

**GAMING AS A WAY TO IMPROVE LITERACIES SKILLS IN SECOND
LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

**MICHAEL FERNANDO HERNANDEZ HINCAPIE
DANIEL SANTIAGO RAMIREZ VALENCIA**

**UNIVERSIDAD PONTIFICIA BOLIVARIANA
ESCUELA DE EDUCACIÓN
FACULTAD DE EDUCACIÓN
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**MICHAEL FERNANDO HERNANDEZ HINCAPIE
DANIEL SANTIAGO RAMIREZ VALENCIA**

Trabajo de grado para optar al título de Licenciado Inglés – Español

Director

RAÚL ALBERTO MORA VÉLEZ

Doctor of Philosophy in Secondary and Continuing Education

**UNIVERSIDAD PONTIFICIA BOLIVARIANA
ESCUELA DE EDUCACIÓN Y PEDAGOGÍA
FACULTAD DE EDUCACIÓN
LICENCIATURA INGLÉS – ESPAÑOL
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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines how teachers can use video games to improve literacies in second languages. In particular, it analyzes how gaming is being used or could be used to improve literacy skills. This paper proposes possible ways these new tools could be integrated in the institutional system. Additionally, it looks at the key points of gaming that can make it a serious option in the classroom. Multiple English lessons and gaming sessions were observed in order to answer these questions. A concept coined by LSLP, LAV or Language as victory is the driving force behind the learning process attributed to video games. This key concept can be used to design a video game course where the students would have to use language as victory in order to successfully complete the game. This approach to second language teaching could potentially save hundreds of teachers all over the world hours of valuable time. This time can then be used to strengthen other language skills that need extra work. With the steady increase of technology use in every aspect of our daily lives, gaming in classrooms could significantly accelerate the language learning process.

Introduction

Back in 1947, the first interactive electronic game with an electronic display was created. Later, in the early 1950's, the first real video game was created. Video games can be defined as electronic games that need human interaction in order for the game to function. Over the years, these games have evolved and transformed into something truly special. In today's day and age, we use video games as a way to teach, not just as entertainment. Take pilots for example, a pilot must log a certain amount of flight simulator hours in order for him to become a licensed pilot. As you can see, video games have expanded our horizons when it comes to training someone how to perform tasks and or how to react to specific situations.

Brief overview of gaming. The application for [video games as a way of training skilled personnel](#) (1) are truly endless. Surgeons, soldiers, businessmen and even architects are being trained through the use of video games. So, as language teachers of the 21st century, we (Michael Hernandez and Daniel Ramirez) have decided to ask the question "How can we integrate video games into the classroom in order to make language learning a much more smooth/enriching process?". Well, [gaming has already started to gain attention as a great way to teach a second language inside the classroom](#) (2). Sadly, it hasn't been truly implemented in the way we would implement them in a classroom ourselves.

There have been thousands of games created for the sole purpose of teaching English. Nevertheless, these games have not had the expected impact. We think is possible by integrating the use of video games in the classroom. For example, websites like: <https://www.gamestolearnenglish.com/> were designed as a quick and free way to teach English to kids in a fun way. These types of games have had small victories by teaching things like simple vocabulary and even verb usage. At the end of the day, the problem with these games have been their repetitive nature. [Compare a game like this to one like call of duty or World of Warcraft. In comparison, these games have much more complex](#)

[interactions](#) (3) and commands that are necessary in order to progress in the game. Also, these games have a clear end/goal that you must reach in order to “win” or “beat” the game.

This is where a phrase coined by our the Literacies in Second Languages Project (LSLP) research lab comes in, LaV. [LaV stands for Language As Victory](#) (4) and it is a concept we created that helps explain how language is being used in these types of games.

[Gamers are literally using the language skills they pick up in the games in order to be successful](#) (5) in them. The most astonishing thing about these language skills is their complexity. These gamers are so intricate that the person playing the game must learn specific commands in order to progress in the game and interact with others in multiplayer platforms. Platforms that usually have players from all over the world.

This phrase was created by a specific sub-group of LSLP called Gaming Literacies (#TeamLaV). We named the group gaming literacies because of the research we are doing. We are literally looking at how literacy skills are being improved/applied through video games. Gaming literacies does not encompass your everyday literacy skills, it goes beyond this. Gaming literacies concentrates on a specific form of literacy. It is the specific way in which literacy is applied in order to play a video game. Skills that are necessary in order to be successful or to win the game. These specific literacy skills are often times much more complex than everyday interactions in a second language. You could say these specific skills are not being developed in today's second language courses (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, (2009) Second Language Use, Socialization, and Learning in Internet Interest Communities and Online Gaming.

