OVERCOMING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CLASSROOM WALLS THROUGH THE USE OF ONLINE ROLE-GAMING: A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE USE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF CLASSCRAFT *IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING*

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In the last two decades, teaching software tools have been implemented in everyday practice, applied to improve learning in different subjects, including foreign languages. The use of a virtual space and the application of dedicated software packages have long been studied (Ghislandi 2014; Miller 2014; Hampel and Stickler 2015). *Gamification*, a term defining the use of principles of gaming in teaching, has emerged as a new trend. Although the use of games, especially, in foreign language teaching is not a novelty in itself, this new application through an online environment has shown new potentialities. *Classcraft* is a virtual space, inspired by the D&D role game, where students are led through a series of quests, set up by the teacher. Previous studies on *Classcraft* have considered different perspectives: its motivational push, (Haris and Sugito 2015), the students' experience (Sanchez, Shawn, Jouneau-Sion 2016) and general performance and engagement (Papadakis and Stamatios 2017). Off the beaten path, implementing a virtual classroom promises to be an effective tool for English language acquisition. This paper intends to explore the potentialities of *Classcraft* in teaching English as a foreign language, in order to provide a first (provisional) assessment on its adequacy and feasibility in the English class according to EFL principles.

Applied Linguistics, gamification, task based approach, Classcraft, TEFL

1. Introduction

In the last twenty years, the use of internet and ICT devices and software in schools has increased and nowadays a special emphasis is placed on online and blended teaching and learning. Particularly during the pandemic COVID–19 emergency, schools globally had to find new resources and new

methods to teach students of all ages, levels and, above all, subjects, posing a great challenge for all the key-players in education: schools, teachers, students and their families. However, language teaching and technology have always co-existed because L2 and Foreign Language teachers have long made use of a technological support, whether a CD player or an Interactive Whiteboard (IWB), which in both cases have been used to provide students with good models of pronunciation and spoken interaction. The communicative approach has fostered the use of these technologies and internet 2.0 has promoted the sharing of practices and ideas and ultimately the prospect of a true multimedia learning experience. At the same time, interest in game implementation, namely videogames and the related software, has led to the rise of what is now called gamification, which can lead to an increased amount of engagement and motivation in learners (Hong and Masood 2014; Buckley and Doyle 2016; Alsawaier 2018). Thus, new ICT software can combine with games to provide a meaningful learning experience in English Language Teaching as well as in other subjects.

2. Multimedia teaching methodology: e-learning and learning objects

The use and implementation of new technologies in ESL teaching are fundamental to keep pace with students' technological background as time goes by. However, they do not imply the reduction and/or the total disappearance of the teacher's role but they can represent a motivational spring for the students towards learning as well as a push for new teaching settings and environments which were unthinkable in the recent past. Consideration of two main factors is important when implementing learning technologies: the equipment and tools used to teach and learn and all the methods adopted in teaching and learning on a technological basis (Fierli 2003: 96). Thus, in this broad category, e-learning can be considered as a technological support for teaching practices (Ardizzone and Rivoltella 2003: 43), hence the elimination of the difference between old and new approaches, i.e., between traditional and multimedia teaching. These new tools may in fact be considered as an integral part of classic teaching approaches, but, by adopting them, the nature of the learning environment and the teacher's role change. As a result, the idea of a classroom as a physical space loses its connotation in such a perspective; in fact, online spaces fuzz their boundaries and they can expand or decrease according to the learning situation and students' needs. So, the concept of classroom, in online teaching, leaves the floor to the idea of a learning space where students can experience and implement learning practices. Five models were proposed by Ardizzone (2003: 51-62): the traditional lesson, distance learning, the online course, the online virtual group and the community. Among those, the "virtual group" has the

distinctive feature of seeing the teacher in the role of prompter and organiser of online collaborative tasks – a peculiar and specific role in gamification, as will soon be shown.

