

“Let’s Go on a Gym Raid Tonight!”: Video Game Affinity Spaces in English Language Instruction

November 2020 – Volume 24, Number 3

Marta Halaczkiwicz

Utah State University, Logan, UT, USA

<marta.hala@usu.edu>

Abstract

The present article describes a study that analyzed practical applications of informal online spaces in formal instruction. It was conducted in an intermediate ESL course at an American University. The concept of affinity spaces was used to guide the research. Students in the course were instructed to play the video game, Pokémon Go as an inspiration for their writing. This qualitative study examined the types of affinity space participation, the participant attitudes toward those spaces and to using video games in formal instruction. The data sources consisted of weekly gaming journals and interview transcripts. The findings showed that the participants used the affinity space to socialize with classmates and other players and to enhance their gameplay. They perceived affinity spaces and the use of the video game positively. The implications of this study include practical applications of video game affinity spaces for English language instruction and suggest further research areas. This study is worthwhile as it offers a rare look at an application of informal online practices to enhance formal language instruction.

Keywords: English language learners, affinity spaces, video games, online writing spaces, CALL, MALL

As an English language instructor, I have observed my students continuously complain about difficulty of mastering writing in English. These observations are reflected in research literature showing how writing poses a challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students (Annamalai, 2016; Cennetkuşu, 2017), refugees in the US (Hirano, 2014), graduate international students in the US (Ravichandran et al., 2017; Singh, 2017), as well as future English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers (Ángel & García, 2017). As awareness of this problem has increased, scholars have identified the lack of student engagement as one of the culprits (Hadi, 2013; Kim, 2013; Liu, 2015; MacArthur et al., 2016). For that reason, I have turned to examine informal online spaces in which writers show high levels of engagement.

Online spaces have been observed as a venue where writers share their creative endeavors (Curwood, 2013; Curwood et al., 2013; Lammers, 2016; Lewis, 2014; Padgett & Curwood, 2016). Fan-driven online spaces, such as fan websites or discussion fora have been widely studied as

affinity spaces. Gee (2004) describes affinity spaces as environments in which people with the same passion, or common endeavor, come together. They voluntarily contribute and consume knowledge about their common passion (Gee, 2004). Researchers attribute this active participation to the authentic audience who respond to the pieces of writing and provide feedback to the author (Black, 2009; Curwood et al., 2013). These online spaces also have a frequent English Language Learner (ELL) presence. Environments such as fansites, online diaspora, and video games have assisted ELLs in their writing literacy (Black, 2009; Burke, 2013; Lam, 2000, 2009; Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Sauro & Sundmark, 2016; Thorne et al., 2009). Research suggests that writers find intrinsic drive to write in the community of an authentic and passionate audiences (Magnifico, 2010).

The common theme in the literature mentioned above is that fans are the most inspired affinity space contributors. One of the popular common endeavors among fans are video games (Curwood, 2013; Curwood et al., 2013; Gee, 2004; Lammers, 2016; Thorne et al., 2009). One example of such popular games is Pokémon Go. This game became a world craze in 2016 (Tsukayama & Guarino, 2016). Since the game's inception, Godwin-Jones (2016) has shown its successful adoption for English language instruction by using it to contextualize language and tie instruction to real-life environments.

Inspired by the above research concerning online literacy practices, classroom uses, and video game application for language instruction, this inquiry sought to examine the practical approaches for an English language course. However, before adapting these in-the-wild practices for instruction, it was paramount to assess whether students would welcome such instructional innovation. The overarching research goal was to examine how students would respond to the use of a video game (Pokémon Go) and informal writing spaces in an academic writing course. This article describes the results of the study on ELLs' perceptions of video game affinity spaces and the types of participation that would allow them to thrive in these spaces.

Literature Review

The concept of affinity spaces encompasses informal learning spaces to which participants are drawn in pursuit of a common interest (Gee, 2004). These spaces can be both physical and virtual, and require two elements: portals and common endeavors. Each affinity space is characterized by a multitude of portals (Gee, 2004), or venues where participants can interact with the space, such as websites, video game communication tools, discussion fora, gaming conventions, YouTube channels, or social media groups. The common endeavor (Gee, 2004), or passion, is the motivation that brings the participants together. These endeavors include popular literature, movies, shows, video games, or hobbies to name a few.

Regardless of the driving force, affinity space participants primarily use writing to interact with others (Black, 2007; Curwood et al., 2013; Lam, 2014; Lammers, 2016; Magnifico, 2010; Padgett & Curwood, 2016). From fanfiction sites devoted to popular video games and novels (Black, 2009; Curwood et al., 2013), fansites inspired by popular Anime franchises (Burke, 2013), poetry writing websites (Padgett & Curwood, 2016), online diaspora communities (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009; Thorne et al., 2009) to in-game (Video Game) communication tools (Lam, 2009; Thorne et al., 2015), affinity spaces strike a creative node in many aspiring writers. These creative literacy practices have been attributed to the wide availability of passionate audiences online (Lammers et al., 2012; Magnifico, 2010). Writers are motivated to share their creations with others who care about the same topic and are willing to give them writing feedback. The writers can then engage with this feedback by way of a beta-reading process for the sake of improving their writing before they share it with a larger audience (Black, 2009).

