

Language acquisition through interaction
between gamers in digital gaming environments

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Matias Mäki-Kuutti

University of Jyväskylä
Department of Languages
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Internetin kautta pelattavat moninpelit tarjoavat monenlaisia mahdollisuuksia harjoitella Englannin kielitaitoa, sekä käyttää sitä hyväksi erilaisissa kommunikointitilanteissa. Pelien hyötyä kieltenoppimisessa on jo jonkin verran tutkittu, mutta tutkimus rajoittuu suurelta osin itse pelien sisältöihin. Lähivuosina internetin kautta pelaaminen yhdessä toisten pelaajien kanssa on yleistynt, mikä on avannut keskustelua myös pelien interaktiivisuuden vaikutuksista kielitaitoon. Internetissä tapaa usein pelaajia monista erilaisista kulttuureista ja taustoista, mikä rikastuttaa kielikulttuuria sekä mahdollistaa kielenkäytön harjoittelun matalan kynnyksen tilanteissa. Suomalaiset pelaavat internetpelejä suurimmaksi osaksi Englanniksi, sillä se on yleisimpiä peliympäristöissä ymmärrettäviä kieliä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tavoite oli selvittää millaisia suomalaisten digitaalisten pelien pelaajien kommunikointitottumukset ovat, sekä millaisessa roolissa Englannin kieli toimii heidän kommunikaatiossaan. Tutkimus selvitti myös millaisia taitoja tutkimushenkilöt kokivat oppineensa Englannin kielen käytöstä pelaamisen yhteydessä, sekä miltä kyseisen kielen käyttäminen yleisesti heidän mielestään vaikutti. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin kyselyllä, joka lähetettiin henkilöille joiden arveltiin olevan sopivia tutkimukseen. Tutkimukseen osallistui 34 henkilöä joista 31:llä oli kokemusta digitaalisten pelien pelaamisesta yli viiden vuoden ajalta. Tutkimusaineiston analysoinnissa käytettiin sekä määrällisiä että laadullisia menetelmiä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat että suomalaiset pelaajat käyttivät englannin kieltä kommunikointiin paljon monenlaisissa tilanteissa ja kokivat interaktiivisuuden parantaneen heidän kielitaitoaan merkittävästi. Pelaajat arvioivat kehittyneensä monilla eri kielitaidon osa-alueilla, sekä kokivat englanninkieliset kielenkäyttötilanteet myös hyvin positiivisiksi. Tutkimuksessa tuli selkeästi esille että pelaajat kokevat interaktiivisuuden kehittävän kielitaitoja sekä myös kielenkäytön varmuutta. Tutkimusryhmän vastaukset olivat suuressa määrin yhteneviä ja vastaukset myös täten laadultaan luotettavia.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Digital gaming is an increasingly popular pastime activity for many in Finland and in the world. Nowadays, technology allows for things that have not been possible ever before, which in turn allows for completely new ways to play and communicate with other players. It is this feature, among others, which makes digital gaming an increasingly interesting field to study for pedagogical purposes. The present study focuses on one particular aspect of pedagogy, languages. To be more precise, it aims to discover how learners of languages can benefit from conversations and interactivity when playing digital games. Understanding what happens in digital gaming communities and how players use language in gaming can be of great use for researchers and teachers alike, creating room for a study that reveals some of what happens in gaming communities, and offering views from the language learners', as well as active gamers' perspectives. Since the linguistic benefits of digital gaming itself have been researched to some extent, the present study is interested mainly in the communicative elements that digital gaming offers, and how they can be useful for language learners.

As the Finnish Player Barometer (Karvinen and Mäyrä 2011: 20) reveals, digital gaming has increased greatly among Finnish people. According to this most recent barometer, digital games were actively being played by 56 percent of Finnish people in 2011, and this number has undoubtedly grown since. Digital gaming is hence an industry which concerns over half of the population and thus its influence and possibilities should not be overlooked. Being a rather recent phenomenon, however, digital gaming has not yet been thoroughly researched and thus there are not many ways to provide hard evidence for some of gamers' daily habits in gaming, since there is not enough scientific data on the phenomenon.

