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Playing with place

Donald Richardson* (https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4833-3180)
University of St Andrews

🎴 Item Details

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Immersive exploration
Task-based interaction

🔑 Key points

- **Name of ludic object:** Place
- **Type/genre/theme:** Location-based language learning
- **Intended audience age 👨‍👧:** 18-30 (or older)
- **Intended audience proficiency 💬:** A1+
- **Typical time to play ⌛:** 90 min per game
- **Number of players 👫:** 15-30

Microblog synopsis

As a teacher-researcher, I love exploring how place works as a tool for language learning. Board games have dice; computer games have controllers. Location-based games use the local environment to engage learners in ways that are uniquely fascinating and pedagogically rewarding. #LocationBasedLanguageLearning

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* Corresponding author. *Email address: email address (preferred title and name)*

1. Playing with Place

Language learning knows its place. There are four walls, desks, chairs and a door that is closed at the start of class and opened at the end. This is where learning happens, with its textbooks, exercises and structures. Taking learning outside is unconventional and, for some teachers, perhaps a little daunting. For me, it is precisely this departure from the norm that I love. Location-based games have interested me for years. Using streets, parks, and shopping malls as tools for exploration, collaboration and communication is endlessly fascinating and I love discovering how familiar spaces can be redefined and transformed into language playgrounds. Unfortunately, place - a free resource on our doorstep - is often left unused in the language classroom. As a teacher-researcher, I try to create ways to use the affordances of the local environment to support meaningful language use. Unlike static classroom exercises, location-based games allow learners to respond to their environment and engage creatively to produce language that is both spontaneous and purposeful. In doing so, they operate within an ecological constructivist framework (van Lier, 2004), where learning emerges through the interaction between learners and the local environment, and knowledge is co-constructed in contextually grounded, socially mediated ways. Place itself becomes a tool - a ludic object, capable of structuring play and supporting active language use.

1.1 Ludic

Location-based games are inherently playful. As Sicart (2016) notes, play can redefine spaces, allowing people to appropriate and reinterpret their environment through playful interaction. To achieve this transformation, the location-based games I design utilise various interconnected facets such as place, role-play, narrative, and collaboration. If place represents the game board, then role-play functions as the playing pieces that bring the experience to life. Students might become time-travellers sent from a devastated future to document 21st-century environmental practices (Thorne and Hellermann, 2017), agents trying to prevent sinkholes from destroying their city (Richardson, 2016) or guardians tasked with saving a Hawaiian lizard goddess by uncovering the cultural and environmental history of their campus (Liu et al., 2016). These roles encourage imaginative engagement and challenge learners to generate the language they need on the spot. Narrative adds motivation and provides structure. Whether it is collecting gnomes that have disappeared or exploring Earth as an alien anthropologist, storylines provide learners with a goal and guide task completion. Collaboration is equally important. Classes typically work in small groups to negotiate decisions, plan routes, make recordings, and solve puzzles together. The combination of spatial immersion, collaboration and imaginative framing keeps learners engaged whilst practising English in an unusual way (Sykes, 2022).

In location-based games, everyday places gain their ludic potential through the imaginative and collaborative actions of learners. Mobile devices support gameplay in various ways. In some games, they play a minor role and are simply used to make recordings or take photographs (Pitura & Terlecka-Pacut, 2018). In other, more tech-heavy games, augmented reality (AR) apps provide learners with tasks they can only access if they go to the right place or find the right trigger (Godwin-Jones, 2016). These tasks might involve creating short films, solving puzzles, interviewing AR characters or completing language exercises to collect clues. Each game is different, so the routes learners take, the choices they make and the features they activate vary accordingly.

1.2 Language

Location-based games generate a wide range of opportunities for language production. Learners negotiate, describe, discuss and hypothesise as they move through the gamespace. They may even chat in the target language as they walk from one place to another. Student-produced videos typically serve as a central feature of the experience and require learners to generate spontaneous language to meet the game's narrative goals. The

videos facilitate immediate, situated language use during the game and act as a resource for later in-class follow up tasks. What learners do with the material they produce during gameplay is a key component of location-based games for language learning. Some examples are:

- Report writing: Synthesising findings from a game session allows learners to practise using formal register and the passive voice.
- Forum postings: Students analyse and critique video evidence collected during gameplay.
- Presentations: Learners present the findings from the outdoor task as a group.

