

ONLINE GAMES: THE IMPACT ON GAMERS' MOBILE LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: *Online gaming has been a trend that has dramatically increased in popularity since the 1990's and it has been growing tremendously throughout the years. However, there are many traditional beliefs saying that playing games are unproductive, waste of time and non-utilitarian. Hence, the research was carried out to investigate the impact of online games on gamers' mobile language and language learning. From the data collected, it is found that online gaming does improve the gamers' language learning, in terms of vocabulary but at the same time, it promotes the heavy usage of mobile languages such as abbreviations and acronyms. Besides that, abundance of coined words has surfaced through online gaming and most of the words contribute to the culture and language of teenagers nowadays. In conclusion, online games have both positive and negative impact on the gamers' language learning through rich in-game vocabularies but at the same time, it promotes the heavy use of mobile languages during communication.*

Keywords: Massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), online games, language learning, mobile games

1. INTRODUCTION

Online gaming has been a trend that has dramatically increased in popularity since the 1990's [1]. Most of the video games have storyline, instructions and chats, which were mainly constructed with English as the primary language [2]. Despite the traditional beliefs that playing games were unproductive, waste of time and non-utilitarian [3]. This belief can no longer be applied to this century, as researchers claimed that the communication environments provided by MMORPGs presented valuable opportunities for language development [4]. Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) could help in developing gamer's language learning, especially in vocabulary aspects, as they engaged in interaction with other gamers by using the English language as a lingua franca [5].

Nevertheless, due to the advancement of technology nowadays, Generation Y gamers were prone to use mobile languages in their daily lives. Even though gamers used English language to communicate with one and another in MMORPGs, it is undeniable that some of the gamers tend to use mobile language such as abbreviations, acronyms, phonetic replacements, and emoticons to communicate. According to McCrindle [6], the claim that abbreviations and acronyms used in communication technologies like text messaging are spilling over to damage formal communication is one that requires attention. The used of mobile languages can be seen widely especially in online gaming due to the fact that gamers have to communicate quickly with each other during the gameplay. Hence, this topic is worth studying as it shows how online gaming influences the use of mobile languages among gamers, and how do online games influence the gamers' language learning, especially in vocabulary

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Roy Trubshaw invented the first MMOPRGs in 1979 and it was called Multi-User Domain or MUDs. It has then evolved and continued to attract gamers from all around the world [7]. Furthermore, there are multi-platforms of MMORPGs emerging from different gaming companies from all over the globe. The success of MMORPGs was contributed by the rapid advances in gaming technologies and the dramatic expansion of the Internet [8]. Other than social media such as

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WeChat, and WhatsApp; MMORPGs also provide gamers to communicate in real-time communication through their avatars and through a more interactive manner as they can convey their expressions through the moving emoticons that are embedded in the games.

MMORPGs provide gamers with access to theme-based virtual worlds, real time communication through text chat, opportunities for role-play, guild membership, status advancement, problem solving, and content creation. Moreover, they further utilize recent developments in computer technologies. The use of text chat has been supplemented with voice communication tools. Users of MMORPGs are provided with access to rich 2D and 3D virtual worlds that incorporate realistic high quality graphical interfaces [9].

Online games were said to help in language learning in the network-based gaming, especially on the psycholinguistic and sociocultural accounts of second language acquisition. According to Lafford [10], both psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic shared a common understanding of the role played by interaction, although they draw on differing conception of the processes at work in language learning. Firth and Wagner [11] also mentioned that language is usually acquired through social interaction. It is also worth mentioned that most of the teenagers practice language learning through activities that spark their interest [12].

Online role-playing games can be seen as a suitable platform in language learning for people around the world. MMORPGs need to have collaboration between the gamers to achieve certain goals or to complete certain quests together and rarely, gamers can go solo to complete the entire quest by themselves. When there were collaborations between the gamers, there will be interaction among them, which in turn provided the opportunity for them to converse and learn English language, as well as to acquire new vocabularies. Besides, online games have the potential influence on language learning because most of the gamers spend hours playing and were introduced to different vocabularies through the games [13].

As successful network-based gaming requires collaborative social interaction in the target language as gamers assist each other in game tasks and activities, MMORPGs provide opportunities for peer assistance involving the co-construction of meaning involving the creation of zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Participation in this type of interaction during play and game-related communication with more capable peers enables individual learners to carry out tasks that they could not undertake unaided. In the sociocultural account of second language acquisition, this type of second language interaction is hypothesized as playing an important role in language learning, as it pushes an individual learner to go beyond their current level of language competence [14]

Although MMORPGs can be a promising platform for gamers to engage in language learning and vocabulary enhancement, it is also a platform where the use of mobile languages, abbreviations and acronyms were widespread. Technology had done more than to extend our vocabularies; it has changed the way we use language, communicate and express ourselves. It is the younger generations who were at the forefront of this language revolution [15]. In this generation, grammar rules and correct spelling do not apply in the daily use of text or chats anymore as it is all about keeping the text short and simple for quicker communication [16]. The use of mobile languages can be seen widely as the means of communication between teenagers nowadays. The use of abbreviations, acronyms, emoticons and coined words were common nowadays. In fact, it does not only apply to the communication via text messages or on other social media, people tend to use mobile languages in their gaming conversation as well, especially in MMORPGs.

