Developing oral interaction skills with a digital information gap activity game

Avery Rueb[1], Walcir Cardoso[2], and Jennica Grimshaw[3]

Abstract. This study introduces the digital game Prêt à négocier, an information gap digital game, and investigates language learners' perceptions of its use in a French as a Second Language (FSL) context. In the game, students negotiate orally and synchronously with a partner for items like cars, houses, and even pirate ships. Inspired by Larsen-Freeman and Long's (1991) information gap activity, game players exchange information to solve a common problem (e.g. to buy a car within certain conditions imposed by the game). As a competitive game, the pairs must use their oral interaction skills in a comprehensible and persuasive manner to win (e.g. to obtain the best final price on a product). In addition to describing Prêt à négocier, this study examines 28 students' perceptions of its pedagogical use in a standard FSL classroom via a triangulation of methods that include a survey, interviews with participants, and focus group discussions. Based on our findings, we conclude that students' perceptions of the game are highly positive in most aspects of our analysis and that Prêt à négocier is well-positioned to help students improve oral interaction skills in a fun, comfortable, and interactive manner.

Keywords: computer-assisted language learning, mobile technology, digital gaming, L2 education, learner perceptions.

1.   Introduction

Oral interaction is a second language (L2) competency that is required in everyday tasks like talking on the phone with a colleague or having a face-to-face conference with a teacher (Hall, 2003). Developing oral interaction skills has many benefits for second language acquisition as students not only practice listening and speaking, but also become motivated to give feedback on what the interlocutor is saying (Gass, 1997).

1. Vanier College, Montréal, Canada; rueba@vaniercollege.qc.ca
2. Concordia University, Montréal, Canada; walcir.cardoso@concordia.ca
3. Concordia University, Montréal, Canada; jennica.grimshaw@gmail.com

Information gap activities develop interaction skills by requiring learners to engage in dialogue with one another in order to exchange partial information sets so that the team can solve problems that require knowledge of the entire information set. Through the 'forced output' generated by these types of activities, learners become aware of and fill in gaps in their L2 linguistic knowledge through negotiation with their interlocutors (Swain & Lapkin, 1995). However, oral interaction frequently goes underdeveloped in language classrooms. A recent study by Zuniga and Simard (2016), for example, reported that out of 64 hours of classroom observation, Quebec high school language teachers spent 8% of the time developing these interactive skills.

The current study introduces and examines the game Prêt à négocier as a digital information gap activity whose aim is to help students develop oral interaction skills. Developed by Rueb, Cardoso and Affordance Studio[4], the game can be played on mobile devices, desktops and laptops, both in the classroom through face-to-face conversations or at home through an audio chat solution. In the game, students earn points for achieving two objectives: exchanging information about the product and arriving at a final price (see Figure 1). Specifically, the product information must be exchanged in terms of the players' roles criteria (i.e. what the buyer is looking for and what the seller is offering). After the item information has been exchanged, students must continue talking to agree on a final price below the maximum price of the buyer and above the minimum price of the seller.

Figure 1. Prêt à négocier interface (buyer's view)
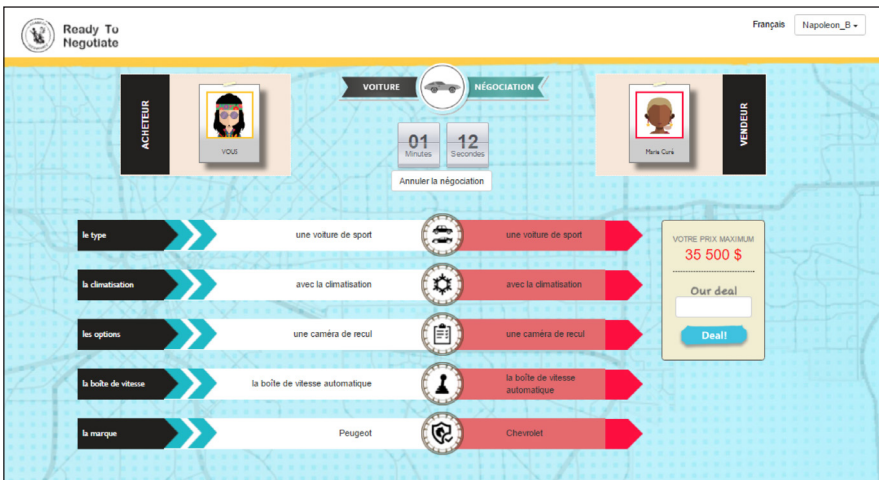
_____

We believe that Prêt à négocier has the potential to help students develop oral interaction skills in a fun, engaging and immersive environment, not only in the classroom under the teacher's supervision, but also outside of the classroom on the learner's own schedule. The goal of our study is to examine students' perceptions of and attitudes toward Prêt à négocier via the use of a survey, interviews, and focus group sections, as will be discussed below.

2.   Method

2.1.   Participants

The participants were 28 post-secondary students enrolled in an intermediate-level FSL class in a post-secondary institution (a *cégep*) in Québec, Canada. The goal of the course was to develop writing, listening, reading and speaking skills to prepare students for credit classes at the post-secondary level. The participants had various native languages including Vietnamese, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and English, and their average age was approximately 20 (range 17-25).

