Embracing Failure: The Missteps to Success

Kyle Maclauchlan
Miyagi Gakuin University

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Often teachers attempt to motivate students by creating simple and attainable goals. By doing so, teachers hope to remove fear of failure, a negative motivator that impedes student participation and active learning in the classroom environment. By viewing fear of failure as separate fear and failure components, it becomes clear that it is the fear of the repercussions of failure, not the act of failure itself, that acts as the demotivator. It then becomes conceivable that fear can be addressed by actually *increasing* failure opportunities. The games described in this paper seek to achieve exactly this. This article provides explanations of the games as well as a rationale for their effectiveness. The games discussed include Reverse Self-Introduction—a standard self-introduction turned into a game, Undoodles—a guessing game incorporating partial images, and Hexagon—a game show-type game that keeps students guessing.

時に教師は、生徒のモティベーションを高めるために生徒が無理なく達成し得るような目標を設定し、『失敗することへの恐怖感』という生徒がやる気を失うような否定的要因を取り除こうとする。この要因を『失敗』と『恐怖感』という二点に分けて考えると、失敗そのものよりも失敗による影響に対する恐怖の方が生徒のやる気をなくす否定的動機になっているというのは明らかだ。そう考えると、生徒にもっと失敗を経験させることでその恐怖感が取り除かれると考えられる。本論文では、この問題を克服するためのゲームを紹介する。ゲームのやり方、そして『失敗することへの恐怖感』を克服する効果の理論的解釈も説明する。ゲーム例は、『逆自己紹介』(標準的な自己紹介をゲーム化したもの)、『アンドゥードル』(不完全なイメージを取り入れた推測ゲーム)、『ヘキサゴン』(学生に推測を続けさせるショー形式のゲーム)などである。

Educational psychology encompasses a myriad of theories that analyze the cognitive processes of learners in an effort to identify the positive and negative motivators that influence the way in which students act and learn. One such negative motivator is termed fear of failure (FF), and it has been shown to influence a learner's overall learning processes as well as mediate decisions regarding participation in individual challenges. Particularly in ESL learning, learners' fear of oral communication (or more specifically, FF during attempts at oral communication) stands as a substantial impediment to the creation of an enjoyable and productive learning environment (Lucas, 1984). Many teachers seek to remove the likelihood of failure from their classroom activities in an attempt to prevent FF from prohibiting student participation. In other words, by "lowering the bar" they hope to elicit student response. Such easy tasks can paradoxically create even bigger threats for students who fear failure, as pointed out by Covington (1992) in his self-worth theory: "Should [students] try hard and fail anyway, especially if the task is easy, attributions to low ability are likely to follow" (p. 17). The author believes that it is FF, not failure itself, that stands as an obstacle to learner motivation. If students can learn to experience failure in a way that minimizes negative psychological impact, while accepting it as a valuable aspect of the learning process, they will have overcome one of the greatest barriers to learning, especially in the realm of language acquisition. This article describes how to create a learning environment that is rife with failure but devoid of fear and reviews a number of teaching tactics and games that can be used to help achieve this kind of classroom environment.

Fear of Failure: A Negative Motivator

Defining Fear of Failure

Human beings, when confronted with a challenge, often imagine both the positive and negative possible outcomes. FF is the term given to the mental processes that include imagining failure after undertaking a challenge and the results of that failure in terms of self-image, perception by peers, confidence, tangible loss, and so on. In terms of educational psychology, FF has been defined as a "2-factor construct that comprises (a) negative expectation, in which individuals worry about possible pitfalls, and (b) reflexivity, in which individuals put forth efforts to prevent possible pitfalls" (Lim, 2009, p. 318).

