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A Phenomenological Study: Exploring Chinese Junior High School Students' Lived Experiences and Perceptions of Using Game-based Technology to Learn English in an English as Foreign Language Classroom in Shanghai, China (EFL-C)

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to determine the efficacy of a video game called Scribblenauts based on the lived experiences of 30 junior high Chinese students in Shanghai. This study sought to understand English language acquisition and critical thinking skills using game-based learning in classrooms in China. Ten, thirty-minute long interviews, 3 hour-long focus group sessions and documentation data were collected from 30 Chinese Junior high school students. This data was then analyzed and categorized thematically. The study concluded that video games like Scribblenauts can be useful in the classroom when the environment within the video game:

- connects gameplay with learning
- allows students to be creative, learn new vocabulary
- allows students to collaborate and take-action to solve problems in real time

Problem Statement

English language teaching in public schools in China has often been described as primarily based on traditional rote memorization and drilling techniques. Such environments emphasize learning vocabulary words, recitation of texts, and learning prescriptive grammar rules. This method of teaching language is known as the Grammar-Translation method, which predominates in China (Liu, Lin & Wiley, 2016). This method results in linguistic deficiencies in students, who risk underdeveloped or absent communicative competence to express themselves coherently after many years of study (Wei & Su, 2008).

There is increasing evidence to support the perception that video games could be effective learning tools in the language-learning classroom. Video games can potentially serve to create more dynamic and communicative classrooms in China. The rationale for using Scribblenauts in this study was that it is a Commercial Off the Shelf (COTS) video game that can be utilized in the classroom to support students in developing their language abilities (Fisher, 2014). Scribblenauts has also been described as an educational literacy video game (Curry, 2005), which Guzmán Duque, Fernández and Del Moral Pérez (2017) believed would be useful in helping non-native language learners develop their competencies in foreign languages. Finally, while Scribblenauts is designed for single players, its basic set up allows for the possibility that children can engage collaboratively in gameplay (Go, Ballagas & Spasojevic, 2012). The research questions that guided this research were:

1. How do Chinese junior high school, lower secondary school English as Foreign Language (EFL) students describe the influence of a video game on their ability to acquire English?
2. How do Chinese junior high school, lower secondary school English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners describe how playing video games contributes to developing skills such as creativity, innovation, and problem solving while acquiring English?
3. How do Chinese junior high school, lower secondary school English as Foreign Language (EFL) students describe their collaboration with peers while playing a video game?

Research Findings

This study found that Scribblenauts motivated and enabled students to engage in persistent, collaborative gameplay that stimulated vocabulary development as well as promoted student creativity and problem-solving skills. Chinese Junior high school students preferred utilizing games like Scribblenauts to traditional teacher-led forms of instruction because students believed gameplay was exciting and helped them learn useful vocabulary words. They further believed the ability to brainstorm multiple solutions to problems helped them to learn as they collaboratively explored the video game.

Conclusion

The study's conclusions are as follows:
1. Games like Scribbelnauts can be useful in the classroom for promoting creativity and problem solving.
2. The sustained interest of students as they collaboratively engaged in gameplay had a positive effect on their language learning.
3. Students are active in determining the value of using technology in the classroom. Overall, students prefer using technology to study English in comparison to the traditional grammar translation method.
4. Students perceive the ability to be creative and explore in game play as critical to the development of their creativity and problem-solving skills.

These findings are significant as they provide evidence suggesting that games like Scribblenauts can be useful in improving students' second language acquisition. In addition, video games like Scribblenauts encourage and motivate students to collaborate to solve problems creatively. These findings suggest that using video games in the classroom can be an effective alternative to the grammar translation method.

Future Research

Future research could include studies that increase the number and variety of participants in studies that utilize video games as well as assign clear roles for students to undertake when collaborating with each other. Studies should also connect such games to school curricula objectives as well as be longitudinal in nature. Schools can create embedded course curricula objectives that center on using game-based learning technology to teach English. Schools can also allow students a voice in determining which technology should be utilized in the classroom as well as train staff and invest in resources to ensure all students have the opportunity to use technology.

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Author Biography

Dr. William Clifton Green II is an educator, researcher and startup founder who has been active in Shanghai, China for the past ten years. He has been pivotal in the creation of the Meiying Foreign Language Training Institute, which currently has 550 students and 22 members of staff. Under William's guidance, the center has expanded with two directly owned centers in Shanghai as well as a Franchise center in Pudong New District, which is also located in the city. William currently serves as CEO of the educational organization.

Over the past 10 years, William has been involved in Curriculum Development and teacher appraisal at Shanghai United International School. He has actively contributed to the Week Ahead educational newsletter organized by Wellington College Shanghai. The articles that he contributed were related to educational values, school-wide inclusion and differentiated support for students. In addition, William has helped create IELTS test-prep content for City & Guild's online IELTS preparatory course. William is a certified IELTS examiner and has invigilated the exam at universities in China.

William is also a certified K-12 teacher in the District of Columbia and has taught English in China, Japan and the United States. Overall, William favors a more eclectic approach to language teaching, learning, and syllabus design. He believes that designing a syllabus should be, first and foremost, learner centered. As such, he believes that learners must be provided with the opportunity to develop their autonomy and must interact interdependently with teachers and fellow students in order to enjoy the benefits of a learner centered syllabus.

William is a language learning enthusiast. He has passed the level 5 HSK (Advanced Chinese proficiency exam). He has also passed the level 2 Japanese Language Proficiency Test. He speaks some Korean as well. He utilizes his experiences learning languages to support student language learning and development.

Most recently, William completed his Ed.D in Educational Leadership and Management at Drexel University. His doctoral research focused on the use of technology in the classroom to promote Chinese junior high school students' language and 21st century skill development. As a result of this research, William's organization is actively seeking to promote student language learning through utilizing technology that has been aligned to curricula objectives.