Our understanding of *gamer*. What is a gamer? A gamer is someone who regularly plays video games in order to reach a goal. We are not talking about mobile games though, we are talking about complex games that need commands or interactions that are much more complex than just matching figures that look similar (candy crush). We make the distinction of what a gamer is because someone playing games like candy crush or plants vs zombies will not have the complex interactions that a gamer would. We mention the use of these complex interaction in one of our LSLP Micro Papers titled; Gamers as L2 Users,

At LSLP, we have analyzed the use of second languages in gamers (Language-as-Victory) as a way to obtain victory as well as a satisfying aesthetic experience. In this sense, our research looks at second language use as a fundamental part of interaction within gaming communities. (Gaviria, 2018)

Purpose and research question. This paper, conceptual and experimental in nature, intends to provide a model for how teachers may use video games to improve second language literacy practices. We are particularly interested in analyzing how teachers may use gaming as a learning tool while proposing possible ways to integrate these new tools in schools. This paper will also consider some key points of gaming that can make it a serious option in the classroom. The following research question will inform our work: *What aspects could gaming bring to the table that conventional teaching strategies do not?*

Background

Teaching in Colombia and the rest of the world has been steadily evolving ever since the profession first emerged. Since then, we have seen technology have a very direct and dramatic impact on teaching across all subjects. [Whether you're an art, language, history or even P.E teacher, chances are you've used some sort of technology in your classrooms.](#) (6)

Obviously there are still plenty of “old school” teachers who are trying to fight against this movement but they are slowly being converted. Most of those who don't accept these changes will slowly start to fade because of their age. Most of the teachers who are trying to keep the old practices alive are teachers who are older and close to retirement. These new technologies that have been popping up all over the place since the internet was invented are being implemented all over the world.

The biggest upside to technology in the classroom is the flexibility it gives the teachers. For example, before, [if an English teacher wanted to show how English is spoken in Europe, they would have to imitate accents or just explain the differences across world Englishes](#) (7).

Now, with the technology that is available to us, a teacher can simply pull up a video on youtube and the students can hear authentic English accents being spoken and see the

differences for themselves. Technology really gives us a way to transform theory into practice more directly.

Even though technology has made teaching a bit easier and has helped the profession progress lately there are still negative factors that must be taken into consideration. Here in Colombia for example, [the Ministry of Education has specific goals and guidelines that were established with the hopes of applying them in the classrooms.](#) (8) The problem with this is different contexts require different teaching strategies and goals. Not to mention the fact that following these guidelines and goals isn't as easy as it seems on paper. We explicitly noticed this after we observed a private English class and conducted an interview in the Poblado area.

Our Observation Experience: A Vignette

The teacher gives class 2-3 times a week to 1 “advanced” student. The student is a B2 and she is trying to reach C1 status. The class began very smoothly, although I would label it as a conversation club rather than a class. The teacher sat down next to the student and they began to have a small conversation about how their weekend went. Next, the teacher pulls out a laptop and they begin to go over the homework he left for the weekend. The activity the teacher implemented in the session was designed to make the student think about what she couldn't understand in a youtube video. The student is a finance graduate from the University of Medellin who is pursuing her masters.

The video the teacher selected was a finance video created by a middle-aged Englishman. His accent was very strong, and he spoke quite fast. The student noticeably had a lot of problems with the video, so they went over it together and the teacher gave her some tips and suggestions. He suggested that whenever she is listening to an English speaker who she thinks speaks too fast she has to use context clues. The teacher then proceeded to show the student how he goes about this process by going over the video with her. She quickly understood the idea and began picking up on words and expressions she hadn't understood the night before. The next phase of the activity consisted of a skype chat

with one of the teacher's friends from the U.S. The person on skype was obviously from the South. She had a very strong accent and it was a bit difficult to understand her at times. The student seemed to love the conversations though. This activity seemed like a good way to practice communicative skills and gain cultural knowledge. The teacher was openly trying to develop the students listening and speaking skills through both of these activities.

Analyzing the vignette. The teacher only used 2 resources, youtube and skype. Both technological resources where the student doesn't have to write much. Here we see some very interesting things going on. Instead of sticking to the traditional foreign language teaching method of "repeat after me" the teacher was actually looking for ways to make the student speak and interact with her and the space around her. [This goes hand in hand with the ministry of education's standards that state that a student should be given the necessary tools to understand and interact with the world around her.](#) (9)

The evaluation process was almost nonexistent. Since the classes are private, the teacher didn't really have any specific forms of evaluation. The only evaluation we saw was verbal. The teacher would go through the students notes and help her correct the grammar and spelling mistakes she made. At the end of the class they also had a small chat where the teacher would tell the student how well she was doing and what she needed to improve on. This means the evaluation process don't include much critical analysis, but it did have a lot of reflection by both the teacher and student. This is probably the most positive aspect we saw in the evaluation process. Evaluations should be done with the sole purpose of letting the student AND the teacher know exactly what they need to work on. By promoting critical thinking and reflection on how the learning process is going the teacher is giving the student insight into what she need to improve on.