Harnessing that drive to write about a passionate topic could enhance English language instruction. However, since students in a language classroom have diverse interests and majors, finding one common topic may pose a challenge. Video games are one of the frequent common endeavors around which many affinity spaces emerge (Curwood et al., 2013; Steinkuehler & King, 2009). In addition, research has shown that language learners already engage in literacy practices inspired by their gaming experiences (Lam, 2009; Thorne et al., 2009). There have also been calls to apply these spaces in literacy instruction. Scholars have proposed how these informal learning spaces could be adapted for use in formal classrooms (Curwood et al., 2013; Halaczkiwicz, 2019). Therefore, introducing a video game as a subject in a language classroom may provide a chance for ELLs to practice their language skills in a less formal context.

Research Methods

Purpose of the Study

The study was designed to examine the practicality of incorporating features of affinity spaces into a formal instruction context. This research project aimed to find out how students participate in and perceive affinity spaces related to Pokémon Go and how they perceive video games as a topic in academic instruction. The questions below guided the research:

1. How do ELLs participate in affinity spaces related to Pokémon Go used in an English language course?
2. How do ELLs perceive affinity spaces related to Pokémon Go used in an English language course?
3. How do ELLs students perceive video games as a topic in an English language course?

Context

This study focused on ELLs enrolled in an intensive English language program at a university in the Intermountain West region of the United States. Drawing on the concept of affinity spaces, the course incorporated a popular cultural element as a common endeavor for students. The course design capitalized on the idea that video games are popular common endeavors for affinity spaces (Curwood et al., 2013; Steinkuehler & King, 2009) and used a mobile game, Pokémon Go, as a topic for all of the course writing assignments.

Pokémon Go is a mobile augmented reality (AR) game that is based on a popular Japanese entertainment franchise (Yoshida, 2016). At the time of the study, Pokémon Go was successful at bringing strangers together as they gathered in places around the world to play. Thus, it was possible that it would help connect students with each other and with players outside the course. The course design also included another affinity space element, portals. Students were using Pokémon Go online affinity space portals such as gamewikis, discussion fora, and YouTube channels. They also used the portals in the physical realm including playing the game with friends and talking about the game with classmates. The last portal was a weekly discussion board where students posted their game journals. The discussion was created for the purpose of the course and was hosted by Canvas, the school's learning management system (LMS).

Participants

The study was conducted in an intermediate academic writing course. All students either moved up from the high-beginner writing course after meeting all of the course objectives or were placed into this level. Although, the participants varied in English writing skills, all of them fell into the intermediate range. Five students consented to participate in the study. The participants came from

diverse linguistic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. All participants were young adults. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Table 1 below presents the population:

Table 1. Summary of the Participant Population

<u>Name</u>	<u>Country of origin</u>	<u>Major</u>
Zack	China	Aviation
Katie	Japan	Computer Graphics
Lucy	Rwanda	Undeclared
Yolanda	Peru	Animal Biology
Takashi	Japan	Physical Education

Instructional Design

Affinity spaces happen spontaneously and participation in them is voluntary. Thus adapting them into a course needs to be approached very cautiously. That is why all students were directed to download and start playing the mobile augmented reality (AR) game, Pokémon Go (<https://www.pokemongo.com/>) outside of class. Students were encouraged to engage in online affinity spaces, such as gamewikis, gameblogs, discussions, and fansites. This way students could choose their favorite sources of information and ways of interacting with the affinity space. The Pokémon Go affinity space was already robust as the game had been a global phenomenon for almost two months prior to the start of the course (Tsukayama & Guarino, 2016). Interacting in this active affinity space would allow students access to a large knowledge base (Gee & Hayes, 2012) which would help them augment their game skills and serve as a source for their writing about the game experiences.

The second focus of the instructional design was to provide students with an informal writing space, or another portal for them to engage in. Affinity spaces allow their participants to share and react to writing (Lammers et al., 2012; Magnifico, 2010). To provide such less formal opportunity for students to connect, a portal in a form of weekly discussions was created. In it, students would share their experiences with gameplay. This assignment was a gaming journal in which language was not corrected so that the students could practice uninhibited writing while reflecting on their gaming (see [Appendix A](#)). Another motivation for creating this in-class portal rather than relying on the existing discussion boards on public portals, was the fact that affinity space audiences may not respond right away (Kelly 2016). Some posts may take longer than the 16-week semester to receive feedback, while others may never receive a reply.