When it comes to defining the content of the teaching/learning process, it is possible to refer to the early definition given by the Learning Technology Standard Committee (Ghislandi 2012: 12) according to which a learning object is a digital and non-digital entity which is used to learn, instruct, educate and could be re-used in the learning process supported by technological tools. According to this quite broad definition, the digital content, the learning software, and multimedia resources can be considered as learning objects. There are two fundamental features of any learning object: its re-usability and combinability with other learning objects. At the basis of these two properties there is the idea of an acquisition process which entails the active participation of the students in a course, elaborated and conducted by the teacher, where new knowledge is constructed collaboratively. The digital content used in the learning process is similar to the digital content used by digital natives in their free time. At first sight, it presents a new type of textuality: as it is made of multimedia elements, the knowledge on the computer screen is mediated and has a mixed nature, which implies that iconic symbols are used with an analogical language, which in turn is typical in printed materials. In particular, the communication in the teaching process via a multimedia language promotes learning by immersion, where students learn by doing, thus creating a teaching environment which is perfect for learning a foreign language. The digital content can interact with reflexive cognition, by which the mind develops and produces abstract reasoning. With this in mind, the appropriate methodology used depends largely on the subject, so this study is intended to investigate which language approach is more suitable for a gamification activity and, in particular, for the opportunities given by *Classcraft*.

a. Gamification or thinking out of the box

The use of games, far from being a novelty in language teaching, and teaching practice in general, has led to gamification. The term itself is a relatively recent neologism and has its origin in the digital media industry (Paharia 2010). The first definition of it encompassed any form of interactive computer-based game software for one or multiple players to be used on any platform, developed with the aim of being more than simply entertainment (Ritterfeld, Cody, Vorderer 2009). In later years the focus has shifted to the idea of games as a tool to teach while entertaining, and the definition of gamification stresses the use of game design elements in non-games contexts (Deterding 2011). The latter was fully developed into the implementation of game-based mechanics, aesthetics and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning and solve problems (Kapp 2012).

Yet, the concept of gamification highlights the combination of *gamefulness*, *gameful* interaction and *gameful* design as distinct from the concepts of playfulness, playful interaction and/or design for playfulness (Deterting, 2011:10). So, the term gamification does not relate to the generic and broader category of "play", which is characterized by freedom of action and lack of rules. The term gamification stems from the three fundamental characteristics that all games share (Reeves and Read 2009). The first feature is a clearly defined set of goals in order to define the scope of the player's choice of actions. Secondly, all games have a rapid feedback system in which the consequences of the player's choices and actions are presented immediately, establishing victory or defeat in the game. Lastly, they all have an ultimate and well-defined goal; the game finishes with an achieved goal or a condition of victory which is clearly defined and shows no ambiguity.

As can be seen, the definition of gamification has expanded from the simple use of some elements of game to a whole range of features which make the boundaries between pure entertainment and teaching very thin since gamification was basically and primarily conceived to increase students' motivation. In fact, the ultimate passage is from gamification to *ludification*, where game elements are subtly combined to design a learning context where play can take place (Genvo 2013; Sanchez 2016). *Ludification* is seen as a reconfiguration of the class setting, with new interactions. It is not about the student adopting behaviour to conform to the class rules but rather adopting behaviour that, considering the rules of the game, leads to its improvement, because *ludification* does not consist of using game elements in a mechanical way, but rather in conceiving a *reflexive space* where the meaning of interactions is modified (Sanchez 2016).

The use of games and elements of games have been incorporated into different areas of life throughout history and this is particularly true of education. The use of games in education processes has the benefits of reaching high levels of interest and participation in students (Ariza Benavides 2001; Peña-Miguel and Sedano Hoyuelos 2014; de Freitas 2018). However, education has always contained elements or mechanics used in games, such as the gold star system, used at Primary School, when a sticker is assigned to students who perform well or the house system (as exemplified by the Harry Potter novels), where student houses gain points according to students' performance and behaviour. It was 2010 when the rise of digital games pushed towards a research field of its own and led the way to what nowadays is called gamification. The implementation of ICT tools has also had the result of increasing the use of games in language teaching.

Gamification is thus the introduction or application of elements of games, especially in education, even though gamification was first designed and

implemented in business theory field. When applied to education settings and environments, gamification affects students' behaviour, their commitment and motivation, thus leading to the improvement of knowledge and skills conveyed (Hsin-Yuan and Soman 2013). As a report on gamification from Oxford Analytica in 2016 showed, unlike the use of a game in class, such as the use of a short game as an ice-breaker or filler during the lesson, gamification focuses on extracting the underlying principles of games and then trying to reconfigure an education experience based on them. According to the report, a successful gamification programme will look to use four freedoms of play, which constitute the principal liberty appeal for students and teachers alike. Firstly, students can enjoy the freedom to fail in games, which allows mistakes to be made with little consequence. Secondly, there is the freedom to experiment, since games allows players to explore and discover new strategies and information. Thirdly, there is the freedom to take on different identities, as games encourage players to see problems from a different perspective, not necessarily from a personal one. Finally, play offers the freedom of effort, because games allow players to go through periods of intense activity and relative inactivity, so that they can pause and reflect on the tasks they have accomplished. All these 'freedoms' represent a pedagogical shift for those students whose educational potential may be hampered by conventional teaching methods.

The elements specifically used in gamification activities are of three types: mechanical elements, personal elements, and emotional elements. There are three main types of mechanical elements in gamification, around which activities can be built. The first mechanical element is an incremental progression system: goals, challenges and quests are set and they are layered with subgoals, missions or quests, which become increasingly challenging for the player - in a shift to language teaching, a clear hint of Krashen is clearly detectable, in particular to the input hypothesis, where the learner improves and progresses along the 'natural order' when he/she receives second language 'input' that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence (Raju and Joshith 2018). A second element is the badges, because games often incorporate visible symbols of achievement to encourage long term motivation. Finally, there is the instant feedback that is typical of games which are designed to be responsive; this entails that the expected impact of decision is often clearly displayed or readily available to the player. The personal and emotional elements from games to gamification activities are those which can ensure the engagement of the students. In the first set, the personal elements of gamification, students' engagement is increased by allowing players to create a sense of identity and this is entailed by the use of avatars, where the players/students take on new identities and roles which help them to make meaningful decisions in-game. Linked to this, there is the collective responsibility, which

stems from giving students a level of responsibility for their role within their team or group, and this may also increase their emotional investment in what they are doing. Finally, the names of the players or teams may be displayed often using a point-based system showing the accumulated results of their actions and decisions. As can be easily inferred, the personal elements of gamification are the core of the sense of belonging to a group and students' commitment to the activity organised. This is particularly true in language learning, where activities need to be meaningful to the students, as it can be when an activity has been charged with personal features, in order to help the passage from learning to acquisition. Turning to the emotional elements of gamification, one of the key principles of games is that they bring players into a mental state called the *flow* (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi [2002] 2014). According to neuropsychiatry, flow is achieved by having a clear goal, clear immediate feedback and a balance between the challenge posed by the game and the skill of the player. Flow can be experienced in everyday life by observing any videogame players who appear to be so totally immersed in a game that they do not even realise what is happening around them. Gamification helps to establish flow by taking students out of their normal routine and presenting them with a series of tasks that are engaging enough to prevent their minds from wandering, keeping them focused on the topic and the language used throughout the activity.

As for its functioning, a gamification model should be made up of three elements: multimodality, task and feedback (Boynbode 2018: 186). This simplified model entails that the first element offers a variety of modes of interaction (made up sounds, animation, effects, and so forth) which connect a learner to the game. Secondly, the task offers a question or a problem within the game to help the learner to be exposed to and absorbed in the content. Finally, feedback reduces the learner's misunderstanding and also motivates the students to continue by telling them they have done something well and giving them a score, and, for this reason, it is vital to every educational game.

3. The world of Classcraft

Classcraft is an online learning environment which embodies the principles of gamification. Its interface and graphics are purposely similar to a Role-Playing Game in Dungeons & Dragons style, where each participant has a role (usually drawn from characters in a Fantasy story) but its scope is exclusively educational for every subject. According to the official *Classcraft* website,[1] it is an engagement management system that uses motivating gaming principles

[1] https://www.classcraft.com/

to address the human issues faced in education. In this framework, teachers launch the adventure (the lesson or a series of lessons) through the teacher dashboard, where they create classes and customize the rules. On the other side, students in teams level up and progress, so that their teams earn privileges in the real world (such as some free time or the chance to have a snack before the break) as well as in the game.