Although the use of mobile languages or acronyms is increasing, nevertheless, MMORPGs facilitate beneficial social interaction based on teamwork and community membership as they may enhance user engagement, enjoyment, and interest. In addition, Bachman (1990) [17] stated that MMORPGs may be perceived as providing beneficial opportunities for the development of communicative competence and it could help in enhancing one's vocabulary

3. METHODOLOGY

In carrying out this research, both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were employed. Firstly, a survey was conducted and was given to one hundred TESL students in the Sultan Idris Education University. Through qualitative data collection, screenshots of the gamers' chat logs, quests system, and powers and skills description were taken to show the English language used in both MapleStory and Ragnarok Online (R.O). In addition, interviews were also conducted with a number of respondents who were involved in the survey to gather their opinions on online games.

Two games were chosen in this research namely *MapleStory* and *Ragnarok Online (R.O.)*. MapleStory is a free-to-play, two dimensional, side scrolling MMORPG, which is

developed by the South Korea Company named Wizet. There are several versions of the game available for specific countries or regions. In the game, gamers travelled the "Maple World", defeating monsters, completing quests that are available, as well as develop their characters' skills and abilities to fight monsters that are high in level, which provides them with legendary items upon defeating the monsters. Gamers were able to chat and interact with each other in real-time communication through the use of the chat logs, emoticons and other services like trading in a market in the game itself.

Ragnarok online is a Korean three-dimensional (3D) massive multiplayer online role-playing game that was first introduced in the year 2002 by a company called GRAVITY Co., ltd. Gamers use their characters (avatars) in the game to travel in the world of Ragnarok, which is divided into a series of maps on two major continents, each of which has its own terrain and native monsters, though many monsters are present in multiple regions. Gamers in R.O. communicate in real-time communication through chat logs and the game includes emoticons, which allowed gamers to express themselves through emoticons instead of words.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data collected, most of the gamers who played online games used mobile languages most of the times. In the given survey, it was recorded that 74% of the respondents claimed that they used mobile languages when they are communicating with other gamers, while only 26% of the respondents reported that they did not use mobile languages when they play online games. In addition, screenshots of chat logs from both *Ragnarok Online* and *MapleStory* showed that most of the gamers used mobile languages, abbreviations, and acronyms in most of the time when conversing with other gamers. It proves that not only social media such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and text messaging were the only platforms where people use the mobile languages intensively but, in online games as well.

People tend to use mobile languages in online games because the gamers wanted to keep their words short and simple as possible. As mentioned by McCrindle (2011) [18], people need to deliver the information rapidly, and people want to express their ideas at speed, short, sharp and witty fashion. In addition, most of the chatters and conversations contained new coined words, acronyms or mobile languages. It is undeniable that not only technology is responsible for non-traditional encounters with the written word; it is also assisting in the growth of new words and concepts [19]. The mobile languages were coined by the gamers to keep things simple and as fewer letters to be type in the chat log, which enable them to converse faster and respond quickly.

Additionally, 52% of the respondents saying that online gaming could help in improving one's vocabulary while the other 48% saying that playing online games will not improve one's vocabulary. Despite the close difference from the respondents, it is clear that most of the respondents agreed that playing online games could help in improving one's vocabulary.

When being interviewed, the respondents reported that online games introduced a set of vocabularies, which were not use in

one's daily life. For example, some words or quests integrated into the world of Ragnarok Online are taken from ancient folklore or myths from Greek, Egypt and mostly on Norse mythology such as Mjolnir, Thor, Midgard, and more. Those vocabs and terms that were used in the quest system were not something that the gamers encountered in their daily life or in some cases, they might never encounter those word before. Hence, in order to understand one of the quests, the game requires the gamers to understand Basic English, if not, a fairly good command or proficiency in English language so that they would be able to understand the context of the quests, for them to complete the quests. In addition, it is supported by one of the respondents' response who said that "good online games use bombastic words in their program to make the game different than other games. Different famous online games have different registers."

