L2 at Play:
Game Learning as a New Approach to Reviewing Language Lessons

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Abstract

The article discusses game learning as a means of reviewing Italian grammar and lexicon in courses for non-Italian students, especially US undergraduates. The author describes why and how, after preliminary observation, he resolved to adopt a game learning approach in his Italian language courses.

Keywords: Game Learning, Grammar and Lexicon Reviewing, Elementary Level Italian Language Courses.

In this paper I'm going to describe how I gradually realized that I should adopt game learning as a means of reviewing the Italian grammar and lexicon that I had previously discussed in class with my non-Italian students. The context I'm speaking of is that of classes consisting of US undergraduates who spend a semester in Florence and take an Italian language course for the first time in their life (ITAL 101).

A five-stage process

My analysis of this experience focuses on five distinct stages, which I'm going to address in what is both a chronological and strategic order:

- **Initial observation:** I first analyse how the class behaves when faced with a common, traditional kind of reviewing. I'm particularly interested in seeing how students react to what we may call "classical" exercises.
- **Planning language learning games:** I assess the criteria usually adopted to create game learning exercises. This includes a reflection on related practical and psychopedagogical features.

- **The theoretical context***:* I reference the main essays and books on this kind of didactic approach.
- **In-class testing***:* I describe how these game learning activities turned out to be in class. To this purpose, I give some practical examples and share my personal, first-hand observations.
- **Conclusions***:* I share some reflections after testing this method in class and suggest potential developments or new perspectives based on my personal experience.

Initial observation: how students react to traditional reviewing activities

Reviewing activities that were included in the course syllabus as part of regular class hours, usually done through the textbook, often left some students passive. The prevailing pattern was basically as follows: students would wait for the teacher to write the correct answers on the board or show them on the screen. At that point, each student would write down the answers in his or her own copy of the book. This way the textbook was never used as an active reference tool or as some kind of support to do the assigned work; instead, it merely became a collection of correct answers.

When I asked my students why they didn't do those reviewing exercises on their own, their answers were either elusive or revealing of some practical and psychological uneasiness on their part. For example, they would often say "I don't know" or "I don't want my notes to look messy. If I make mistakes, I have to erase them and I don't like that". I must say that this kind of behaviour did not apply to the whole class; it was usually only some students who slackened when faced with more traditional activities. That is why I started thinking of exploring new ways to get them more engaged in my lessons.

Then, a few semesters ago, on a day I had to cancel a field trip because of bad weather, I thought of replacing that outdoor activity with a "didactic treasure hunt" inside the institute facility. The building (Palazzo Bargagli, overlooking the Arno River) has several spots that can nicely

serve as a series of stops on the way to the final discovery. I thus divided the class into small groups and gave them several language assignments (grammar and vocabulary exercises). The correct answers provided the clues necessary to move on to the next stage in the game.

I was surprised by the immediate change in the students' attitude: suddenly, they started using the textbook as a natural and strategic tool, not so much in search of the answers per se but to solve the problems and, therefore, have their team win the contest. I didn't suggest that they use the Italian language book; it was the groups of students themselves that decided to rely on it and use it in an active, autonomous and collaborative way within each team. This led me to think about the potential that game learning could have to trigger behaviours different from those I had often observed during review sessions in my classes.

Planning language learning games and related parameters: from theory to practice

In this case too planning proved to be crucial to the success of the whole project. Before preparing the games to be played in class with the students, it was necessary to identify some basic parameters to design those activities.

The treasure hunt I had experimented before was as an end-of-semester activity. As such, it served as a general review of the grammar and the vocabulary that had been studied for many weeks in a row. This time, instead, I wanted to come up with a series of activities to be done at regular intervals throughout the semester, from beginning to end. For this reason, the games had to be consistent with the course syllabus. That also meant that they had to tie in with what we did in class every single week. Likewise, their difficulty had to be on par with the students' expected level of knowledge at that exact time. In other words, the games had to reflect the course topics' complexity also in terms of structure, not only content.

Time was another crucial factor. Each activity was supposed to last between 15 and 20 minutes, so as to be completed while guaranteeing

direct and active involvement on the part of the students. At the end, students would receive some kind of award to keep their motivation high. Variation happened to be important, too; I couldn't just make slight changes to the same format over and over. Repetition would spoil the surprise effect and the fun that comes with it.

Another significant element to keep in mind was when to do that game learning activity during the week. I ended up choosing Thursday, as it is usually perceived as the last day of class in a regular semester week (although students may have course-related fieldtrips on weekends). Also, it's unusual to have tests on Thursdays. For all these reasons, I consider it to be an "easy" day and, as such, the best time to have reviewing sessions. I also thought that ending my Thursday lessons (and, therefore, the whole school week) with a game learning activity would increase the students' motivation and avoid any requests to offer it again the following day, thus reducing its "extraordinary" character.