The English language is becoming increasingly useful for Finns due to the vast use of it in all kinds of media in Finland. The fact that the digital world demands so much language use enhances already ongoing learning and also encourages new learners to start learning languages by providing concrete reasons and motivation to study. A study by Sylvén (2004) has found that there is a strong correlation between language activities outside the classroom and vocabulary improvement. These include for example reading books, watching TV series, surfing the Internet and digital gaming. The present study focuses on the benefits of digital gaming on language skills and more importantly on how interaction between players can be useful in language learning. Games developed for enter-

tainment are the most sold ones worldwide and therefore they offer the biggest source of language input and output for gamers amongst all games. These games focus on the fun, which increases the motivation to play and language skills develop on the side of playing. There are also educational games being developed that focus specifically on language learning and teaching, but these are not usually favoured by gamers and are very rarely played outside of the classroom.

The role of English as a foreign language is quite peculiar in Finland. Although it is not an official language in Finland, most people in Finland speak the language (VARIENG). The majority of digital games are released in English, most often without any sort of Finnish translation. This implies that English has a very central role in digital gaming, as most of both in-game language use and communication between players from other countries is done in English.

The interest in this topic stems initially from my own interest in interaction and gaming. I have much experience of talking to players from different countries with different backgrounds and have also observed what Uuskoski (2011), found out in his Master's Thesis, that gamers often have higher than average language skills. Finns that I have personally played with have similarly reported improvement in their conversational English skills and also other skills that do not necessarily develop just by playing the game itself. Although it is obvious that the use of language improves language skills, I have reasons to believe that digital games offer an especially good platform for language learning, and that the benefits of gaming should be further examined. There has been much research on the benefits of gaming on logical thinking and problem solving skills, but games' effects on language learning have not yet been thoroughly researched. Recently, Uuskoski (2011) revealed also that playing video games had a significant effect on especially Finnish boys' English grades in school. The study, among others, inspired me to further examine the effects of interaction and communication between gamers on their language skills.

When reading the present study, it should be born in mind that the word 'gamer' refers to individuals who play digital games, display interest in them and to some extent consider themselves as gamers. It is impossible to distinguish a gamer from a non-gamer without consulting the person in question, since being a gamer has much more to do with identity than what they actually do in real life. For example nowadays I still consider myself partly as a gamer, because regardless of the fact that I do not play digital games on a consistent basis, I still possess a gamer mentality, in other words I feel that I belong to a group or community of gamers, and I have a certain enthusiasm for playing certain types of games. The meaning difference between the terms 'player' and 'gamer' is in reality small and these two words are often used interchangeably in contemporary research, although their

definitions do differ to some extent. In the present study the word 'player' refers to someone who participates in a single game match or event rather than defining a certain type of personality prototype. However, the two words are commonly used almost as synonyms for each other and in this study the use of these words in different contexts should not cause any type of confusion. The present study mostly uses the word gamer for identifying research participants, since many of them considered themselves as such and generally fitted well in that category based on the information they provided.

2 INTERACTION IN GAMING

This section deals with different general aspects of online digital gaming and its' interactional features as well as introduces some theories about language acquisition that are found relevant to the present study. The following three sections address features of gaming, chats and chat environments and interaction in gaming in practice.

2.1 Online games and language

Playing games online refers to virtually engaging in games with other people via the Internet. This means that players can participate in all kinds of events in games depending on the type of game. Usually they can progress and compete in games, and chat with each other. According to a study by Uuskoski (2010), chatting with other players while playing is becoming increasingly popular. The study indicated that 91% of Finnish upper secondary school students who played video games actively (for five or more hours a week) also chatted with other players while doing it. There are many ways in which interacting with other players can be done. Computers are the most common electronic software used in Internet gaming, but for the past few decades there has also been a rise in gaming consoles which people can play and consume other media on. Gaming with others via the internet is becoming more and more common as time passes and new technology is developed. At the time being, the third generation of gaming consoles has just been launched (The PlayStation 4 and the Xbox One), which brings interactivity between gamers into an even bigger role.

There are different types of games which can be played online, and the type of game makes a great difference on what kind of language it exposes its' players to. The content of games is usually a very central topic of discussion for players, and thus the language content in games often shapes what kind of language input players work with when playing the game. New words can be learned and language problems discussed in order to progress in the game, creating a reason to develop language skills in changing areas. Language content in games varies usually based on what genre the game belongs to, basic first person shooters having quite few but very specific terms for weapons, equipment and actions, and Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMO:s) requiring a variety of language skills such as knowing names for each type of tree, fictional creature names, names of everyday life items, old proverbs, and the ability to read old short stories and follow dialogue written in old English containing odd words and expressions. Furthermore, games such as these also build up gaming communities of multiple gamers from many countries, which have been well ar-

gued by Leppänen and Nikula (2008) to increase especially young individuals' language and communication skills even further.

