"This class doesn't have a textbook?": An overview of a TRPG course for L2 English learners in Japan

Jacob Reed

Otemon Gakuin University

ARTICLE INFO

KEY POINTS

Background: Given the opportunity to teach a mixed language/content course and my longstanding interest in TRPGs and second-language acquisition, I made a course titled "Interaction through Tabletop Roleplaying Games."

Aim: The aim of the course was - beyond the development of students' English language skills -- to open a window into the world of tabletop roleplaying games and encourage students to see TRPGs as an opportunity to use English outside the classroom in a playful way and learn how to play them.

Methods: The course used three different TRPG systems of slowly advancing difficulty in order to acclimate the students to the genre and equip them with the basic schema they would need to participate fully in English. To introduce the materials, I began with a teacher-centered approach and then moved to a student-centered one as students became more familiar with the genre.

Results: By the end of the course, students were able to play TRPGs unassisted in English by creating their own stories, characters, and adapting them to their playstyle. Some also expressed interest in playing TRPGs in their futures, or if not running a game themselves, said that they would be open to the idea if someone else invited them.

Conclusion: In the future, I want to use this paper as a starting point to further refine and develop the course as well as the ideas within it.

Tweet Synopsis

Ever thought about using a TRPG like D&D in a large, second-language classroom? I did, and this is what happened… #dnd #ttrpg #tesol

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* Corresponding author. *Email address: j-reed@otemon.ac.jp*

Background

The Course and Teaching Context

"Interaction through Tabletop Roleplaying Games" is the title of an elective, semester-long course I taught during the 2017-2018 academic year at a four year Japanese University, which focuses on foreign-language education. Around one-third of students' credit hours at the university were taught in English as the primary language of instruction. The course aimed to develop students' ability to communicate meaningfully in English and sense of agency by offering them opportunities for interaction with fellow peers in enriching tabletop role-play gaming (TRPG) environments. There are many kinds of TRPGs, but there are several features that set them apart from other types of games. One scholarly overview by Mackay (2001) defines the TRPG as:

> an episodic and participatory story creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters' spontaneous interactions are resolved. These performed interactions between the players' and the gamemaster's characters take place during individual sessions that, together, form episodes or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters (pp. 4-5, emphasis in original).

In short, TRPG rulebooks generally contain the guidelines for creating characters (for players) and running a game in the world depicted (for gamemasters) and, unlike other game genres, offers a great deal of freedom in terms of the types of scenarios and stories that the players at the table want to take part in. If the players each control and act as a single character in the game world, the GM is akin to a narrator, the rules referee, and the person who controls all of the events and activities outside the direct control of the players' characters. The only constraints in a TRPG are the imaginations of the participants and the rule system of the TRPG being played. For instance, one TRPG may have rules for piloting a spacecraft, while another takes place in a medieval setting without access to such technology. TRPG systems may also include adventure modules that give a GM the tools they need to tell a particular pre-made story in the TRPG world and allow the players' characters to play the central roles in that story. These tools would include the major plot points, descriptions of the antagonists and their motivations, the encounters the players will be faced with, and general advice on how the GM can put all of the pieces together and involve the players in the adventure.

The course met twice per week for 90 minutes each and lasted for one 15-week semester for a total of 30 class meetings. Along with the other content plus language courses, it was designed for 3rd/4th year students who have acquired a certain baseline of English language proficiency as measured by the TOEIC test (450+). Students could select this course among a pool of other content-based English courses within the department such as American History, British Youth Culture, Beginning Photography, or Developing a Social Media Presence.

Before courses in this "content and language" elective basket could be taught, they first needed to pass a competitive internal review. Generally, courses that did not overlap significantly with a course already being taught would pass the review as long as: a) the teacher could demonstrate/explain their expertise about the planned course content, b) there was a language-learning component to the course that included activities around all four skills, and c) it could be clearly shown how students would be evaluated.

The Students

The maximum number of enrollees in these types of courses could be 30, and 28 signed up for the TRPG course. Students were all Japanese majoring in English and the class was split about 50/50 male to female, although the school population leaned heavily towards female (About a 3/1 ratio of female to male).

On the first day, I administered an open-ended survey which asked the students' reason(s) for enrolling. Students chose the course based on a number of factors including: 1) needing elective credits/fitting their schedule, 2) friend(s) taking the course, 3) the teacher, and/or 4) an interest in the

course topic (games/gaming). The majority of students selected the content/language courses based mainly on the first two factors alone, but a minority chose it based on the third and fourth. Because the course is about playing TRPGs, I knew that group dynamics would be an important factor. I wanted to have an idea of how many students were interested in gaming in general for making the groups and to find "leaders" among them who would likely be interested in being a gamemaster (GM).

Theoretical Foundations and Impetus for the Course

One of the main goals of the course is to facilitate second language acquisition. From an SLA perspective, the interaction hypothesis developed by Long (1985, 1996) and Gass (1997) is the theoretical framework at the heart of this course. A TRPG, being essentially a rules-based system used to allow a group of players to co-construct a narrative, seemed the perfect medium in which to maximize opportunities for different types of interaction to take place. A fundamental assumption of this paper is that interaction -- while arguably not a necessary condition for acquisition to take place -- likely contributes to the creation of conditions and opportunities that allow for SLA to occur. For instance, Mackey (1999) and Loewen (2005) both found that language learners in interactive settings improved their L2 production in comparisonto those in conditions without interaction, and Mackey and Goo's (2007) meta-analysis on interaction further confirmed findings such as these.

Another impetus from my context as an English teacher in Japan is the ubiquitous notion of "shyness" amongst students to speak using a second-language. Krashen (2009) suggests that all language acquisition first passes through an "affective filter" that can either help or hinder acquisition depending on the attitudinal factors of the participants. In short, learners with less anxiety stand a better chance of acquiring language. Role-playing, like acting, creates a simulated, non-threatening space in which players can experiment with new identities, personas, and ways of being that may be divorced in significant ways with their "real life" identity. This allows players to take chances and engage in what might be perceived as "face-threatening" activities in non-roleplaying contexts. One such activity might include "speaking English." This phenomenon is similar to what is described by the psychologist Erik Erikson as the "psychosocial moratorium" (1968), or a stage in one's life when one experiments with new identities without committing wholly to any one.