These outputs encourage more considered, deliberate use of English and can support specific linguistic aims such as speculation, descriptive language or reporting skills. Post-game reflection, including peer feedback, promotes critical analysis of language and collaborative evaluation. Unplanned interactions during gameplay, such as speaking to passers-by or interpreting environmental clues, provide additional opportunities for contextualised, authentic communication. Many learners report that the unpredictability of their surroundings is highly motivating and that the activity could not be replicated in a classroom. Advanced learners benefit particularly from the tasks as they require higher-order thinking, improvisation, and spontaneous language use.

1.3 Pedagogy

Location-based games align with several pedagogical frameworks, including task-based language teaching (TBLT), place-based learning (PBL) and game-based language learning (GBLL). The games are highly adaptable. For lower levels or school settings, teachers can provide more pre-teaching and linguistic scaffolding. For advanced learners in university contexts, the complexity of the narrative and the required output can be increased to encourage higher-order thinking. This flexibility allows the same ludic framework to be applied to teaching various languages in a range of settings, from structured school classrooms to more independent higher education projects.

Materials include printed maps, clue cards and mobile apps, along with student-generated content such as photographs and videos. The teacher plays an important role in providing the initial motivation for going outside and giving feedback on language produced during the game. Assessment may be formal (portfolios, reports, presentations) or informal (observation, reflection, peer critique).

Two examples of projects I have developed are outlined below. Both are designed to allow advanced learners to put their strong English skills to use in novel ways:

The P-Team

The P-Team integrates Cambridge Proficiency Exam (CPE) speaking tasks into a location-based format. I introduce the game through a movie trailer parody of *The A-Team.* This links to previous class discussions on movies and trailers as well as setting a deliberately playful tone for the class. Students use the Taleblazer app to navigate a route where GPS triggers authentic CPE speaking prompts. This moves the focus from dry exam preparation to narrative progression. In terms of GBL, the project uses a non-linguistic win condition (Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012): hunting an evil mastermind called Danlod. This scenario provides the ludic drive and language becomes the functional key students use to unlock digital inventory items and clues. As groups reach each location, they record the various speaking tasks as evidence of their work. The narrative concludes when groups converge at a city landmark to share clues and establish Danlod's location.