Fear vs. Failure

FF should be considered as two separate entities—the failure itself, and the fear associated with that failure. Birney, Burdick, and Teevan (1969) argued that FF is less the fear of the failure itself than it is the fear of the consequences of that failure. "Nonattainment by itself . . . should not, in and of itself, produce any fear reactions . . . . If we are to understand why nonattainment is aversive, we must know what results from an episode of nonattainment" (p. 201). They went on to describe three categories of negative effects that result from failure: devalued self-estimate, nonego punishment, and reduction in social value. Devalued self-estimate is a result in which the individual is forced to change (i.e., lower) their self-image, and so there exists a fear that individuals would be forced to accept a lesser view of themselves or forced to face a weakness that was either unknown or had been ignored. Nonego punishment encompasses the loss of tangible rewards resulting from failure, as well as the feeling of loss of time and energy spent in a failed effort. Reduction in social value pertains to an individual student's perception by peers and teachers and creates a fear of loss of social status in the event of a failure.

Removing Fear by Increasing Failure

An initially counter-intuitive approach to removing fear from the classroom learning environment involves *increasing* the likelihood of failure in activities, to the point where it is clear that everyone will fail. Such activities remove all of the negative effects enumerated by Birney et al. (1969). Devalued self-estimate is avoided because the initial goal is clearly unobtainable. Nonego punishment is avoided because it is unlikely that any punishment would be dealt out to an entire class, none of whose members could divine the correct answer. And the threat of reduction in social value is removed because it is clear to all students that they are equally at a loss for the answer, and no individual student is uniquely unequipped to determine the answer. It is a level playing field of impossibility.

This does, however, remove all of the standard motivators for achievement as well, including mastery and performance goals. In other words, an impossible task offers no value to the learner. So, tasks that are viable for use in the classroom setting must either be clearly possible to overcome after some degree of invested failure (i.e., failure that results in the obtainment of information or elimination of possible answers), or they must offer some form of amusement or entertainment during the process.

Games That Induce Failure

Game Development

The following games were all either created or developed by the author and used in noncontrolled classroom settings during the course of standard English education to Japanese learners at the elementary, junior high school, and senior high school levels.

Reverse Self-Introduction

The Game

A teacher's self-introduction creates a flow of information from the teacher to the student. Depending on students' interest in the new teacher, the information itself can be reward enough to encourage students to listen and process the information. Reverse Self-Introduction changes the flow of information in a way that results in all new information being generated from the students' input. The teacher begins by offering his or her name. Then, instead of offering information about him or herself, the teacher then begins to offer categories within which students are expected to guess the correct answer. For example, *I am from America* becomes *Where am I from?* Students are then encouraged to offer guesses to the answer, many of which will be wrong. These incorrect answers will eventually lead the class as a whole toward the correct information. Questions such as the teacher's home country, favorite food, or favorite sport can often take several minutes for students to discover the answer to. In my own experience, classrooms became highly motivated, and guesses were elicited from around 90% of the students, in the search for my favorite sushi.

Why It Works

The game works first and foremost by turning a one-way communication flow into a two-way cooperative interaction between the teacher and students. But the student responses are destined for failure, and that is where the fear of failure begins to be chipped away as students attack the problem with more and more vigor. At the outset of the game, students have nearly zero information with which to begin forming guesses, but with each guess the number of remaining possibilities diminishes. This allows students to realize that each and every failure offers more information for students to work with as they approach the problem, leading them ever closer to the correct answer. At the beginning, and throughout the game, every student is equally likely to fail to answer the question, but also equally able to happen upon the correct answer. The failure that each student experiences by answering the question incorrectly contains none of the conse-

quences discussed earlier: no loss of self-estimate or self-worth, as it is assumed from the beginning that the submitted guess will likely be incorrect; no loss of social standing, because an incorrect answer does not equate to a lack of ability or poor performance; and no tangible loss, because there is no penalty incurred from guessing incorrectly. In fact, rather than resulting in a loss, each failure results in attaining further information that helps the class as a whole in seeking the answer to the problem.