Similarly, a TRPG is also situated at the intersection between "Willingness to Communicate" (WTC) and gaming. Reinders and Wattana (2011; 2014) explored this topic using digital games and found evidence suggesting that L2 English students' WTC improved as they became less anxious and more confident partially as a result of the game environment. In other words, the TRPG offers a unique, ludic setting in which participants have the potential to more freely interact and experiment in the target language with arguably a lower affective filter and more WTC.

Finally, my personal experience with TRPGs has perhaps been the main driver behind my interest in exploring the intersection between games and teaching. I have acted as a GM in TRPGs since I was a teenager and have found that the TRPG medium possesses a peculiar ability to bring people together from all different backgrounds, dispositions, and opinions. Fiction or not, the experiences and stories that players create together can have the effect of uniting people around common, negotiated goals, and to even occasionally engage in voluntary discourse external to the scheduled game sessions (see Sullivan, 2010 and Reinhardt and Sykes, 2012).

> The TRPG medium possesses a peculiar ability to bring people together from all different backgrounds, dispositions, and opinions.

Design

The interaction hypothesis being the core theory of the course, I attempted to maximize the amount of time that students would interact with one another. Giving the students the task of learning, understanding, and engaging in TRPGs together set the stage upon which the interaction would take place. Because playing a TRPG requires a constant back and forth between players and the GM – the GM describing the scene, asking the players what they want to do, and the players discussing amongst themselves, asking the GM questions, and responding in kind – I suspect that this environment would

produce a continuous number of opportunities for negotiation of meaning. Over time, this should contribute to the students modifying their output, elsewise the game would not be able to continue.

In order to focus on peer interaction, most of the interaction between the students took place during the game (Playtime phase; see below) and away from the teacher. This allowed students a free space to practice and perform in English without the feeling of being evaluated or judged, thereby lowering the affective filter. This is not to say that students were told to never use Japanese, but they were encouraged to use English during playtime. Furthermore, as a TRPG is a group activity with the same members over multiple play sessions, the students have many opportunities to bond. Students know that they will continue playing the same game with the same members, and this therefore provides implicit encouragement to bond with one another to have a good experience. More than a one-off group-work task in a traditional lesson, the multiple session nature of a TRPG should provide a much more fertile space for non-face threatening interaction to take place.

General Course Overview/Syllabus

Overall Course Design Schematic

What follows is a visual representation of the overall course design across three blocks. The first block comprised 3 lessons, the second around 9 lessons, and the third around 14 lessons. Each of the blocks is composed of three types of lessons: First Steps, Playtime, and Reflection in that order. Each of the three blocks as well as the lesson flow for each of the types of lessons follows.
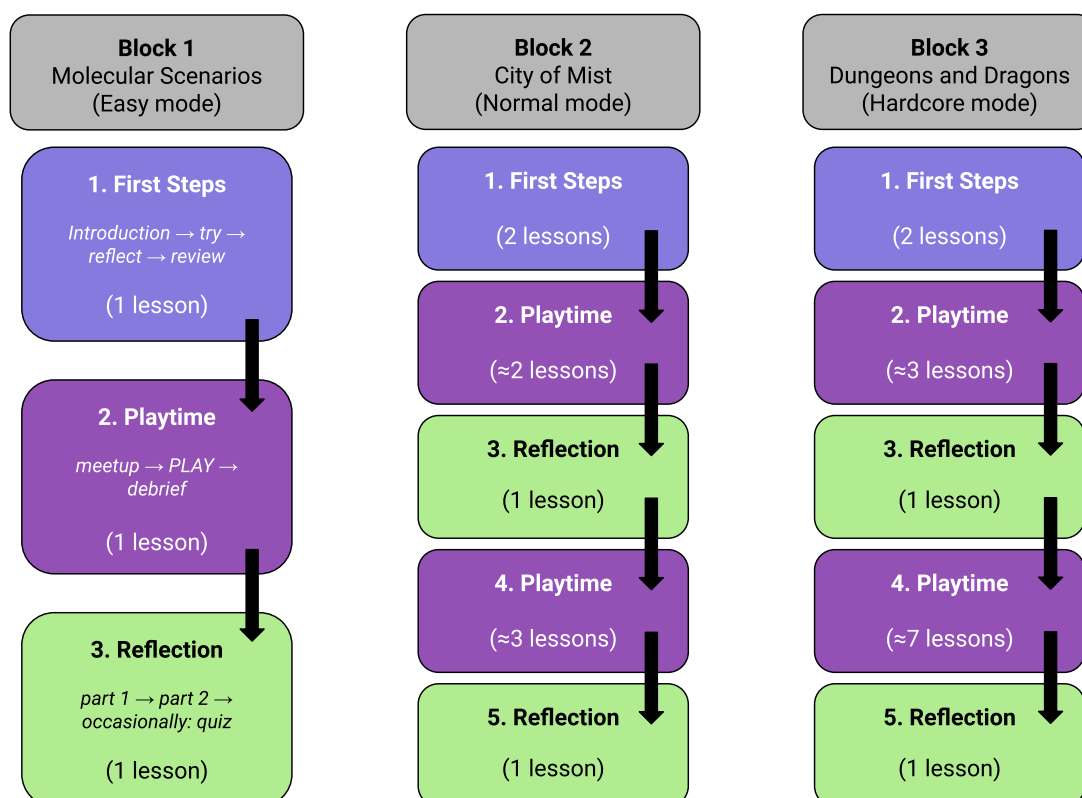

Figure 1 *Course Design Schematic*

The course was designed in three "blocks" of about 3-5 weeks each, illustrated as columns in the design schematic above. Each block focused on one particular TRPG with an increasing level of difficulty. Difficulty here refers to things like rules complexity, ease of access for newer players/learning curve, and how long a typical play session might take (necessary time commitment). The difficulty level of the first block is the smallest, and the third the largest. To break down the course, this section will begin with a bird's eye view and become more granular. First, each of the three blocks will be described after which the flow of each type of lesson is given. Finally, there is a section on the point system I used for assessment.