Within the past few years, along with the growing gaming industry, also research within gaming has increased. Several sources indicate that games can act as language learning tools, helping language learners develop competence through digital gaming (see for example Yolanda et al. 2013). Games themselves offer many ways of learning language (see for example Piirainen-Marsh, A. and L. Tainio. 2009), but as languages are a primarily interactive part of our lives, the highest value in terms of language learning in games can arguably be found in their interactive features which bring gamers together for chatting, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.2 Chats and chat environments

Following psychologist Lev Vygotsky's theory which sees learning as a predominantly social phenomenon (see for example McLeod 2007 for an abstract of his theory), research has proved that learners are in fact able to accomplish more with the help of more experienced peers than what they could on their own. This was observed for example by Nardi et al. (2007), among others. Attention should therefore be focused on the interactive side of gaming in particular, as research proves that gamers can maximize their language input by playing games online with other players and communicating with them.

Another, perhaps even more important theory considering language acquisition is that by Stephen Krashen (1980, 1982), who points out that we acquire language in one and only one way - through comprehensible input. What he means is that we learn language through understanding messages. In many digital games, one must be able to understand at least parts of the language used in games in order to make progress in them. This is taken to a whole new level with in-game peer conversations where players acquire language automatically when working together to create meaning for different events in the game and so on. The game also offers its players some universally understandable input which can help in interpreting messages, such as different visual figures, gestures, arrows to point out what to do et cetera. Krashen also continues in his theory on language acquisition that learners of languages need to be motivated in order to acquire language efficiently, and motivation is best produced in a low-stress environment. Games are in general very motivating, and motivation is also a crucial part of language learning (see for example Dörnyei 2001). Chatting online is also less stressful to an extent, because first of all gaming is a pastime activity that is done for leisure,

and anonymity online allows for low anxiety discussions when players have the option to stay silent for longer than in normal face to face encounters.

Furthermore, players often report that it is in fact the interactive side of gaming that increases motivation to play, and contact with other players, friends, often extends play time much more than what a single game would provide when played only by oneself. It is the people that many players return to most of all, not the game itself. I myself would not play nearly as much if it were not for the friends that I have online. The fact that one has friends and other people in general to play and communicate with is for many a huge motivation when it comes to playing, and communication often leads to development of social and language skills.

There are many theories built on Krashen's input hypothesis. One that is very central to language acquisition in gaming is what Michael Long (1996) called 'negotiation for meaning', which means that two persons interact with each other using language to reach a common understanding. This happens most of the time in internet gaming when players discuss with each other in order to overcome obstacles in game or to reach an agreement on what is to be done next. When language is used in this way without focusing on language itself, language will be acquired as a by-product of interaction. It can therefore be assumed that communication between gamers is even more beneficial in terms of language acquisition than just playing games with no contact with other players.

Digital games offer various ways of communicating with other players via the internet while playing, which gives individual players a chance to meet new people, have conversations with them and solve game related issues such as how to make progress in the game. Players usually meet people from around the world who speak different languages and have different cultural and educational backgrounds. Although to a common eye it may seem that there is often not so much going on in these talks, many people become friends over time and begin having deeper conversations in their chosen language. And when that language is a target language to learn, development occurs. As players become more familiar with each other, they establish friendships online which often brings up new more personal conversation topics such as relationships, lifestyle, and views on contemporary issues in the world. Deeper and more area specific conversations demand more complex use of language which in turn facilitates learning. Finnish people talk to each other in Finnish when there are no foreigners around, but most often switch to English for communicating with players from other countries. Finns tend to use English as a lingua franca for the most part, but some who speak more languages sometimes use other languages and develop their language skills in for example Spanish, German, and French.

Making long-term friends through chatting online in games and in general has also additional benefits. Players that know each other well are more willing to help each other out in situations where assistance is needed, and they tend to be more patient with players who are not as proficient users of the English language as themselves. As players communicate, less proficient users of language acquire new terms and ways of speech from those that are more proficient. Krashen described this as the $i+1$ level in his input hypothesis, meaning that the optimal learning environment is one where the level of language used is slightly more advanced than the learner's current level. Furthermore, establishing long-term groups of gamers can often lead to meeting them in real life, some participating in bigger conventions, and some just visiting each other for fun. This often means travelling to foreign countries, which is always good for language learning.