In particular, students have the chance to create and customize their own character, giving it special powers, tools or even pets. Students can choose between a Warrior, Mage (or Wizard) or Healer, each with specific powers and abilities; Warriors should protect the teams and use their powers to absorb damage for other players and Mages supply Action Points for their teams. Meanwhile, students can earn or lose several kinds of points: Experience Points (XP) – which help students to level up and unlock powers and can be gained through positive behaviour; Health Points (HP) – which are important to remain active in the game and they can be lost through negative behaviour in class; Action Points (AP) – which allow them to use their powers and are earned automatically every day; and Power Points (PP) – which are earned when students level up and allow them to unlock powers. Powers are nothing but privileges for the students or their teams. Some powers are set by default, others by the teacher and others can be adapted to the class.

Once in the virtual classroom, which resembles a board game since it is a map with different areas (stages) set up by the teacher, the teams face different objectives (tasks in a lesson) and gain points to advance the game, to the route map and the ultimate Quest Goal which marks the end of the game. The Quest objectives offer an option which enables assignments and students submit their work in order to complete the tasks (objectives). In such a learning environment, the role of teacher changes dramatically and becomes not only the instructor but also the Master of the game. As shown from studies on modern approaches to TEFL, the teacher is a facilitator for the language learners, assuming also the other roles of independent participant, (learning) needs analyst, counsellor and group processing manager (Kamalja 2014: 11). So, great creativity is needed on the part of the teacher in setting the tasks, the penalties and rewards and developing a story in which the teams of students can progress. In particular, through the dashboard, the teacher can customize Random Events, according to the students' behaviour and motivation. Random Events are basically messages that the teacher can throw in the game whenever it is required - they can relate to a quick task or game. One of the most interesting features is the chance to monitor the level of noise in the class through the computer microphone at any moment of the quest. All these things considered, not only does the teacher need to know students well but also the teacher's goal devolution is made easier, because the responsibility of the learning activity is transferred

from the teacher directly to the students, raising in this way their level of motivation and attention.

3.1 Previous studies on Classcraft

As stated above, *Classcraft* is not a software tool to teach a specific subject, since it is designed to engage and motivate students of different ages and school grades in any subject. Previous studies were conducted to measure the level of class management. In 2014 a study was carried out in two classes: one history-geography class of 32 students in grade 10 in France and two physics classes of a total of 66 students in grade 11 in Canada (Sanchez, Young, Jouneau-Sion 2016). Both schools had approximately 800 students in a well-off social context, but the French students were described as undisciplined and talkative, while the Canadian students were academically successful. The study, based on an ethnographic methodology, showed that the game experience seems to depend on a multitude of factors and the role of the teacher and his/her appropriation of the game was fundamental. Ultimately, the behaviour expected from students did not fundamentally change, but the meaning of the actions performed by students was changed by the game mechanics and the metaphor it entailed. The effectiveness of the proposed approach of *Classcraft* was the focus of a study in 2017 carried out with a sample of 30 students in a public high school in Heraklion, Greece, in a programming class for 16 hours (Papadakis and Kaloginannakis 2017). The study focused on the impact on students' attitudes towards their programming course and the improvement in the overall grades of the students in the same course. Although the study presents a few limitations, such as the small sample and its short duration, it showed that gamification through *Classcraft* could ensure engagement in the class and promote students' active participation. One of barriers, however, was the lack of methodologies and tools that would have allowed teachers to implement their approach in a more appropriate manner. So far, the studies have shown a rise in students' motivation and engagement, with particular emphasis on their behaviour and the new role that teachers should assume according to the principles of Gamification.

