

Examining the Role of Multiplayer Online Games in Enhancing Communicative Competence: Insights from Kuwaiti Students

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Abstract: *This research investigates how multiplayer online games MMORPGs affect the communicative competence of Kuwaiti students learning English as a foreign language. The study identifies how MMORPGs offer an immersive environment for students to enhance their language skills, focusing on collaboration and interaction with native speakers. The research also highlights the impact of motivation and the communities of practice within the game, suggesting the potential of MMORPGs to boost second language acquisition by reducing anxiety and fostering engagement.*

Keywords: multiplayer online games, communicative competence, second language acquisition, Kuwaiti students, MMORPG

1. Introduction

Computer and platform video gaming have grown tremendously in recent years, and as of 2022 the industry had a market cap of more than \$200 billion (Grand View Research). The invention of the web 2.0 revolutionized the gaming industry, enabling almost every individual that has access to a fast and cheap internet connection to interact with each other across the world and indulging themselves in fascinating entertainment simultaneously. Many researchers in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Computer - Assisted Language Learning (CALL) have focused their research and studies on the impact that the activity of playing such stimulating games can have on the ability of English learners to acquire communicative competence (Gee, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Beavis et. al., 2015).

1.1 Purpose of the study

This study aims to investigate the impact of multiplayer online games on enhancing communicative competence among Kuwaiti students learning English as a second language. Although literature on this topic is abundant, this research can be related to other contexts where English is being taught as a foreign language similar to the Kuwaiti context. It is generally noticed in Kuwaiti public schools that learners possess some knowledge about vocabulary and grammar rules, but they lack communication skills. This echoes the notion that many intermediate learners in Kuwaiti schools lack the ability to employ what vocabulary and grammar they know in an intelligible sentence to communicate properly, which in return can leave an adverse impact on their motivation and transform them into students who are reluctant to participate in the classroom because of anxiety and lack of confidence.

1.2 Significance of the study

This study is significant as it explores a modern, technology driven approach to language learning, offering insights into how multiplayer online games can supplement traditional

classroom instruction and address communication challenges in second language acquisition. It is the job of teachers and instructors of language to identify the learner's need. Overall, learners – particularly the younger ones – have no clear idea of their language needs; in fact, evident discrepancies exist between what learners think they need and where their actual weakness lies (Benson et al., 2011). In other words, while some Kuwaiti intermediate learners have a considerable amount of vocabulary grammar concepts in their repertoire, they lack confident communicative skills which are essential for better utilizing that language knowledge that they have built during the several years of studying.

This study examines communicative competence through the lens of contextual frameworks that includes the willingness to communicate and the communities of practice and their role in learning within massive multiplayer online games. The category of games that will be explored here involves commercial off - the - shelf games (COTS) games which are designed basically for fun, not for learning purposes. We will also look at the main characteristics of massive multiplayer online role - playing games (MMORPG) and their potential in developing learners' communicative competence, in addition to the role of motivation and collaboration that arise within those games and how they can effectively enhance communicative competence.

2. Communicative Competence, The Willingness to Communicate and Communities of Practice in MMORPG

As human beings, we need to express ourselves clearly to achieve a proper interaction with others and to communicate effectively and efficiently when using a common language (e. g. Arabic, English, and French) and producing a verbal exchange. The communicative techniques that are still used in courses textbooks in intermediate level Kuwaiti schools are outdated. They usually consist of role playing and repetitive drills that do not always serve the learners need in every aspect of class communication.

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Hymes (1972) coined the term *communicative competence* as the knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of language use appropriate to a given context (Hymes 1972 cited in (Cetinavci, 2012 p.3446). Chomsky defined it as “the speaker’s inventory of language knowledge and as the actual performance of language in different verbal or written contexts” (Chomsky 1959 cited in (Swaffar, 2006 p.246).

Krashen (1982) states that learning any language in an artificial setting (e. g. classroom) is different from acquiring it in its own environment. However, Duquette (1995) claims that “in the interest of producing students who command excellent communication skill, we must also produce students who are competent in their social skills” (p.47). This means that classroom activities and interaction must properly consider real life situations and emulate them carefully, so that communication skills and social skills are reiterated simultaneously with language learning and acquisition. According to Alptekin (2002) there are four competencies that make up for communicative competence, namely: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Although learners learn about the four competencies in the classroom, they still learn them through a fixed setting governed by the course books and curriculum. This comes in drastic contrast to the environment of online gaming where players communicate freely and get in touch with the native speakers of the target language (L2) or with other competent users of L2.