2.3 Interaction in gaming in practice

In internet gaming, collaboration with other players is often an essential part of gameplay and this requires language use of some kind. In fact, according to Freiermuth (2011), collaboration in e-conversations is one of the best ways of learning language in the internet. In most online games, players from all over the world play together with the ability to interact with each other in more ways than just by playing the game. On personal computers, the classic way of communicating with others is by sending them electronic mail. On consoles, each gaming platform has their own account system which allows players to create accounts to play online games on. It acts as their profile and other players see the name they have created when playing with each other. This name is also called a gamer tag. Players can usually send e-mail-type messages to each other via their accounts, and share media, just like on a personal computer.

Another way of communicating is to assemble chat rooms where friends can be invited to join and talk with each other. The discussion here is written in short sentences or paragraphs. Writing in these chat rooms usually interrupts gameplay for the time being, but can be sped up by using an external keyboard, which can be attached to the console. It is, however, quite uncommon to have one so usually players need to use an on-screen keyboard to type in their messages using the console controller, which is quite a slow process. Players can also communicate through voice chat, which is made possible by microphones and headsets. In this way players can set up voice chats and talk to each other using their headsets. This is a much faster way to communicate and, unlike writing a message in a chat room, does not interrupt the game they are currently playing.

What happens in gamer interaction is a topic of its own entirely. There is little collected data on it, but anyone who has played online games has a rough idea of how everything in gaming interaction works. Many of the phenomena described here are confirmed by the present study itself. As discussed above, a usual topic for discussion is in-game content and events that take place in it. Players also talk to strangers and closer friends while gaming, and the way in which they speak to each other varies based on many factors. Both the relationship type of the participants as well as familiarity with the subject have an effect on the flow of the conversation. So do the participants' social and cultural backgrounds and their language abilities along with personal factors. Conversation between friends tends to be more relaxed and personal in general, and in an established group there are different kinds of roles that participants occupy. Some participate quite actively in discussions while others like to be silent for the most part, often replying only when asked something. According to Rogoff, Paradise, Mejía Arauz, Correa-Chávez, and Angelillo (2003), however, players can improve their language skills even by only following the conversation or 'listening in'. This exposes them to terms and strategies others are using that can be of use to them as well.

Godwin-Jones (2005) points out in his study that the emerging technologies make language use in networking a big phenomenon especially for the millennial generation, as a great variety of new tools for communication are being produced all the time and the new generation is the most capable of benefitting from them. With the release of the next generation consoles, social media is becoming an even more crucial part of gamers' lives with Facebook and other networking services integrated into gaming consoles. Chatting is also made even easier on consoles such as Sony's Playstation 4 and Microsoft's Xbox One. Players can now also share video stream of themselves playing for others to enjoy and comment on, which brings even more opportunities for interaction whilst gaming. Players can now also talk to each other via the microphone regardless of the game they are playing, which gives them more opportunities to discuss issues outside the game they are playing (although this has already been a feature on Xbox). For the new PlayStation 4, players can use their smartphones to type in text in the chat by connecting their phones wirelessly into the console (see PlayStation and Xbox websites for more information about the new consoles). All this new technology makes interaction a large part of gamers' lives, and increases the possibilities of eliminating the stereotype of gamers being unsocialized human beings. At the time of writing, most people have yet to purchase a next generation console, however, so the present study has most of its focus on chatting on Sony's PlayStation 3 console.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study was conducted by researching a group of gamers on Sony's Playstation 3 gaming console and more precisely their chat habits within gaming. The aim of the study was to discover how gamers think their language skills are affected when playing video games with other people and what role interaction had in that context. As there is indeed much interaction within digital gaming, the knowledge of what language skills players use and develop there can be of great benefit when considering the effects of gaming on learning. Furthermore, digital game based activities are not usually a part of normal language education and gaming is primarily regarded as a pastime activity, which decreases the pressure on language learning. Digital games offer such a useful platform for language development in a low-anxiety environment that it is inevitably worth discovering how gamers benefit from the time they spend playing.

