

# The uniqueness of gameplay

**Jason Anderson** finds a way of making controlled language use authentic.

**C**an language use be simultaneously authentic and yet controlled? Is it possible to have meaningful communication between learners that still retains a linguistic focus? I believe the answer to both of these questions is *yes*, if we draw upon the unique features and qualities of gameplay to create a dual context for language use in the classroom.

Among the many definitions of *authenticity* that have been invoked in language teaching, it is Henry Widdowson's that resonates most meaningfully for me as a teacher. In his influential paper 'Context, community, and authentic language', Widdowson made the point that authenticity is not a quality of the materials we use, but a context-dependent interaction between individuals within a community, whether that be the face-to-face interaction of conversation, or the time-displaced interaction when we read a text or watch a TV programme. He identified three key features that are necessary prerequisites for language use to be considered authentic: context, a discourse community and 'pragmatic functioning', by which he means a purpose for using language.

## Language use in gameplay

When we look at gameplay, we can identify two contexts for authentic language use within Widdowson's definition, as illustrated in Table 1.

Let us call the language used in these two contexts 'in-game language use' (for context 1, the game) and 'around-game language use' (for context 2, the lesson event).

## In-game language use

In the first context in Table 1 (in-game language use), whenever a player does what is required of them in order to progress towards success within the game, they are using language authentically. For example, a learner who is talking for a minute without stopping on a random topic, or trying to guess a word being described by a classmate, is using language no less authentically than I am when I am playing *Just a minute* or *Monopoly* with my friends, regardless of whether the language use replicates anything that might occur beyond the world of gameplay. What's more, in-game language use is usually quite rule-bound, restricted even. Asking and answering a *Trivial pursuit* question would hardly constitute 'authentic' language use according to Jim Scrivener's 'Authentic, Restricted and Clarification' (ARC) model, yet it happens in gameplay outside the classroom. The language use is authentic because it has a 'pragmatic functioning' within the discourse community of the game, even if it fulfils a partly- or wholly-linguistic outcome (as opposed to a non-linguistic, 'real world' outcome). As David Crystal and Guy Cook maintain, using language for its own sake is part of authentic language use.

## Around-game language use

Around-game language use (the second context in Table 1) includes any language use that either facilitates, supports or comments on the gameplay itself. It recognises the class (including the teacher) as its discourse community. It is present in all types of gameplay, but tends to be, in my experience, more extensive and more varied in competitive gameplay, as opposed to collaborative

Context	Community	Pragmatic functioning
1 The game	The players	To win the game or play well
2 The lesson event	The class	To (be able to) play the game

Table 1

gameplay. Interestingly, around-game language use can be surprisingly varied both in terms of discourse type and function, and it fits under almost anyone's definition of authentic language use (for an overview, see, for example, Alex Gilmore's article in *Language Teaching*). Table 2 provides some examples from my recent lessons.

From a second language acquisition perspective, this around-game language use, happening under the guidance of the teacher, provides valuable opportunities for learning. It gives a clear context for both negotiation of meaning and focus on form – as opposed to 'focus on forms' – both of which have been argued to promote language learning within the classroom context (see works by Michael Long). We can help our learners to develop their confidence in around-game language use by pre-teaching useful vocabulary or expressions, and providing feedback on successes and errors made during the game. This around-game language use also allows us to get a peek at how our learners are likely to be using language outside the classroom and, as such, provides a useful opportunity for noticing what they've learnt and what they need to learn next.

Teachers working in monolingual classes often find it difficult to get their learners to use English for around-game language use. While I am a great believer in the use of the mother tongue as a

learning resource, this is a wasted opportunity to use English communicatively, so as well as patiently encouraging learners to use English as much as possible, you could try using the 'yellow card, red card' system (see the box opposite).

## Games versus tasks

If we take a fairly widely-accepted definition of a task, as provided by Rod Ellis in 2009, for example, we can see some key differences between language use in games and tasks. Unlike games, tasks cannot really offer a distinction between 'in-task' and 'around-task' language use because language use in tasks is not normally governed by a set of artificial rules. In his definition of a task, Ellis argues that tasks should have a primary focus on meaning and a non-linguistic outcome, neither of which is necessary in a game, yet the language use (both in-game and around-game) can still be described as authentic within Widdowson's definition of authenticity. Like tasks, games can be 'unfocused' (with no specific language learning aim) or 'focused' (designed to practise a specific grammatical feature, lexical area or function). However, in games, unlike tasks, target linguistic features do not need to be 'hidden'. Either the teacher or the game itself can make the language learning outcome explicit to the learners, without the language use in the game losing any of its inherent authenticity or