Another criterion to be considered in planning these language-learning games was their structure: they had to be easy to manage, visually stimulating, intuitive and lively. I decided to include digital tools like Kahoot! but make limited use of it, thinking that its repetitive (and, therefore, predictable) format – together with the passive role it has students play – would make it difficult to keep the class motivated and engaged. If students were expected to participate in designing those games it became a lot easier to create something fit for them, almost customized.

Another underlying principle was that the Italian language learning games would have to stimulate not only the students' mind but also engage them physically. In other words, they would not sit all the time; they would have to move inside the classroom and change positions. Basically, these dynamic activities would embrace a holistic approach to learning; in the footsteps of Plato's *Republic*, I also believe that mind and body should not be taught separately, as if they were completely different entities. On the contrary, I regard them as interconnected tools, capable of creating harmony and perfection when they work together.

I thus came to realize quite clearly the assets that this kind of game

learning could offer:

- To break up the ordinary lesson's routine, with the teacher lecturing all the time, thus catching the students' interest.
- To join studying with a pleasant, stimulating activity.
- To create a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, where students learn without realizing they are in school.

The theoretical context

Here is a list of the main books I'd suggest on these topics:

- Koster, R. (2005). *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Scottsdale, AZ: Paraglyph Press.
Koster considers games to be most efficient learning tools. As he puts it, "Fun is just another word for learning." In his analysis, he emphasizes the notion of cognitive challenge and the acquisition of new skills while playing.
- Ratey, J. J., & Hagerman, E. (2008). *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
The authors explore the connection between physical exercise and cerebral functions. In doing so they highlight how aerobic activities improve learning, memory and our mood too. As they write: "Aerobic exercise physically remodels our brains for peak performance." This supports the idea that joining physical activities and learning exercises make it easier for students to learn.
- Prensky, M. (2010). *Teaching Digital Natives: Partnering for Real Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
As the title suggests, Prensky relies on the notion of "digital natives" to illustrate how today's students, having been born and raised in a technological context, have developed learning techniques that are different from their parents'. He holds that students are now totally different from what we used to be at their age. The current educational system is thus unfit for them, as it was conceived and then developed for another

type of learners. Consequently, we should adapt our teaching strategies to this new scenario if we want to engage our students.

- Sheldon, L. (2011). *The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game*. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.
  Sheldon suggests an innovative approach to teaching whereby courses are structured as a series of multiplayer games to better involve students. Through practical examples, he shows how gamification can transform any educational experience and render it much more engaging and stimulating.

In-class testing

To better manage the language learning activities and make sure students would participate in them, I split the class into four or five people teams. This was mostly dictated by practical reasons: if a 5-player team misses a person, the game can still take place without any issues.

The underlying idea is transforming the semester into a four-month tournament. Teams compete against each other by accumulating points every single week. Apart from being fun and educationally efficient, this strategy boosts team spirit, a sense of comradeship and collaboration among the students.

To further strengthen these features, I asked each team to choose a name. The first time we launched this "tournament" all teams were named after Peanuts characters. This is something all students agreed on, thus helping to create a particularly relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

Here is an example of the learning games we played: using expression with *avere*, *essere*, and *stare* verbs (that is, *to have*, *to be*, *to stay*). Usually, early on in the semester one of the most difficult things for ITAL 101 students to learn is how to distinguish and memorize idiomatic expressions using those verbs, such as *ho fame*, *sono stanco*, *sto bene* (that is, *I'm hungry*, *I'm tired*, *I'm fine*, respectively). Sometimes there are no exact equivalent idioms in the students' native langue. For this reason, it is important to review those expressions as often as possible.

To make the games more dynamic I modelled them after dominoes, using tiles that reported the Italian idiom on one side and the corresponding English expression on the other. Each team was expected to match the tiles correctly, thus finding the right English-Italian combination and creating a trail.

This game has favoured peer interaction and stimulated greater attention to language rules. Consequently, students learned Italian in a collaborative and friendly atmosphere, which made it easier for them to remember what we studied in class.

Conclusions

An issue I had to address during the semester was how to deal with large groups of students. In particular, when groups consist of six or seven people some students may lose interest or motivation. When that happens, they tend to delegate their tasks to other peers within the same group, without contributing directly to the in-class activities. This not only slows down the students' learning process but disrupts what should be a balanced participation by all group members. For this reason, I think teachers should consider making smaller groups, so as to induce their members to contribute more actively and responsibility to game learning.