2.2.   Design and procedure

Participants met with the classroom teacher two-times a week for 100 minutes each class. The treatment consisted of game-playing during 25-minute sessions, twice a week, over a four-week period for a total of approximately 200 minutes of game play. The study was completed using an early version of the Prêt à négocier game with four different negotiation scenarios: buying a car, renting an apartment, buying a pirate ship, and purchasing a trip to space.

After the last treatment session, participants completed the survey and participated in interviews. Select participants also gave feedback in a focus group. The survey contained 16 statements using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6) with numerical values indicating degrees of agreement, and asked questions about how the game contributed to learning (e.g. "Prêt à négocier helped me improve my vocabulary"). The research team also conducted interviews and a focus group session with participants in order to delve deeper into some of their answers and to expand on their understanding of the tool's usefulness. In this study, we report the results from the analysis of the data collected from the survey, focus group, and individual interviews with the participants.

3.   Results and discussion

Based on the descriptive statistics from the survey as well as the analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts, our results indicate that participants found Prêt à négocier to be enjoyable and helpful for language learning. Due to space constraints, only the most relevant data are reported here.

Firstly, the participants said to have found the game fun: "It's a fun learning, like, it's not boring or something, we enjoy it. We don't feel like we're learning, but we're learning". Warschauer and Healey (1998) describe this as the 'fun factor' in second language games. This 'fun factor' could be one reason that participants reported really enjoying using the Prêt à négocier game (Mean: 5.29/6; SD: 1.12).

Secondly, students found that the game helped them improve their French (Mean: 5.25/6; SD:0.97) and that Prêt à négocier is a great tool to learn a language (Mean: 5.11/6; SD: 0.99). One possible reason for these results might be the competitive quality of the game where using the language effectively can lead to better game outcomes (see Vandercruysse, Vandewaetere, Cornillie, & Clarebout, 2013 for different results). One student commented in an interview that "the competition is good I think. It makes us know more words to say what we mean".

Another student stated that the game helped to increase her Willingness To Communicate (WTC), a result supported by related studies (Reinders & Wattana, 2014): "It helped me to want to be able to talk more, uh… More open, in a sense, it made me want to talk instead of being – I'm a very shy person when it comes to talking in French, I tend to hold back, so it kinda (sic) made me want to open up and to expose myself". There was a similar trend in the survey, where students felt more comfortable talking in French after playing the game (Mean: 4.46/6; SD: 1.09).

Finally, some students enjoyed the collaborative aspect of the game: "Some of my favourite things are, just getting to talk to other people, that not only helps you but you get to help them too. I always find it rewarding when you get to help somebody else too. So along with improving yourself, others improve too and it just makes everything better".

The relationship between cooperative learning and WTC has been shown in past research (Montasseri & Razmjoo, 2015) and might be one reason why participants felt more comfortable speaking during gameplay than in other oral activities in previous French classes (Mean: 5.25/6; SD:0.97).

In terms of feedback on how to improve the game, students found that the pre-established three minute time limit to reach deals was too short. They also suggested that the tutorial and game onboarding needed to be made more user-friendly. All suggestions will be implemented in the new version of the game, to be released in fall, 2016.

4.   Conclusions

Based on students' perceptions of the game, Prêt à négocier appears to be well-positioned to help students improve oral interaction skills in a fun and interactive way. Participants reported a higher level of comfort with this type of game interaction than with other oral activities. They also enjoyed both the collaborative and competitive aspects of the game, which played a role in helping students to feel more motivated to learn French and improve their language skills. This also seems to bear out in the (unpublished) preliminary results from a longitudinal study on the effects of game play on vocabulary acquisition, where we see that the game-playing experimental group outperformed the control group in recalling vocabulary items that they had practiced in oral interactions with their peers via Prêt à négocier.

5.   Acknowledgements

References

Gass, S. M. (1997). *Input, interaction, and the second language learner*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hall, J. K. (2003). Classroom interaction and language learning. *Ilha do Desterro, 44*, 165-188.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Long, M. (1991). *An introduction to second language acquisition research*. New York: Longman.

Montasseri, Z., & Razmjoo, S. (2015). The effect of using competitive and cooperative teaching on the WTC of Iranian EFL learners. *International Journal of Language and Applied Linguistics, 1*(3), 54-61.

Reinders, H., & Wattana, S. (2014). Can I say something? The effects of digital game play on willingness to communicate. *Language Learning & Technology, 18*(2), 101–123

Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (1995). Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: a step towards second language learning. *Applied Linguistics, 16*(3), 371-391. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/16.3.371

Vandercruysse, S., Vandewaetere, M., Cornillie, F., & Clarebout, G. (2013). Competition and students' perceptions in a game-based language learning environment. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 61*(6), 927-950. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-013-9314-5

Warschauer, M., & Healey, D. (1998). Computers and language learning: an overview. *Language Teaching, 31*(2), 57-71. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444800012970

Zuniga, M., & Simard, D. (2016). Observing the interactive qualities of L2 instructional practices in ESL and FSL classrooms. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching, 6*(1), 135-158. https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2016.6.1.7

CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016
Edited by Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny