



LightVerb-Quest: An Adventure Storytelling Game to Foster Second Language Acquisition and Verbal Multi-Word Expressions Assimilation

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Abstract

In today's ever-changing society, Second Language Teaching (SLT) is becoming a challenge for language learning teachers and educators as the increasing availability of digital tools – to whom 21st Century students are constantly exposed – can cause the traditional face-to-face language learning process to be boring and/or ineffective.

Nevertheless, CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) researchers have recently stated the potential for serious games as innovative support to traditional educational methods.

In effect, Game-Based Learning (GBL) could have a strong impact on achieving educational objectives in language learning as it stimulates learners' autonomy and cooperation and promotes language acquisition through goal-oriented activities.

Moreover, when gaming is accompanied by a good narrative structure, motivation and engagement are further enhanced.

In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL), Multi-word Expressions (MWEs) play an essential role in enabling language fluency but, at the same time, they usually represent a challenge for L2 learners as, unlike native speakers, they tend to paraphrase or produce word combinations instead of multiword sequences.

In particular, Light-Verb Constructions (LVC) pose a problem for processing due to the non-compositionality of their meaning that cannot be easily deduced from their constituent parts.

In fact, as a light verb is formed by a verb plus a nominal complement (take a nap), it actually presents some information on the event but has abstract semantics, unlike heavy verbs that have full lexical meaning (sleep).

Therefore, this paper aims at presenting a class-interactive adventure game called LightVerb-Quest (LVQ) or "The Story of WordLand" aiming at teaching English LVCs to Italian secondary school students.

The game is based on an original adventure-story whose highly narrative nature allows the creation of a flow that fosters students' intrinsic motivation and learning as they face their learning challenges by interacting with the game through their Smartphones.

Accordingly, Multiple-choice questions (MC) related to the chosen LVCs gradually appear during the story narration, thus making students understand their meaning and assimilate their usage.

Furthermore, the story has been syntactically and grammatically constructed according to CEFR (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) levels for secondary school students (A1-A2), so to make them learn and fix other grammatical structures.

This paper also aims at responding to today's latest methodological guidelines about students' needs for digital skills by creating an innovative instructional product.

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition, Storytelling, Game-Based Learning, Multi-Word Expressions, English as a Second Language, Computer Assisted Language Learning.*

1. Introduction

A challenging aspect in SLT is represented by Multi-word Expressions (MWEs) that usually cause problems to L2 learners as they are units derived from the combination of two or more words. The meaning of the MWE is different from the meaning of their constituent parts. However, MWEs form a considerable amount of the English language and learning them is fundamental to be able to communicate both in spoken and written language. Among MWEs Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) are a type of highly frequent Verbal MWEs (VMWEs) in the English language and their processing is



usually difficult for L2 learners because their meaning is mostly non-compositional, that is it is not evident on the surface.

As a result, this paper aims at presenting a class-interactive storytelling game called “*LightVerb-Quest*” or “*The Story of WordLand*” devoted to teaching LVCs to Italian learners of English.

2. Digital Gaming, Storytelling and MWEs

The use of games in SLT is quite recent[1] as CALL educators have lately underlined the potential of digital gaming in being a valuable resource in fostering language learning.

The reason lies in the fact that, in the past, the use of computers and games was limited to the usability of computer labs while today, the increasing availability of new media technologies and mobile applications, allows second language educators to practice with this relatively new form of teaching generally well-welcomed by the students as they are heavy users of Smartphones and video-games.

Researchers state that games that include a meaningful story are more likely not only to engage and motivate students with their studies but also make them both assimilate the subject matter even better and develop their problem-solving skills[2].

In effect, since ancient times storytelling has represented not only a means of transmitting traditions and beliefs from a generation to another but also knowledge and wisdom as stories make the learning process faster because they are entertaining and easy to remember.

In the context of SLT, when the subject matter is conveyed through the combination of gaming and storytelling, this leads to the development of a meaningful learning environment in which students’ learning is enhanced by digital technologies.

In particular, digital games seem to be a powerful way in fostering ESL (English as a Second Language) students’ learning as they provide them with the opportunity to experience language acquisition not only as a traditional scholastic subject but in a more natural way by allowing players to interact with new vocabulary and stimulating their thinking skills.

In effect, it is self-evident that vocabulary acquisition is central to language learning because a limited vocabulary can impede successful communication.

3. Light Verb Constructions (LVCs) and Language Learning

The term Light Verb was first coined by Jespersen[3] to refer to those English verbs composed by a verb + a noun construction such as “*take a walk*”, “*have a rest*”, “*make a call*”, “*give a presentation*”.

The essential characteristic of these verbs is that their semantic content is not provided by the verb but by the nominal complement. This means that in a Light Verb Construction the noun complement adds additional semantics to the event representation.

Let’s take for instance the sentence “*Luke gave his presentation yesterday*”: the Light Verb *give* contributes little semantic content to the sentence while the main meaning is provided by the noun, thus “*Luke presented yesterday*”.

It seems clear that processing these types of constructions could be difficult especially for beginning learners of English as the information they provide should be gathered both from their syntactic and semantic components.

Moreover, Light Verbs differ in their use and they cannot quite always be translated. In Italian these verbs are called *verbi supporto*[4] but they are differently constructed compared to the English ones. In fact, referring to the example mentioned above, the English construction *give a presentation* cannot be translated in Italian as *dare una presentazione* (namely, “*Luca diede la sua presentazione ieri*”) as the Italian verb *dare* generally refers to the act of *giving something to someone* while the verb *give* in the English LVC refers to the act of *doing something*. In this case, the Italian translation “*Luca fece la sua presentazione/presentò ieri*” seems to be more appropriate as the verb *fare* better translates the meaning of the English LVC.

Having said that, apart from the syntax, what makes the acquisition of LVCs difficult is their abstract meaning. To that end, the idea of this paper is to claim that by narrativizing the abstract content of some most frequently used English LVCs through storytelling and gaming as further support to the learning process it could be possible to simplify and better allow the acquisition of English LVCs.



4. The Game & the Adventure: Storyline and Linguistic features

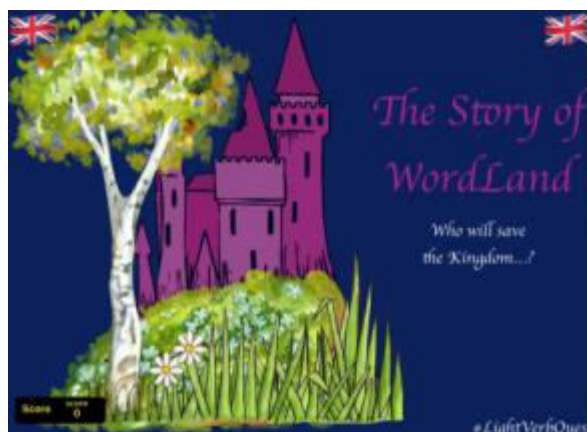


Fig.1 The Game

Light-Verb Quest or "*The Story of WordLand*" is a class-interactive storytelling game developed by using a role-playing engine called *EVO-RPGE* aiming at fostering English language acquisition by Italian secondary school students at their 7th grade.

The game deals with MWEs, especially VMWEs (in particular, LVCs) but the story narration has been developed so that it contains most of the grammatical structures provided by the syllabus students should be able to manage at the end of their school year.

In fact, the game provides students with the possibility to better assimilate and review tenses (e.g. *Past Simple* of regular and irregular verbs); *Wh-questions*; *Comparatives* and *Superlatives*; *Modals* (their positive and negative forms) such as *Have to*, *Must*, *Can*; constructions with verbs that express likes and dislikes (*like*, *love*, *hate*, *prefer + ing*); vocabulary about *weather*, *means of transport*, *body parts*, *holidays*; also, there are some geographical and historical references to the UK such as information about *Scotland* or *The Tudor Times*.

Light-Verb Quest is based on an original story that makes students directly involved in the narration so that they get to know characters and events as they proceed in the story.

The adventure is set in the fantasy world of *WordLand*, a magical kingdom where people live happy and free. The King, the Queen, and the little Prince peacefully spend their lives in a bucolic castle and protect a very important treasure: a magical chest that contains all the words of the World. Unfortunately, one day a terrible dragon who hates seeing people love each other and wants to control the world of *WordLand* and throw people into despair and solitude attacks the Kingdom with its fire and steals the magical word-treasure. From that moment on, people cannot talk anymore. Only the Prince could save *WordLand* but he needs a *WordMaster* (the students) who helps him collect all the missing words by overcoming the trials the dragon has prepared for him, give people their words back and restore peace and serenity in the Kingdom.

This is the moment in which the learning process starts, however, students are introduced into the topic thanks to an external narrator that presents the background situation, describes the characters and the kingdom, so to make them active participants in the game. Each character has its voice, in this way students identify roles and objectives and better follow the story narration. Also, both the protagonists (e.g. the prince or his friends) and the antagonists (e.g. the dragon) of the story directly interact with the class by addressing it by simply asking students to do things (e.g. a rabbit who cannot talk asks the Prince to help him complete a sentence that gives him a hint to proceed in the story) or "threaten" them when the class is trying to complete a challenge in the story (e.g. the dragon gives the class wrong hints). This is a way to engage students provided by digital gaming and storytelling that cannot be experienced during traditional *face-to-face* teaching.

Moreover, by giving students the role of the *WordMaster* of the English language they experience a sense of responsibility in completing the game and the need to overcome the troubles created by the dragon could motivate them to better focus and reflect on the different linguistic questions that gradually appear during the story-narration.



5. The Questions

The questions are presented in the form of Multiple-Choice questions (MC) that allow students to reflect upon the answers and follow and proceed in the story without needing particular knowledge of the topic.

Also, the MC-questions are sometimes presented in the form of a *gap-fill exercise* especially when it comes to LVCs, so to make students able to visualize, understand and remember not only the

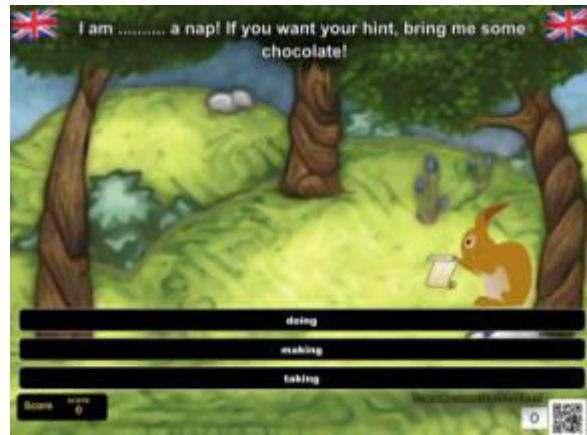


Fig.2 *Gap-fill exercise*

syntactic construction of the LVC but also the appropriate verb that goes with the noun complement. Moreover, each question gradually appears during the story narration and this helps students maintain their attention without distracting themselves, something that could happen instead if they were forced to only follow the narration.

The interaction with the game is provided by students' Smartphones that are connected to a private Wi-Fi that only allows them to play the game by impeding them to surf the net or use other applications.

Students can work individually or in groups, however, results by previous work with this type of language-learning game[5] have already demonstrated that students prefer doing these activities in groups. This allows claiming that the combination of gaming and storytelling fosters cooperative learning (CL).

When all the students have answered the question, then the system chooses the most voted one by following the criterion of the majority. Besides, each student can auto-evaluate himself/herself as the correct answer is displayed both on their screen and on the Interactive Whiteboard (IWB). In the example below, a rabbit missing words is trying to tell the students that he is taking a nap, so if they want a hint to proceed in the story they should bring him some chocolate. This example shows the case in which the students choose the wrong answer. Accordingly, when the answer is incorrect, then

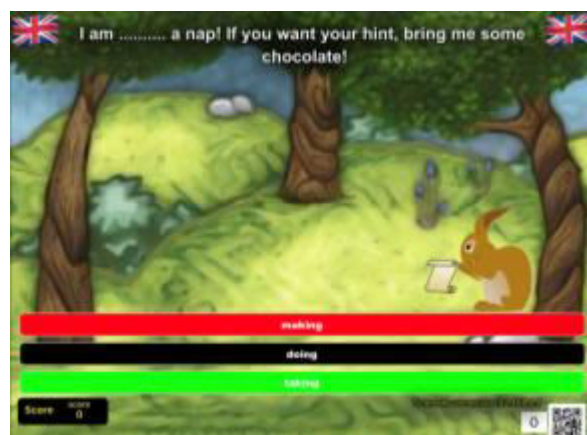


Fig.3 Correct and Wrong answer



the system colors the right answer in green and the wrong one in red.

Furthermore, the game has been developed so that the system not only shows the correct answer but also explains why the other one is incorrect by giving the actual meaning of the answer. To reinforce students' understanding, the explanation is always accompanied by visual and textual elements that help students memorize the content.

In the example below, the narrator tells the students that the chosen answer is incorrect and explains



Fig.4 Example of an explanation

to them why both through visual text and voice but also the image of the rabbit *taking a nap*.

All the music, the sounds, the images that accompany the story-narration in *LVQ* are copyright-free or have been created and/or modified by using photo, video and audio-editing software. The idea of mixing the verbal and the visual into the game aims at offering the students the possibility of experiencing different communication codes that could enhance their learning process.

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed at presenting *LightVerb-Quest* or *The Story of WordLand*, a class-interactive adventure game devoted to enhancing ESL acquisition and MWE assimilation by Italian secondary school students. The game focuses both on the grammatical structures provided by the English syllabus of the students and on a particular type of VMWEs, which are LVCs, usually problematic in their comprehension and processing. By combining digital gaming and storytelling, *LVQ* aims at offering students an innovative learning experience in which they can feel stimulated and motivated both in their independent and cooperative learning.

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