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An investigation of the language learning opportunities in collaborative dialogues during tabletop game play

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KEY POINTS

Background: Tabletop games have been a frequent addition to task-based classroom activity.

Aim: This study investigates the potential differences in learning opportunities that arise during collaborative dialogues between learners as they play tabletop games that differ in how they utilize player interaction.

Methods: This study uses a qualitative analysis of task transcripts using the construct of the Language Related Episode.

Results: Tasks did not produce any major differences in quality or number of LREs between games, but across games a vast majority of LREs were prompted specifically by cards with text during the game.

Conclusion: Tabletop games may not afford an abundance of specific language talk, but more research is necessary to get a better idea of how learners handle L2 gaps during gameplay.

Tweet Synopsis

Games are a novel means of facilitating peer interaction in a language. Here are how three different games compare. #ludic #EFLinteraction

Background

This article represents the first step in an exploration of learner interaction during play of tabletop games. It reports the findings from a study that follows the lead of previous studies on interaction during collaborative L2 learning (Swain and Lapkin, 1998; Foster and Ohta, 2005) and utilizes the latter's blend of cognitive and sociocultural frameworks in its analysis. The motivation for this research project stems, in part, from my experience as an English teacher in Japan and is also informed by my experience working on a research project regarding collaborative playwriting for which a portion of analysis similarly focused on the quality of peer interaction in collaborative groups (Reid, 2019, 2015). As a high school teacher who was part of a 4-skills program, my lessons incorporated a communicative focus and featured a (mostly) task-based approach that frequently made use of pair and small group work. My students at the time told me they were very enthusiastic players of the game *Werewolf* ('jinro-geimu' in Japanese), which is a social deduction game where players have different roles and, as protecting these identities is advantageous, bluffing and deception are often

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employed. Wanting to let them relax after taking a test one day, I asked them to show me the game. I observed that my students were highly engaged in playing the game, and I also noticed that they seemed to make a greater effort to communicate in English while doing that task than during work on most of the other speaking tasks. I wondered, at the time, if it had as much to do with how the gameplay motivated interaction as it had to do with the morbid theme of the game itself (which doubtlessly added intrinsic appeal for them). It took some time for me to develop a research project, but this experience eventually informed the current study's exploration of learner interaction while playing commercially available tabletop games.

Literature review

To begin a literature review, Sato and Ballinger (2016) provide a useful overview of two broad theories concerning interaction, and peer interaction in particular. To summarize their review, the cognitivist view posits that learners negotiate breakdowns in communication and notice gaps in their own knowledge. Within this negotiation, corrective feedback is valued, and while some may doubt the effectiveness of peers offering this feedback rather than a teacher or native speaker, other research has suggested that many native speakers do not provide feedback that gets noticed and that peer feedback can mitigate concerns about quality due to its higher frequency (Ibid., p.10-11). In contrast, the sociocultural view posits that knowledge is essentially a shared construct that is accessed and distributed through social interaction. From the ideas of Vygotsky, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is, to paraphrase Dunn & Lantolf (1998), a space that represents cognition that has begun to develop but is not fully developed, and is the distance between what a learner can do on their own versus what they could achieve with assistance or guidance from an expert (p.415). This means that some things will remain impossible for learners at their current stage of development, even with intervention from a more capable person, but there is a certain range of knowledge beyond their current level that should be attainable through constructive social interaction.

The relevance to peer interaction is that, while typically, the ZPD assumes a more capable other (such as an adult, or more pertinent to L2 acquisition, a native speaker) is interacting with the learner and providing feedback (Vygotsky was observing children, after all), researchers such as Donato (1994) and Swain and Lapkin (1998) have in recent decades considered contexts such as collaborative dialogues during work on a task when peers (learners in the same class) may assume this role of an expert for one another as a situation allows. These collaborative dialogues can be seen as potentially fertile opportunities for learner language development. Particularly in classes with many students that focus time on group work and purposeful interaction to complete tasks, teachers may not have the ability to provide enough corrective feedback as they rotate between groups and may miss much of the language output of their students. In light of this lack of feedback, Swain and Lapkin (2002) discuss how output allows learners to notice gaps and make efforts to fill them. They also posit that communicative tasks, with their focus on making meaningful output, afford opportunities for learners to notice these gaps, given that they are engaged in social interaction and are trying to negotiate meaning towards mutual comprehension of a given message (p. 99-100). In essence, collaboration frees a language lesson from a teacher-fronted orientation that limits opportunities for feedback.

Swain and Lapkin (1995, 1998) have studied the nature of collaborative dialogues from a cognitivist framework using a unit of analysis called a Language Related Episode (LRE) which can be broadly defined as any stretch of dialogue in which learners discuss the language they are using, including instances in which they might question or correct usage. Adding to this, Foster and Ohta (2005) note that peer assistance may provide the input learners need to advance in their ZPD, as "this gap between individual and joint performance is filled and learners develop increased independence" (p. 414). Therefore, as with their paper, which opined for using both approaches, this paper will make use of a blended cognitive-sociocultural view of peer interaction and investigate collaborative dialogues that occur while engaged in tabletop game tasks. Among LRE studies currently in the literature, one of particular interest to the current study was conducted by Garcia Azkarai and del Pilar García Mayo (2015) that looked into the matter of task modality, as there was little discussion in the relevant research at the time regarding any distinguishing features of peer interaction between writing tasks and speaking tasks. The authors found that writing tasks produced a greater number of LREs that focus on language form while speaking tasks produced a greater amount of LREs that focus on meaning.

