

Acquiring Interactional Competence in A Socially Constructed Environment Through the Use Of “Roll N’ Play”: An Interactional Board Game

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Abstract

This paper highlights the benefits of game-based learning for adults in acquiring interactional competence in English. Roll N’ Play is an interactional board game that is a learning tool for acquiring interactional competence in English for adults. In acquiring a language, it has to be of use in an adult’s professional and personal lives. Roll N’ Play enables players to use English, the target language, in a socially constructed environment while having fun in a competitive environment and at the same time applying peer-learning strategies. Roll N’ Play allows a hands-on experience in language use and it also fosters creativity and problem-solving skills as players compete to reach the highest score in order to win the game. This board game has four bonus squares, eight challenge squares, two penalty squares, and one first date square. The educational benefit of this innovation is that it will improve players’ interactional competence because players are required to interact with other players to complete situational-based tasks in a timely manner. Although there are many online language games and applications, those who are not Internet-savvy will not be able to enjoy such games applications and some users may even find them unappealing. This paper concludes that purposeful language use can be promoted through an engaging and enjoyable social activity such as playing a board game.

Keywords: board games, interactional competence, experiential learning, adult learners, informal learning

INTRODUCTION

There have been many debates regarding the success of learning in an informal environment (Lai, Wu, & Li, 2011; Baker, 2014; Lewin & Charania, 2018; Van Noy, James & Bedley, 2016) because of its non-conventional nature but for adult learners, they learn and perform much better in an environment that is meaningful to their personal and professional lives (Ho & Lim, 2020; Radovan & Makovec, 2015). This is especially true in the case of acquiring interactional competency in a second language for adults – the language has to be taken out of the classroom context (Cortina-Pérez & Solano-Tenorio, 2013; Shvidko, 2017) and used in a natural manner with participants of their generic English speaking community (Illés & Akcan, 2017). In addition to having numerous positive effects of learning in informal settings, adult learners will definitely benefit from learning in a fun and motivational environment as well (Taspinar, Schmidt, & Schuhbauer 2016), such as acquiring interactional competence through playing board games.

As such, the rationale of this paper is to introduce a board game, Roll N' Play, as an innovative tool in the acquisition of interactional competence for adult learners, and to comply with the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 in Chapter 2: Vision and Aspirations under the element of 'Bilingual Proficiency' (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). Roll N' Play is a board game that encourages and prompts interactions among players in a socially constructed environment. The educational aspect of this board game is that players will be exposed to the use of everyday English, which is the target language, with the generic English-speaking community that they socialise in. Consequently, by being in a fun and enjoyable environment, the players will have acquired the confidence to interact in English.

Henceforth, the three objectives of this paper are:

- 1.To increase the confidence of an adult to use the English in various aspects of daily interactions;
- 2.To promote fluency of an adult to function well in the language; and
- 3.To develop authentic, real-life language materials in socially constructed situations.

For the purpose of this paper, adults refer to those ranging from 18 to 40 years old. The rationale behind this choice of age group is that this age group is the typical age group for undergraduate and post-graduate students. Therefore, for adults, incidental learning of the vocabulary and grammar in English is perhaps one of the many learning mechanisms (Francis, Schmidt, Carr & Clegg 2009; Plotnikova, 2017) to overcome the obstacles in adult second language acquisition. As the findings in Maasum, Mustaffa and Stapa's (2015) study suggest, acquiring language with reduced anxiety provides an advantage towards the success of language acquisition as with the case of acquiring interactional competency through daily social interactions in a socially constructed environment.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

For many adults in Malaysia, they have realised the importance of having more than just one skill and knowledge in one specific area in order to move upward in their professional lives. However, there are many challenges that adult learners have to face if they decide to go back to school, and as explained by Kara, Erdoğan, Kokoç, and Cagiltay (2019) these challenges are divided into three categories: i) internal (management, learning, and technical); ii) external (job-related and domestic); and iii) programme-related (tutor-related and institutional). As such, it is important for adult learners to remain interested and motivated in order to be successful in their learning. Additionally, being able to function in English, especially for adults, is not a pressure but a means of advancement (Hajibah, 1997; Muhammed Abdul Khalid, 2018). Members of any

generic English speaking community in Malaysia are usually second language speakers and come from diverse language backgrounds (Asmah, 1982; Azman, 2016) and so, by being exposed to the language used by the speakers in the community of a target language, especially for adults, they will acquire some word-order and sentence construction (Francis et al., 2009).