When we take a look at the standards being taken into account in these classes the subject gets a bit more complicated. Since the teacher isn't affiliated with any institutions he has the liberty of making his own standards. In addition to this the Ministry of education does not have any specific standards for higher education English. Nevertheless, we can still see some connections between this teachers classes and the English standards in Colombia.

The standards clearly say that English should be taught in a way that allows the student to acquire linguistic skills through reading, writing, listening and conversation.

Another great thing the teacher did in order to give his class was tailor it to the student he was teaching. [One of the biggest problems we face as English teachers in Colombia is the fact that we often times have over crowded classrooms](#) (10). Just imagine being able to direct your classes to only 1-2 students, the learning processes going on would be specifically designed for those students. This would make the acquisition of a second language a lot faster. Moreover, this allows the teacher to customize the class just how the student needs it. [Since the student is working towards her master's in finance](#) (11), the teacher took this into account and used finance vocabulary and information to make sure the student is learning language relevant to her everyday life.

Reflecting on the observation. [One of the biggest aspects we reflected on in this observation is the transformation of the English teacher.](#) (12) Although there are still traditional teachers who focus on repetitions and textbooks, the majority nowadays use technology as a tool to help them teach more efficiently. [These technological tools are usually referred to as information and communications technology \(ICT\).](#) (12) These technologies have revolutionized the way we look at the world as people, and most importantly as teachers. These tools give us a way to bridge the cultural gaps that are the key to keeping your students focused. [One of the best ways we can see this in today's classrooms is in videos and audios.](#) (12)

Through YouTube videos, one can easily teach a class on different English accents. Before, the teacher used the old Boombox method where students would simply listen and read along in a textbook. Now they can see the person talking and gain important cultural vocabulary and knowledge about the language that is being transmitted. We can clearly see this by looking at the way traditional learning methods were thought of. They based their theories on [behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism](#) (13) in a time where these advanced technologies didn't even exist yet. In the class we observed we can clearly see the positive impact technology can have in the classroom. The student is not only learning

quicker, but they are gaining knowledge about ICT that will ultimately benefit them because the world we live in now is dominated by these technologies. It is here where we as teachers need to start looking at how we can help our students adapt to their new technological lives from the classroom. In a way, they are already being prepared from their homes. [There are very few kids today that won't have access to some sort of ICT technology in their homes](#) (14) from an early age. Most kids today seem to know how to use computers better than most adults.

Discussion

[In today's day and age, it is important to look at how students learn](#) (15) in order to help them grasp ideas and concepts instead of just memorizing them. In order to do these we must look at the way they are being raised, what interests them, the questions they ask and what their needs are. One of the most important aspects to take advantage of as a teacher is group work. [Group work can help students better themselves](#) (16) by comparing ideas and thoughts with their fellow students. This is one of the key elements that was missing in this teacher's classroom. [Though there were no more students in the classroom we think a great way he could fix this problem would be by using skype.](#) (17) Maybe there is a way he can find another student who is willing to connect and interact with his student through the internet in exchange for a way to practice English. Even though the teacher does interact with the student and share ideas, it is still crucial to have someone at the same "knowledge level" as the student so they may feel more comfortable and relaxed.

This is where video games might provide some help in the learning process of the new generation of students who are beginning to learn English. Apart from using the game as a didactic tool to [teach specific language use to each student individually](#), (4) it is also possible to incorporate Co-op gaming to apply the group work aspect of language teaching. The students could potentially join online gaming platforms where hundreds of thousands of English speakers, both Native and Non Native congregate to share ideas, get to know each other, and most importantly, work together to face challenges that video games throw their

way. This would provide valuable language challenges that the student wouldn't normally face inside the classroom. Challenges that often times the teacher cannot predict either. Ideally, we would like to have a de-briefing class where we would discuss commands, vocabulary and expressions that the students have never heard or experienced before playing in these online platforms. Integrating these Video games as a teaching tool in the classroom would be the next step in the evolution of the use of technology in the classroom.