This matter of mode raises the question: what type of task could tabletop games be? As far as output is concerned, while they are certainly not writing tasks, they are also certainly not simply speaking tasks in the typical sense either, as the language that players use while playing the game is often inconsequential for how a games' mechanics operate and may have little effect on whether a game is completed successfully, although there are certainly games which go further than most in prescribing specific language for gameplay. At the same time, tabletop games are not purely input tasks either because, while the act of reading the rules and procedures (in the rule book or on cards during the game) and following them to find a winner would qualify as an input task to a certain extent, the games themselves are very much live, dynamic events that allow for interaction and influence between players (such as strategy, diplomacy, or commentary) that is not explicitly controlled in some way by the game but is still arguably very much part and parcel of the experience. Therefore, whether it is the intention of game design or not, many modern tabletop games by their nature foster a lot of output, especially if one considers the current catalog of available titles that focus on team-play or cooperative gameplay. There is very little research that looks into the nature of learner interaction in this unique context, although there is a recent study by York (2020) that approached the matter of interaction by having students undertake transcription of their own interactions as a part of a post-task language focus. The practice was useful for improved language production in subsequent undertakings of the task (the game) but that study was concerned with analyzing development by operationalizing performance with CAF (complexity, accuracy, and fluency) measures of analysis, whereas the current study could complement that vein of research by identifying areas of gameplay or game design that foster moments of explicit language focus within a game.

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As a final matter for this literature review, research into LREs typically involves peer-to-peer interaction, but some studies investigating teacher-to-student LREs are also present, such as Erlam and Tolosa (2022), who observed how teachers either negotiate a focus on form as a reaction to a learner prompt or preemptively initiate a focus on form in anticipation of a knowledge gap. While it is common behavior for teachers to provide such information during a lesson, it is worth considering how peers perform when they temporarily assume such a role for each other as the need or opportunity arises. Sometimes this behavior has an effect on the relationship dynamic of learners working together. Storch (2002, 2001) looked at the dynamics of collaborative pairs, investigating whether peer learners have equal parts to play in undertaking a task and negotiating LREs. Her research suggests four patterns of behavior: collaborative, dominant-dominant (competitive), dominant-passive, and expert-novice. Edstrom (2015) extended this 4-way taxonomy to triads and found similar results: notably, collaborative and expert-novice were superior choices for LREs produced and resolution of those LREs. In line with the sociocultural theory informing both studies, the expert-novice dynamic would most resemble a typical teacher-fronted learning style, as one peer would make efforts to prompt and guide the other in an approach similar to what a teacher might do. It is worth noting that Storch focuses on writing tasks, and in accordance with the matter of task modality from Azkarai and del Pilar García Mayo (2015) mentioned above, I can posit that the existence of an artifact, in this case the text they are writing together, is an actual physical representation of the language that the learners are collaborating to construct, and the ability to access this non-extemporaneous mode freely will facilitate greater attention to grammatical (and mechanical) features. What remains unclear is what happens to such dynamics of collaboration when presented with ostensible speaking tasks that also involve a potentially substantial amount of visual (lexical) and tactile reinforcement as well as procedures for gameplay (task completion) that are expressed with specific language forms.

The current study - A case study of three tabletops games with differing interactive demands

In order to explore peer interaction in tabletop games further, I decided to look for contrastive gameplay experiences for three or four players that afford, and typically require, a greater deal of player interaction than other games, but not to the extent of more 'pure' role-playing game experiences like the popular *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax & Cook, 1989) games, nor games that share a strong allegiance with improvisational games common in actor training. To be clear, this process of evaluation does not consider meta-commentary or general socializing that occurs during gameplay.

While players may engage in off-task talk during the game, the design of the game itself generally has little connection to what players discuss in this space, and thus the reason for its exclusion as a data source.

My selection process drew from my own familiarity with available products as well as a desire to focus on games where interaction is a core mechanic of gameplay. To delineate further, quite a few modern tabletop games seem interactive because they feature component interaction. Common examples of this type of interactivity fall under the commonly known category of "Euro" games, which often feature players interacting with multiple shared spaces in the tactile sense, such as a shared pool of resources or actions. A game like *Catan* (Teuber, 1995) seems interactive, but if one were to predict the quality of interaction in that game from a consideration of the basic procedures and rules, players usually only need to interact to request, or respond to a request, to trade resources, and this trading involves only a small set of contextually relevant language (e.g., 'will you trade me one sheep for two wood?', or more elliptically 'one sheep for two wood?'). My desire was to avoid such games and try to select commercially available titles that enable and encourage players to have more spoken interaction as a part of taking their turns (that is to say, spoken interaction is a more consistent and integral part of the gameplay). Additionally, I also avoided games that are well known and widely available in Japan already, such as the game *Werewolf* (Davidoff & Plotkin, 1986) which was mentioned in the first paragraph, in order to give learners more novel game experiences where they would have opportunities to discuss unfamiliar game features. A brief description and rationale for each selected game is available in Table 1:

Table 1 Selected games, core mechanics and rationale for choosing

Game	Core mechanic	Rationale
Coup (Tahta, 2012)	Bluffing, hidden roles	players may make plays unrelated to the roles and related abilities of each card type. In this style of gameplay, player to player interaction foregrounds negotiation and interrogations as players are within their rights to lie about the cards they have and in an attempt to bluff the other players. This style of game offers the chance for extended communication centered around this bluffing.
Fluxx (Looney & Looney, 1997)	Variable rules	players may change the procedures and limits of how the game is played and won, which necessities consistent checking and enforcement of those rules. In this way, players are encouraged to communicate and remind each other of the current state of the game.
Pandemic (Leacock, 2008)	collaboration	players have asymmetrical roles and must work together to overcome the game's challenge. As there are a limited number of turns to accomplish the objective of stopping the spread of disease, players each have abilities that are useful, especially if coordinated with other abilities. In this way, communication between players is necessary for a greater chance of success.

One obvious feature of this list for many is likely the absence of 'word games'. For this study, I wanted to avoid selecting games with the English language as the focus of play because my previous (albeit anecdotal) evidence suggests that students tend to view those games as if they were educational games purpose-built for language practice., I wanted players to authentically experience games in their L2, but to do so playing games that do not have players explicitly focusing on form, such as spelling as with games like *Scrabble* (Butts, 1948) or *Upwords* (Rudell, 1982) as the core gameplay.

One obvious feature of this list for many is likely the absence of 'word games'.

Before moving on to the study itself, one matter that seldom gets discussed is the question of expertise in regard to a given task itself. In the case of most tasks in the task-based language teaching (TBLT) sense (e.g. see Willis and Willis, 2007, for examples), there is no requirement of any specific skill set or experience in order to attempt them, and in general, as pedagogical work plans (see Ellis, 2003), tasks tend to be structured around simple sequences of activity and needs (compare two pictures for differences, write a summary paragraph about a reading together, share your information and sort it by some ranking criteria, and so on) where engagement is still 'real' but the situation is necessarily pedagogic (e.g. people in the real world likely do not engage in information gaps typical of task-based lessons, but they do likely have to deal with collecting and completing incomplete knowledge as a part of their normal lives). (see Ellis 2017) Opposed to these typical tasks, tabletop games can be tasks as well, but they can be implemented with little or no alteration to their procedures and components. In this sense, they are a type of task that offers learners authenticity of interaction and of situation, as they are undertaking the same activity in the same way that fluent English speakers would undertake it. In other words, tabletop games are real-world activities, and as real-world activities, they require more non-linguistic front-loading in terms of an introduction to the theme and goal of the game, the rules, and the procedures; all of which players need to understand and abide by to successfully complete the task. This type of prerequisite would not be expected of most other normal tasks; learners do not need special training in how to interview someone, how to fill in missing parts of a worksheet, or how to share information, for example. In this way, tabletop games are similar to other examples of classroom activity built around real-world tasks, as certain (read: more authentic) endeavors require, or at least benefit greatly from, knowledge and experience with the same or similar tasks.

To take an example from previous research I have done (Reid, 2019), the implementation of tasks based around theater could require that learners become familiar with the praxis of theater, or at least familiar with what the mode of theater demands, in order to adequately perform during a theater-based task and successfully complete it. For example, dynamics of vocal and corporeal expression need to be perceptible to every part of the audience regardless of distance or angle, so a certain amount of training will raise awareness of this need and how to fulfill it. Now to be clear, a learner does not need to be a theater professional in order to undertake such a task and perform well at it, but it can be said that an understanding of theater and the needs of that mode of communication would be useful in order for a participant to successfully undertake a task (such as an improvised role-play)- thus acknowledging that in the real world, theatrical performance would favor those with the requisite skill set, as it is with any other discipline. In the same way, while many tabletop games can be very simple in their procedures and mechanics, it could also be the case for many other tabletop games with more robust or complex game designs that learners might need familiarity with the basic genre of similar games, if not the chosen game itself, in order to reduce the demands on cognition that learning a new game would bring about. This matter is outside the scope of the current study, but I make mention of it here to opine that it would be prudent to consider skill with games and see if greater familiarity with a game, or a genre of games, has any significant effect on how learners use their L2 to play the game, in the manner of task familiarity found in Robinson (2011), where it would be conceptualized as a resource directing feature.

Methodology

Research Questions

1. What are the salient features of interaction that occur when learners play the tabletop game tasks, operationalized as Language Related Episodes?
2. Are there differences in the quality of Language Related Episodes between the different task conditions?

With the games selected, I can posit several working hypotheses about the nature of interaction during gameplay prior to collecting and analyzing data from a case study. In response to research question 1, two hypotheses were posited.

