



**Article Title:** Collaborative Non-Linear Narrative - Tabletop Role Playing Games in the ESL Classroom

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**Abstract:** An article regarding tabletop role-playing games (Dungeons and Dragons, Modern D20, etc) and their effects and uses in the second and foreign language classrooms.

## INTRODUCTION

Second and foreign language teachers have been using language-based games to capture students' attention and make them more interested in learning the target language than they would be if these language games were not used. Crossword puzzles, tongue twisters, and even classroom-modified versions of popular game shows, like Jeopardy and The Price is Right, are used often in order to enhance the students' vocabulary knowledge, oral communication skills, reading comprehension skills, and even critical thinking skills. Although teachers have successfully incorporated different language-based games into their curriculums, there is one type of game that is rarely used and that could be successfully incorporated into the second and foreign language classrooms in order to help the students become engaged in spontaneous development of the target language. These games are the tabletop role playing games (RPGs). In these games, the students (or players) take the role of characters in a story, and together with the teacher (or game master) they create a cooperative narrative while following a system of preset rules. Tabletop RPGs, are a type of game that can be used to ameliorate the language acquisition process, as well as to grasp the students' attention, get them involved in spontaneous use of language, become immersed in the activity, and have fun while doing it.

### **Teaching Methodology and the Role Playing Game**

Some teachers may be hesitant to use games in the classroom. They may see games as not being educational. However, Reiber (1996) points out that research on play with children and adults indicate that “play is an important mediator for learning and socialization throughout life” (44). Reiber hints that using games in the classroom can be beneficial, not only for the learning process, but also for socializing, and that while the skills acquired during a lecture or traditional lesson may last only until the next test, the skills learned by playing a game could last for a lifetime. For this reason, teachers should be willing to experiment with new games in their classroom; after all, “play and imitation are natural learning strategies at which children are experts. Having children play games to learn is simply asking them to do what comes naturally” (Reiber, 50).

Language educators should also be willing to take risks in trying out new classroom activities. According to Brown (2001), “the best teachers always

take a few calculated risks in the classroom, trying out new activities” (40). Risk-taking includes using new teaching approaches with different students, trying out new methods of assessment, and integrating new activities into the lessons. Language-based games, and the assessment strategies required to evaluate student performance, are activities which teachers have successfully integrated into their language lessons. Of course, the teachers who integrate these games into their classroom do so because these games have several elements that are identified by the latest language teaching and learning methods and approaches as activities that can be used to enhance the language acquisition process.

The latest trends in ESL teaching approaches advocate the use of authentic speech, meaning speech that is used spontaneously and can be applied to every day life (the Communicative Approach) and the integration of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) as well as technology and content areas (like history and math) within the ESL curriculum (Whole Language). The communicative approach, or communicative language teaching (CLT), “is about linguistic fluency, the ability to use and adapt language to different situations. It emphasizes on the use of unrehearsed, spontaneous use of the language” (Brown, 42). Although CLT advocates in favor of the teaching of specific aspects of grammar when these lessons can help enhance communicative competence, a communicative class focuses on oral communication. In a communicative classroom, all activities must be geared towards giving the students necessary practice to accomplish the production of unrehearsed language in outside-the-classroom situations. In order to accomplish this task, teachers need to integrate activities in which the teacher will act as a guide instead of a lecturer, students have the opportunity to speak and communicate with each other freely, and that are variable every time the activity is used. In other words, the main purpose of a CLT classroom is for the students to use the target language. Whole language philosophy, however, does not advocate for focus on a single skill. Although originally “whole language referred to the “wholeness” of the language, as opposed to fragmenting language into parts (graphemes, morphemes, and words), and to the interaction of the written and oral language” (Brown, 2001, 48), this philosophy has evolved, and now it encompasses , the integration of the four language skills, as well as learner-centered instruction, interactive learning, and content-based language learning. Teacher and learner-centered instruction focuses on the roles of the teacher and the students in the classroom. Just like in CLT, “learner-centered instruction requires

techniques that give some control to the students without overwhelming them” (Brown, 46). In other words, learner-centered instruction requires that the teacher be a guide who gives students language tools necessary in order to learn the language. Brown also suggests that learner-centered instruction should involve cooperative behavior and interactivity. Interactive learning advocates for the use of strategies and activities that are ‘interactive’, meaning that the students are able to interact with the text or media, as well as with each other. Content-based instruction, another aspect of the ‘evolved’ definition of whole language, states that the integration of the entire academic curriculum into the language classroom can be beneficial for the language acquisition process. This means that an ESL lesson can revolve around science, history, or math.