The research questions of this study were:

1. How much do Finnish gamers use English as a lingua franca for communication when gaming?
2. What purposes does English serve in these contexts?
3. How do Finnish gamers find the use of English in chatting with other gamers?
4. What language abilities do Finnish gamers think they have gained in interaction with other gamers?

The material for this study was collected using a questionnaire. The questionnaire included both open and multiple-choice questions about players' gaming and communication habits, their impressions of English language use while gaming as well as their reflections on their own language skill-level. These questions were also followed by some very basic background questions such as those of age and gender. The questionnaire was created especially with the participants in mind and the questions were carefully formulated to minimize the chance of misinterpretation or vagueness. The questions used were mostly created by the researcher, bearing in mind his own experiences as both a language expert and a gamer. Inspiration for some of the questions was taken from Uuskoski's study (2011), modifying them to suit the present study. The questionnaire used in the study can be found in the appendix. The questionnaire was created using Google Drive software and the questionnaire presented in the appendix differs from the original in form. In the original questionnaire, there was a box with unlimited space for open questions and no questions were split to two pages.

The research participants were recruited by messaging people that fit the target group of Finnish gamers asking if they would like to participate in a study of language acquisition through online gaming. Messages were sent either through the Playstation Network, e-mail, or the social networking website Facebook, describing the purpose and nature of the survey and asking for permission to use their answers in the study. Those who agreed were sent the survey and given a week to answer it and e-mail it back. Within that one week period, 34 replies were received. The participants were aged between 17 and 32, averaging at 23 years of age. Six of the participants were women, the rest were men. In the survey, participants were asked to reflect their experience on all platforms where playing digital games online was possible, including in addition to the Sony Playstation also PC, Mac, Xbox and other gaming gear.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to find out how much Finnish gamers use the English language in communication with other players, how they do it, why they do it, how they feel about using it, and how they think this affects their language abilities. The questionnaire results were analyzed and are presented in this section along with discussion about what the results might indicate.

4.1 Basic gaming habits

Firstly, when asked about their basic gaming habits, nearly half of the participants reported playing digital games between 11 to 20 hours a week, and eight of them were even more hardcore gamers, playing over 20 hours a week. A third of the participants reported that their play time varies from two to 10 hours a week, which is still a significant amount of time played on a weekly basis. This means that two thirds of the gamers that participated in this study were hardcore gamers that play very actively, and even the remaining third were still somewhat active at playing digital games. It is not surprising that most of the research participants are active gamers, since the participants were mostly selected based on their interest in helping in a study of gaming communication, and many players that communicate with others while gaming are also active gamers. What was surprising was that almost all of the gamers regardless of game time per week reported that they had played digital games for five years or longer. This was beneficial for this study, since having played for such a long time players have had many opportunities to talk to other players and have gathered much experience and knowledge about games and gaming in general that they were asked to talk about in answering the questionnaire. Although digital gaming is still today a relatively new hobby, many people who start playing digital games at early ages continue to do so in adulthood, at least to some extent.

The gamers' were also noticeably active communicators with other players. Almost half of them spoke to other players orally most of the time, using a headset and a microphone. A third reported doing so occasionally. Written communication was even more common. Up to 19 people, which is almost two thirds of all participants said they did it most of the time and the other 13 admitted doing it occasionally. There were only two people who said that they do not really communicate with other gamers while gaming. What was noticeable in this section was that when asked how much they use the English language while communicating, over half of the participants said they used it nearly

all the time. Eight people also reported that they used it quite a lot and five that they use it to some extent. The popularity of English as language choice can perhaps be explained by the following.

4.2 English use in gaming communication

When asked who the gamers primarily used English with and why, the most common answer was that they used English for communicational purposes in contexts where there were one or more persons involved who did not speak nor understand the Finnish language. Communication with strangers was by default done in English, because according to most of the gamers, it was the most used and understood language in gaming around the world. Many of the gamers had well established gaming groups of friends in which there were one or more non-English-speaking gamers involved. In all of these types of groups, the main means of communication was the English language. Furthermore, when speaking Finnish, most gamers reported using English terms for many game-related things since as most games they played were in English, the terms in their original language were easier to use and carried meaning more precisely. Some participants reported also using English in all-Finnish groups for fun, humour, and when referring to and quoting English media such as television-shows, movies, and song lyrics.