Undoodles

The Game

A small part of a sketch is displayed for the class to see. Students attempt to guess what the person or animal in the sketch is doing, or what situation is depicted. The sentence constructs used by the students can range from simple words like "baseball" and "surfing" to full constructs such as "He is opening a present." or "She is driving a car." The teacher demonstrates an example of the desired construction by showing a complete image and giving an answer that correctly uses the construction. The chosen construction should match the students' level and optionally incorporate a construction that has been recently taught. The students guess at the true nature of the sketch until one student guesses correctly or until the teacher reveals the whole sketch. The whole sketch reveals the actual situation, which may be quite different from what the students were led to believe when viewing a small portion of the sketch. One example I drew is shown in Figure 1. It depicts what appears to be a boy pulling on two ends of a bow to open a present. However, when the lower part of the sketch is revealed, as shown in the second picture in Figure 1, it is clear that the boy is actually riding a horse, and the strings are the bridle. The second example, Figure 2, depicts a man from the shoulders up, holding his fist in the air and wearing what looks to be a football helmet. The larger picture reveals that he is a man about to be shot out of a cannon.

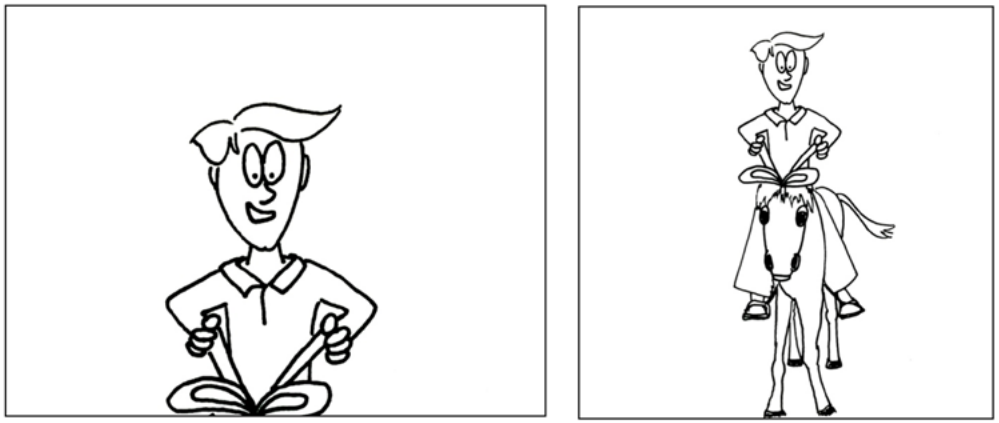

Figure 1. Example drawing of a boy riding a horse.

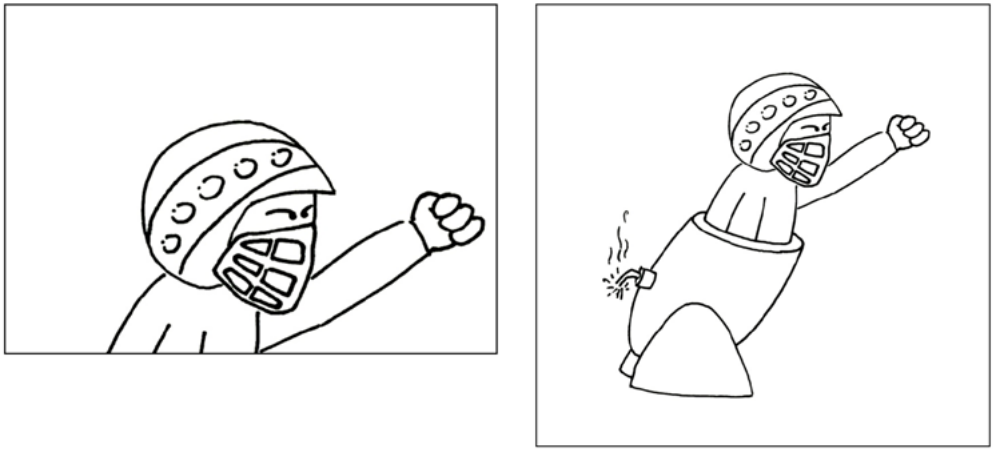

Figure 2. Example drawing of a man about to be shot out of a cannon.