In addition, students completed several academic writing assignments throughout the semester using the topic of PokemonGo as inspiration for their writing. For example, when our curricular focus was on a comparison contrast essay, students could write about differences of the console version of the game and the mobile one. Others compared different types of Pokémon. Alternately, when we focused on argumentative writing, some students wrote essays encouraging readers to

take up the game due to its positive health effects, while others condemned video games, particularly PokemonGo, as detrimental to productivity, safety, and other effects. Students were graded on these assignments based on content, organization, and language. However, since this was an exportation of informal writing, the formal assignments were not analyzed as a part of this study.

Research Design

To answer the research questions, two sources of data were used: gaming journals and participant interviews. The writing journals provided an insight into how participants engaged with the game and its affinity spaces. The interview questions asked directly about participants' affinity space and game perceptions as well as how they engaged in affinity spaces.

Gaming journals. The gaming journals were in the form of an online discussion forum. The forum was hosted on Canvas, the university's LMS and available to students via an online classroom component of our course. Students posted a weekly journal entry describing their Pokémon Go gaming experiences. The requirement was that they describe one new experience and write a reflective summary about it in one or two paragraphs. They were also required to respond to at least two other posts each week. The students were not graded on language or content of their posts or responses (see [Appendix A](#) for the assignment description). The assignment was mandatory for all students, but it was intended as a less formal place for students to share their gaming experiences and resources for gameplay assistance. The intention was to foster a classroom space that would act like an affinity space portal for students to share their common endeavor of Pokémon Go gameplay. The journal entries of each study participant were copied and compiled into a single document. The original language of posts including language mistakes was preserved as they did not inhibit comprehension or obstruct the participants' meaning.

Interviews. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions (see [Appendix B](#) for the Interview Protocol). The questions helped find answers to all research questions but also probe more deeply into the reasons behind participants' perspectives. This way, the data from the interviews could be confirmed with the data from the gaming journal observations (Maxwell, 2013).

Even though the consent letters were signed prior to the completion of the course, interviews were not conducted until after the grades were posted. The instructor-researcher, did not find out who was participating in the study until after the end of the semester, thus protecting the identities of the participants. The students could feel assured that their participation in the study or lack thereof, would not affect their grades. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were edited for language accuracy and clarity of pronunciation, as it was the content, not the form that was the focus of my study.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected in this study, two cycles of coding were performed. The utterances that contained a complete thought or idea were used as units of analysis. Those included complete sentences or self-contained phrases (e.g. "excellent!"). During the first cycle, *descriptive coding* was used. It is defined as a method in which the coder "assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase (...) the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña p. 262, 2013). The research questions guided the choice for each topic: ways of participating in affinity spaces (RQ1), perceptions of affinity spaces (RQ2), and perceptions of games in an English language course (RQ3). For the second cycle, *focused coding*, a method that categorizes coded data based on thematic or conceptual similarity and allows for identifying most salient categories based on their

frequency or meaningfulness (Saldaña, 2013) was used. In this cycle, initial codes were reviewed and grouped into the most logical categories.

After the second cycle of coding, the analysis resulted in twelve categories answering RQ1. The categories comprised of four ways of participating in out-of-class affinity space portals (online discussions, gamewikis, YouTube channels) and eight ways of participating in the in-class portal (game journal). Because the answers for RQ2 and RQ3 did not yield many categories, a simple comparison of the answers of each of the participants was performed. This comparison yielded two categories for RQ2: one category for perception of affinity space portals out-of-class and one for the in-class portal (game journal). For RQ3, I used one category for game perceptions.

Findings

Both in- and out-of-class online space portals served the participants as a socializing platform. In addition, the participants perceived the use of the game and the informal online spaces positively. The results are summarized below.

Activity in Out-of-Class Affinity Space Portals

The reported activity in the out-of-class affinity space portals yielded four categories of participant behavior: 1. *invitation*, 2. *share w/ friends*, 3. *use internet*, and 4. *played w/ friends*. In the utterances in category 1, participants invited their classmates to play the game together outside of the class. In category 2, they mentioned how they shared their game accomplishments with their friends outside of class. In category 3, participants described how they used online sources like Google, mobile apps, or wikis to improve their gameplay. In category 4, participants talk about their own experiences of playing the game with friends. The results are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Frequency of Different Types of Participant Utterances in Out-of-class Affinity Space Portals

	<u>Invitation</u>	<u>Share w/ friends</u>	<u>Use internet</u>	<u>Played w/ friends</u>	<u>Total # of utterances</u>
Zack	3	0	0	0	3
Lucy	0	0	0	0	0
Katie	1	3	0	1	5
Yolanda	0	0	1	0	1
Takashi	4	0	3	2	9
Totals	8	3	4	3	18

The participants reported two types of out-of-class portal participation; in the first type participants used internet portals like wikis, blogs, or game pages. Their participation was characterized by passive consumption of information which is a common affinity space behavior (Gee & Hayes, 2012). It was described by utterances in category 3 (*use internet*). The second type happened in the

physical and online realms and involved active interaction with other players of the game. The utterance in categories 1 (*invitation*), 2 (*share w/ friends*), and 4 (*played w/ friends*) were examples of this affinity space behavior.