Block 1

The first block's game was *Molecular Scenarios* (*MS*; see: appendix 1) which was a TRPG prototype designed for beginners written by a fellow gamer friend based in the United States. The goal was to create a simple rule-set that would not take up more than a single page and could be used to quickly generate a character using standard six-sided dice. Similarly, there was one page to help a novice GM set the stage and lead the players on a short pre-written mission (a "molecular scenario"). One of the scenarios involved sleuthing and conversing with characters in the game to solve a mystery, while another required the players to escape from a dangerous monster on a treacherous wooded hillside, and the last had the players defending a merchant's caravan from an attack by orcs. The scenarios were written to showcase some common encounter types that arise in TRPGs: in-character role-playing, environmental hazards/chases, and combat.

Due to how compact *MS* is, the English linguistic resources required to play it are minimal. There would be no need to reference rules or to narratively go beyond what is already written on the page. For instance, being able to express a simple desire or ask a clarification question in English should be enough to complete a *MS* successfully in a single play session.

Block 2

After grasping the basics of TRPGs, I introduced them to a game called *City of Mist*, which began as a kickstarter in 2016[1]. The game's narrative system allows for several players and one MC (Master of Ceremonies) to become heroes in adventures set in a modern, noir-esque comic book-inspired world. The game has seen much development since its original release, but the original pitch stated that, unlike "heavy" rules-based systems like *Dungeons and Dragons*, the game "is extremely easy to pick up, even for those new to role-playing games." The basic set came with 7 pre-generated character folios which included their "mythos" (a character's connection to the supernatural) and "logos" (a character's connection to the mundane). Each character also possessed a number of "power tags" corresponding to their mundane and supernatural skills. The "power tags,", rather than spelling out in minute detail every ability that a character can do, simply provide suggestions to the players. For example, one of the character's has a power tag called "gunslinging stunts" while another has "enhanced interrogation techniques." The players, upon encountering a situation in the game world, can then use these tags to try and convince the MC to allow bonuses to their die roll. The result is what determines success or failure in their chosen course of action. In summary, *City of Mist* seemed to me the perfect bridge between a "one-shot" TRPG like *MS* and a rules-heavy TRPG like *Dungeons and Dragons*.

In *City of Mist*, players would be expected to be able to understand a slightly more nuanced character than in *MS*. Opportunities for role-playing their unique character and creative problem-solving based on their characters' power tags would push the students to produce more complex language amongst themselves. This might include asking the MC for more detailed descriptions, making a plan that goes beyond the scope of a single play session, reacting to story developments of which their characters were a part, and – on the part of the MC – adjudicating the results of player actions that are not necessarily a part of the script.

Block 3

The last thrust of the course used Dungeons and Dragons fifth edition Starter Set[2], which includes pre-made adventurers, a simplified rulebook, and an adventure all written with new GMs and players in mind. Because these authentic materials are not written with second-language learners in mind, I

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[1] https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/sonofoak/city-of-mist-a-noir-rpg-of-modern-day-legends/description
[2] https://dnd.wizards.com/products/tabletop-games/rpg-products/rpg_starterset

created two much shorter and simplified readings to help guide the students (included in the appendices). I did not do the same for the adventure module as GMing was done on a volunteer basis. As one might expect, the most motivated and English proficient students were the ones who signed up to be GMs for their groups.

Unlike the previous two games, the students' command of English would truly be put to the test in *Dungeons and Dragons*. Not only would they need to understand their characters (players) and the adventure's plot (GM), but they would also need to juxtapose this ability with a much more complex system of rules for determining how encounters in the game are resolved. Whereas *City of Mist* is largely open to collective interpretation and the storytelling ability of the MC, *Dungeons and Dragons*'s ruleset would necessitate players having a higher reading comprehension ability. The adventure is longer, more detailed, and each of the players' abilities are variegated with specific rules for how and when to use each one. At the same time, the speaking ability needed to play *Dungeons and Dragons* should be largely the same as in *City of Mist*.

Lesson Flow 1 (First Steps Phase)

The first lesson[3] of each block was structured in the following way, and for the purposes of this paper, I have dubbed this lesson "first steps":
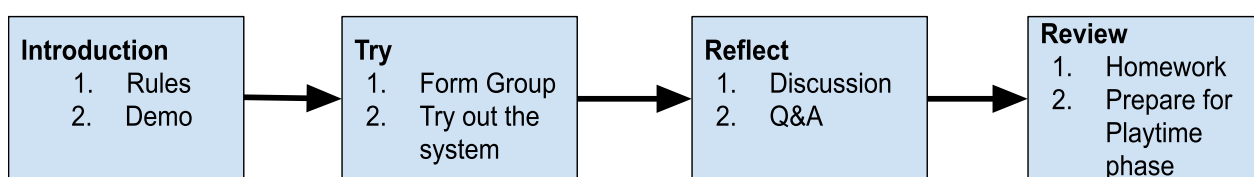

Figure 2 *First Steps Phase*

The first-steps lesson was designed as a "closely watched" trial session in which first the rules were introduced and some key mechanics or gameplay was demonstrated. Next in the "try" section, the students could interact with one another and with the game realia while getting to know their group members. In this phase, they might be creating a character, reading through the rules, looking up terminology, skimming through the adventure module, or asking questions.

After trying the game, students would reflect on it and have a short discussion as a class. They would also decide what role they would be most comfortable filling during the "real" game in following weeks, and have an opportunity to ask questions to each other/the teacher about the game. If necessary, I would use the "reflect" part to scaffold and give more explanation/examples for tricky concepts or rules.