One of the toughest challenges we expect to face in this process is showing teachers who have little to no experience with these types of video games how to use them in their classrooms.(18) With video games becoming more and more popular among the youth of the world, we have the opportunity to use this popularity to our advantage. Including video games in the English curriculum would create interest among students, both male and female and motivate them to want to learn English even more. (19) This is the main reason we decided to find a way to help students learn English in a more effective way. We came up with this idea through our love of video games. As hardcore gamers, we saw how much video games like World of Warcraft, Call of duty and other games that require the player to know and learn English in order to be successful pushed us to improve our English skills:

We have begun to actively describe and understand LaV as a literacy practice. We believe that LaV holds key insights into how gamers are improving their literacy skills by playing online video games. These verbal- and text based communications have their own unique learning processes that gamers could help us understand. (4)

Playing online was a tough but very enjoyable experience for both of us. We saw how Non Native English speakers were able to communicate with each other by using the English language as their main tool to beat these games. These games have intricate commands and strategies that are most commonly used through the English language.

Another thing to keep in mind is that we believe technology as a whole should be utilized more in the classroom. We believe that integrating video games is simply the next step towards the future of language teaching. (20) Nevertheless, there are both negative and positive aspects that must be taken into account in order to take an objective stance in this

matter. In order to see this we decided to take a broader look at gaming in the classroom by looking at how technology is being used.

Furthermore, in order to further the integration of technology/video games in the classroom we would need to prepare the teachers in a timely manner to do so. Their role is crucial in the learning process. [Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen mentioned the importance of the teachers role:](#)

Therefore, they also see the teacher's role as imperative for the learning experience. This is true particularly for the commercial entertainment titles that find their way into educational settings which have not been developed with curriculum explicitly in mind. The problem is that if we rely too much on teachers we may be disappointed by their reluctance to engage with games and their lacking knowledge of how to use games (Cavallari et al., 1992; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2005; Grundy, 1991; Klawe, 1998; Squire, 2004).” We believe the best way would be to introduce a course for teachers who don't have much experience with these types of technology. (21)

This course would consist of a brief history on video games, a segment on the newest/most popular games and possible ways they can be applied along with examples. we have yet to decide exactly how long this course would be, but we think it would have to be minimum 3 weeks long. For example, while we were making this observation we came up with a very interesting idea that we already mentioned before. We thought it would be great to create some sort of test that the students would have to prepare for during their school year. A test that would mix traditional tools like the pen and paper with technological ones like computers and tablets. Some sort of historical exercise where they would have to use their laptops or tablets to search for information, but they would have to supplement this information with facts found in a textbook also. And all of the information documented would have to be turned in on paper. This would be a great way to keep the traditional forms of teaching alive while still promoting the new practices that the students are becoming more and more accustomed to each and every day. After completing the exam on paper, they

would then move on to the next phase of the exam process which would be a video game that would test their English skills.

[Today's classrooms are evolving and changing with each day that passes. We can see how technology is quickly becoming the go to resource for classrooms all over the world.](#)

(22) Nevertheless, technology alone will not teach students what they need to learn. [It takes a good teacher who knows how to be the middleman between the student and the knowledge he must acquire](#) (23). No matter how much technology advances, it is this teacher-student relationship that is the key to meaningful learning. Most teachers have some kind of inspiration as to why they decided to become a teacher. For some of us it might be that childhood teacher who helped us develop love for English literature. For others it might have been the teacher who made us hate going to class so much that we wanted to grow up to be better than them. Either way teachers are here to stay and impact the lives of future generations.

Our Proposal

Is it possible to integrate these games into a classroom? Well, the simple answer is yes, of course. Just take a look at your students. [The students of the 21st century literally have the world at their fingertips at all times.](#) (24) With the integration of the internet into our everyday lives, we now have students that are thinking differently compared to just 10-20 years ago. Students don't have the same amount of patience as before, they want to be stimulated at all times. Through video games, we could find a way to entertain them while teaching them valuable language skills at the same time.

Our plan is straightforward: it involves giving the students a game they must complete *after* they finish an English course with us. Our course will be designed in the same way we designed an English course we gave together here in Medellin. The way we designed the course was interesting, we were looking for a way to make the final something fun and didactic. So, we decided to make the final a scavenger hunt where our students had to follow certain commands and clues in order to reach the final stage or goal. We would like

to design our video game course in a similar way. The idea would be to design the course in a way where we would give the students most, if not all of the language skills they will need in order to beat a specific level within a video game. A video game that will require them to use complex language and commands in order to be successful. We would NOT be playing video games every day in the classroom, instead, we would play a maximum of one time a week just so the students can start getting a feel for the types of interactions they will see in their final.