In the first type of participation, Zack was the most avid affinity space user. He reported visiting YouTube gaming channels, joining group chats, and researching online content to find information about Pokémon Go. Takashi used Google several times in search of advice for Pokémon Go gameplay. Yolanda, used an app that helped her locate rare Pokémon. Even though the participants did not report on their own contribution to any knowledge themselves to the affinity space, they gained access to online affinity space portals, often via initial Google search, in order to inform their game play. The game pushed them to use their English language skills in a real-life context, thus, situating their language socially (Gee, 2004).

The second type of affinity space participation was with other players of the game in the physical and online realm. Such game behavior has been previously described as *hanging out*, or a way for players of the same game to engage socially with the game as a pretext for those social encounters (Ito et al., 2010). The findings of this study reveal several instances of hanging out. Katie, Yolanda, and Takashi all enjoyed talking with classmates about their Pokémon Go adventures. Katie mentioned that she doesn't *"play with friends very much, but Pokémon Go is a good topic for conversation."* For Yolanda, classmates were a rich source of game knowledge: *"For example, I didn't know how to play in the gym, so I needed to ask other people how to do that."* Takashi also mentioned that he and his classmates compared their Pokémon a lot. Takashi also described his other social experiences: *"When I played close to the student center on campus, someone came to me and talked about my team (...). So, I talked to many people all over the campus."* He also seemed to involve his friends in the gameplay: *"I went to many place for find Pokémon or Pokémon gym with friends. (...) we caught Pikachu, and my friends didn't have Pikachu, so they were so happy."*

Activity in the In-class Affinity Space Portal

The analysis of the in-class portal, game journal, data resulted in eight categories: social, experience, opinion, tips, rules, hopes, ask advice, and research. The results are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3. The Frequency of Different Types of Participant Utterances in the In-class Affinity Space Portal

Participant	Social	Experience	Opinion	Tips	Rules	Hopes	Ask advice	Research	Total # of utterances
Zack	11	8	11	24	13	1	1	1	70
Lucy	8	11	6	1	0	0	2	0	28
Katie	22	15	12	5	1	1	0	0	56
Yolanda	11	17	10	3	0	5	2	1	49
Takashi	26	15	15	13	2	2	0	3	76
Totals	78	66	54	46	16	9	5	5	279

Social. The participants engaged in the game journal mostly for social purposes. The *social* category had the most utterances out of all of the eight categories (n=78). For example, they asked each other about their teams so that they could mobilize for a Pokémon Go Gym raid, which requires players to go to a physical location at the same time to play. This is exemplified by a quote

from Takashi: *“What’s your team? If you are team of Valor(red), we can go gym together!”* They frequently invited each other to play together: *“Now grab your phone and lets go get some gym fights!”* (Zack), or *“Let’s play PokemonGO together!!”* (Katie).

They encouraged, praised, and sympathized with each other in their game journals. For example, Lucy wrote: *“Hahaha sorry same thing happened to me, sorry you will get there.”*, and Takashi replied: *“Awesome! You have strong Pokémon!!!”*

They wished each other well, agreed, thanked, and expressed surprise as seen in this quote from Katie *“wow! I was wondering that symbol. Thank you!!”* or this one from Zack *“Hope you get something amazing!”*

Humor was also one of the social activities exercised in the game journals. They engaged in friendly banter like when Takashi threatens to steal his classmates coveted Pokémon; *“Hey I wanna see your Electabuzz! Then I’ll transfer it to the professor!haha.”* They also referred to inside jokes: *“If you caught Spearow, what do you call it? Like KFC2?haha”* (Takashi). These examples show a close relationship that participants of this study shared with their classmates confirming findings in previous studies that also found players using humor (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008).

Experience. The second most popular type of participation in the third space was sharing their gameplay experience. Students shared their good and bad in-game experiences. For instance, Lucy wrote: *“This week am still waiting on the hatching of the eggs.”* Participants also expressed frustration with technical problems, as shown in this quote from Katie: *“This week I couldn’t Pokemon GO well because it was malfunction. My app didn’t show any Pokemon and Pokestop even though I did update this app.”* These examples show that in the classroom community, students felt comfortable sharing their positive and negative game experience.