As English is the most common foreign language taught in Finnish schools and the language used the most both in media and in games in Finland, it is not surprising that English is the primary language choice for Finns to use when attempting to communicate with foreigners online. In most encounters, the English language is the best language choice to communicate in as the chances of the other players understanding are typically the highest with that language. In the case that they do not speak English, then there is often nothing that can be done about it unless the players happen to share some other language (which is usually quite rare).

The topics that gamers talked about were numerous. As expected, the most common topics included game-related issues such as problem-solving and game tactics, which were reported by almost all participants. The second most common thing to talk about were random everyday-life topics, such as the weather, how everyone was feeling, what players ate for breakfast, beer-drinking, provocation of the opponent and whatever else came to mind at any given moment in time. In more close relationships between gamers it was more common to talk about personal issues and feelings in general, and sometimes even have longer and more elaborate discussions about life-changing topics. Some gamers even said that they sometimes share personal life matters with complete strangers

online, which could perhaps be explained by the anonymity of conversations in most situations. More often than not, however, situations with high anonymity led to provocation and trash-talk accompanied by a great number of profanities instead of civilized conversation.

According to the participants, there were also differences between English use in gaming conversations and in real life or other contexts. Most of all, the conversations in gaming were considered informal and more chilled and relaxed than conversations that took place in real life. The biggest theme and difference was that all kinds of communication, both speech and writing was much faster within gaming and word abbreviations were used by the majority of the participants in their communication. The nature of gaming chats was also said to affect gamers' word choice, since the environment did not necessarily encourage the use of long and very technical words. The most important thing was to convey meaning as clearly and quickly as possible. Within the conversations, grammar use was often thought to be less precise due to the lack of time but many said that they try to speak and write properly if provided with enough time to do so. The nature of the game currently played had a great effect on how fast or technical the conversation could be. Slower-paced games allowed for more laid-back conversations with more detail and content. The afore mentioned trash-talking and provocation of opponents is in general also a common feature of the gaming culture and the results of the present study correspond with this fact, as many gamers admitted the increased use of profanity and slang in their conversations. Provocation was said to happen more in competitive games where players compete with each other (for example shooters, strategy games and role-playing games). About a third of the participants reported no significant difference between their gaming and real-life language use.

4.3 Language skills and development

All of the participants felt that their English skills had improved through communication in gaming, with a total of 29 out of 32 saying that their English skills had improved either extremely or quite a lot. The remaining three admitted that communication within gaming had slightly improved their language skills. Given the high agreement level of the participants, the results appear to be reliable. When asked what kinds of language skills the participants had attained from communication, the results were again very positive. The participants were given different options to choose from including vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, writing skills, oral skills, cultural knowledge, as well as courage and confidence in using the language. The option chosen the most times was easily 'confidence in language use', which was chosen by a total of 28 par-

ticipants. A very close second was 'oral skills', receiving up to 26 votes. Behind that came vocabulary, listening comprehension, writing skills, and reading skills with just little less votes each. All of the afore mentioned categories except grammar were chosen over 20 times, and even grammar, which is often overlooked in gaming, was chosen 15 times. The slightly smaller impact on grammar compared to other categories could be explained by the afore mentioned speed of language use and the use of slang in speech. As gaming communication focuses mostly on fast and practical communication and negotiation for meaning rather than correct language use, it is understandable that grammar and language rules are often less thought of when communicating. Lastly, and perhaps surprisingly, improvement in cultural knowledge had also been chosen by twenty participants, perhaps relating to the multicultural scene of online gaming which includes gamers from all around the world.

All the participants also answered that they understand other players' use of English either superbly (23 answers) or quite well (11 answers). This seemed to fit the overall picture of the survey well since there were no answers found indicating that they would have trouble understanding each other. The vast majority of the gamers also felt that also their school grades in English were better compared to other subjects. It is unlikely that they were all native-like users of English, but the more likely reason for gamers' positive views of their language comprehension is that the conversations are meaning-based, meaning that when they discuss their primary goal is to understand and be understood by each other. The same answer was also given when asked why English was used for communication in the situations where it was used.