First, we should expect some amount of language processing to occur as co-construction when players encounter language in the game used for purposes within the game. This processing will likely focus on meaning and the impact on gameplay, but there should be moments in which a focus on

form is necessary to delineate the applicability of a given rule or in-game prompt. Therefore, as tabletop games are speaking tasks at their core, I expect LREs within the game to be almost exclusively meaning-focused, but there should be some form-focused LREs when the finer details of some text (from the rule book or some game component) could have an impact on task progression.

Second, in relation to the first, we can assume that these matters of rules, as well as moments of strategizing between players necessitate, or at the very least encourage, participants to use and reference the L2 to help make sense of how the game is designed to be played, in essence giving voice to the cognitive processes required to meet this demand. Therefore, I anticipate that players may frequently attempt LREs related to this in the L2, although it will likely be carried out with simplified or indexical language (words like pronouns for which the meaning is context-dependent). I make this hypothesis on the assumption that players view the game, including the live experience of orienting themselves to playing the game, as an authentic L2 experience and so they will feel that negotiating the rules of the games and the prompts from various components (such as cards) are intended to be done in the L2 as well.

In regards to research question 2, as for differentiation of tasks, a third and last hypothesis predicts that a truly collaborative experience such as *Pandemic* (Leacock, 2008), where cooperation and coordination between players is essential to game play, should mean a greater amount of dialogue in general, which in turn should engender more LREs that focus on meaning as players seek to clarify positions and possibilities with one another.

Context

This is an experimental study that took place on a university campus. The participants were all familiar with me as they had taken several of my English communication and communications studies courses prior to this research project. This research project had no connection to any course at their university and was conducted during a vacation period between terms.

Participants

The current study is a single case study that features three third year university students in Japan (aged 20-21) enrolled as English majors in a teacher education program. Difference in abilities is unavoidable, but the three participants had relatively similar levels of English ability based on their prior marks in other courses which can be roughly defined as A2 approaching B1 on the CEFR scale. All participants gave informed-consent and were assigned pseudonyms for the purpose of data analysis.

Procedures

The participants in the case study attended two sessions, each session lasting roughly ninety minutes. The groups played Game 1 (*Coup*) first and then Game 2 (*Fluxx*) in the first session, and then Game 3 (*Pandemic*) in the next session one week later. During the start of each game, I explained the rules in English with some Japanese elaboration and had the participants work through a full turn or two of each game to get a handle on how a game's rules operated and the flow of gameplay. Once everyone was satisfied that they understood how to play, they attempted the game on their own. I was situated away from the table but I made myself available for rules clarifications if the need arose.

Each session was recorded on video. To avoid any issue regarding the effects of task repetition, each game was only played once. Given that the games had different durations, I decided to take a sample segment of equal length from the middle of gameplay for each game. As the shortest game took ten minutes to play, I removed the first and last minute of that session and made eight minutes my segment length for analysis. I then selected a random eight minute segment near the middle of gameplay for the other two longer games. For instances in which I was unsure of the Japanese spoken by participants, I enlisted the assistance of a native-Japanese-speaking colleague and provided them with only the snippet of audio in question to check after any identifying information had been removed. Each transcript was coded for LREs as well as group relationship as summarized in the list below.

1. Nature of LREs, adapted from Azkarai and del Pilar García Mayo (2015):

meaning focused	vs.	form-focused
outcome resolved (target-like or non-target like)	vs.	outcome unresolved (addressed or ignored)

2. Group relationship dynamic during LREs, adapted from Storch (2002, 2001):

   collaborative
   expert/novice
   dominant-dominant
   dominant-passive

Results

In line with Ellis and Shintani (2023), it is useful to present negative results in research. The original motivation for the current study was to ascertain if there was a difference in how three tabletop games with differing interactive demands elicited LREs. In the case of this research project, as I will discuss below, the three different task types of tabletop games did not produce any marked difference in a qualitative analysis of LREs. That being said, the results of the different games considered together help to illuminate consistencies in interaction that point to aspects of gameplay that can facilitate language development. What follows now is a discussion of these findings.

Nature of LREs

After coding LREs, it is worth noting at the start that each analyzed segment featured frequent stretches of silence, some as much as twenty to thirty seconds long, as the participants mulled over their options on a moment by moment basis. This sort of behavior was consistent across all three gameplay attempts. Therefore, there often was very little in the way of spoken output to potentially initiate a discussion of language. Looking at Table 3 below, we can see that despite a relatively balanced number of form- and meaning- focused episodes, the form-focused episodes were solely related to mechanics (pronunciation) and not to grammar. Pandemic in particular had a higher number of these episodes in the sample segment.