Opinion. Opinion sharing was the third most popular type of in-class portal engagement. The participants openly voiced their opinions about the game as Yolanda did in this quote: *“I liked evolve my Pokemos It was fun”*, or when Takashi wrote: *“My fall break was awesome by Pokémon GO.I became level 21 in last week, and I caught many new Pokémon, and took a lot of goods”*, or this quote by Zack: *“Pokemon has been really boring for me since I have basically caught all the Pokemon and tried everything I can possibly do in the game.”* As exemplified here, the participants show trust in their classroom community by sharing their opinions even if they are not positive.

Tips. As the fourth most frequent type of participation, the participants gave each other tips which consisted of general advice on how to succeed in Pokémon Go. The advice came mostly from Zack and Takashi, the self-proclaimed avid Pokémon Go players. For example, Zack shared gameplay strategies: *“Don’t evolve anything yet because once you get to higher level you will for sure find better one!”* or *“You get you highest cp to fight the Pokemon that is taking the gym, if you win you will take over the gym.”*

Occasionally, the participants also engaged in a range of other participation types. For example, they shared rules of the game (mostly Zack), their hopes for future success in the game or changes in the game, asked for advice, and wrote about their research activities to help gameplay.

The quotes above show that students engaged in affinity spaces by either consuming the knowledge available online or by interacting with other players in real-life. Their activity, however, was the most frequent in the in-class portal. The participants used the game journal to be social and share their gaming experiences and opinions. This behavior matched the common communication patterns we may encounter in online affinities in the wild (Black, 2009; Curwood et al., 2013; Kelley, 2016). The participation type was indicative of a close community. The participants felt

comfortable enough to be familiar with each other by using humor and freely sharing their negative and positive experiences and opinions.

Perceptions of Affinity Spaces

The participants shared their perception of affinity spaces. They agreed that affinity spaces were great for social interaction and for getting help with their game play, as showed in the following quote from Yolanda: *“I liked to catch Pokémon because you can compare with your friends what you caught and what I have. It was fun.”*

Zack added that he did not trust affinity space portals and needed *“more credible, logical, exact, correct”* sources for his academic writing. However, he was comfortable using them for this classroom activity. This is to say, that affinity space portals served as good sources for informal class activity. However, they were not perceived as a credible source of information for formal, graded assignments.

Zack confessed that he only participated in the game journal as it was a course requirement. Lucy and Katie complained that they did not always have much to contribute to the game journal due to technical difficulties with the game. Nevertheless, all participants shared positive perceptions of their participation in the affinity spaces. They reported enjoying reading and responding to others’ posts. The familiar format of the game journal resembling social media discussion threads made it easier for Takashi to contribute to the weekly game journal discussions. The participants also valued learning about the gameplay from each other, like in this quote by Takashi: *“I could learn about where specific Pokémon were on campus from my classmates and I could go get them.”* In this judgement-free space, Zack felt compelled to share his positive and negative experiences and opinions: *“It was just between us in the class. I could say ‘(...), this game is terrible.’”*

The above findings reveal how the affinity spaces contributed to students feeling more connected to each other. The comfort the participants reported to feel implies intimacy within the classroom, which may be an indication of a close community. As shown in previous studies (Lam, 2014; Thorne et al., 2015), affinity spaces helped bring participants together. In this study, however, the in-class and out-of-class portals contributed to bringing students together in an instructional setting thus, contributing to a closer rapport and a feeling of belongingness.

Perceptions of Pokémon Go Use in Formal Instruction

Out of the five participants, only one self-identified as an avid gamer and the rest claimed to avoid gaming. The non-gamers confessed that in general they found video games as a waste of time or a distraction. Nevertheless, asked about the application of Pokémon Go in their academic English writing course, all claimed that they liked it. Yolanda and Takashi enjoyed the sentimental value of this specific game as they remembered playing it as children. Yolanda stated: *“When I was a child (...) Pokémon (...) was my favorite TV program, so when I was playing, I was reminded of that.”* Zack and Takashi found the use of a video game a *“cool”* or interesting idea and seemed to be excited about it. Zack and Yolanda also mentioned the game as being very social. Katie especially appreciated the connection she could make between her friends at home and an academic experience in a foreign country. These findings align with those in other affinity space research. Affinity space participant enjoy their travels (Gee, 2017) through available portals as they create a greater sense of belonging (Schamroth Abrams & Lammers, 2017).