As such, this paper suggests that for adults in Malaysia, interactional competence in English should be acquired by using materials that can be applied to real life use. The reason is because a typical Malaysian adult would have learnt the English language since the age of six. This generally means that they have had years of grammar, spelling as well vocabulary lessons, so, by being in a socially-constructed environment, it will provide them with the opportunity to use English in real-life and the chance to be exposed to true human-to-human interactions in English. This paper believes that by playing Roll N’ Play, adults can be well on their journey to be successful in acquiring interactional competence in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interactional Competence

The term ‘interactional competence’ is used by Young (2011) to explain the interpretation of a conversational exchange that presupposes the culture and the tradition of a particular discourse community. Interactional Competence is a theory that looks at communication deeper than just the surface. It looks into the non-verbal semiotic resources, identity resources, linguistic competence resources, interactional resources, the register of the conversation, discursive practices, mutually and reciprocally employed resources, as well as viewing the interaction in a wider social and historical context. These are the aspects that should be also taken into consideration during the interpretation process of a conversational exchange mainly because, in a conversation, the participants involved are more than just two speakers: it involves everyone in the background and everyone from the same background, and this is termed as the ‘discourse community’.

In Interactional Competence, it is not a sin to make mistakes, for learning is useless if not practiced. Where knowledge is concerned, making mistakes could lead to a greater development of skills (Chomsky, 1965; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017; Özkayran & Yilmaz, 2020) because in any discourse community, the participants must be able to interact effectively and must learn to co-construct meanings with one another during a dialogue or a conversation. As such, in second language acquisition, focusing solely on utterances that are accurate, appropriate, and fluent will result in the second language learners having a ‘compensating’ foreign language education as opposed to a truly ‘emancipating’ one (Kramsch, 1986). Indeed, Brown (2003) highlights that

L2 learners place unrealistic expectations to be error-free during conversations when errors are a natural part of native speakers' speech. He advocates creating opportunities for learners to practise speaking in different contexts as well as becoming comfortable to make mistakes during speaking in order to help learners build fluency.

Previous studies in the field of second language acquisition have not dealt much with the forms and structures of natural, spontaneous interactions. Only a limited number of studies have focused on this aspect of spoken English (AlGhamdi & AlGhamdi, 2017; Bachelor, 2017; Shriberg, 2005; Weng et al., 2006) for studies in this field were more concerned about the written form and sentence structure of the English language (Spolsky, 1998) and the analysis of political speeches, otherwise known as rhetoric (Carter et al., 2001). However, second language learning is not just a matter of written construct only, for it is a means of communication and social construct as well. It enables one to get messages across, share ideas and knowledge, and meet the complex social organisation and communicative requirements in life (Babu, 2018). Therefore, it is very important for a person to be able to function and interact effectively in a natural setting and the board game, Roll N' Play does just that.

Informal Language Acquisition for Adults

Previous studies in the field of adult second language acquisition tend to focus more on language acquisition in a classroom setting. Only a limited number of studies have focused on language acquisition by adults in a natural and informal setting. One of the few studies in this field is Cote's (2004) study of two different adults in two different environments (one is in a highly positive environment, the other is in a highly negative environment) acquiring a second language in a completely natural and outside of the classroom setting. One subject, a male, was trying to acquire language in a highly positive environment, while the other subject, a female, was trying to do the same but in a highly negative environment. Both situations proved to be successful because both subjects were immersed in environments where the speaking community used the target language frequently. The study also found that peers and surrounding, as opposed to the language itself, are important in any language acquisition.

Given that adults learn differently than children, Malcom Knowles, father of andragogy, as early as the 1950s, proposed a 'friendly and informal climate' as the most appropriate and suitable method for many adult learning situations (Darden, 2014). Smith (2002) states Knowles's goals of adult learning as:

- i) Adults should acquire a mature understanding of themselves;
- ii) Adults should develop an attitude of acceptance, love, and respect towards others;

- iii) Adults should develop a dynamic attitude towards life;
- iv) Adults should learn to react to the causes, not the symptoms;
- v) Adults should understand the essential values in the capital of human experience;
- vi) Adults should understand their society and should be skillful in directing social change.

Such incidents that make up informal learning of the language consist of watching television shows in the target language, reading magazines or newspapers in the target language, and even reading billboards and signboards. Language that is highly relevant to a language learner’s lives and language that enables learners to integrate into their daily tasks will become helpful and meaningful (Johari, Sahari, Morni & Tom, 2017; Mali, 2017). Since Roll N’ Play is a board game and players are to interact with one another in a fun and creative manner, player(s) with limited English proficiency have the opportunity to learn the language as it is used by player(s) with intermediate and advanced English proficiency.

METHODOLOGY

The Board



Figure 1: Roll N’ Play board

Based on Figure 1, the Roll N’ Play board game consists of 24 squares of contexts containing places that Malaysians usually frequent such as a bank, a car dealership, a cinema, and a hospital, and each square has a

symbol and a label to it. On top of that, there are special contexts which are: eight squares for Challenges, four squares for Bonuses, one square for Violation, and one square for First Date. In the middle of the game board, there are four rectangles (stacks) to represent 4 special functions and these functions are: i) Violation; ii) Bonus; iii) S.O.S.; and iv) Challenge.