Finally, during the review section, I would ask the students to re-familiarize themselves with the rules for the game system on their own for homework. They would need to know the basic rules in order to participate fully in the game with their group members. Later lessons would have the students split off into their own groups, mostly isolated from the teacher and other groups.

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[3] The *City of Mist* and *D&D 5e* (blocks 2 and 3) are more difficult games, so there were two lessons devoted to introducing the players to the games. Both were structured using the format above, but the topics were divided into: Roleplaying (Lesson 1) and Encounter mechanics (Lesson 2).
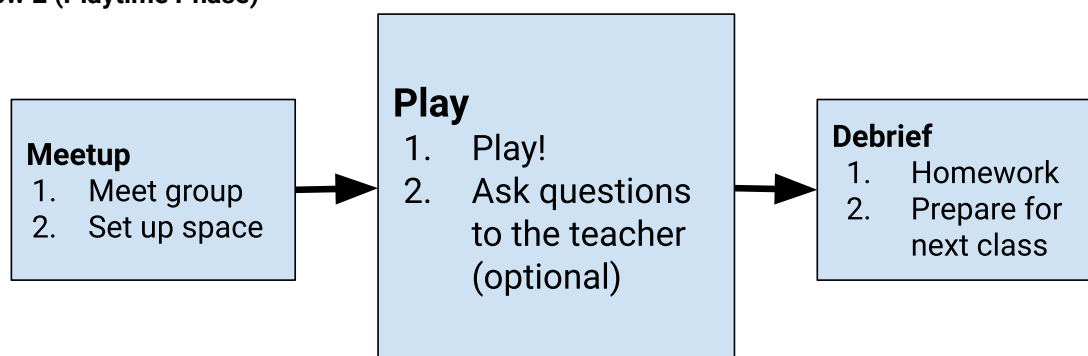
Lesson Flow 2 (Playtime Phase)

