Creating Board Games to Promote Learner Autonomy

by Jacqueline Nenchin and Susan Feltman

ESL students are "hampered by the fact that traditional classrooms and schools are poor at facilitating acquisition" (Gee, 2012, pp. 176–177). Thus, ESL students, among other non-mainstream students, are frequently unable to completely master the language of schooling, especially with regard to form and correct usage. This struggle is often compounded by the demand to quickly assimilate to an unfamiliar pedagogical system and to understand a new curriculum with little support. ESL educators may help meet the challenges of assimilation, new-language acquisition, and understanding a differently styled pedagogical system by incorporating a variety of educational principles that encourage students to become autonomous learners utilizing a high-touch, hands-on approach of "connecting words with experiences" (Gee, 2007, p. 218). Creating board games is one such pathway where a high-touch, hands-on, interactive setting fosters natural language development.

Board games make creative use of signals, symbols, and gestures or "microsemiotics" (Halliday, 2009, p. 262) by combining actions, images, and dialogue with words. According to Gee's principles behind game-based learning, "people are poor at dealing with lots of words out of context and games almost always give verbal info" (2007, p. 218), when the players need it or can use it. Several of Gee's principles help to categorize the four stages of designing a board game (Shell Centre, 2013), turning some of his theories of language learning into a high-touch learning opportunity.

The Four Stages of Creating Board Games

Stage I is sampling existing board games to get the students' creative juices flowing. Teachers should offer as many samples as they have available to illustrate this step. This stage gets everything going, as Gee's (2007) Design Principle states, by encouraging English language learners to appreciate how things look, smell, and feel. It uses the senses to open the gateway to the learning experience.

Next, Stage II promotes brainstorming and teamwork to create synergies between Gee's (2007) Design Principle and his Multimodal Principle. This stage utilizes brainstorming and teamwork to provide an opportunity for the learners to express themselves. It promotes comprehension skills, analysis, and interpersonal communication via negotiation and agreement, and development, similar to some of the stages of writing (brainstorming, outlining, first draft). This stage also encourages learners to explore their "inner Picasso" with imagery, symbols, design, sound—whatever it takes for learners to get their points across and make the board game.

Stage III is hands-on and high touch. This is the point at which learners get to implement their team's ideas by producing the game. Gee's (2007) Practice Principle takes all of the work thus far and makes it real. Creating a game becomes a tangible, high-touch experience at this stage, which can take the longest amount of time because students also get to test and evaluate, redesign, and play their games to discover what works and what needs to be reworked. This process can be likened to editing, revising, more editing, and completing a final version of an essay.

Stage IV exemplifies Gee's (2007) Situated Meaning Principle, in which students must embody the rules and learn from the ground up how to use language for creating meaning via the game experience. As the stage for testing and evaluation, it allows learners to exchange, explain,

and evaluate each other's work. Language skills are critical here. Learners must be able to give directions clearly in order to play their games and then step back and enjoy another group's game. When the games are returned, each group reassesses its own game in light of the comments made by other groups.

Putting these four stages together is an example of the Semiotic Principle. Learning by doing makes the learner an "insider," "teacher," and "producer" (not just a consumer), able to customize the learning experience and comprehend the relationships among multiple sign (semiotic) systems (e.g., images, words, actions) from the beginning and throughout the experience of the game.

If educators accept the premise that "learning begins with the learner" (Nyikos & Oxford, 1993, p. 11), then student-centered learning activities, such as creating board games, are an effective way to promote autonomy and facilitate natural language development. "Language comes to life only when functioning in some environment," not in isolation (Halliday, 2009, pp. 90, 102). Developing board games encourages higher order thinking, prediction, and real-life decision making (Schwartz, 2014). The educator's role is to facilitate the implementation of this

and the other principles, while learners use board games as an important step toward fluency by becoming successful and autonomous language learners.

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