However, the participants were not very ardent about their game experience. The initial enthusiasm was unilaterally reported to have dwindled. Lucy and Yolanda, for instance, complained about difficulty of the game. Lucy and Katie also experienced frequent technical difficulties with the game which lowered their interest in playing. The biggest complaint that most of the participants

had about the game was that it became boring. Zack, for example, stated that *“The second week, nothing really interests me anymore. I caught all the Pokémon. It doesn’t have story line and its ... I’m lazy and I don’t want to walk around.”* He was the gamer of the group and had previously played the game. Even though he was thrilled about playing the game for class, he quickly lost interest in the game. Yolanda shared the same sentiment and complained about the game as well: *“But I played only for two months and then it was boring for me. You only catch Pokémon, so I wasn’t sure what else to do.”* Takashi admitted *“If I play for a long time, Pokémon were the same, nothing changed. So, the Halloween event was good, but if they didn’t have events, it became boring.”* The game was not a sustainable motivation for students to connect to their in-class writing community and the English-speaking Pokémon Go players at large. It was a good force to get them started but not sufficient to keep them going. Yolanda suggested that games for the class should have been changed: *“Pokémon Go is good, but changing the game would have been better (...) Maybe play Pokémon Go for one month and next month try a new game. But the same form for assignments. That was good.”*

The findings revealed that the participants saw a video game as a novel, or “cool”, idea to use in English language courses. Interestingly, regardless of their interest in video games, all participants were excited about trying something new in their writing course. However, they complained about the game itself. After the initial enthusiasm, their interest gradually declined. They were bored with gameplay and the lack of narrative.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the practicality of using video games as a common endeavor in academic writing courses for ELLs. It also examined how participants engaged with affinity and third spaces and how they perceived them.

Pokémon Go proved a successful common endeavor around which students in this course could converge and geek out (Ito et al., 2010) about. The results suggest that a video game as a topic in an academic English language course was a welcomed instructional innovation for ELLs. The participants of this study engaged in communication patterns typical for practices reported in other affinity space studies (Black, 2007; Curwood, 2013; Thorne et al., 2015). The course online discussion forum was an effective portal in which students could express their affinity with their classmates. Their reported practices in other portals were also positive and helpful in creating a feeling of togetherness. Just as in previous studies of ELLs in informal settings (Black, 2009; Burke, 2013; Thorne et al., 2009), the participants in this study connected to a larger community. However, in this study, the participants made those connections while engaging in formal instruction providing a real-life connection of formal instruction to the outside world.

What is more, the participants claimed to enjoy gameplay and using their experiences in assignments. The game was easy to learn and play and its novel AR design inspired a lot of gameplay. Other studies explored Pokémon Go activities as a link of formal instruction to out-of-school practices (Godwin-Jones, 2016). The present study adds to the current knowledge by observing ELLs in a formal instruction setting using Pokémon Go as a means to successfully connect to their classmates and to the community at large. The use of the out-of-class affinity space portals showed that participants engaged in active research and reading skills to improve their non-academic skills, such a gameplay, which confirms previous studies (Steinkuehler & King, 2009). However, the current study adds that ELLs may exercise caution, as did Zack, when trusting the non-academic online sources for academic purposes, such as writing an essay.

The use of the in-class portals added to a more cohesive classroom community serving as a nonjudgmental (i.e. ungraded) space for students to freely share opinions and engaging in social

interactions with their classmates. Similar results have been found in previous studies that showed informal classroom spaces as a safe place to share student hobbies or cultures (Buelow, 2016). In addition, in prior research on language diaspora communities ELLs connected by sharing and comparing their experiences with their native and new cultures (Thorne et al., 2009). The current study used one video game as a common endeavor for the entire class to exchange experiences. The participants compared Pokedex (a tally of caught Pokémon) with classmates, battled in the Gym with and against their classmates, or taught effective gameplay strategies to each other.

Nevertheless, the game was not a lasting motivational force. Unlike other research where games such as SIMs, Neopets, Pokémon, or Dungeon and Dragons provided sustained motivational force (Burke, 2013; Curwood et al., 2013), Pokémon Go failed to do so in this study. The students first approached the task very enthusiastically. However, this excitement did not last. The game lacked a strong narrative or varied ways to interact with the game. Most participants reported boredom, lower gameplay activity, and thus, lack of material to write about.

Implications

This study carries several implications for instruction. Pokémon Go proved to be an engaging, even if not long-term, force. However, when choosing a video game, besides the cost and ease of play, instructors need to focus on how engaging the game might be. Choosing a game with a captivating story line, multiple game objectives, or simply changing games every few weeks could retain student interest. Relying on new games adds to the novelty and excitement of the activity yet introduced the possibility of technical difficulties. Using older, tested games may ward off possible user frustrations. Due to the fact that the Canvas online discussion forum was so successful at bringing students together, adding an in-class portal may help students connect to each other and to other participants of affinity spaces at large.

The findings also suggest that future research could explore the use of multiple games throughout the semester in an academic English language course. Research could explore the effects of using video games affinity spaces in the instruction of writing, vocabulary, reading, listening, or speaking.

