1 use as scaffolding (York, 2020). This gives beginner students the chance to use their L2 in smaller, less intimidating groups.

Conclusion

Out of the five categories of interest, only "Organic Grammar Practice" and "Narrative Uncertainty" passed The Eye Test, while "Student-to-Student Language Assistance" failed, and "Developing Intrinsic Motivation in Students" and "Vocabulary Increase" received a "Retake Course." So, what can we say of the project as a whole? If the same grading system is to be applied to the project, it receives a score of "Retake Course." It will have to be done again, using the quantitative and qualitative methods outlined above. As York (2020) points out, "Just as I advocate playing the same game multiple times as a way to build confidence and language comprehension, don't give up on a pedagogical intervention after the first "playtest." Good games were not made in one sitting and neither will your curriculum. It needs to be playtested and iterated a number of times to really shine" (p.109). At this stage, I consider a grade of "Retake Course" to be just fine, and look forward to repeating the project. It certainly was fun.

References

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methodologies.* Oxford.

Johnson, P. (2019). SLA Benefits of Student-Centered Character Creation for Tabletop Role-Playing Games. In D. Shaffer & J. Kimball (Eds.), *KOTESOL Proceedings 2019* (p.197-204). Korea TESOL.

Johnson, P. (May, 2020). Another New Technique? *The Word.* 29(3), p.23-25. https://hawaiitesol.wildapricot.org/resources/Documents/Word/2020%20May.pdf

McDaldno, Joe. (2017) Simple World: A streamlined, generic hack of Apocalypse Word. Use at your own risk. http://buriedwithoutceremony.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/simple-world.pdf

Simmons, B. (n.d.) *The Bill Simmons Podcast.* https://www.theringer.com/the-bill-simmons-podcast

Techopedia. Playtesting. Retrieved on September 24th, 2020 from: https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27197/playtesting

York, J. (2020). It's your moooove: Why teaching with games should be like vaporwave (and not nightcore). *Ludic Language Pedagogy, 2*, p.104-114. https://www.llpjournal.org/assets/publication-pdfs/york-its-your-move-vaporwave.pdf

Wired Staff. (2012, August). Simplifying D&D (You know, for kids?). Wired. https://www.wired.com/2012/08/simplifying-dd/

Wizard's RPG Team. (2014). *The Player's Handbook: Everything a player needs to create heroic characters for the world's greatest roleplaying game.* Renton: WA: Wizards of the Coast.