Activities designed around the postulates of these two teaching approaches should focus on communication (both oral and aural), but also give some emphasis to reading and writing, allow the students to cooperate, and integrate certain aspects of the content classes, like social studies, math, or science. Preferably, these activities should be fun for the students. A language-based game that encompasses all of these qualities and can be used in the ESL/EFL classroom is the tabletop RPG. As David-Phillips states, “Role Play is not new to language classes, although RPGs are” (1995). A tabletop RPG is a language-based game in which the participants assume the roles of fictional characters and collaboratively create or follow stories. Participants determine the actions of their characters based on their characterization, and the actions succeed or fail according to a formal system of rules and guidelines. As long as the players follow the rules, they can improvise freely. Their choices often affect the direction and outcome of the stories they create.

According to Butler, “when properly designed and presented at the right stages, RPGs could foster intrinsic motivation for learning that would far exceed any form of extrinsic motivation one could think up” (1993). When the students are engaged in a narrative session where they can control the story, they will feel more comfortable with the setting, less threatened by the teacher, and more willing to speak up and use the target language; after all, they are the ones who decide what happens. There is no preset linear tale, but a continually shifting non-linear story in which the students are the protagonists, editors, and audience. In these RPGs, the students become engaged in “a complex process of group narrative; they are the authors,

narrators, characters, actors, readers, and audience of a text that can be both experiential and product-oriented” (Harry, 2003).

By using RPGs in the classroom, teachers can also find out information about the personal needs of students. Padol (1996) states that “a role-playing game allows people to become simultaneously both the artists who create a story and the audience who watches the story unfold. This story has the potential to become a personal myth, shaped to meet the needs of its creators.” Although the characters controlled by the students are not the students themselves, they are a reflection of them. The characters could be considered avatars of the students who control them. Sometimes, students are not willing to speak up about their own feelings or personal needs. Many of them feel ashamed or embarrassed of speaking. By the use of a fictitious character, students are allowed to displace their feelings and opinions into their characters, therefore expressing their thoughts indirectly.

Paul Cardwell, CAR-PGA president, noted in his article *Role-Playing Games and the Gifted Students*, that “there are several language and non-language based learning skills developed directly when students become involved with RPGs” (1995). These skills include, but are not limited to, following directions, vocabulary, research, independent/self-directed study, planning, choice/decision making, mental exercise, evaluation, cooperation/interaction, creativity/imagination, leadership, problem solving, critical thinking, predicting consequences, figural/spatial reasoning, taking other points of view, asking questions, ethics, prioritizing, interrelated learning, and continuity of learning. Furthermore, David-Phillips (1995) states that Swink and Buchanan found that there is also some evidence to suggest that role-playing methods facilitate attitude change, increase self-concept, and produce behavioral change.

When playing the game, the players and GM sit and talk about what the characters are doing. They speak in character or out of character. When speaking in-character, players and GM make their characters speak to each other directly like characters in a play or novel; they also can narrate their character actions in first or third person. When speaking out of character, the players speak to each other or the GM, often stating the actions that their characters will take. This interaction is what gives the game the communicative aspect. The conversations in which the students’ characters become engaged are not rehearsed, but spontaneous. The actions which the students state their characters will make are variable. One student’s response

to a particular situation may not be the same response another student would make.

In these games, the teacher acts as the GM. The teacher guides the students through the story, but does not tell them what to do, what to say, or how to respond to situations. The teacher is, essentially, a guide or facilitator. This is a trademark of the whole-language classroom as well as of the communicative classroom, where, as Brown states, “the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator and guide.” (43) According to David-Phillips (1995), “because RPGs are language-centered communication games, they have a definite positive effect on student socialization skills which are central to RPGs where much of the game is based upon gaining information from the GM and then interacting with one another to come up with a common interpretation so that the group of players can accomplish their goals.” Furthermore, it should be clear that “RPG activities are not limited to language practice as language learning is also taking place during the games.” (David-Phillips-a, 1995). The students’ constant interaction with the teacher and fellow students, reading from the manuals, writing on their character sheets, and consulting the rule book, results in language acquisition. Students who create their own adventures instead of relying on published books usually become better thinkers and writers. By thinking of an original rules system and storyline, they are enhancing their thinking and creative skills. This is because a scenario requires internal logic, a balance that is the main condition for true enjoyment of the experience.