Conclusion

This study explored one application of video game affinity spaces in English Language instruction. The generally positive attitudes of participants towards using a video game and affinity space portals in formal instruction show that these tools could be further explored in English language instruction. Previous studies have shed light on affinity spaces in the wild (Black, 2009; Curwood et al., 2013; Lammers, 2016; Magnifico, 2010) and their application for language instruction (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008). This study took those previous findings and focused on the possible application of those spaces in a formal English language classroom.

About the Author

Marta Halaczkiwicz is a Senior Lecturer in the Intensive English Language Institute of Utah State University. She holds Master's Degrees in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages and in Educational Technology. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences at Utah State University. Her research interests span from writing pedagogy, game-enhanced instruction, to agency and identity issues in ELLs.

References

- Ángel, N. L., & García, J. M. (2017). Improving English language learners' academic writing: A multi-strategy approach to a multi-dimensional challenge. *GiST Education and Learning Research Journal*, 14, 49–67. <https://doi.org/10.26817/16925777.367>
- Annamalai, N. (2016). Exploring the writing approaches in the Facebook environment. *Teaching English with Technology*, 16(1), 71–87.
- Black, R. W. (2007). Fanfiction writing and the construction of space. *E-Learning*, 4(4), 384. <https://doi.org/10.2304/elea.2007.4.4.384>
- Black, R. W. (2009). Online fan fiction, global identities, and imagination. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 43(4), 397–425.
- Buelow, S. (2016). Popular culture and academic literacies situated in a pedagogical third space. *Reading Horizons*, 56(1), 1–24.
- Burke, A. (2013). Creating identity: The online worlds of two English language learners. *Language and Literacy*, 15(3), 31–49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20360/G2DS38>
- Cennetkuşu, N. G. (2017). International students' challenges in academic writing: A case study from a prominent U.S. university. *Journal of Language & Linguistics Studies*, 13(2), 309–323.
- Curwood, J. S. (2013). The hunger games: Literature, literacy, and online affinity spaces. *Language Arts*, 90(6), 417–427.
- Curwood, J. S., Magnifico, A. M., & Lammers, J. C. (2013). Writing in the wild: Writers' motivation in fan-based affinity spaces. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 56(8), 677–685. <https://doi.org/10.1002/JAAL.192>
- Gee, J. P. (2004). *Situated language and learning: A critique of traditional schooling*. Routledge.
- Gee, J. P. (2017). Affinity spaces and 21st century learning. *Educational Technology*, 57(2), 27–31.
- Gee, J. P., & Hayes, E. (2012). Nurturing affinity spaces and game-based learning. In *Games, learning, and society: Learning and meaning in the digital age*. (pp. 129–153). Cambridge University Press.
- Godwin-Jones, R. (2016). Augmented reality and language learning: From annotated vocabulary to place-based mobile games. *Language Learning and Technology*, 20(3), 9–19.
- Hadi, M. J. (2013). *Writing with computers in ESL classroom: Enhancing ESL learners' motivation, confidence and writing proficiency*. ERIC Clearinghouse. <https://eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED553755>
- Halaczkiwicz, M. D. (2019). Harnessing writing in the wild: Practical applications of affinity spaces for English language instruction. *TESOL Journal*, 11(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.453>
- Hirano, E. (2014). Refugees in first-year college: Academic writing challenges and resources. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 23, 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2014.01.001>
- Ito, M., Baumer, S., Bittanti, M., Cody, R., Herr-Stephenson, B., Horst, H. A., Lange, P. G., Mahendran, D., Martínez, K. Z., Pascoe, C. J., & others. (2010). Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out. *Digital Media*. Retrieved from https://clalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/files/Hanging_Out.pdf
- Kelley, B. (2016). Chocolate frogs for my betas!: Practicing literacy at one online fanfiction website. *Computers and Composition*, 40, 48–59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2016.03.001>