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┌────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐
│ Meetup         │      │ Play             │      │ Debrief          │
│ 1. Meet group  │ ───► │ 1. Play!         │ ───► │ 1. Homework      │
│ 2. Set up space│      │ 2. Ask questions │      │ 2. Prepare for   │
│                │      │    to the teacher│      │    next class    │
│                │      │    (optional)    │      │                  │
└────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘
```

Figure 3 *Playtime Phase*

Lessons in the Playtime part of each block comprised the vast majority of lessons. To emphasize this, the "Play" box in Figure 2 is larger. Starting from the second lesson (block 1) or the third lesson (blocks 2 and 3), the students had formed groups, chosen/created their characters, familiarized themselves with the rules, and chosen who the GM would be.

For all blocks, the GM needed to have read through the adventure module included with the materials. For *Molecular Scenarios*, the GM was asked to prepare at least one of the three included scenarios. In *City of Mist*, GMs were given a copy of "V is for Going Viral," (Moshe, 2016b) which is a pre-made scenario for the game. For *Dungeons & Dragons (5th Edition)*, students played the official introductory adventure, *Lost Mine of Phandelver* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014). All of these modules are designed for novice GMs, which was by design for this course.

"V is for Going Viral" is useful because of its brevity and fairly simple, linear plotline. "Lost Mine of Phandelver," while much longer, features extensive hand-holding in the form of "read-aloud" text boxes, step-by-step instructions for running each of the scheduled encounters, and shorthand appendices with all relevant rules and information so as to not require the GM to flip through the rulebook. A gamemaster could reasonably prepare for a session with these modules by simply reading them beforehand and perhaps jotting a few notes.

The playtime phase for block 1 (*Molecular Scenarios*) lasted for only a single class meeting, while blocks 2 and 3 lasted for 4-6 meetings in total with a lesson in the middle scheduled as reflection (see "reflection phase" section next). To begin the playtime phase, the class would meet together in the classroom with their groups, and I would give them tasks that they needed to accomplish at some point during the playtime phase. All of the products arising from these tasks were used for their homework and due at various points throughout and by the end of the playtime phase (See: "The Students" in the Playtest section for details of these activities.) Students would then break off from the classroom with their group members and go to separate, private rooms that each group had reserved before the class period as a space to play their game together.

During the playtime phase, I was available in a centralized location to answer questions or help any group with the rules, the flow of the game, or any other questions they might have. Largely however, the students were left to their own devices in this phase. In general, I encouraged students to not feel overly burdened by a rule they did not understand. Rather, they should prioritize interacting together in English and trying to play through the game as best they could.

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For the last five minutes of the lesson, students would put their game on hold and return to the classroom for a short debriefing. At this point, I would explain the homework, give any relevant announcements, and ask them to prepare for the next lesson.
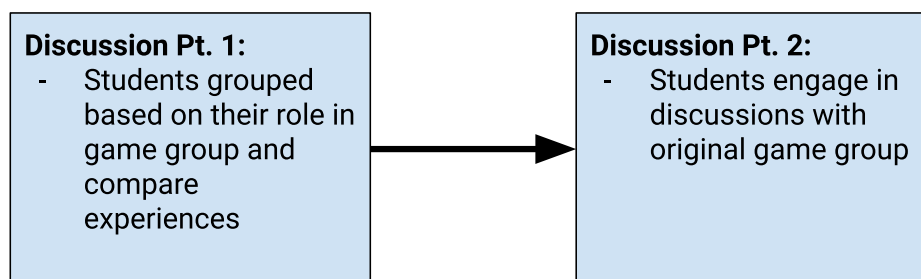
Lesson Flow 3 (Reflection Phase)

Figure 4 *Reflection Phase*

Reflection phase lessons took place twice per block: once in the middle of the longer playtime phase, and once at the end to wrap up the block (see Figure 1 above for a visual representation). The exception to this was block 1, which had only one reflection phase at the end.

For part one, students would be placed into groups and asked to discuss various aspects of the course and the TRPG they were engaged with. The first round of discussions would be:

1. Players with the same character (*City of Mist*) or the same class (*Dungeons and Dragons*) would be grouped together with 4-5 people.
2. Gamemasters would be grouped together.

In the groups, students would share their experiences, ask questions to the other game groups, and get a glimpse into how their classmates' games were going. Because groups were all using the same adventure modules and playing the same games, the only difference was the players, the gamemaster, and the way they were using the materials. The idea here was to allow the students to help each other to clear up rules misunderstandings and to take something positive back to their own game group about what another group was doing.

Part two of the reflection phase would put the students back with their usual game groups for the block and ask them to share what they learned from their part one discussions. Primarily, the students were asked: 1) What was one thing another group did that you thought was interesting/fun/effective for learning and playing, etc.? and 2) What do you want to change about your game from now on to improve your experience?

The reflection phase at the end of a block before switching to another game brought the discussion more directly to language learning and TRPGs in general. Questions like the following were discussed: 1) What did you learn about games, if anything? 2) Do you feel as if your English has improved? In what way/why not? 3) How could you use this game or games like it to learn/practice English? 4) What aspects of your language would you like to focus on next time?, and so on. In addition to this, ideas and observations that came about during the small group discussions would also be brought to the whole class for showcasing or further deliberation.

Finally, if an assessment such as a quiz was scheduled, it would be held at the beginning of a reflection lesson before beginning the discussions.

Assessment

Like most if not all Japanese universities, I had to submit a letter grade for each of the students with an S being the top and D being a failure. However, I wanted the way that the students earned their grade to seem more like a game, and therefore be (hopefully) more motivating of an assessment