Table 3 - LRE focus by task type for eight minute gameplay segment

Task	LRE count and focus	resolution	Researcher notes
Fluxx	2 form-focused	1 correct, 1 incorrect	All self-correction of pronunciation
	3 meaning-focused	3 correct	Clarifying rules
Coup	2 form-focused	2 correct	All self-correction of pronunciation
	2 meaning-focused	1 unresolved, 2 correct	word-choice
Pandemic	5 form-focused	3 unresolved, 2 correct	All about pronunciation of city names on cards
	3 meaning-focused		Simplifying text from cards

The greater number of form-focused LREs for Pandemic may not be so surprising if one considers the details of the game's components in contrast to the other games. One of the main features of Pandemic is a world map playing board with 48 different (actual) city locations. These locations also each have two corresponding cards (96 cards in total) that get drawn during the game. Revealing these location cards is a main part of gameplay, so the frequency in which players are prompted to read the place names on cards to other players is at least three times per player turn. Coup features a far fewer number of cards at fifteen, and there are only five card variants. Fluxx features drawing different cards as a frequent feature of play, arguably to a greater extent than Pandemic, but while the

cards often feature names and rules combined, they do not feature as many potentially unfamiliar words for the participants such as Anglicized place names. As the excerpt below from Pandemic shows, these place names in particular prompted moments of language discussion:

Excerpt 1 - *form-focused LRE in Pandemic regarding place name*

1	KANTA:	(reading card) kohl-ka-ta?
2	RYO:	(also reading) ko-ru-katta?
3	SHOTA:	(looking at board) karu-katta?
4		(finds and points) Here. (reads board) Kol-katta.
5	KANTA:	(places a game piece) OK.

Although this seems to be a very simple and short episode, it demonstrates the often indexical and elliptic quality of interaction. At line 1 Kanta reads the card and then looks as Ryo responds to Kanta's attempt with an alternate, but also not accurate, pronunciation. At line 3 Shota, who had not looked at the card but only heard it, repeats, but with a pronunciation more inline with how it would be rendered with Japanese phonemes. He did this as if he recognized the place name, for he soon found the right city space on the map and read the city name with a closer to accurate pronunciation. Ultimately, the three had a chance to support each other, but no one seemed sure of the correct pronunciation in this case, although Shota seemed to understand that the English pronunciation differed a bit from the Japanese one.

Related to this prompt from a card in Pandemic, the balance of focus on meaning and pronunciation found in all three games highlights the integral importance of the cards themselves as the only part of gameplay in the recordings that fostered LREs. Fluxx had three instances of meaning-focused LREs during the analyzed segment. These LREs were about rules because, as the previous section explained, the rules of play for that game are being modified almost every turn by the cards that are played. For example, one rule could be that each player on their turn must draw a card and play a card, but in playing a card, a new rule may be established that each player must now draw five cards instead. In this way, the game makes it necessary for players to keep track of all the current modifications to the original starting rules. In Excerpt 2 below, we can see how this might instigate a meaning focused LRE if one of the players is not clear about what a card's text means.

Excerpt 2 - *Meaning focused LRE in Fluxx regarding rules*

1	RYO:	Draw.
2	SHOTA:	Wha-? Draw? But you have to trash!
3	RYO:	Yeah… oh? What the meaning? (gives card to Kanta)
4	KANTA:	(reading the card) 'No limits. Discard all hands and keeper limits completely in play.' (Gives card to Shota)
5	RYO:	So I have to take these 2 cards?
6	SHOTA:	Hmm. (looking at the card and reading it closely) [3s.]
7		AH, Keeper. (…) Yes. The keeper and hand limit is over.
8	RYO:	OK. (plays the card and discards two other previously indicated cards from the playing area).
9	KANTA:	-OH my gosh.
10	SHOTA:	And keep this card.. (…) So you can keep a lot of cards.
11	RYO:	OK. Ok.

In this excerpt, Ryo initiates an LRE about the text of a card he is holding in Line 3. Kanta reads the card but does not seem to understand what is written on it as he immediately gives it to Shota. Ryo checks his own comprehension by identifying the consequence of the card and asks on line 5 if playing the card means that he can remove two current cards from play (which is correct for the 'No Limits' card in question). Shota responds to this by recasting the language on the card in line 7 and confirming Ryo's understanding. Kanta seems to understand the consequences at this time and on line 10 follows up by explaining further effects on the game from playing the card. So in this excerpt, the text of a previously held card leads to one of the players initiating a LRE about the rule. The only uncertainty is to what degree the language was understood, but the effect on the game was not

uncertain. So, given that Kanta quickly understands Shota's recast, it is possible that a specific issue with the language on the card, such as the meaning of the word 'discard', may have been the gap in this episode.

Coup represents a middle ground between the collaborative interactivity of *Pandemic* and the consistent rules maintenance of *Fluxx*. It featured a similar spread of LREs over ten minutes of game play. As interactive as bluffing games might appear to be (and that is certainly the way I had observed them to be), the reality of a game like *Coup* is that once rules are established, there is actually very little necessity for verbose interaction, as Excerpt 3 below will help to illustrate.

the reality of a game like Coup is that once rules are established, there is actually very little necessity for verbose interaction.

Excerpt 3 - *A sample of interaction in Coup*

1 SHOTA: I have duke, so three coins.
2 KANTA: Yeah. (laughing) (…)
3 RYO: Mm…
[6 s.]
4 KANTA: OK. I'll do foreign aid.
5 SHOTA: Foreign aid?
6 KANTA: Yes.
7 SHOTA: Oh. (…) I block.
8 KANTA: Challenge.
9 SHOTA: Duke? Challenge?
10 KANTA Yes.
11 SHOTA: OK. [turns over card]
12 KANTA: Oh, really? OK. (…) [picks card to discard] OK.
13 SHOTA: Assassin? OK.
14 KANTA: No assassin.
15 RYO: Owari? [Are you finished?]
16 KANTA: No. Captain, so I take 2 coins. (…) [to 2] It's your turn.
17 RYO: (…) I'm captain.
18 KANTA: Oh? Captain, too?
19 RYO: Yup. 2 captains.
20 KANTA: You also have a captain?
21 SHOTA: Wow. 2 captains.