- Kim, T. Y. (2013). An activity theory analysis of second language motivational self-system: Two Korean immigrants' ESL learning. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 22(4), 459–471. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-012-0045-x>
- Lam, W. S. E. (2000). L2 literacy and the design of the self: A case study of a teenager writing on the internet. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(3), 457–482. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587739>
- Lam, W. S. E. (2009). Multiliteracies on instant messaging in negotiating local, translocal, and transnational affiliations: A case of an adolescent immigrant. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(4), 377–397. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.44.4.5>
- Lam, W. S. E. (2014). Literacy and capital in immigrant youths' online networks across countries. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 39(4), 488–506. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2014.942665>
- Lam, W. S. E., & Rosario-Ramos, E. (2009). Multilingual literacies in transnational digitally mediated contexts: An exploratory study of immigrant teens in the United States. *Language and Education*, 23(2), 171–190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09500780802152929>
- Lammers, J. C. (2016b). “The Hangout was serious business”: Leveraging participation in an online space to design Sims fanfiction. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 50(3), 309–332.
- Lammers, J. C., Curwood, J. S., & Magnifico, A. M. (2012). Toward an affinity space methodology: Considerations for literacy research. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 11(2), 44–58.
- Lewis, T. Y. (2014). Affinity spaces, apprenticeships, and agency: Exploring blogging engagements in family spaces. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 58(1), 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.322>
- Liu, H. (2015). Learner autonomy: The role of motivation in foreign language learning. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(6), 1165. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0606.02>
- MacArthur, C. A., Philippakos, Z. A., & Graham, S. (2016). A multicomponent measure of writing motivation with basic college writers. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 39(1), 31–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731948715583115>
- Magnifico, A. M. (2010). Writing for whom? Cognition, motivation, and a writer's audience. *Educational Psychologist*, 45(3), 167–184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2010.493470>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. SAGE Publications.
- Padgett, E. R., & Curwood, J. S. (2016). A figment of their imagination: Adolescent poetic literacy in an online affinity space. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(4), 397–407. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.453>
- Ravichandran, S., Kretovics, M., Kirby, K., & Ghosh, A. (2017). Strategies to address English language writing challenges faced by international graduate students in the US. *Journal of International Students*, 7(3), 764–785. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.570033>
- Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed). SAGE.
- Sauro, S., & Sundmark, B. (2016). Report from Middle-Earth: Fan fiction tasks in the EFL classroom. *ELT Journal*, 70(4), 414–423. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccv075>
- Schamroth Abrams, S., & Lammers, J. C. (2017). Belonging in a videogame space: Bridging affinity spaces and communities of practice. *Teachers College Record*, 119(110302), 34.

Singh, M. K. M. (2017). International EFL/ESL master students' adaptation strategies for academic writing practices at tertiary level. *Journal of International Students*, 7(3), 620–643. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.570025>

Steinkuehler, C., & King, E. (2009). Digital literacies for the disengaged: Creating after school contexts to support boys' game-based literacy skills. *On the Horizon*, 17(1), 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120910936144>

Thorne, S. L., Black, R. W., & Sykes, J. M. (2009). Second language use, socialization, and learning in internet interest communities and online gaming. *The Modern Language Journal*, 93, 802–821. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2009.00974.x>

Thorne, S. L., & Reinhardt, J. (2008). “Bridging Activities,” new media literacies, and advanced foreign language proficiency. *CALICO Journal*, 25(3), 558–572. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/cj.v25i3.558-572>

Thorne, S. L., Sauro, S., & Smith, B. (2015). Technologies, identities, and expressive activity. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 215–233. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190514000257>

Tsukayama, H., & Guarino, B. (2016, July 12). What is really behind the Pokémon Go craze. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2016/07/12/what-is-really-behind-the-pokemon-go-craze/>

Yoshida, R. (2016, August). “Pokemon Go” a hit 20 years after franchise debuts. *Japan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/08/01/reference/pokemon-go-hit-20-years-franchise-debuts/#.WnD4WpM-dBw>

Appendix A

Gaming Journals

During this semester, you will play Pokémon Go and write about your experience in Gaming Journals. You will use the Discussion Boards set up in Canvas for the Journals (each titled by week). Each posting will be due on Thursday, starting September 1. You will also respond to two other posts by the Sunday of that week.

Here are specifications for this assignment:

1. 1-2 paragraphs
2. description of a new experience (new Pokémon, new PokeStop, new gym victory, new information source, new game strategy to level up, win or train at a gym, evolve, etc.)
3. reflection – likes, dislikes, difficulties, future suggestions

Here's how I will grade you on this:

criteria	yes 1 pt.	no 0 pts.
Is the post 1-2 paragraphs long?		
Is there a description of a new experience?		
Is there a thorough reflection?		
Did the post meet the due date?		
Did you respond to two other posts?		
Did you respond by Sunday?		

[Back to text](#)

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. Do you play a lot of video games?
2. If yes, what kind?
3. If no, why not?
4. How do you like playing Pokémon Go for class? Why?
5. What was your favorite experience playing the game?
6. What was your worst experience playing the game?
7. Were there any challenges in playing the game?
8. Tell me about your experience writing the journals.
9. Were there any challenges in the weekly journal writing?
10. Compare your experience in my class with other ESL classes you've had before?
11. Tell me about your use of English while playing Pokémon Go? (who did you use English with? In what places? Situations?)
12. How did playing Pokémon Go influence your use of English this semester? Did you use English more? Did you write more?
13. Tell me about your social experience playing the game (i.e. did you meet any new people? Did you help other players? Did you help your classmates? Did your classmates help you? Did you use any websites, blogs, discussion boards other than our Canvas class?).
14. What was your favorite assignment in this class? Why?
15. What was your least favorite assignment in this class? Why?
16. Which assignment, if any, do you think helped you become a better writer in English?

[Back to text](#)

Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.