Why It Works

The game works by making it clear from the very first sketch that students are not likely to, nor are they expected to, divine the actual answer to the problem. Nonetheless, the possibility of a student guessing the answer correctly, however unlikely, does still exist, giving the students a reason to guess. Guesses do eliminate options, but the number of possible answers is so limitless that this does not factor in as a motivator for guessing. Instead students find excitement in the possibility of randomly guessing the answer and also in the eventual revelation. The answer is humorous, and the humor serves as the primary reward for participating in the game. Students also realize that they are practicing English constructions, which is the true purpose of the activity. This game walks a fine line, because the outlandishness of the answers is the source of the humor and entertainment found in the game, but the impossibility of finding the correct answer can

cause some students to view the game as a waste of time. The substitution of humor as reward must be effectively executed, and the teacher must be careful to use humor that resonates with the students.

Small Problems

The Game

Students are shown photographs taken through a microscope, and encouraged to guess the object in the photo. Depending on student level, expected answers can range from simply stating the object ("pencil") to complete sentences ("It's a pencil" or "I think it's a pencil"). Photos that can be used for this game can be found online, but I created my own by placing everyday objects under a stereomicroscope and taking photos with my iPhone placed over the eyepiece of the microscope. The results can be quite colorful, surprising, and intriguing. I found success in the use of colored-pencil shavings, eraser dust, and powdered tea mix, shown in Figure 3. A magnification of around 5x to 10x was found to be most beneficial, allowing the students to visualize the object and recognize it properly once the answer is revealed while still making it difficult enough for them to guess what the object was.

Why It Works

The game works similarly to Undoodles in that students understand that they are not expected to know the correct answer to any of the questions. When the answer is revealed, students can make the connection between the gigantic eraser dust displayed on the screen in front of them and the tiny eraser dust on their desks. This intriguing change in perspective creates interest and encourages students to think differently and look for possible clues within the photos. Students often guess these pictures correctly after several tries, which is a positive incentive for student participation. But the questions are difficult enough in nature that there is no negative stigma attached to guessing incorrectly.