The willingness to communicate (WTC) within the classroom is sometimes measured by the learner’s communicative competence; communication and practice speaking plays a major role in the modern language learning pedagogy (MacIntyre et al., 2003). MacIntyre et al., (1998) states that the WTC is the final step before the use of L2. Moreover, one of the main reasons learners in Kuwaiti intermediate schools are reluctant to participate as mentioned earlier is their lack of satisfactory communicative skills. MacIntyre and Doucette (2010) state that:

“L2 communication can be conceptualized as either an activity in the here - and - now or a regular pattern of activity. With respect to the former, we might find a person who, though generally willing to communicate in the L2, keeps quiet for any number of reasons; she feels disinterested, distracted, anxious, bored, sad, sleepy, or is giving another person a turn. However, if this reticence is habitual, her teachers might be more concerned that she consistently refuses to communicate in the L2. ” (p.161).

Overall, there is a tendency among Kuwaiti school pupils to fall into the second category of L2 communication as described by MacIntyre and Doucette. In fact, their continuous avoidance of L2 communication inside the classroom is seen as a significant indicator of the inexistence of communicative competence. Consequently, teachers must try different approaches to compensate for that.

Learners are often anxious to make mistakes in front of their peers, and therefore, it is the responsibility of teachers to try to adopt the most suitable pedagogical methods that can ensure the creation of ample opportunities in the classroom to

engage learners consistently. Communicative language teaching or CLT promotes pair or group work as one of the main learning activities, where learners are required to communicate only using L2. The main aim is to maximize the exposure of students to L2, make them participate in a communicative only activity and hoping that it will lead them eventually to achieve communicative competence. Producing the target language is an important contributing factor to eventual success in language acquisition (Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1995, cited in Reinders and Wattana, 2014 p.101).

Wenger (1998) states that we arrange the classrooms to isolate the learners from the outside world where they learn explicitly and grade them individually and use exams to assess their learning process which always put learners under a huge pressure. Learners practice L2 within the classroom community where there are established rules written by the ministry of education, “we belong to communities of practice at home, at work, at school, in our hobbies” (Wenger, 1998). However, learning is not a separate activity that only occurs in the classroom. As we take part in various communities like Facebook groups, internet forums, Twitter and many more, we are on constant move from community to another learning new information about a plethora of subjects including languages. And we use with great motivation what we learn within the communities that we are part of, which are referred to as Communities of Practice (CoP).

Lave and Wenger (1991) defined CoP “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.98). Learners in MMORPG are engaged with each other in their own virtual world where they share their expertise and passion about the game they play together. According to Wolf (2007), the tools that are provided by the MMORPG support the building of CoP. He further states that the domain, the community and the practice which are the main blocks of CoP are present in MMORPG, as most of those games have English interface, most learners find themselves practicing English while they play, reading online forums that are related to the game and manuals just to progress and level up their character. As they communicate spontaneously, they are motivated to listen, speak, read and write in L2 within their virtual community.

Virtual communities provide learners of English as L2 with a safe and stimulating environment. Clément’s social context model suggests that the frequent and pleasant contact with a group of native speakers who use L2 as their mother tongue will lead to variation in the L2 confidence, composed of perception of communicative competence and low levels of anxiety (Clément et al., 2003). The decrease of anxiety will eventually feed into an enhanced level of motivation to communicate which plays a major role in developing communicative competence.

McCroskey and Richmond (1991) defined WTC as the intention to initiate communication when the choice was given (Zarrinabadi et al., 2014). Observing the traditional classrooms within intermediate school in Kuwait, WTC is being impacted by various variables like motivation and the teacher’s wait time. In addition, many researchers have investigated the main variables effecting learners’ WTC and

have found that “several variables such as motivation (Hashimoto 2002), the size of the group, familiarity with interlocutors (Cao and Phillip 2006), the topic of the discussion, the teacher’s wait time (Zarrinabadi 2014; Kang 2005; Cao and Phillip 2006), and teachers’ support or interaction strategy (Lee and Ng 2009; MacIntyre, Burns, and Jessome 2011) influenced learners’ WTC” (Zarrinabadi et al., 2014).

Furthermore, SLA theories frequently emphasize the role of vocabulary learning. Learners learn vocabulary explicitly inside the classrooms, but outside the classrooms they learn new lexical items implicitly. The virtual reality context creates a rich environment for learners to acquire vocabulary, due to creating an interactive and motivating context where learners can easily and subconsciously share their information (Ashraf et al., 2014). Online games create an enjoyable environment resulting in a positive reinforcement of vocabulary acquisition. One possible explanation is that students welcome a higher degree of autonomy in their learning and they tend to be in control of their own learning when learning from vocabulary websites with games (Yip and Kwan, 2006).