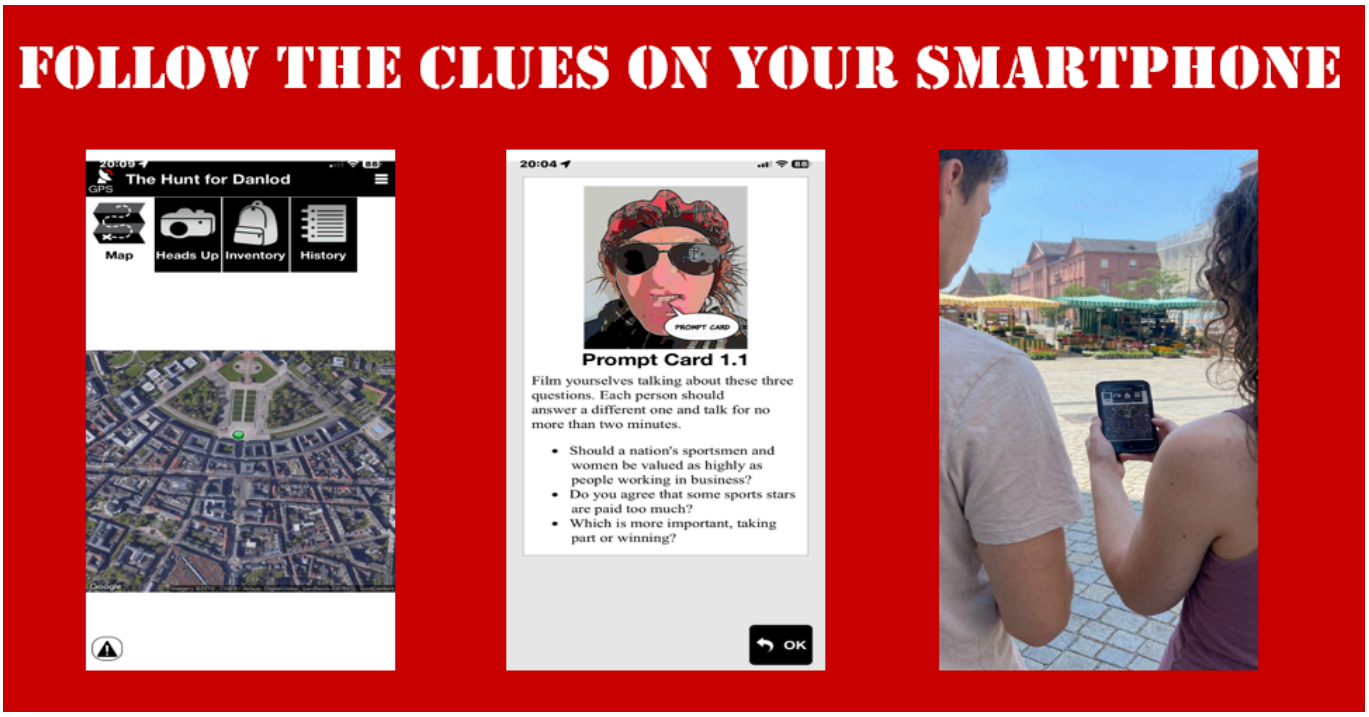

Figure 1: An introductory slide from *The P-Team* game

The game context turns CPE tasks into situated requirements for the story to move forward, aligning with TBLT principles where the task rather than the textbook is the primary unit of instruction (Ellis, 2022). By moving the class outdoors, place becomes an active variable – a key feature of PBL. Students navigate the city to find the learning, treating the environment as a multidisciplinary text that needs to be decoded (Gruenewald, 2003). The mission functions as the "Explore" phase (Reinhardt and Sykes, 2011). Students create videos, which are uploaded for an "Examine" phase involving peer analysis. This move from active play to classroom review ensures the spontaneous language produced outdoors is captured and used for meaningful reflection.

Alien Anthropologists

Alien Anthropologists follows a similar logic but incorporates an imaginative role-play where students act as extraterrestrial researchers on a visit to Earth. The project spans two 90-minute sessions, moving from classroom speculation to outdoor fieldwork and a mock interstellar conference. The process begins in the classroom, where students analyse magnified photographs of everyday objects to practice speculative thinking. The fieldwork stage takes students outdoors to gather photographic and video evidence. No app is required and students are free to go wherever they like, speculating about living things, places and objects as they move around. Students have to use their existing linguistic resources to describe familiar concepts differently, such as explaining that humans are imprisoned as statues or walk downstairs to the underworld where they are recycled. Meaning is clearly prioritised over form (Ellis, 2022) – a key element of TBLT.

Figure 2: An intrepid anthropologist exploring Earth

After class, students write short, speculative texts about three photographs before returning the following week to prepare and deliver their findings. As with many PBL projects, place is an essential learning resource and in *Alien Anthropologists*, the research trip prompts students to look at their local area with fresh eyes. The overall structure of the activity ensures that the initial “Explore” phase leads naturally into the final “Examine” and “Extend” phases (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2011), lending the activity academic weight as learners’ "silly" observations become the foundation for formal, academic-sounding presentations.

1.4 Reflection and Adaptation

Location-based games are not without challenges. Some teachers may find AR apps or GPS tools intimidating, and logistical issues can arise when coordinating groups across public spaces. My advice is to start with a simple scavenger hunt and build from there. Some learners may struggle with role-play, feel shy speaking in public or simply dislike games in general. I would argue that they represent a minority. For most learners, the benefits of authentic language production, collaboration and creative problem-solving outweigh these difficulties, especially when teachers introduce the activity enthusiastically and make it part of a playful course design involving game-based learning. Then, introducing a location-based game does not come as a huge surprise. I tend to introduce such games in the middle of a fourteen-week semester. By this point, students have spent several weeks engaging in lessons that involve a significant amount of task-based learning and game-based learning. This gameful environment ensures they have developed the necessary rapport and are familiar with this way of working before moving the classroom outdoors. When introduced this way, the location-based game feels like a natural progression of the syllabus rather than a disconnected, one-off event.

1.5 Conclusion

I love place as a ludic object because it represents an enormous classroom, packed with resources that can be used to encourage learners to engage with language creatively. My students usually love the experience too, and most have never experienced anything like it before. I invite you to play with place in your classes. Experiment to see how this neglected resource can support student engagement and promote active language use.

Discover how treating place as a playful learning tool can turn city streets, parks and campuses into spaces for active language learning.

◺◺◱ **TEACHING TIP**
Introduce the location-based game with a short video or slideshow. A 1-2 minute clip using PowerPoint or a similar tool sets the scene, explains the roles and quickly gets learners engaged before they start exploring.

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