Additionally, gamers were asked what kinds of feelings they had towards the use of English in communication. About two thirds of the participants replied that using English felt easy and natural, and about a half felt that using English was enjoyable and that they were confident in doing it. Around one third reported also that the opportunity of using English for means of communication was inspiring and exciting for them. Very few felt insecure about using English and only two persons said that using English was either hard or that they felt uncomfortable doing it. In addition, many participants were enthusiastic about the results of the study and said that the topic of research was close to their hearts since many of them had a feeling that gaming and communicating with other players had improved their language skills but they had not been able to prove it until the present day.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this qualitative as well as quantitative level case study was to examine the communicative preferences of Finnish gamers and find out what role the English language played in their online gaming communication. More specifically, the present study attempted to find out exactly how interaction in gaming can affect language skills and be of benefit in terms of language acquisition and learning. For this purpose, a questionnaire was created and sent to Finnish gamers to answer based on their personal experiences of online gaming.

Overall, the questionnaire received positive reviews from participants, many of them leaving feedback saying it was coherent, easy to answer, brief enough and that they were also interested in seeing the results of the study when the work would be done. The results of the present study suggest that gamers use the English language a great deal in communication and feel that it develops their language skills very effectively. English is the most common language to use in digital games, and Finnish gamers use it with pleasure. It should be observed that these results are based on a target group the majority of which plays digital games actively and also participates in conversations actively while playing. However, data with a total of 34 questionnaire answers from the target group provides very decent reliability for a study of this size. Though it cannot be argued that all Finnish gamers feel the same about their language use and learning experiences, the present study indicates that those who actively use language and communicate with others while gaming generally have an extremely positive experience of both using the language and learning from it. Development especially in oral skills and confidence in language use indicate that playing digital games and talking to other gamers can be very beneficial for language acquisition.

Although the majority of the participants played digital games mostly on the Playstation 3 system at the time of the present study, it is likely that the survey would have produced similar results on gamers playing on other gaming platforms as well. Creating a survey which would produce similar results regardless of target group was one key element in designing it. Of course a greater number of participants would be required to produce more reliable data, but the results of this study can regardless be used as a preliminary look at how interactivity in gaming can be of benefit in language learning and acquisition.

The results of the present study support earlier research, the greatest similarity being with Michael Long's interaction hypothesis (1996), since 'negotiation for meaning' was reported as the single most common purpose of conversations in chats in digital gaming. The kind of study that the present study represents is relevant to show the possibilities and advantages that emerging new tech-

nology presents, in this case for communication and language acquisition. The data and results of the present study therefore both reveal new phenomena in online gaming and interaction, and also confirm theories and phenomena presented in the literature section of the study.

Overall, based on all this research it is clear that Finnish gamers have a generally positive attitude towards English as a medium of communication in gaming. Contrary to common expectations about Finns as a silent and unsocial people, Finnish gamers are fairly communicative and enjoy using the English language in gaming. Many of the research participants had their own established gaming groups where they used English for communication mainly so that foreigners in the groups could understand their conversations and participate in them. However, gamers also reported that they liked to chat with total strangers and make new friends using English, since the chances of being understood when first meeting someone online were the highest when using English as the first language for communication. With all this being said, there is no doubt that digital gaming can be of benefit for language learners, especially if one is courageous enough to talk to other people. After all, communication is the only way to create acquaintances, some of which may eventually turn into friendships, and all that becomes much easier when people share the same language.

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APPENDIX: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Kysely digitaalisten pelien pelaajien keskustelu- ja kommunikointitottumusten vaikutuksista englannin kielen taitoon.

Tämä kysely käsittelee digitaalisten pelien pelaajien keskustelu- ja kommunikointitottumusten vaikutuksia englannin kielen taitoon. Kyselyn kannalta olennaisinta on että käyttäjä on ainakin joskus pelaamisen yhteydessä kommunikoinut tai keskustellut muiden pelaajien kanssa. Tutkimukseen lasketaan mukaan kaikilla eri alustoilla pelaaminen (Playstation, Xbox, PC, Mac, Käsikonsolit, Puhelimet jne.). Pelattavien pelien genrellä ei ole tämän tutkimuksen kannalta erityistä merkitystä. Tutkimuksen vastaukset ovat täysin nimettömiä, eikä niitä luovuteta kenenkään muun kuin tutkijan käyttöön. Jos sinulla on tutkimuksesta tai kysymyslomakkeesta kysyttävää, ota tutkijaan yhteyttä sähköpostilla.