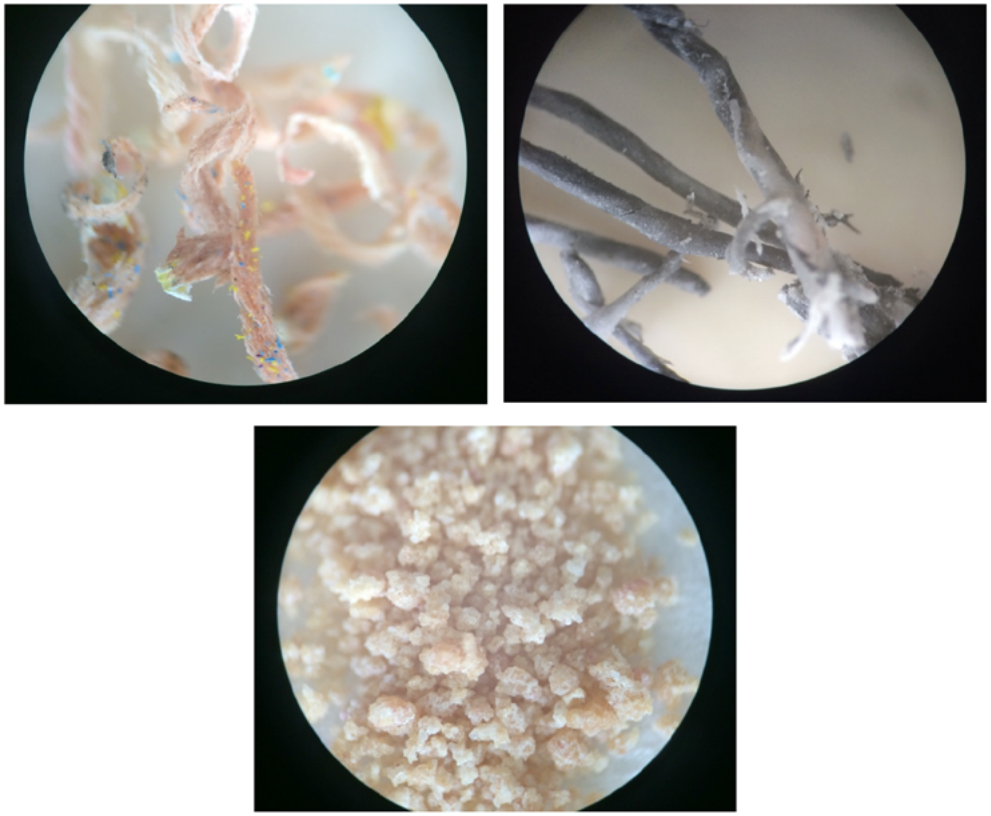

Figure 3. Examples of photos of everyday objects taken through a microscope. These are colored-pencil shavings, eraser dust, and powdered tea mix.

Mix and Match Sentences

The Game

The teacher creates a group of sentences that all follow the same English grammar point. For example, one grammar point involving infinitives might be illustrated with the following six sentences:

Mr. Green went to the library to read a book.
Godzilla went to Tokyo to destroy everything.
Our homeroom teacher used the computer to watch YouTube.
All the students came to school to study English.
The school nurse practiced every day to draw comic books.
Doraemon used many magic tools to help some friends.

The sentences are printed on paper and then cut into three pieces - the subject, the verb clause, and the infinitive clause. All of the pieces are placed in an envelope. Classes are divided into groups of students, and sentence piece envelopes are prepared for the necessary number of groups. Student groups arrange the pieces to create their own set of six sentences. They work together to confirm sentence meanings and create unique sentences. Students are encouraged to create the strangest or funniest sentence they can think of, and each group presents their favorite sentence to the class by writing it up on the board. Students enjoy each other's answers and can vote for the ones they like the best. Alternatively, the teacher can bestow awards for "most creative," "most ridiculous," and so on.

Why It Works

The game works by encouraging students to make the most nonsensical sentences they can. The goal is not proper English, but rather to create something fun and entertaining. Because all sentence combinations are acceptable, there is no wrong answer. Students receive a reward in the form of humor when they parse the various sentences and determine the meaning. Also, students are able to see how English works on a grammatical level by switching out individual components such as the subject or the verb clause.

Mix and Match Sentences: Version 2

The Game

A set of similar sentences is prepared by the teacher, such as the following set that illustrates the passive voice:

Lady Gaga is known by many people.
My lunch was eaten by my dog.
My sick brother was helped by the school nurse.
Our teacher is loved by all the students.
Harry Potter was written by J. K. Rowling.

This version of Mix and Match works well with small classrooms. Students are divided into three groups. The sentences are printed on paper and then cut into subject, verb, and prepositional phrase. All of the subjects are given to the first group. All of the passive verbs are given to the second group, and all of the prepositional phrases are given to the third group. One student from each group selects a random paper, and the three pieces are assembled into a sentence and shown in front of the class. The students are all given time to parse the meaning of the sentence within their groups. Then, as a class, the students decide if the randomly generated sentence makes sense. The class gets a point if the sentence is acceptable.

Why It Works

The game works because the sentences are generated randomly. Sentences may fail, but the failure sentences are not generated by any one student, removing the chance for the stigma of failure to be placed on any individual. At the same time, failures offer a chance for humor, which helps to continually motivate the students to participate and to seek out the meanings of the sentences made.

Hexagon

The Game

Hexagon is based on a quiz game from the 2009 Japanese television show of the same name. A classroom is divided into teams (e.g., six rows of students divided into three two-row teams; a standard setup is depicted in Figure 4). Students are given questions that

require a two-word answer such as "What is the date today?" The list of questions and answers should be prepared by the teacher beforehand. A student raises his or her hand, is recognized by the teacher, then gives the first part of the answer, "November." The student sitting adjacent to the first student on the same team gives the second part of the answer, "15th," without discussing with the first student. When a team gets a correct answer, the entire team rotates so all of the pairs change. Any student can raise his or her hand to act as the "A" part of the pair, and must give the first half of the two-word answer. The "B" student is automatically the student adjacent to student "A" and must give the second part of the answer without any further input or discussion. If the answer is incorrect (the teacher only announces this after both halves of the answer are received), the remaining teams are given an opportunity to answer. If all teams fail to answer, the question is then opened up for all teams to attempt to answer again.