The pedagogical implications vary from context to another, for example, in our context where we used to work as English language teachers in an intermediate school in Kuwait, learners perceived English as a foreign language which would create a gap between them and the teacher unless the teacher can find a way to bridge the gap between classroom English and extramural English. In our case, we were familiar with the most popular online games that are played by most of my learners, and we could relate what vocabulary they encounter in the games to what they learn in the classroom. Indeed, knowing learners favorite extramural activities helps to facilitate learning. Furthermore, Rankin, Gold, Gooch (2006) (as cited in Reinders, 2012) discovered that a group of Russian young learners who actively participated in MMORPG showed a distinctive enhancement of their vocabulary skills.

There have been several studies that have found how video games can boost vocabulary learning and improve listening and reading abilities (Reinders et al., 2012). Purushotma (2005) claims that such benefits come from strong contextual and visual cues found in the games, but they argue in the same time that they do not enhance reading and writing skills because the lack of communication abilities of the players, although the design and characteristic of modern MMORPG games offer multimodal ways of communications.

3. MMORPG Design and Characteristics

MMORPGs offer a rich environment for communication, and this has been made possible thanks to the expanding and development of web 2.0. This in turn enabled the designers of MMORPGs to embed in them multimodal communication features that learners use to interact and communicate within a social context of its own. Such context can conveniently allow for human communication which “relies on a dynamic information exchange of several communication channels” (Regenbogen et al., 2013 p.1). The communication tools that are used within these games are instant synchronous text chat

messaging, which is a type of technology that allows users to transfer texts messages between computers quasi - instantaneously (Wigham and Chanier, 2015); voice chat, which is used constantly and simultaneously by players of these game to communicate; a multimodal feature, which combines a few communication channels together and therefore tends to develop the strategic competence of the active conversers. Learners lacking grammar or vocabulary skills may feel encouraged and motivated to use the multimodal feature.

MMORPGs can be traced back to the 1970s when early theme - based adventure games such as Multi - User Dungeons (MUDS) emerged (Peterson, 2010). These games occur in a virtual world which is filled with tasks and quests that players are required to complete through collaboration and communication. The use of text chat as the primary means of communication between the users within a game has been enhanced by allowing the use of voice communication tools (Peterson, 2010). Such games are usually designed to make the learners interact with the whole virtual world environment; they create sequential problems which are represented in the requirements needed to complete certain tasks and quests. Such problems include puzzles, which are great stimulus that drive learning, and knowledge advances through social negotiation and evaluation of individual understanding (i. e., its ‘viability’) (Savery & Duffy, 1996; Reinders, 2012). These are the three key constructivist tents according to Savery and Duffy.

4. Collaboration and Motivation

English is generally regarded as the lingua franca of the world, and consequently most developers of MMORPG create their games interface in English first and foremost. When immersed in the game, users from around the world find themselves interacting and communicating in English. In the game - based language learning literature, it has been noted and empirically observed that collaborative dialogues prevail in digital games such as World of Warcraft (WOW), where many tasks require collaboration (Sylvén and Sundqvist, 2012). Indeed, WOW is an English interfaced MMORPG in which learners use many text messages and voice chat simultaneously. They find themselves unintentionally using English as L2 in the presence of native speakers that they need to collaborate with. This creates for them a suitable opportunity to interact and develop their communicative competence.

Learners need to acquire certain cognitive skills to be able to comprehend the tasks and quests providing the ideal environment for language learning as verbal information is given just in time and is provided in an appropriate context (Peterson, 2010). Their grasp of the English language as a whole varies, so when encountering unknown vocabulary items throughout the game whose comprehension is vital for the continuation of the game, they have to learn and practice such terms. However, most learners prefer simple mechanical strategies (repetition) instead of deeper more complex strategies (contextual guessing), to acquire such blocking words. Nevertheless, deep strategies appear to improve learning gains (Bytheway, 2014).

Collaboration and interaction that occur frequently in online gaming have been frequently mentioned within the context of sociocultural literature (Pena & Hancock, 2006; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Jung, 2020). MMORPG's design aim is to facilitate teamwork and social communication. It creates a friendly environment that reduces inhibition and anxiety encouraging learners to take risks to communicate with other learners and in many cases with native speakers creating communicative interactions which are considered substantial in SLA. Furthermore, Peterson (2010) draws attention to the concept *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), which describes the interactive states where individual learners can undertake functions through collaboration with more capable peers which otherwise they could not carry out independently. MMORPG games often seem to be complex and tiring at the begging for the require a lot of effort to progress throughout the game; novice players are exchange and interact with more experienced players using L2 to learn about tactics and strategies, in order to advance and compete with other players.