Utterance	Role of language use
<i>Can we start?</i>	Organisational
<i>I think you have to ask me first. I think it doesn't matter.</i>	Negotiational
<i>Wait! Here is written 'If you can't think of a reason for ...'</i>	Arbitrational
<i>It's under your bag. (referring to dice)</i>	Descriptive
<i>You used the wrong tense! You said 'I meet him', not 'met'.</i>	Metalinguistic
<i>Yukiko won again!</i>	Social
<i>I think it is a lie. He closes his eyes like this – do you agree?</i>	Evaluative

Table 2

## Yellow card, red card

Distribute two or three yellow cards and one red card to each group playing a game (if it's a mingle activity, you can give the cards to 'language police officers'). During the game, if any learner uses their mother tongue, either for in-game or around-game language, the other learners give him or her a yellow card. A learner who then uses their mother tongue again gets a red card, and must either miss a turn or lose a pre-specified number of points. While you're monitoring, if you see a yellow card in front of a learner, you can find out what they wanted to say and translate it into English for them. Because learners understand the importance of rules in gameplay, and are usually familiar with how these cards are used in football, I have found that this system allows them to monitor their own production well, even in large classes or when they get very excited by the game.

becoming a 'situational grammar exercise' (Ellis's term), precisely because the artifice of the game is part of its authenticity. As Guy Cook puts it, *'It is artifice ... which may on occasion be more authentic than reality'*.

This is potentially a unique characteristic of gameplay.

## A challenging game

The 'Third person challenge' game on page 6 is one that my learners enjoy playing. You will see that in-game language use is clearly rule-bound, and the language focus could not be more explicit. However, not only is *interaction* meaningful, but so is the *content* of each learner's answers to their partner's questions, which should be truthful, or at least logical. The rules require that answers are provided in full sentences, despite the fact that if the questions were asked in a different (non-game) context, a shorter answer would often be more natural. They also require instant peer-correction of errors with the third person *s*. The challenge is intensified by both the time limit and the unpredictability of the questions, constantly distracting the learner from their intended focus on form to a focus

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on meaning. Questions such as *How many languages does a banana speak?* and *What type of cigarettes does a chicken smoke?*, both of which require a negative third person form (*It doesn't ...*) catch out about half the learners in an intermediate class! Try it out with your learners, and then try inventing a similar one for regular past simple *-ed* endings or comparative forms of adjectives.

## Game over!

In this short article, I have not found time to mention the importance of games in providing intrinsic motivation for learning, nor indeed for the wonderful potential they have for developing higher-order thinking skills or rapport within a learning community – all this is fodder perhaps for a future article. What's more, my tentative claims

for the unique qualities of games and their potentially conducive role in second language acquisition remain to be proven. But until they are (and even if they aren't), I'll be crafting games for my learners to play for the foreseeable future. As Henry Widdowson himself puts it:

*'As TESOL professionals, we need to make language and language learning a reality for learners, and we cannot do so by bland reference to "real English". It can only be done by contrivance, by artifice. And artifice, the careful crafting of appropriate language activities, is what TESOL is all about.'* **ETP**



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## Third person challenge

### Student A

Your partner will have three minutes to answer all your questions. Don't show your partner the questions and don't take any notes. Repeat the question slowly if your partner doesn't understand.

**Make sure your partner:**

- answers all the questions using complete sentences (say *Full sentence, please!*).
- uses the present simple tense only.
- never forgets to use the 's' on the third person verb.

**The student who makes the fewest mistakes wins. Start the timer – three minutes only!**

- 1 What does an English teacher do?
- 2 What does a shoe shop sell?
- 3 What does a radio do?
- 4 What does your best friend watch on TV?
- 5 What doesn't your best friend like to watch?
- 6 Where does the president of the USA live?
- 7 What does a dog do in its free time?
- 8 How fast does a snake run?
- 9 Who talks too much in this class?
- 10 Who doesn't talk enough?
- 11 Why?
- 12 What type of cigarettes does a chicken smoke?

### Student B

Your partner will have three minutes to answer all your questions. Don't show your partner the questions and don't take any notes. Repeat the question slowly if your partner doesn't understand.

**Make sure your partner:**

- answers all the questions using complete sentences (say *Full sentence, please!*).
- uses the present simple tense only.
- never forgets to use the 's' on the third person verb.

**The student who makes the fewest mistakes wins. Start the timer – three minutes only!**

- 1 What does a taxi driver do?
- 2 What does a book shop sell?
- 3 What does a freezer do?
- 4 What does our teacher do at the end of every lesson?
- 5 What does your mother eat for breakfast?
- 6 What about your father?
- 7 What about a tiger?
- 8 What two things does a door do?
- 9 How well does a mobile phone swim?
- 10 Who wears the best clothes in this class?
- 11 Why?
- 12 How many languages does a banana speak?