We would have to choose a game, then model the entire course in a way where the interaction the students will see in the game will be learned efficiently in the course. This paper will explore the different strategies we may use in order to plan out this course and execute our teaching plan.

[Over the course of human history technology has been steadily gaining ground in English class rooms all over the world. Today, most classrooms will usually have](#) (25) a desktop computer, a projector and the occasional smart board which sometimes has games that are included in the software. These games are [nowhere near as complex](#) as we would like them to be but they do show definitive proof of how engaging they can be in the classroom. When kids play these games, they are genuinely interested and intrigued throughout the entire lesson. What we hope to do one day is create this same environment of interest and excitement through the use of much more complex games. [Our teaching strategy would be organized in the same way as your average English course](#) (26). We would give all of our students all of the tools they will need in order to complete the “Final Exam”.

Assessment. This Final Exam would essentially be a video game. A role playing (RPG) where the student would have to complete an assortment of tasks or pass varying obstacles that would test their English skills. This would be done in a way that is very similar to the strategy that we used to teach the course where the final exam we gave our students was a scavenger hunt. The course would be planned based on the game we would give as the final. Our students would be allowed to [play the game one time a week so they can see](#)

[the complex interactions they must be able to perform and understand.](#) (4) In class, the students would be taught these commands, verbs, adjectives, interrogative expressions, and so on that would make it possible for them to beat the game. The most versatile aspect of using a video game in the classroom is you that can you can choose games that [would challenge and give your students the opportunity to see language that is hard to recreate in the classroom environment.](#) (27)

A great way to picture this is; if we were to give them a game where the objective is to roam around the city in order to meet up with friends who will give them parts to a machine that would allow them to travel into the future. The plot in the story would include various “side missions” or challenges they must overcome to reach their destinations. One of these challenges could be acquiring some sort of transportation to move around the virtual environment more effectively. The students would have multiple ways of accomplishing this and it would be completely up to them how they decide to handle the situation. Where one student might decide its best to ask a friend to borrow a car/bicycle another might think it's better to simply walk and ask for directions or take a taxi. All these challenges would be unique because each scenario requires different forms of communication.

Nevertheless, there are some factors that we can control and adapt depending on the specific language skills we want our students to learn. In a scenario like this one we would have to teach our students how to ask for directions, this would include giving them key vocabulary as well because the game could also challenge the player to help people while they are on their quest. In addition to this they would also learn unique vocabulary that would allow them to interact and identify their environment. [Building confidence is one of the key elements](#) (28) that all learning processes should have. As soon as the student enters the virtual world of the game, their confidence would increase as soon as they sees that they knows a lot of the things that are in the game: objects like cars, chairs, buildings, or unique stores/shops, to name a few. They could ultimately use these points of reference they learned in their previous English lessons [in order to ask for directions or receive directions on how to reach a certain area of the city. If we follow this strategy we take advantage of the](#)

[opportunity to include basic everyday communications between characters](#) (29) in the game that would in turn boost the players confidence even more. If he encounters a friend or a stranger on the street the game might prompt him/her to spark up a conversation before he can ask for directions. conversations that may include questions about the main character's job, family, everyday life etc.

These are conversations that are not very engaging when dealing with a classroom of students who do not completely trust their language skills enough to open up and talk on a consistent basis. After this first lessons where we introduce the player to the gameplay environment and the types of language skills that would be needed we would slowly transition into more complex forms of gameplay. The ultimate goal would be to make the final quest in the game the final exam for the course. The final quest would include all communications the students learned in the classroom along with unique variations they would create themselves depending on their personality and language skills. Ultimately, we hope to include a written exam where we can physically show the students and their parents exactly how much they have learned through this teaching strategy. This would also serve as a way to validate our teaching techniques with the institution or organization that we may be working with at the time.

Conclusion

These games can be used in virtually any teaching scenario you can imagine. Even if it's simply using the interactions in these video games as examples to explain grammar structure. Their flexibility as a teaching tool does not stop here. These games would also give us the opportunity to compare [different world Englishes](#) (30) so the students understand the differences between them. For example, in Europe you would have to ask for crisps when asking for potato chips or "chips" which is the most common term used in the U.S for this food. There are other differences in everyday vocabulary that would be easier to show the students through video games. Everyday expressions like "go on vacation" in the U.S which is "go on Holidays" in Europe could potentially be taught much faster.

We would save hours of class time that could be used to improve other areas of their language skills. With careful planning and preparation, we believe that videogames can become a standard tool in any English classroom. These new strategies could help students from all over the world learn English more effectively in ways that have been overlooked simply because the main teaching tool has the word “game” in it.

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