Most tabletop RPGs revolve around a given set of rules. These rules govern the use of currency, movement, character attributes, and combat (if there is any) by using mathematical equations. In most, if not all, of these rules systems, characters must have certain attributes, such as strength, wisdom, intelligence, and charisma, which are used to accomplish various tasks. To obtain the base score of each attribute, players, or students, must roll several dice, add, subtract, multiply, and divide the numbers rolled, and come up with a base score. This score is what is used later in the game to perform tasks. If a player wants to lift a boulder half the size of the character, the player rolls a dice. Based on the rules set by the system, the base score, and the score in the roll of the dice, the action is accomplished or failed. Mathematical equations given by the rules of the game state how successful the action was. A higher roll may result in the lifting of a stone, while a lower roll may result in dropping the boulder and tripping over it. Similarly, movement and combat (if the teacher decides that there is to be any) is

handled by similar dice and score-based game mechanics. In some games, the character's movement may be adversely affected based on how much weight the character is carrying. Currency is commonly handled by a generic system where ten 'copper coins' are equivalent to 'one silver coin', and ten silver coins are equivalent to 'one gold coin'. However, some of the games that are set in modern or futuristic times have different currencies. All of these equations that take place within the game are an obvious display of these language-based games integrating mathematics into their design.

The integration of history into the game comes at the discretion of the GM, or teacher. The game master is the one who decides the setting and main topic of the scenario to be played. However, the creation of the story itself is the product of all the players. Padol (1996) writes that "whether a game session centers on an epic battle, Byzantine politics, or a simple day in a town created by the players and the GM, the events of the session are mythical to its audience, which consists of the players and the GM who collaborated to create it." These two scenarios which she mentions are but two of the endless possible scenarios that can be prepared by the teacher for the enjoyment of the students. A scenario designed by the teacher can incorporate historical facts. As Kim (2007) states, "RPGs are actually a very interesting approach to history." He states that while traditional history lessons are macro-histories, where students learn about the lines of kings, elected presidents, or dates of wars, RPGs give students "a micro-history approach where the players instead get a more complete picture of what life was like at a particular time and place." Through playing an RPG, students can learn about everyday life of a specific period. The drawback of this, however, is that there are only a handful of accurately historical RPGs that have been published. The best option for teachers who want to engage students in historical RPGs is to study the period and write a scenario themselves.

In the end, tabletop RPGs are language based communicative activities that integrate mathematics and history into their design in which the game master acts as a guide or facilitator and in which all of the participants are required to (1) use language in a spontaneous, unrehearsed manner, (2) read and explore a set system of rules and conditions, and (3) make annotations regarding the game in their notebooks. And (4) engages students in the weaving of a collaborative narrative. All of these qualities are viewed by modern language acquisition theories as helpful for the language acquisition

process. For these reasons, tabletop RPGs should be given serious consideration for use in the ESL classroom.

## **Integrating the Tabletop RPG into the class**

### **Setting**

There are several views on which level is the most appropriate to use tabletop RPGs. Davis-Phillips (1995) states that “Role-Playing activities offer opportunities for real use of the language. Although they are more often used in many English for Special Purposes courses, they can be used with general classes too at any level.” He says that although the ones who can benefit the most out of using tabletop RPGs in the classroom are students of English for specific purposes, the activity can be modified to fit other levels. However Nephew (1992) disagrees, and states that “RPGs have the most immediate benefits and possibilities for the upper-level all-English conversation classroom.” It is possible, however, that the true benefits of using tabletop RPGs in the classroom do not come about because they are used in a specific course or grade, but because they are used with students who have reached a certain level of fluency with the target language. Tabletop RPGs are not recommended for classrooms in which the students know nothing of the target language. However, once the students feel a bit comfortable with the language and are able to construct sentences of their own they can be introduced to the game. This activity works best in groups of five to ten students, but can also be carried out with groups of up to thirty students.