In addition, learners use scaffolding in a collaborative dialogue with the expert players. These interactive states, which have been identified in computer - based interaction, occur when learners are assisted by more capable peers in undertaking target language functions they could not complete unaided (Peterson, 2012). The AVATARS are the players social 3D projection – a human embodiment – and their social interaction which occurs in the virtual reality world is merely a projection of what learners do in their daily life. Learners cannot interact or communicate with each other unless their AVATARS are facing each other. Svensson (2003) reported that native speakers (NS) and non –native speakers (NNS) deployed a variety of speech acts during interaction, which suggests that such activities have the possibility to enhance learners' interaction management raising their communicative skill levels.

Moreover, 3D collaborative virtual environments share some common advantages for language learning with MMORPG in fostering communicative competence, although a study conducted by Toyoda and Harrison (2002) on text chat in an MMORPG found that some NNS participants faced a some difficulties managing multiple threads with NS participants due inter - culture communication gap. The communication between the AVATARS are considered a computer - mediated communication (CMC), and the findings on this type of interaction suggest that real time interaction over networks may support aspects of second language development (Peterson, 2006).

Other aspects of MMORPGS such as the story narrative, textual cues, and interactive dialogues also offer an ideal communicative context for English language learners to stay motivated while immersed in a gameplay (Wu et al., 2014). Motivation in online games is regarded as an intrinsic pivotal perk for language learning. Motivation is attributed as a key factor for the success or failure of second language acquisition (Bytheway, 2014), and learning through games aligns well with the recent shifts in educational philosophy from traditional teacher - centered model to a learner - centered model, where players are expected to play an active role in their own learning (Butler et al., 2014). This entails that learners sometimes will adopt autonomies of learning

techniques and strategies throughout many hours of playing; for example, grasping the meaning of unknown words out of the context, or search for the meaning using the internet or electronic dictionaries.

In most countries where learners learn English as a foreign language they lack the opportunity of using English on a daily bases to communicate with other learners outside the classroom, but the MOORPG environment allows students to practice English in holistic ways in that the knowledge and skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading are integrated into communication with game players (Suh et al., 2010). Learners show a willingness to communicate while they are playing which helps to facilitate the L2 acquisition, and participants are willing to take risks in using L2 although some of them may not possess the confidence to communicate. A case study carried by Reinders and Wattana (Reinders, 2012) to investigate the willingness of learners to communicate in a MMORPG games revealed a positive result about the engagement in the L2 between game sessions to discuss details about the quest and tasks that they were trying to complete. Participants reduced the use of their native language gradually leading them to use English through the whole gaming activity. They consider the virtual world as their safe place where they can interact and communicate freely without any external pressure, and in the absence of any extrinsic fears like failing the exam. This evidently happens because they are highly motivated to complete the game.

Furthermore, CLT's main aim is achieving communicative competence in L2 (Clément & Kruidenier, 1985, cited in Clément et al., 2003), and therefore the virtual reality world that learners are communicating within helps them enjoy every single moment of it, and stay motivated to communicate with the other players and the reduced anxiety about making any mistakes. anxiety associated with learning and using the L2 has been shown to contribute to low levels of WTC (Chu, 2008; MacIntyre, Babin, & Clément, 1999; McCroskey, 1991 cited in (Reinders and Wattana, 2014p.102), meaning that learners will remain silent and refuse to participate or communicate due their low level of communicative competency.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the potential of multiplayer online games, specifically MMORPGs, to improve communicative competence among learners of English as a second language. The findings suggest that through interaction, collaboration, and immersion in virtual environments, learners are able to enhance their language skills more effectively. These games provide a unique platform for students to practice language without the pressure of formal settings, thereby fostering motivation and reducing communication anxiety. Future research should explore integrating MMORPGs into formal language learning curricula to maximize their pedagogical benefits.

Multiplayer online games show an inherent potential to develop the communicative competence in young learners, and all concerned stakeholders should consider the possibility of making a game similar to a MMORPG to facilitate learning within the classroom or include video game learning within

the school's curriculum with tutors and teachers being assigned the role of facilitators. However, what pedagogical approach should be used in this scenario remains a point of research interest that should be investigated further.

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