3.2 Is Classcraft useful in TEFL?

Since *Classcraft* is designed for different subjects, one may question whether the software can be adapted to English teaching and whether it is suitable for a specific teaching approach. Previous studies have shown the impact of videogames on the learning process, especially in raising motivation in learners (Osma-Ruiz, Víctor & Argüelles-Álvarez 2015). Apparently, *Classcraft* seems to have all the potentialities of a gamified or *ludified* experience, where

communication is at the centre of the learning process. The use of gamification in language teaching has the same advantages as mainly it helps the L2 learner in a number of personality factors which positively influence the L2 process (Self-esteem, Extroversion, Motivation, to name a few) and it enhances the learning of the four skills and motivates collaboration and interaction (Figueroa 2015). In particular, *Classcraft* can provide students with different communicative contexts taken from everyday life, stressing the role of the teacher, who, in a communicative approach, is seen as a prompter rather than a mere instructor and organises meaningful activities for the students. Finally, *Classcraft*, as has been demonstrated, clearly raises students' engagement and motivation. *Classcraft* was also studied with English-Medium Instruction (EMI) courses, those academic courses in which academic subjects (other than English itself) are taught in English in countries where the first language of the majority of the population is not English-speaking. In a study in Spain, computer-mediated techniques were combined with a multilingual approach through the use of *Classcraft*. The study showed the potential utility of the software for EMI courses because common problems that EMI teachers experience are related to low participation rates and student inhibition. Instead, *Classcraft* proved to have a positive impact, since the students demonstrated enhanced engagement, academic performance, motivation and participation (Trigueros and Sanchez 2020).

Few studies have been carried out on the use of the software to teach English at beginner level (A1/A2). One of the problems faced by teachers in Secondary School is the lack of interest and motivation in students when they learn a foreign language, and this may lead to disruption in the classroom. So, theoretically *Classcraft* could be used to ensure high levels of motivation with learning advances. In order to test this hypothesis, an action research experiment was carried out in 2019/2020 in a 12-hour module with a class of 12-13-year-olds at an Italian secondary school. At the end of it a qualitative questionnaire was completed by the students. What was fundamental before setting up the Quest and the topic of the lesson was the best methodology to be used according to the features of gamification and *Classcraft*, so at first three approaches were first examined: PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production), ESA (Engage Study Activate) and TBL (Task Based Language). For each of them, advantages and disadvantages were taken into consideration, also reflecting the structure of a possible *Classcraft* quest, students' interaction, and the role of the teacher. The three-stage structure of PPP (Harmer 2015) seems to adapt to the game, because these stages could fit in the route map of a possible quest, but, at a closer analysis, the drawbacks seemed to be more numerous, particularly the use of teacher talking time in the presentation stage, which is high. Moreover, PPP is an approach which encourages accuracy over fluency, and this could impede free communication exchanges during the quest and,

most of all, PPP does not allow any movement between the stages, with a rather rigid structure. From this perspective, the ESA approach appears more flexible and for this reason could fit in the Quest structure more easily. Among the other advantages, ESA is a student-led grammar discovery approach, where the role of the teacher is that of a guide. The main drawbacks seemed to be that free practice is expected in the last stage and not throughout the lesson, as in a Quest and it could be difficult, though not impossible, to insert grammar into the activity task during the lesson on *Classcraft*. For all these reasons, TBL was chosen in the end. Task Based Learning (Willis and Willis 2007) stems from Communicative Language Teaching and entails as its main conceptual basis experimental learning or learning by doing. More specifically, the TBL approach breaks down the barrier of the traditional classroom, as *Classcraft* does, because the roles of the learners and the teachers are significantly altered. Even the structure of a TBL lesson can be easily adapted to the Quest structure because its structure can be divided into several lessons which could be fit the Quest stages. Finally, students work in groups to achieve a final goal and this is strictly connected to the theory of gamification to which *Classcraft* is designed.