framework (see: Kapp, 2012) as well as being a reflection of what the students were doing in the class.

On the first day of class, I explained to students that they would be assessed based on a number of "XP" (Experience Points) that they acquired throughout the course. Just like the characters they were roleplaying in the TRPGs, they would be awarded XP based on submission of assignments and active participation in class.

Students needed to earn a total of at least 6000 XP in order to "pass" the course and receive credit, with higher thresholds required for a higher final grade (9,000 XP for an "S"). In total, there was 10,100 worth of XP available through a combination of quizzes, homework assignments, active participation/attendance, and a final project. There were also several opportunities for students to earn bonus XP beyond the 10,100 such as by volunteering to take on the role of GM for their group or meeting with the teacher during office hours to discuss and ask questions about the games in the course.

Playtest

In this section of the paper, attention will be brought to the experiences and specific activities students did in the course as well as the role of the teacher during the course..

What the Students Did

Students began each block by learning how to play a game (*Molecular Scenarios*, *City of Mist*, and finally *D&D*) by doing assigned readings (see: appendices 2 and 3 for examples), watching videos online, and participating in classroom demonstrations. After forming game groups, deciding their role (either player or GM), students were asked to play the game together during class time by booking private "group work" rooms that were available to students at the university the course was taught at.

Image 1 *Students playing Dungeons and Dragons in a study room*

Image 2 *Students playing Dungeons and Dragons in a study room 2*

Students' knowledge of the game was checked/assessed through short quizzes about the readings/rules which took place at the beginning of some reflection lessons. These quizzes were announced ahead of time and students were given suggestions on how to study.

17. Fill in the blank by choosing the correct word:

    You get to roll damage two times because you rolled a 20! That's a _____!
    a.   TPK!
    b.   Spell!
    c.   Critical Hit!
    d.   DC!

    For numbers 18-23 below, write down the full term. Each of these is worth **10 XP.**

18. XP _____

19. Cha. _____

20. PC _____

Image 3 *Short quiz example*

Students were asked to take notes about and audio record their interactions during the game using a smartphone or their computer. Based on these recordings and their notes, students maintained a

physical journal that they would submit to a box at the end of each week. The journal content was slightly different depending on the student's role: a player would write one "in-character" (IC) entry per game session (two per week) while a GM would write a reflective entry about the game, the group members, their ideas, or questions they might have for me about running their game.
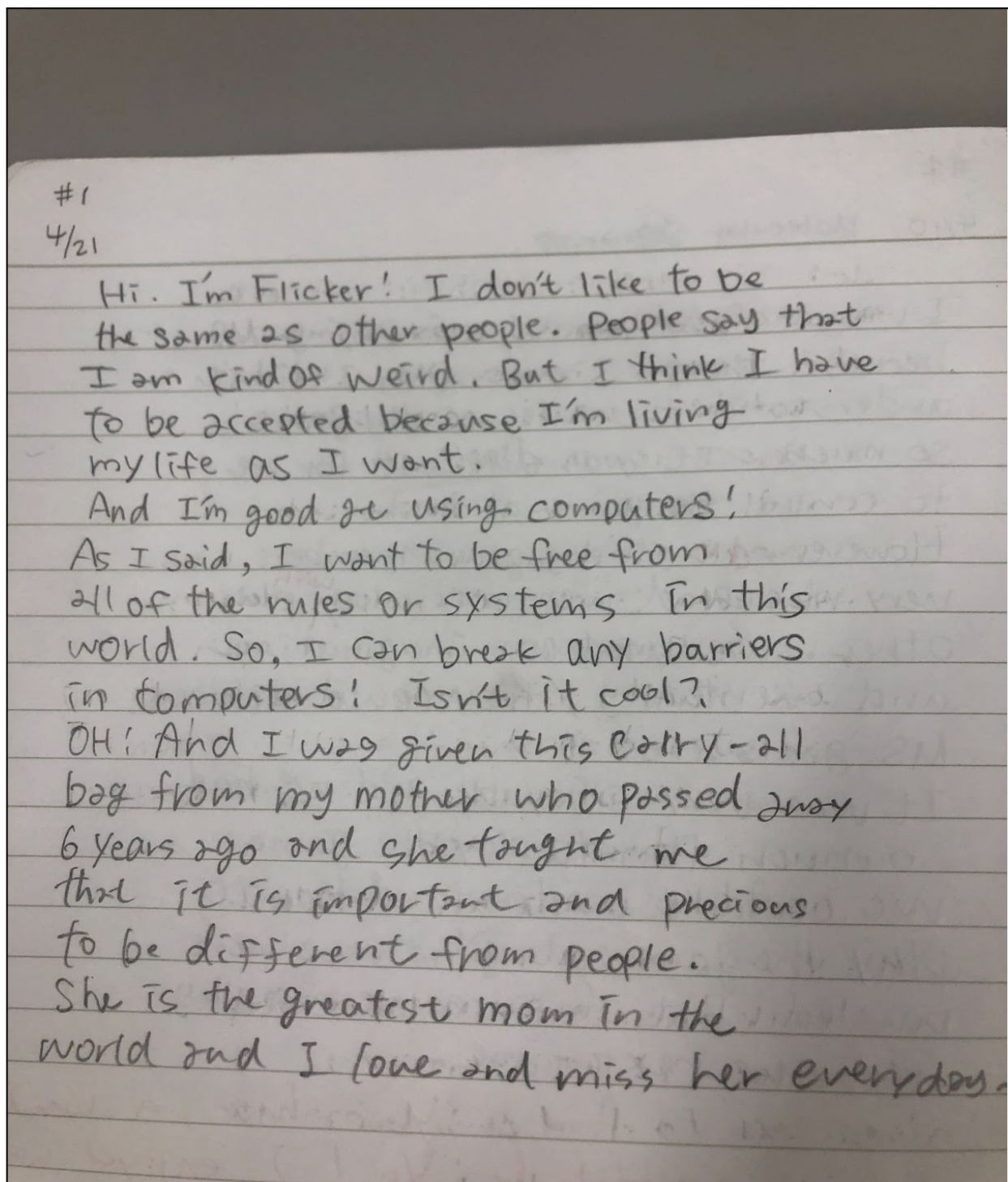

#1
4/21

Hi. I'm Flicker! I don't like to be
the same as other people. People say that
I am kind of weird. But I think I have
to be accepted because I'm living
my life as I want.
And I'm good at using computers!
As I said, I want to be free from
all of the rules or systems in this
world. So, I can break any barriers
in computers! Isn't it cool?.
OH! And I was given this carry-all
bag from my mother who passed away
6 years ago and she taught me
that it is important and precious
to be different from people.
She is the greatest mom in the
world and I love and miss her everyday.

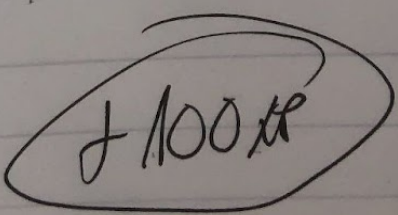**Image 4** *Player IC journal example*

Image 5 *GM journal example*

Students used their recordings to do some language-focused homework. Specifically, they transcribed parts of their recordings that had "errors" (defined as one of the following: grammar/vocabulary errors, pronunciation errors, or communication errors). They would then "fix" their language mistakes and

write a short reflection to explain what they learned and how they might avoid similar errors in the future.

(9) Full of zombie → full of zombies (37:59)
(10)End of the turn → at the end of the turn (39:02)

Through today's class,I realized that all of the group members talked less in other's turn. We were just waiting for our turn without talking. Only the player who is taking actions talked just a little bit. Mostly we were so quiet. I think we should have spoken more. It seemed that I didn't have any confidence when I was speaking English. I thought that because my voice was very small and I didn't speak clearly in the recording. Every time when I speak English, I'm afraid of making mistakes. That make me talk more less and nervous. I also realized that I always use same words and phrases. It doesn't help me to improve my speaking. I'll try to speak with different vocabularies and phrases. To improve my speaking, I won't be afraid of making a lot of mistakes and I'll study vocabularies from native speakers. I would like to make more opportunities out of the class to talk with native speakers and have more confidence in speaking. If I get chance to speak, then I'll try to intonate my English when I speak. My English is like no emphasis so I couldn't understand what I said sometimes. I think it makes sound more natural and helps us to understand easily. One more thing to improve my English, I'll use English dictionary with English definition when I search the words I don't know. I can learn many vocabularies at once.

Image 6 *Transcription/reflection example*

During the reflection phase, students had discussions about their experiences and what they learned. They used worksheets like the following to help to focus their discussion:

Part 2: *Player Type Reflection*

Next, please sit with the people in the class who had the same role in the game as you (e.g. rogues sit with rogues, noble fighters sit with noble fighters, wizards sit with wizards, DMs sit with DMs). Using your notes from **Part 1** above, have a discussion about your experiences. Take notes below:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Part 3: *Group Reflection*

Now, sit with your D&D 5e group and have a discussion using your notes from **Parts 1 and 2**. Did you think similarly about the game as your group, or differently? Why? Take some notes below.

_____

_____

Image 7 *Reflection worksheet example*