Matias Mäki-Kuutti, Jyväskylän Yliopisto
matiamk@gmail.com

1. Arvioi kuinka monta tuntia viikossa käytät digitaalisten pelien pelaamiseen keskimäärin.

- 0-1 tuntia
- 2-5 tuntia
- 6-10 tuntia
- 11-20 tuntia
- Yli 20 tuntia

2. Kuinka pitkään olet harrastanut digitaalisten pelien pelaamista?

- Alle 6kk ajan
- Noin 1 vuoden ajan
- Noin 2 vuoden ajan
- Noin 3 vuoden ajan
- Noin 4 vuoden ajan
- Noin 5 vuoden ajan tai pidempään

3. Keskusteletko tai kommunikoiuko muuten muiden pelaajien kanssa pelaamisen yhteydessä?

- Kyllä, erittäin usein
- Kyllä, melko usein
- Kyllä, jonkin verran
- En oikeastaan (siirry kohtaan 12)

4. Kuinka usein kommunikoit muiden pelaajien kanssa suullisesti mikrofonin tai kuulokkeiden välityksellä?

Useimmiten
Silloin tällöin
Harvoin
En ollenkaan

- 5. Kuinka usein kommunikoit muiden pelaajien kanssa kirjoittaen (esim. yksityisviestit, chat yms.)?**

Kuinka usein
Useimmiten
Silloin tällöin
Harvoin
En ollenkaan

- 6. Kuinka paljon käytät englannin kieltä kommunikoidessasi muiden pelaajien kanssa?**

Lähes aina
Melko paljon
Jonkin verran
Hyvin vähän
En ollenkaan

- 7. Kenen/keiden kanssa käytät enimmäkseen englannin kieltä pelatessasi? Onko sinulla esimerkiksi tiettyjä henkilöitä tai peliporukkaa joiden kanssa käytät englantia? Jos on, niin miksi käytät heidän kanssaan juuri englannin kieltä?**

- 8. Millaisista asioista puhut englannin kielellä muiden pelaajien kanssa? Nimeä erilaisia aiheita. (Esimerkiksi peliin/peleihin liittyvät asiat, ongelmanratkaisu, pelaajien kuulumisten vaihto, ajankohtaiset asiat, henkilökohtaiset asiat)**

9. Koetko, että englannin kielen käyttö muiden pelaajien kanssa on kehittänyt englannin kielen taitojasi?

Kyllä, hyvin paljon
Kyllä, melko paljon
Jonkin verran
En usko

10. Mitä seuraavista englannin kielitaitosi osa-alueista keskusteleminen ja muu kommunikointi pelaamisen yhteydessä on mielestäsi kehittänyt? Valitse niin monta kuin haluat.

Sanasto
Kielioppi (oikeinkirjoitus, lauserakenteet, sanonnat yms.)
Kuullunymmärtäminen
Luetunymmärtäminen
Kirjoittaminen
Puhuminen
Kielen käytön varmuus
Kulttuurintuntemus

Muu, mikä?

11. Millaiselta englannin kielen puhuminen/kirjoittaminen muiden pelaajien kanssa sinusta tuntuu? (Valitse niin monta kuin haluat)

Helpolta
Varmalta
Luontevalta
Miellyttävältä
Innostavalta
Epävarmalta
Epämukavalta
Vaikealta
Jännittävältä
En osaa sanoa

Muita tuntemuksia?

12. Eroaako englannin kielen käyttösi pelatessa mielestäsi jotenkin englannin kielen käytöstäsi muualla? (Esimerkiksi puhetyyli, sanavalinnat, kielenkäytön monimutkaisuus jne.)

13. Kuinka hyvin koet ymmärtäväsi muiden pelaajien englannin kielen käyttöä?

- Erittäin hyvin
- Melko hyvin
- Jonkin verran
- Hyvin vähän
- En ollenkaan

14. Mikä seuraavista väittämistä sopii sinuun parhaiten?

- Olen/olin englannissa parempi kuin muissa kouluaineissa keskimäärin
- Olen/olin englannissa yhtä hyvä kuin muissa kouluaineissa keskimäärin
- Olen/olin englannissa heikompi kuin muissa kouluaineissa keskimäärin

15. Taustatietoja

Sukupuoli:

- Mies
- Nainen

Ikä: _____

Paljon kiitoksia vastauksistasi! 😊

Voit halutessasi antaa kyselyn onnistumisesta palautetta tai muuten vaan kirjoittaa jotain mukavaa.