As the excerpt makes clear, the language production of the three players is quite elliptical and indexical. At the start, Shota performs the action of the Duke card and simplifies the explanation of taking three coins from the center pool to just 'three coins'. The role's name could stand in for the action, as it did for Ryo at line 17, so players did not always feel compelled to announce themselves taking the action as Kanta does at line 4 and again at line 16. This might be indicative of a language gap between them, but more data would be necessary. In line 9, Kanta thinks Shota is bluffing and announces this with only the word 'challenge' at line 8. Bluffing, which here is conceived to include another player attempting to question the veracity of an action, seems like a fruitful opportunity for meaningful banter, but in truth, as this example clearly shows, calling another player's bluff can involve very little discussion at all; one need only to announce a challenge to a bluff and the show the card. If players know the abilities on each card, there is no need for much spoken interaction to resolve that called bluff (the challenging player loses a card for calling a bluff wrongly, but their opponent loses a card if the bluff was called correctly). Moreover, *Coup* has only a small set of card types, and text in the game overall is limited to explanation of each role's abilities on their respective cards, which is duplicated on a player quick guide. This means that there are no other in-game components, such as cards, that have text that can meaningfully affect the rules of gameplay and which students must interact with and reconcile in order to continue. *Coup* did feature the only LRE that was not initiated by a card (Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4 - *a meaning-focused LRE in Coup*

1 RYO: Turnover?
2 SHOTA: You have to… You have to… Trash
3 RYO: Trash?
4 SHOTA: Yes. Trash assassin.

In this brief excerpt, Shota thinks Ryo is bluffing and calls his bluff. The 'turnover' on line 1 refers to revealing the card, at which point Shota sees that Ryo was bluffing. At this moment, he wants to follow the rules he learned from me, but he cannot remember the word 'discard', so he eventually settles on 'trash', which is likely a direct translation from the Japanese 'gomi ni suru' (throw away [as garbage]). Ryo does not seem to understand this usage of trash fully, so Shota confirms on line 4 by recasting the instruction to Ryo to discard the assassin card that he had just revealed. For this excerpt, Ryo seemed to think something was not quite right on line 3 (in the video he scratched his head and looked at Shota at this point) but Shota did not seem to think that Ryo's gap was due to an incorrect word choice on his part, and thus he repeated his choice as if to confirm this. This LRE stems from an application of a rule that they learned when I taught them how to play the game. 'Discard' again seems to be a word that is hard for even Shota to recall without seeing it.

Pandemic, in contrast, has a number of unique one-time use ability cards which players acquire during the game, and typically someone teaching the game to others (as I did) would not introduce every one of these cards and their effects. It is clear from the data that this feature of gameplay encouraged meaning-focused language related episodes as these cards became available for play during the game. Compare Excerpt 3 above to Excerpt 4 and 5 below.

Excerpt 5 - *Rules related meaning-focused LRE in Pandemic*

1 SHOTA: (watches RYO place a cube, points to RYO's card)
(to KANTA) My ability is used?
(KANTA looks at 3's role card but doesn't respond)
2 My ability is (begins reading card) prevent disease cub-
3 (.) prevent disease cube. So, I prevent.
4 KANTA: OK. Nice job!
5 RYO: OK. (*seems to understand)

Excerpt 6 - *Rules related meaning-focused LRE in Pandemic*

1 KANTA: First treat this disease.
(As KANTA does his move, RYO points at SHOTA's card)
2 RYO: I think you should better use this card as soon as possible I think.
(SHOTA leans over and starts to read the card)
3 KANTA: Move to here and take two pieces.
4 RYO: (motioning to the card) What here?
5 KANTA: (notices them) What?
6 SHOTA: (after reading) remove any 1 card (shows it to KANTA)
9 KANTA: (reading) You may remove any 1 card from the infection dec-
(inaudible- reads on silently)
10 Ah! (Reading noises as he reads again)
12 SHOTA: I can choice?
13 KANTA: Yeah, maybe.-
14 RYO: - Yeah. I think.
(They look at the board)
15 You can remove the card of Istanbul. (pointing to the deck of cards)

Both of these excerpts from *Pandemic* demonstrate the way in which cards prompt meaning-focused LREs during gameplay. They both also involve the instantaneous play of a card or character ability that one of the player's already has in their possession. In excerpt 4, Shota initiates a brief LRE to check his understanding and ask if his play is valid. However, Kanta does not seem to understand the card as he offers no confirmation. Shota then decides to read the card, so that Ryo can be reminded as well, but

after starting this, Shota seems to verify for himself that his understanding is correct and he simplifies the card's language to explain it to them on line 3.