Some gaming terms and the language used were rather bombastic and sophisticated, which could facilitate in vocabulary enhancement. According to Chik [20], video and online computer games may be a very influential part of language use since gamers spend many hours playing and are introduced to different vocabularies through the games. New uses of a language develop through the lack of words for new trends and inventions [21]. There were lots of new terms and coined words emerged from playing online games such as 'GG' (*good game*), *catastrophic*, *feeder*, *eliminate*, *invulnerable*, *continent*, *countermeasures*, *devour* and many more. The emergence of these gaming terms helped to improve one's vocabulary as the gamers are required to understand the terms before they are able to play the game. In addition, one of the respondents responded that online gaming do help in improving one's vocabulary because communication in online games are mainly through text. This gives rise to many opportunities to encounter new words that a person would otherwise not encounter in real life. For example, the gaming jargons used when with other gamers such as 'scout' 'mana', 'farming' 'spam', and 'leeching' could facilitate them to learn the context of the terms used in the games, as well as the meaning of those terms. Another example was the in-game quests, which have elaborated backstories that helped to expand gamers' vocabulary. Some of the function verbs were changed accordingly to suit the context of the games. Hence, the gamers not only could learn the meaning of the verb that were used for gaming context but, they could also learn the base meaning of certain function verbs such as 'carry', 'looting', 'scourge', 're-spawn', 'resurrect', 'level' and much more

Unfortunately, there were some who disagreed that playing online games could help to improve one's vocabulary as they opined that gaming language cannot help create a proper vocabulary list in the individual's mind. This is true in a sense that words like 'noob', 'gg', 'imba', 'gtfo', 'HP', 'MP' and other gaming terms cannot be used in academic writing because those words are gaming languages and those words were not Standard English language. In addition, most competitive online games focus on the gameplay and only used the simplest words to convey the message. In addition, the other reason that the respondents gave was that one would be using words that were not accepted as proper English.

Through the results gathered, there were several ways where online games can help to improve one's vocabulary. As much as 39% of the respondents claimed that they usually learn

new vocabulary through the interaction or communication between other gamers in the game. Communication was the vital key for the gamers in online games, as they need to work together to handle quests and usually they were unable to complete most of the quests alone, such as the one of the quests called 'party-quest' (PQ) in *MapleStory*. Participation in this type of interaction during gameplay and game-related communication with more capable peers enabled individual learners to carry out tasks that they could not undertake unaided [22]. In the sociocultural account of second language acquisition, this type of second language interaction is hypothesized as playing an important role in language learning, as it pushes an individual learner to go beyond their current level of language competence [23,24].

In addition, the respondents claimed that in an online game, the gamers varies from different countries, and the common language used for communication is English. For someone who is poor in English, he or she may pick up words used by the native speakers and learn the usage of those words. This is further supported by the research conducted by Peterson, [25] which suggested that social interaction with player characters produced significant increases in the quantity of target language messages produced.

Besides, most of the respondents also claimed that they learn new vocabulary by interacting with the Non-Player Characters or NPCs. The language used by the NPCs are Standard English and grammatically correct. Thus, it could indirectly help to enhance the gamers' vocabularies. In addition, NPCs also used bombastic words, which could further enhance the vocabulary development among the gamers. In addition, the used of Standard English that was integrated into the quest system also helped to enhance the gamers' language learning because the gamers must know and understand the context of the quests. Some of the quests do not provide direct instructions to the gamers and only provide certain clues instead, which required the gamers to read in between the lines. Without the knowledge of the games' terminology or at least a good proficiency in English language, gamers faced difficulties in completing certain quests due to some of the sophisticated English vocabularies and contextual clues that were used and provided in the quest system.

A pilot study conducted by Rankin, Gold, and Gooch (2006), investigated learner interaction in the MMORPG Ever Quest II (Sony Online Entertainment, 2004). The subjects were four intermediate and advanced level EFL students who after training, undertook eight gaming sessions held over a period of four weeks. The researchers in this study attempted to confirm if participation would enhance English language proficiency and knowledge of new vocabulary. This study further examined the effectiveness of the in-game learning support features. The findings indicated that interaction with non-player characters increased target language vocabulary output by 40%. Data also showed enhanced understanding of new vocabulary after conversation with non-player characters [26] (Peterson, 2010; page 59)

5. CONCLUSIONS

Although most of the findings supported the idea of online games (MMORPGs) influences the player's vocabulary, the primary findings reported here though not conclusive, were encouraging, and draw attention to the need for further research. The used of MMORPGs to enhance player's English language proved to have positive outcomes.

The limitations of my research includes the lack of evidences especially on the interaction with the NPCs and the quests system integrated in MapleStory and Ragnarok Online. In addition, my research only used two selected MMORPGs out of hundreds over MMORPGs that have been created. In the future, other MMORPGs should be used in the research, as there were other popular and trending MMORPGs to date.

In addition, the used of online games should not only limited to the area of vocabulary, but should also take a look into using online games, MMORPGs as a learning tool in classroom to improve one's English language and make teaching and learning process in classroom to be more interactive, lively, and fun. As a conclusion, although MMORPGs have the tendency to promote mobile languages and other coined words, it is undeniable that MMORPGs facilitated in language development, especially in the aspect of vocabulary learning.

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