The Players

Roll N' Play is a game for a minimum of three and a maximum of six players. At the start of the game, players number themselves from 1 until the maximum number of players, which is 6. However, for example, if there are four players, players number themselves 1, 2, 3, and 4. This number will determine the *Partner* during an *Interaction*. The *Speaker* is the player who has the turn (i.e. the person who rolls the dice in that turn) and the turn follows the player number. The *Partner* is the player whose number is the same as the *Speaker's* dice.

The *Speaker* should roll the dice again until a *Partner* is found if:

- i) the *Speaker* rolls their own number, or
- ii) no player is assigned the number of the dice roll (e.g. the *Speaker* rolls a 5 in a game with only 4 players).

The only exception to the *Partner* rule is if a *Speaker* lands on the *Context* of *First Date*. In such a case, the *Speaker* is allowed to choose any *Partner* according to their preference.

The players are represented by six tokens in the form of quintessentially Malaysian items and they are: turtle, tiger, hibiscus, the Petronas Twin Tower, *wau*, and *ketupat*.

The Interaction & Context

An *Interaction* happens when a *Speaker* and the *Partner* interact during the *Speaker's* turn. During an *Interaction*, the *Speaker* tries to complete a *Task* appropriately according to the *Context*. The *Context* is the situation on the game board that the *Speaker* lands on based on their first dice roll.

The Task

A *Task* is the interactional activity that a *Speaker* needs to complete with their *Partner*. The *Tasks* are listed on the *Task Cards*, which are divided into three categories which are: i) Beginner (green); ii) Intermediate (yellow); and iii) Advanced (red). There are 42 *Task Cards* from each category. Players can choose to play one category exclusively or a mix of the categories. Before the game starts, the *Task Cards* are shuffled and players will be given seven cards each. Player 1 (i.e. *Speaker* 1) starts the game by rolling the dice and having

an *Interaction* with their *Partner*. During the *Interaction*, the *Speaker* has to perform one *Task* from the *Speaker's Task Cards* that is appropriate to the *Context* (e.g. borrowing a book from a library, not borrowing a book from a car dealership). The *Speaker* is free to choose whichever *Task Card* to use during an *Interaction*. The *Speaker* may not reuse a *Task Card*.

The Scoring System

Speakers and *Partners* are encouraged to be creative in order to match the *Tasks* and *Contexts* (e.g. they may role-play different professions), but their creativity must be logical as determined by the *Spectators*. The *Spectators* are all the other players during the turn. The *Spectators* must collectively decide on the degree of success of the *Interaction* and reward the *Speaker* and *Partner* based on their individual merit. The definition of success is left to the players; this gives players the flexibility to tailor the game to their needs. For instance, players may choose to focus on general fluency in a game and on specific grammar points or vocabulary.

The *Treasury* will pay the *Speaker* and the *Partner* according to the *Spectators'* decision. The *Spectators* must come to an agreement about the reward that the *Speaker* and the *Partner* deserve. The maximum reward a *Speaker* and a *Partner* can receive during an *Interaction* is one Gold Star each. There is no minimum reward. However, if a *Speaker* receives 0 Star from the *Spectators*, they will have their next turn at the same *Context*. The dice roll of the next turn will only determine their *Partner*, not a new *Context*.

The goal of the game is to collect as many *Stars* as possible. *Stars* are the currency of the game. The value of one *Gold Star* is equivalent to two *Silver Stars* and four *Bronze Stars*. The value of one *Silver Star* is equivalent to two *Bronze Stars*.

The three types of stars and their values are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Total number of Stars in the Treasury

Star	Value	Total in Treasury
Bronze	1	106
Silver	2	75
Gold	4	20

The Treasury

The *Treasury* is an objective, independent entity that holds all the currency of the game. All transactions happen between the *Players* and the *Treasury*. The *Players* can choose to exchange *Stars* with the *Treasury* as appropriate, for example, exchanging two *Bronze Stars* for one *Silver Star*. Since the highest penalty a player may receive is 2 *Bronze Stars*, the *Treasury* allocates two *Bronze Stars* per player at the start of the game. The *Treasury* holds the rest of the currency (the *Stars*).

One player will act as the *Treasurer*. The *Treasurer* handles transactions on the *Treasury's* behalf. The *Treasurer* must keep their private stash separate from the *Treasury*.

The Stack Cards

Besides the *Task Cards*, a *Speaker* can utilise cards with special functions called *Stack Cards* during an *Interaction*. A *Partner*, however, cannot utilise *Stack Cards*. A *Speaker* may be rewarded or penalised based on the type of *Stack Cards* used.