In excerpt 5, while Kanta is taking his turn, Ryo seems to remember something as he points at a card that Shota had acquired a little bit earlier. As Kanta is about to continue his turn, he notices them talking. When Ryo shows Kanta the card, Kanta does not seem to fully understand the card as he stops reading and tries again, but seems to realize something soon. Shota also seems to understand the card now and, as with excerpt 2, he confirms his understanding by asking if he is the one who chooses. Ryo confirms this and suggests a card to remove. In this way, Ryo checked his own understanding of the card by seeing if either Kanta or Shota understood what it meant for their next move. This makes more sense if you realize that at the start of excerpt 5, Kanta was removing game pieces called infection cubes from places on the board, and Ryo likely realized that removing that location's card from the game would prevent future infections from happening on that space.

Group Dynamics during LREs

The matter of the in-task relationship between group members is also worthy of some analysis, as the excerpts shown above often feature a relationship between them that skirts the edge of collaborative work towards something resembling an expert-novice orientation. It is worth noting that neither the dominant or passive role appeared in any identifiable amount, suggesting that whoever assumed the role of the expert looked to maintain active contributions from the other player(s). In this case study, although all three participants were from the same class and program, Shota seemed to function most often as leader of sorts, that is to say, a more capable other. The frequency and breadth of his involvement in Excerpts 1,2,4, and 5 show that he is comfortable assuming a more active 'expert' role in an LRE, and he can be observed to recast content for the benefit of his peers. At the same time, as excerpt 6 shows, he is also capable of a more balanced, collaborative approach to negotiating language gaps as a reaction to Ryo initiating an LRE. In that case, it could also be said that he may not have fully understood the effect on his card. Given that the discussion is tightly bound to the context of the game itself, it may be difficult to construct and maintain an extensive episode about language, especially when the game and its demands are commanding attention and cognitive processing at the same time that often lead to long stretches of silence. As an opportunity for learning, given that some research suggests learners prefer practicing with their peers and feel a greater responsibility to monitor each other's language use, moments like the LREs discussed above are still good opportunities for contextualized focus because learners might be more comfortable with their peers providing corrective feedback or anticipating language gaps.

Discussion

The findings above allow me to answer both of my research questions. In regard to research question 1, the gameplay of all three games did not feature a dominance of meaning-focused LREs as predicted, but rather featured a relative balance of both form-focused and meaning-focused LREs that were (with one exception) prompted by a card with explanatory text being used during the game. This means that, outside of the one noted exception, the participants did not initiate LREs during other interactions, such as talking about general strategy. The form-focused LREs were exclusively about pronunciation, and the meaning focused LREs always related to the wording of the game's rules. As for my second hypothesis predicting frequent LREs as players discussed the rules and strategized out loud, this hardly occurred at all. In fact, in the 8-minute segment analyzed in this study, the only discussion about strategy (that coincidentally initiated an LRE) occurred because of attention being drawn to the text on a player's card (Excerpt 6), rather than a discussion strictly between players talking strategy. This may have been a matter of the participants communication style preferences (and possibly cultural in nature), or it may just be the nature of these type of tabletop games in general, but all the same, it is worth noting that the three players in these games did not engage in much of any game-related talk without that talk referring to and indicating a specific bit of written text.

In regard to research question 2, my third hypothesis was that a cooperative game like *Pandemic* would produce more meaning-focused LREs but there was no particular difference between the three task types in terms of LRE focus or quality. In fact, there were more form-focused LREs, although these tended to be of shorter duration. Moreover, they were confined to pronunciation issues, which is similar to the other two task types. As mentioned in the analysis, Pandemic features many Anglicized

place names and given how many Japanese pronunciations of certain cities around the world can differ from English, it is not at all surprising perhaps that matters of place names promoted a higher number of brief form-focused episodes. It is also a possible reason for the higher number of these LREs compared to *Fluxx* or *Coup*.

Outside of these hypotheses, one further consideration here is the phenomenon in tabletop gaming circles of 'quarterbacking'. This is when, even in L1 contexts, a certain player tends to dominate discussion and takes the most active role in making decisions. To be sure, this is a behavior that can likely be found in most, if not all, collaborative contexts, but in relation to L2 learning, it could be a contributing factor to one learner disproportionately leading and resolving any issues that initiate LREs. This was not exactly what seemed to transpire in this case study. Instead, from observations across the three games, there is evidence to suggest that one of the players (Shota) felt more confident in their ability to assist others with language issues during the game. This should be seen as a good thing, because it shows that interaction in this context allows a peer to assume the role of an expert when the occasions afford and foster potential language development with corrective feedback from peers rather than the teacher. Indeed, players of a game will likely be enjoying that game, and if moments of dialogue about language help them to enjoy that game further, this may be a positive boost to motivation.

Interactive games were selected on the observation that their game design potentially fostered greater amounts of peer to peer interaction and, in contrast, many other games require very little in the way of spoken interaction to actually play. As far as why learners would interact with one another, the design of a collaborative game has the most obvious answer: players need to communicate in order to properly align their movements and abilities and achieve victory together. Games with a bluffing mechanic similarly require players to announce their moves and respond to the moves of others if an attempted bluff is apparent. In the greater realm of similar games, hidden role games do not require, but certainly might encourage, greater deliberation between players if a choice such as acceptance or rejection is at stake.