3.3 Action research experiment

The experiment was conducted before the pandemic emergency in December 2019 and January 2020 in a class of second year Middle School in Belpasso, Catania province (*Nino Martoglio* school). The class was chosen for their level of English, which was between A1/A2 and because it was a '2.0 class', that is a class where the use BYOD (Bring Your Own Device – students may use their mobile phones or other technological devices) or school tablets is regularly implemented. The class was made up of 21 students, with mixed abilities and skills but with no behavioural problems. The experiment was carried out for a total of twelve hours and the designed Quest focused on describing people's physical features and characters. After creating four different groups, the students were invited to create their avatars and start the Quest named 'The search for the hero', which had four different main stages at the end of which students should hand in an assignment. The four groups were presented with a framework for a meaningful learning setting in which the participants were to free the fictitious land of the game from danger by evoking the perfect hero. The Quest was divided in four main parts: 'the hero qualities' (a vocabulary task), 'heroes from the past' (a reading task about three biographies of famous people from the past), 'create your own hero' (a writing task where each team had to invent their own hero, describing his/her qualities and physical appearance and his/her story), 'the hero comes' (a speaking activity, where each team presented their own creation to the other teams). During the Quest several Random Events were launched to increase motivation and decrease any

possible lack of interest in the activity; at its end, there was the final fight, against an evil monster where all the teams were playing together (a summary quiz to check their knowledge at the end of the Quest).

Some drawbacks were noticed at the beginning of the experiment and those were mainly technical together with management issues which were tackled later. For the first kind of problems, some of the internet connections of the students' devices were not strong and stable enough for every lesson and some students faced some problems in logging. To add to these complications, some students kept on losing their credentials. From a teaching perspective, TBL was at first rather difficult for the students to follow, because they were expecting instructions which were embedded in the map and in the tasks. Some students kept on asking what they had to do because they did not read the instructions. Another problem was that it took students some time to understand that they had to work as a team. At first, they were not ready to split tasks and roles within the assignment. What appeared to be a challenge for them was the ability to re-use the vocabulary from the previous assignments to complete the following one. For instance, after the first step focused on a vocabulary activity, in the following assignment they needed to write a description and they wondered where to find the words, which clearly were in the previous task.

On the other hand, there were some positive aspects in the use of *Classcraft* with a TBL methodology. First of all, the students were all engaged, even those who were usually less interested in the activities and with a lower level of English. Disruptive behaviour was not noted, and they were more focused than usual on what they had to do. The four skills were mostly used, but probably a major emphasis was given to reading and writing over speaking and listening. The Random Events had a positive impact in raising the level of motivation and interest especially the Volume Meter, through which the class noise had to stay below a predetermined level set by the teacher.

This overall appreciation was also confirmed by responses to the questionnaire completed by the students at the end of the twelve hours. The questionnaire was made up of nine items, focusing on assessing the positive and negative aspects of using *Classcraft* and working in a team, from the students' point of view. The qualitative results showed that the students appreciated the framework provided by the story and the setting, as well as working in groups. In particular, they appreciated the use of a virtual environment, with the possibility of using characters and different powers during the Quest. Students did not perceive they had worked more than usual, such as during a traditional lesson. Finally, they did not feel that their level of English had improved dramatically but nonetheless they appreciated the new methodology linked to the software and its potentialities and showed the desire of future quests through *Classcraft*.

4. Conclusion

The action research plan conducted showed that the level of motivation and engagement of the students rose higher than during a traditional lesson and confirmed that *Classcraft* is well designed to reach this goal. Through observation in the class, students were more focused and performed the tasks assigned with increased interest. Nevertheless, a few issues should also be considered, first of all the use of TBL, whose process was at first rather difficult for the students to grasp, as they were not accustomed to teamworking and having a certain degree of autonomy in the learning process. Obviously, this can be overcome by spending some time to explain the way TBL works and how students should organise their teams and share internal tasks and roles. At the same time, this would suggest that the role of the teacher has changed and proved to be that of an instructor and a guide. So, when implementing such activities through *Classcraft*, a certain level of creativity and sympathy with the students is fundamental in order to raise a higher level of engagement. Hence, tasks should be clearly adapted to the students' level of English and need to be different at every Quest set by the teachers in order to maintain the interest and not to enter into a kind of routine. For this reason, using gamification and *Classcraft* should be temporary, in alternation with traditional lessons. Nonetheless, for future developments, further research could be carried out in terms of hours and class typology in order to develop protocols and procedures centred on *Classcraft* for young learners of English. In the long run, such further studies could contribute to the production of a complete course in English through the use of *Classcraft.*

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