Around half-way through the term, students chose one of three final project assessments: A) Gameplay Analysis and Presentation, B) Research Paper and Presentation, or C) Final Exam about D&D 5e (see appendix 4 for the handout students received).
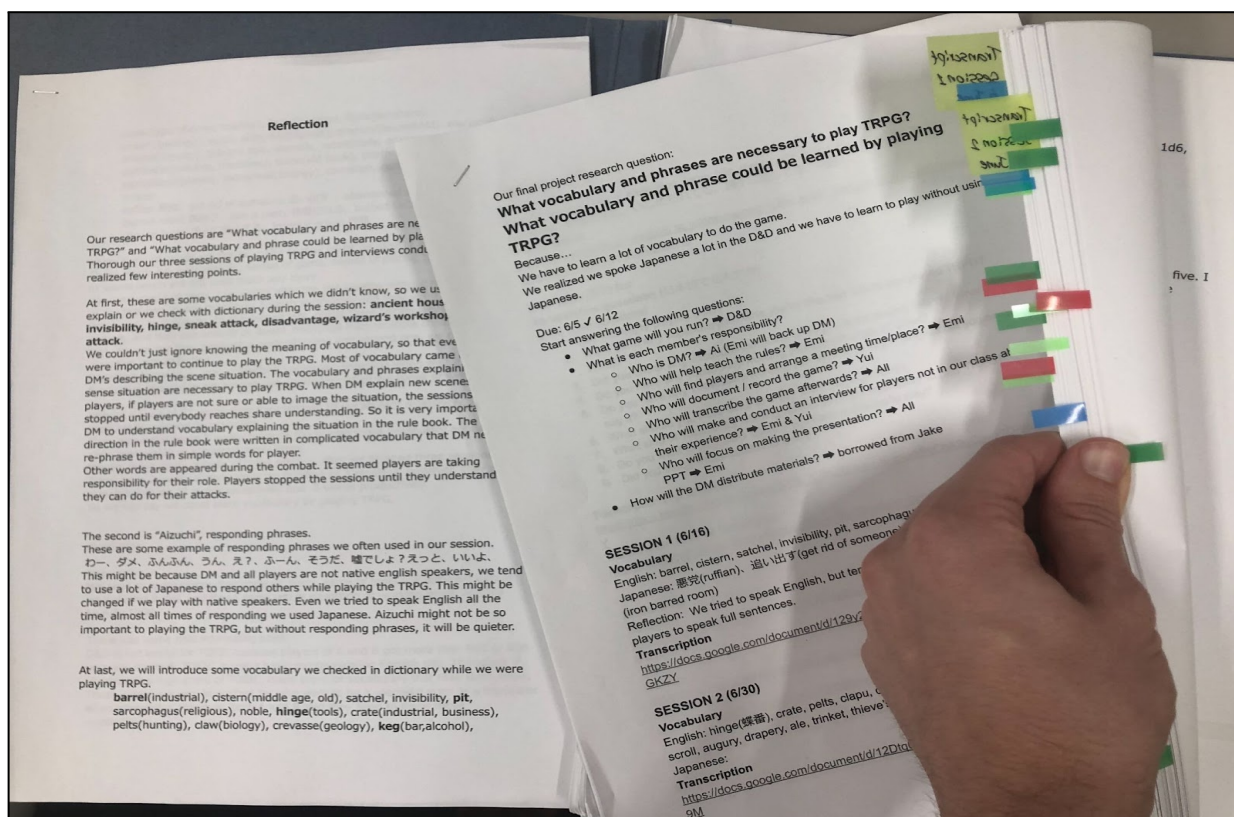

Image 8 *Final Project Example Materials (Option A)*

What the Teacher Did

My personal experience with the games was a vital part of my preparation to teach the course. As mentioned in the introduction, I have a personal interest in these games, and this is part of why I wanted to teach the course. I had experience running all three of the games with friends and acquaintances before I took any of them into the classroom. For teachers unfamiliar with TRPGs, it is highly recommended that participating in a game be part of proper due diligence to teach a course like this. If participating in or running a game proves difficult, watching TRPG groups such as the famous "Critical Role" on YouTube could be an option. While this is not a true replacement for personal involvement in a game, it is at least one way to familiarize oneself with the genre.

Other than choosing and familiarizing myself with the games, I created some simplified versions of the third game's rules in order to hone in and focus the students' attention on the most important rules (see: Appendices 3 and 4). This cut down on the amount and difficulty of reading that would be required of the students if I'd simply given them the full Starter Rulebook, which is 32 pages of two-column text.

In the classroom, I was most active in the beginning stages of the course (First steps phase). I spent time explaining a game, its rules, doing live demonstrations, or showing videos from the Internet in order to build up a mental schema about TRPGs in general. This was important because not all students in the course were 'gamers,' nor were they familiar with TRPGs.

While students played a game (Playtime phase), I did not interfere with them, but would drift around to student groups who either appeared to need assistance or indicated that they had a question for me about the game they were playing. The rooms that students played in had glass walls and doors, so students could visually indicate if they needed help. If all games were running smoothly, I would use this time to write feedback for the students on their homework submissions.

During the reflection phase, I facilitated group discussions. For example, one discussion asked GMs from each group to come together and share ideas for how they had run their games, problems they encountered while running a game, and how they dealt with them. Players would group with other players from different groups and compare/contrast their experiences and what they learned. Other discussions focused on topics such as whether or not they thought TRPGs were useful as a language learning/practice tool and why/why not.

Course Evaluation

The Good

From my perspective as a language educator as well as responses on a student survey at the end of the course, there are several points that should be highlighted as positives.

First, the course materials (TRPGs) encouraged and showed students that language learning does not necessarily need to be a monotonous drill or 'chore' and that authentic materials are not outside of their grasp.Several student comments on the end-of-course survey confirmed my view here. When asked, "Do you have any final comments about your experience?" one student wrote, "This experience might be helped my English life at least. Thanks for teaching us the way to enjoy English." Another wrote, "Thank you for giving the opportunity to play the game. I felt I could enjoy studying English."

The second positive is that a TRPG by its very nature necessitates that all group members are involved to some degree. Students playing together in a TRPG group offered them a bonding group identity. The fact that the students were accountable to each other to know the rules of the game and to participate in it as their own, unique character in the game world gave each student an opportunity to shine. The GM needs to tell the story and prepare the session while the others need to use their characters' abilities to work together and overcome challenges. In other words, it could be said that a TRPG may provide fertile conditions to facilitate interaction. This notion was mentioned by several students directly in the end-of-course survey. One particularly active student answered the question "Did you feel motivated to use English during the game? Why, or why not? Explain." with: "I was. Because we were analyzing how the game would effect player's English skills, especially negotiation as part of English communication." Another wrote, "When we discuss what will do for team, we had chance to say our opinion many times so I think I feel motivated."

Finally, for all of the adventure modules given, students were never assessed on how far through the story or content they progressed. The language activities, quizzes, and reflection could be completed fully even if very little "story" progress or character development was accomplished. As a result, players could engage with the material and each other at their own pace and focus on the areas of the game that resonated with them the most whether that was battles and using their characters' powers, roleplaying with each other, or simply trying to understand the GM's story and navigate through the narrative. This helped to emphasize to students that it was their language development and effort to use English in class that was being assessed rather than their knowledge of or their skill at a game. By the end of the course, students were able to play TRPGs unassisted by creating their own stories, characters, and adapting them to their playstyle. Some also verbally expressed interest in playing TRPGs in their futures during class discussions in the reflection phase. In the survey, one student wrote, "I really enjoyed playing this game and having conversation with the players, so I want to play it more. I also would like to share this game with my friends."

The Bad

On the other hand, the class could have been better as there were several things that did not go so well based on my own observations and those of the students themselves.

The class likely did not have enough language scaffolding, and I was too ambitious in allowing the students to "play" without enough teacher intervention or guidance in the beginning regarding language. The students in the course were of varied English ability, and it was the case that some of the students would have benefited from a more focused approach. For instance, instead of asking