The three games used in this study suggest that, at least for these more interactive games, there is some evidence here to suggest that it might not be player-to-player discussion that initiates LREs but perhaps player interface with additional input from the game itself, in this case text on cards. Indeed, of the three games studied here, all the meaning-focused LREs were prompted by written text, either on cards or player aids. There might yet be plenty of games that give rise to meaning-focused LREs that stem from something a player said, but the current study can only conclude that for this case study featuring intermediate level L2 English speakers, text was a necessary prompt for both meaning-focused and form-focused LREs. With regard to the latter, it is actually hard to imagine many games during which a grammatical aspect of English would be a point of focus. More likely would be players recalling rules explanations and wanting to distinguish between, for example, 'can play one card' and 'must play one card'. While this did not result in an LRE during game play of *Fluxx*, others playing the game might have rules clarifications to start an LRE, but then again, this rule would be presented on a card in play, thus continuing the mentioned trend of cards being crucial for initiation of LREs.

Limitations and Future directions

With all of the above stated, the following limitations of the current study can be seen as necessary considerations for future steps. Firstly, the three games that I selected for analysis were chosen based on differences that I identified regarding how each game's design necessitates interaction for different reasons. It could well be the case that my selection process did not consider other available games that also contrast in how they engender and encourage player interaction. Also, it is likely the case that my three participants took great pains to only use English, although they share an L1, resulting in a rather threadbare discourse. One consideration in the future is to expand the available data by having other groups attempt similar games, as well as gathering data from both lower level learners, higher level learners, and native speakers. Then we can better ascertain whether the relative paucity of interaction that can facilitate language learning is a result of the mode of tabletop games themselves or a matter of learner profile.

For a second limitation, as mentioned in my research design, I eschewed 'word games' from my selection of games for this study as I wanted to avoid games that overtly draw player attention to language since I felt participants would likely view such games as elaborately contextualized drills. That being stated, I could easily hypothesize that commercially available tabletop games that involve language as a more direct focus of play would likely be a superior means of fostering LREs if the details of meaning or form are a critical part of a game's design.

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On that point, however, games like *Scrabble* (Butts, 1948) or charades or *Pictionary* might not actually bring about very much language discussion at all outside of one player not knowing a word. To think about this further, we can turn attention to other games that are not 'word games' but have a focus on language through demands in the game design for creative language production, such as *Apples to Apples* (Kirby & Osterhaus, 1999) or *Say Anything* (Crapuchettes & Pillalamarri, 2008) where judges elicit explanations from each player about their word choices. Going further into creativity, consider the game *Dixit* (Roubira, 2008): it involves players trying to craft well worded clues that only some of the other players will understand, and it has a lot more potential for inventive language use. Yet in spite of this design feature, the nature of *Dixit*'s gameplay is not actually all that verbally interactive within the game itself (although discussion after each round could certainly reference language from the game and initiate an LRE).

A further limitation related to game selection regards the duration of playtime. Tabletop games offer an enormous range of experiences, and even games with apparent similarities of design can differ greatly in how long it takes players to complete them. In the current study, three games were selected based on differences in how interaction was prompted by the game design. This had the consequence of producing games of different durations, with *Coup* taking around ten minutes, *Fluxx* taking around twenty-five minutes, and *Pandemic* taking around sixty minutes. The decision was made to take a segment of equal length from each game, but it should be noted that longer games may very well produce more LREs overall, but it is the frequency of LREs that might matter more to some teachers. In order to get an average segment of longer duration (up to the length of a full playthrough), possible effects of task repetition would arise for some but not all the games, which would complicate the analysis further. This being stated, a further study could be designed to investigate both average LRE counts and the potential effects of task repetition, but this matter was beyond the scope of the current study.

A final question for consideration concerns the focus of research: would it be beneficial to view tabletop games more holistically for this kind of analysis and consider all learner output? As an exploration, the current study wanted to maintain a narrow focus on a measure of learner interaction, the LRE, that has been identified as a potential opportunity for language development. Is it worth considering how different games affect interaction in general, thereby considering matters such as engagement much more seriously? Would a comparison of the language production measures (complexity, accuracy, lexis, and fluency) be a better way to see the potential benefit of different game types?

In conclusion, even if research in SLA wants to move on to other aspects of tasks, tabletop games are an underrepresented topic for L2 acquisition research and still have some catching up to do. This under-representation may be understandable for teachers and researchers who consider them as merely recreation, but should be hard to understand for academics and teachers alike who consider how popular and engaging games are for many students. Tabletop games are a unique undertaking, being a shared activity in a shared space. The abstraction of most games is balanced by the very real nature of interaction between players sharing the experience of playing the game. Tabletop games can likely find a place within a task-based or project-based curriculum, such as what is outlined in York (2020), and many of them might actually be a good means of discriminating learners' language knowledge and skills. Further research into the aspects that make tabletop games the unique experiences they are —the tactile components, the proximity of players sharing the same play space,

the themes and abstract representation of those themes in the game— research into these features could do much to unlock their full potential.

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