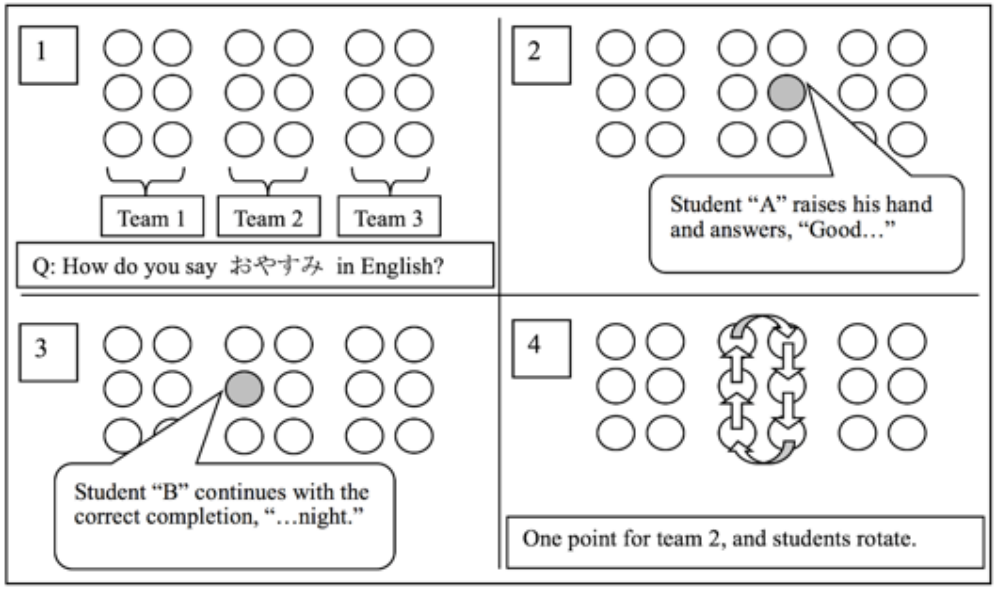

Figure 4. The standard setup for the game Hexagon.

Why It Works

The game works by creating a "game-show" atmosphere that inherently carries with it a sense of levity, as well as an understanding that incorrect answers are simply a part of the game and therefore carry no stigma or negative impact on self-estimate. By splitting the answer between two students, a further obstacle is created for the students, which turns the paradigm from student vs. English into students vs. Game. This takes away the direct correlation of incorrect answers to a lack of English skill in the perception of the students. Splitting the answers also allows students to split the responsibility and work together. The rotation of students creates new pairings to prevent any low-level pairings from remaining throughout the game, and additionally creates a steady stream of chances to stand and move about physically, allowing for increased blood flow and energy. This game was made quite famous in the 2009 television show, and has always yielded a lot of excitement from the students because of its unique format and because it offers many opportunities for humorous answers.

Conclusion

Students who face failure in situations that afford a chance to fail without detriment to self-estimate can experience failure in a way that protects them from the fear that is usually associated with failure in the classroom setting. By utilizing games that create this kind of environment, students become more emboldened to face the possibility of failure in all activities in that environment. The key to all of the activities presented in this paper is to *increase* the difficulty and likelihood of failure, rather than sanitize the classroom by removing all threat of failure. Teachers who wish to cultivate students who actively participate in the learning process should shift their focus from the prevention of failure to the elimination of fear.

Bio Data

Kyle Maclauchlan received his BS in biochemistry from Florida State University. He is a veteran TESOL practitioner and currently works at Miyagi Gakuin University and Tohoku Gakuin University. He is the author of *The Ooze* by Atama-ii Books and a sports broadcaster for the Rakuten Eagles. His research interests include motivation in the language classroom and the applications of mass media and technology in education. <himurakyle@hotmail.com>

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