students to play an entire module mostly unassisted, it might have been better in retrospect to follow the model set in *Molecular Scenarios* of providing students with short, self-contained "encounters" that could be finished in the space of half of a class. To illustrate, one student indicated that they did not use much English during the game sessions at all: "I tried in project but not much in usual game [...] because we do basically same thing battle rolling." Another student who felt motivated to use English during the game nevertheless was perplexed by the rules. "If people understand the rule, they could enjoy it, but it will take much time to understand the rule."

Regarding language, most of the students admitted to needing to use Japanese at times, which is not necessarily a bad thing to speed up communication, it nevertheless is a lost opportunity for negotiation of meaning to take place in the L2. One of the GMs for *City of Mist* wrote, "In a complicated situation, after trying to explain in English, and the players still didn't get a picture, I used Japanese," while a student who was a player said, "I used some words in Japanese because I had to explain difficult words to players." By spending more time on a single game, students might have been able to more carefully build up a repertoire of TRPG related phrases and vocabulary that would be useful for a more rules-heavy game later. In fact, some students expressed frustration about changing the game just as they had acclimated themselves to the rules for the one before. In pushing the students to "level up," I inadvertently broke their flow.

In one case, a GM who could not understand the rules of *D&D* or the adventure module just made up his own simplified combat game using a battle-grid and the dice provided whilst eschewing any roleplaying or character development on the part of the players or himself. While a student taking an active approach like this and essentially developing their own game is not necessarily a 'bad' thing, I nevertheless put this episode in this section of the paper. This is because it is evidence that the student (and his group) were wholly unprepared for a full TRPG experience despite having played simpler games before.

Practical Implications

While using games in education might sound intriguing, it is not necessarily feasible for all settings. At schools in which the teacher has very little authority in materials selection, an entire course structured around TRPGs may not be possible. On the other hand, a simplified version of a TRPG like that created by Johnson (2021) or *Molecular Scenarios* might be a good starting point.

The required language level to deal with authentic TRPG texts like the *Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook* or *Dungeon Master's Guide* is arguably high. The students in my course were all English majors in their 3rd and 4th year of university study, but even so were a fairly mixed group in terms of proficiency (as measured by the TOEIC test). The lower level the learners and the more unfamiliar they are with TRPGs or RPGs in general, the more scaffolding and time will be required to manage a course or activity around them. It is also worth pointing out that class size can be a serious issue. Especially with mid-sized or larger groups (30+ students), the prospect of using something as complex as an authentic TRPG is dim indeed.

The design schematic that I made to teach this course may also be a useful tool or piece of the puzzle to help guide teachers interested in bringing a TRPG into their classroom or designing an entire course around TRPGs. It is worth pointing out again, however, that a teacher who is unfamiliar with the genre will likely experience a great deal of difficulty without first familiarizing themselves with TRPGs. This is a notion that I believe stands for any attempt at GBLL, as any lack of enthusiasm or understanding on the part of the teacher can inevitably lead to the same for students when introducing the games for the first time.

Next steps

In the future, this course would benefit from a more rigorous and structured approach such as York's (2019) "Kotoba Rollers" (KR) framework. In particular, "pre-play" activities in this course need to be more well-designed and thought out. For instance, creating a "textbook" that has all of the game materials, language activities, and homework in one place would surely help in setting the scope of the course. Secondly, the idea of repeating the same game many times rather than switching to a new

game mid-course is one I would like to try based on the experience of some students outlined earlier. Rather than splitting this course into blocks and taking a "taste-testing" approach, I would like to try narrowing the content scope of the course by focusing on a single TRPG. This would help to relieve students of the burden of switching rules systems as advocated for by York (2020). In the same paper, York suggests that cognitively demanding tasks such as learning rules systems should not simply be assigned as reading for homework. While this TRPG course had one phase dedicated to learning the rules in class with examples and explanations, largely students were left to their own devices after these one or two lessons. Therefore, a more carefully designed pre-play phase is likely key to really see the benefits of something like *D&D* in a language classroom.

Lastly, I would like to create opportunities for international exchange using TRPGs as well. Given the upheaval of COVID on Study Abroad programs globally, I suggest that online tabletop environments such as Roll20[4] pose an interesting way of rethinking opportunities for international exchange. Research comparing online versus in-person modalities for TRPGs may be one route of revealing new affordances in the space going forward.

Acknowledgements

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[4] https://roll20.net/

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Appendix 1: Molecular Scenarios

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Appendix 2: D&D Reading #1 (What is D&D?)

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Appendix 3: D&D Reading #2 (Character and Adventure Creation)

W D_D 5e Reading #2.docx

Appendix 4: Final Project Guidelines

W Final Project Information TRPG Course.docx