The types and content of *Stack Cards* are displayed in Table 2:

Table 2: Content of *Stack Cards*

The Stacks	Value (Bronze Stars)	Total Cards	Content
Bonus	+1	24	High-frequency words
Challenge	+2	48	Phrasal verbs and idioms
S.O.S.	-1	24	High-frequency contexts
Violation	-2	12	Low-frequency contexts

The different *Stack Cards* can only be used in specific conditions:

- a) *Bonus*: A *Speaker* may draw a *Bonus Card* from the stack if they land on a *Bonus Context*. The *Speaker* may use the *Bonus Card* during any *Interaction* where they are the *Speaker*. If the *Speaker* successfully incorporates the *Bonus Card* into the *Interaction*, they receive one *Bronze Star* from the *Treasury* on top of the reward (*Stars*) from the *Spectators*. A *Speaker* can only have one *Bonus Card* at any time. A *Speaker* cannot draw another *Bonus Card* if they have an unused *Bonus Card* on hand even if they land on a *Bonus Context* during their next turn. A *Speaker* may choose to ignore a *Bonus Context* (i.e. does not draw a *Bonus Card*).

- b) *Challenge*: This stack of cards contains the most challenging contexts. It contains phrasal verbs and idioms, and players are to incorporate them in the *Interaction*. A *Speaker* may draw a *Challenge Card* from the stack if they land on a *Challenge Context*. The *Speaker* may use the *Challenge Card* during any *Interaction* where they are the *Speaker*. If the *Speaker* successfully incorporates the *Challenge Card* into the *Interaction*, they receive two *Bronze Stars* from the *Treasury* on top of the reward (*Stars*) from the *Spectators*. A *Speaker* can only have one *Challenge Card* at any time. A *Speaker* cannot draw another *Challenge Card* if they have an unused *Challenge Card* on hand even if they land on a *Challenge Context* during their next turn. A *Speaker* may choose to ignore a *Challenge Context* (i.e. does not draw a *Challenge Card*).
- c) *S.O.S.*: This stack of cards contains the easiest and most versatile contexts. If a *Speaker* is unable to use any *Task Cards* they have with the *Context* that they have landed on, they may draw an *S.O.S. Card* during the *Interaction*. If a *Speaker* draws an *S.O.S. Card*, they must use it during that *Interaction*. The *Speaker* will be penalised one *Bronze Star* for drawing an *S.O.S. Card* regardless of how well they utilised it. The *Speaker* is still eligible to be rewarded by the *Spectators* when using an *S.O.S. Card* and they may be unable to move to the next *Context* in the next turn if their *Interaction* is unsatisfactory.
- d) *Violation*: When a *Speaker* lands on *Violation*, they will have to draw a *Violation Card*. They try to satisfy the *Task* of the *Violation Card*. The *Context* will follow that of their *Partner's* current position. If the *Spectators* are happy with the *Interaction*, the *Speaker* wins the turn. The *Speaker* does not get any reward, but they can continue playing as usual. The *Partner* can be rewarded as usual. If the *Spectators* are not happy with the *Interaction*, there are 2 options:
- i) the *Speaker* pays the *Treasury* two *Bronze Stars* (or one *Silver Star*) and then they can continue playing as usual,
 - or,
 - ii) the *Speaker* does not pay the *Treasury* but forfeits one turn (i.e. the next round).

While in *Violation*, a *Player* can still be a *Partner* and earn rewards (the *Stars*).

The Winner

The game ends in one of the two ways:

- i) once any player finishes using all seven *Task Cards* allocated to them at the beginning of the game,
or
- ii) once the *Treasury* runs out of currency (the *Stars*).

The rewards that the players have received up to that point are calculated. The player with the highest amount of reward (the *Stars*) wins (refer to Figure 2).

REPORT RESULT

Board games that are available in the market for the purpose of English language learning or acquisition mainly focus on the acquisition of vocabulary such as Scrabble, Dabble, and Taboo. However, language should not be acquired in separation. A board game that encourages players to make interactions with other players will definitely make language acquisition more meaningful for adults. The nature of Roll N' Play encompasses real-life, human-to-human interactions in a socially constructed environment that does not magnify accuracy errors hence allowing players with limited English proficiency the opportunity to use the language in an enjoyable manner. This is in line with the well-established social constructivism theory of learning where meaningful learning is constructed through learners' interaction and co-construction of meaning (Aljohani, 2016).

This board game caters to adults who are looking for ways to acquire competency in their English interactions but it can also be played by students who are in primary and secondary schools. Apart from the fact that it can be played as a leisure activity, it can also be used by teachers or educators who are looking for a teaching tool to encourage their students to interact in English whether in formal or informal learning environments. Its commercial value transcends learning for it can strengthen the bond between families and friends and even possibly create new friendships.

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