### **Materials and Handouts**

The materials required for this activity may vary depending on the tabletop RPG that the teacher wishes to use. As Padol (1996) states, “material will be added or cut, depending on the needs of the group.” This gives the teacher freedom to choose from the various available game systems and stories. Still, although it is the teacher’s job to decide which materials to use with this activity, there are two things that are a requisite for this activity: (1) the tabletop RPG and (2) dice. According to David-Phillips, “using RPGs with a simple interface instead of RPGs with a complex rules system is ideal. (David-Phillips-b, 1995). A teacher located in a school with few economic resources might opt to use a free RPG system, which can be found online, such as “1940 – England Invaded”, an alternative history RPG where

England is invaded by Germany, “The Roman Legion”, set in the historical Roman empire, “Ad Astarta: The New Age”, a futuristic setting of space exploration, or “Ars Magika”, where players are thrust into a mythical version of Europe. If teachers opt for using these free RPGs, they should download the PDF file and print several copies; one for the teacher, and at least five for the students. A teacher in a school with more resources might decide to use one of the commercially available tabletop RPGs. Commercially available RPGs usually have a GM guide book, a player’s handbook, and several ad-on material, such as supplementary stories and maps. Teachers who decides to use commercial RPGs should at least have one copy of the GM manual, five copies of the player’s handbooks for the students, one character sheet for each of the students, and whatever supplementary material the teacher decides to employ in the scenario.

The second important element of the RPG is dice. Although the narrative form of the story being played out, as well as the interactions between characters, are all of a communicative nature, when a player announces that his or her character will make an action the dice must be used to verify whether the action succeeded or not. Although the most commonly used dice are the four-sided dice, the six-sided dice, the eight-sided dice, the ten-sided dice, the twelve-sided dice, and the twenty-sided dice, the teacher can decide to use some, or just one type of dice in their scenario by modifying the system of rules. Additional materials, such as maps or figures representing the characters, are completely optional.

Once teachers have managed to secure a copies of the GM guidebook, player’s handbook, dice, and whatever other optional supplementary material they wish, they are ready to engage the students in a tabletop RPG scenario.

### **The Classroom as a Role Playing Game**

Tabletop RPGs play out like interactive narratives. First, the students and the teacher should sit in a circle. The teacher should bring example games, dice, adventures, and literature based upon various games. The teacher will then explain to the students what a tabletop RPG is, and some of the basic rules of the system the teacher has chosen. The teacher will talk about the rules of interaction, in-character and out of character conversations, currency, and some of the basics of the dice system. The teacher will then give the students their character sheets, their player’s handbooks or player’s information, and

their dice. The first task is creating a character. First, students need to create status scores. This is accomplished by rolling dice and adding or subtracting numbers in order to obtain status scores. In most of the basic RPGs, to obtain a score, the player rolls four six-sided dice and adds the three highest obtained numbers. After obtaining the status scores required by the game, the students will proceed to create the character. This begins by the naming of the character. Students have to specify character race (human, elf, alien, etc), character class (warrior, politician, spy, etc), skin color, eye color, and another host of attributes which are identified by the game chosen by the teacher. Afterwards, each of the students are given a specific amount of 'money' to spend buying clothes, food, and other equipment necessary for their quest. Finally, after all of the students have prepared their characters, the game will truly begin.

In smaller groups, the teacher can begin with a story of friends who have not met for a long time and are now in a reunion. In this reunion the conflict begins, and the teacher guides the students through the story. The narrative should not be made by just the teacher. Teachers should pause often and ask the students about their actions, and ask them to interact amongst themselves to come to group decisions. Although some of the aspects of the game can be controlled (where the students go, what characters interact with the students, the setting, etc) student reactions cannot be controlled. This may lead to discussion amongst the students regarding which way to go. Even though student decisions cannot be pre-determined, the teacher, or GM, should always have a draft of what the story will be like. Teachers should always keep in focus the main conflict of the plot, and use every narrative device at their disposal to guide the students through the story, while allowing them the right to make their own choices. If the student group is large, then the story could begin with a major conflict, like a war or a natural disaster. Although all the students begin the story together, they eventually become separated. When characters separate, teachers can "cut" back and forth between scenes involving different characters, making each group of students the focus of their own individual sub-plot. According to Nephew (1992), this technique has several benefits. He states that "first, it allows players to develop characters towards their goals without having to subsume them to the demands of the "party" as a whole", and "secondly, it quickens the pace, allowing players to think while their characters are "off-screen," cutting down on dead time in which players thrash over decisions." He also states that this technique is entertaining for players out of the spotlight

because it allows them to sit back and enjoy the adventures of other characters.

Complexity of story and system should vary depending on how often / how long the teacher is going to use the activity. Every week could have a more complex system and story than once a month or twice per semester.

After students are familiar with game, they can do their own stories for classmates to play. Rotate students. However, for this to happen the teacher should have more than just one GM guide and enough player's handbooks for every student.

### **How the dice work**

Dice are an important part of the tabletop RPG. Almost every action announced by a player is deemed successful or unsuccessful by the roll of a dice. A player in a fantasy setting could, for example, announce that his warrior character is going to use an axe to chop down a tree for firewood. To accomplish this action the GM needs to know the character's strength score, if there are any modifiers, the character's required roll to perform the action. With the strength score, the GM knows if there are any natural modifiers to the dice roll. The player's warrior character has a strength score of 18, which gives a bonus of two points. Skill bonuses also can alter the dice roll. The player's character has a skill bonus of 2 points for using the axe. This is called axe mastery. Based on the class and level of the player's character, his required roll to succeed in cutting down the tree is 17. Die rolls that fall on 20 are an automatic success, and die rolls that fall on 1 are automatic misses. The student declares his action, "I want to chop down the tree", and rolls the 20-sided die three times. First he rolls a 10, next a 16, and finally a 20. The modifier scores from strength and axe mastery are added to the first two rolls, and the resulting scores become 14 and 20. With a total score of 14 the student is not able to succeed in hitting the tree. With his second total, 20, the student is able to hit the tree. The third roll, a natural 20, is an automatic hit. All of these hit-or-miss rolls are determined by the RPGs rules. To determine whether the tree is knocked down or not depends not only on whether it is hit or not, but on how hard it is hit. With his first rolls using the 20-sided dice, the student was able to hit the tree twice, once normally, and once with an added burst of energy for having rolled a natural 20. To determine how hard the student's character hit the tree the, first the GM needs to be aware of the kind of item the character is using to chop down the

tree. The student stated that he is going to use an axe to cut the tree. A woodcutter's axe deals damage equal to one 8-sided die. To deal damage with this weapon, the player rolls the die, and the strength bonus modifier and axe mastery modifier are added to the number rolled, resulting in total damage. Finally, the GM needs to know the tree's health points, 30. The student throws his first 8-sided die to know how much damage he did to the tree in the hopes of cutting it into fire wood. He rolls a 1, to which the GM adds 2 points for strength modifiers and 2 points for axe mastery modifier. The student does 5 points of damage to the tree. The student rolls his second die and obtains a 7. To this 7 the GM adds strength bonus and axe mastery bonus, for a total of 11. However, this is the damage roll for the hit which he had obtained a natural 20, it deals double damage, for a total of 22 points of damage. Together with the first roll, the student does a total of 27 points of damage to the tree. This is not enough to knock down the tree. However, it is up to the teacher, the GM, to decide whether this is enough damage to obtain some amount of firewood, or none at all.

## **Assessment**

The students should be evaluated based on their participation and contribution to the overall game, the degree of interaction with students and non-playable characters, and their notes on the character sheets. To do this, teachers should develop their own rubrics in which they detail the following criteria: (1) student's willingness to participate, (2) student's communication effectiveness, (3) student actions and interaction's level of coherence, (4) ideas were well expressed, (5) acquired knowledge of the rules system, and (6) cooperation with other students to accomplish a goal. Students who are willing to use the language to communicate their ideas, who demonstrate some degree of acquired knowledge about the rules of the game, and who try to help everyone in their team in order to accomplish a certain goal should receive a higher score or grade than students who simply 'tag along'. Other criteria may be added at the teacher's discretion. The student's character sheet can also be used as part of the evaluation. If the student filled out the character sheet, kept track of their items, and wrote notes regarding their scenario, they should get a higher score than those who simply wrote their name and their character's name. In the end, the real demonstration of whether the activity was successful or not is the increased willingness of the students to use unrehearsed, spontaneous language in different settings.

## **Drawbacks**

There are two main difficulties that arise when planning to use tabletop RPGs. The first is that lower-level English Conversation classes may not find as much immediate use in the games, as "students may feel intimidated by the free-form nature and language demands made by the games." (Nephew, 1992) For upper level classes, the teacher need only to introduce the game to the students, while using the game in the lower level classes may present more difficulties. The second drawback that may arise is that if the students don't know how to describe an action in the game, they may revert to simple language rather than exploring other possibilities for description. If teachers can manage to get around these two small setbacks, the tabletop RPG will become a great tool in their arsenal for teaching students how to speak English as a second or foreign language.

## **Links**

For a comprehensive list of free and commercial tabletop RPGs, visit John H. Kim's website at <http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/>

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