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In this column, we explore the issue of teachers and technology—not just as it relates to CALL solutions, but also to Internet, software, and hardware concerns that all teachers face. We invite readers to submit articles on their areas of interest. Please contact the editor before submitting.

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Having a Blast with a Computer-Mediated Information Gap Task: *Keep Talking & Nobody Explodes* in the EFL Classroom.

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The potential of information-gap tasks to enhance the language learning experience is broadly acknowledged (Willis & Willis, 2007), and recently the added value of technology-mediated task-based approaches has been highlighted (Thomas & Reinders, 2010), as well as the role of synthetic immersive environments (Sykes, 2014). *Keep Talking & Nobody Explodes*—a commercially produced video game available for both Windows and Apple iOS—has proved extremely effective as a technology-mediated activity, providing both ample opportunity for strong, student-led, task completion (Skehan, 1996), with a clearly-defined outcome (Ellis, 2003): for students to avoid exploding!

How it Works

Keep Talking & Nobody Explodes is best played with two teams, who have to communicate effectively through sharing of the information necessary to defuse a bomb. One team takes charge of the bomb using either a PC or a tablet. The bomb is three-dimensional, and requires thorough inspection (see Figure 1). The bombs can consist of three to 12 independent modules, each requiring a unique solution.

All of the solutions demand quick and accurate exchange of information with another team, who has sole access to the manual containing all the required defusing information (See Figure 2). The modules' communication requirements vary widely, including memorising number sequences, negotiating mazes, cutting wires in a correct order, and exchanging chains of code words. In the authors' classroom context, learners are majoring in science and technology subjects, so the activity provided useful practice in using technical vocabulary such as grid references in a time-pressured, accuracy-focused environment. The range of skills required across the different modules is quite broad, and few teams are successful at their first attempt. The authors' strategy was to let the students play the game once and then add in some scaffolding activities. This approach dealt with the students' wish to explore the bomb, and allows them to understand that they need to prepare if they are to beat the game.



Figure 1. The Bomb.

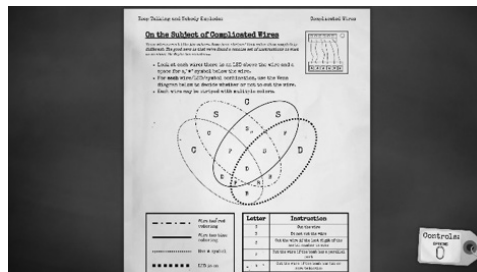


Figure 2. The Manual (example page).

Scaffolding Initial Levels

Although the game was not designed for EFL/ESL contexts, the manual does not contain particularly complicated vocabulary. Nonetheless, it contains a lot of information that students will need to familiarise themselves with. With this in mind, the authors used the manual for timed scan-reading exercises with some classes, which helped students build reading speed and confidence (Chang, 2010). Another strategy was to assign a single module excerpt per individual or group, where they would identify and translate difficult parts to digitally annotate on a PDF for the class to use as their manual. The first three default levels in the game are always exactly the same and use the simplest three modules. The authors devised worksheets and a video showing one of these levels being played to guide the students into the game. The video and worksheets, as well as other resources, are available at <<https://goo.gl/QEzYhW>>. Initially, the students were provided with a set of simple expressions that are useful for the game in general such as asking about remaining time, requesting repetition, and expressing confusion. Depending on the level of the students, translation was requested, or comprehension checked. Additionally, a Module Identifier Page was provided, which allows the bomb team to quickly communicate as to which kind of modules they have when the bomb first appears (see Figure 3).

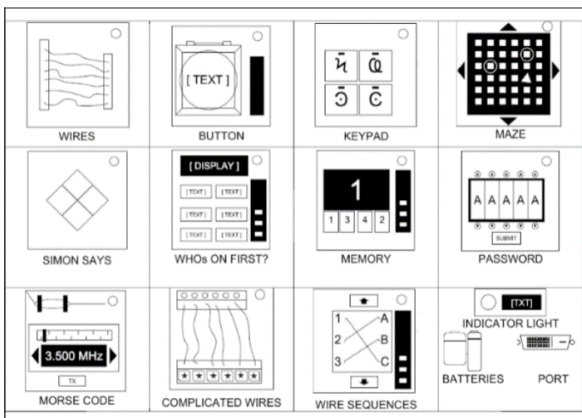


Figure 3. Module Identifier Page showing module types.

Next, to help learners acclimatise to the crucial process of translating the tables, diagnostics, and other information in the manual into efficient questions, a worksheet was designed around the Wires Module (see Figure 4). Since the game requires the bomb team to describe a wide range of visual elements, and especially as the aim is for students to

create their own linguistic strategies for overcoming the task, a simple worksheet was used, which was based around describing the symbols used in the Keypad Module (see Figure 5).

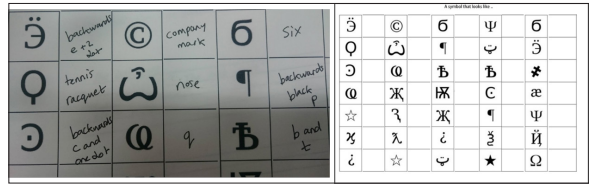


Figure 4. Wires Module Question Activity.

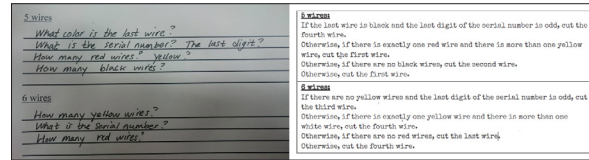


Figure 5. Keypad Module.

Later Levels

Beyond the first few levels, the difficulty increases quite sharply as the game progresses. An approach that worked for the authors was to challenge the groups to proceed as far as possible in the allotted time, with three rules: full sentences must be used, strict division of the bomb/manual members must be maintained, and only English can be used. However, the students were encouraged to have practice runs for difficult levels, where they could contravene any or all of these rules in order to figure out the language they needed. Using a large whiteboard positioned behind the team, the students constructed their own questions, systems, and approaches to solve the task. When they were ready, they could attempt to pass the level whilst adhering to the three rules. This self-scaffolding approach was an effective strategy for helping the students deal with the increasing difficulty of levels and reflects a strong, student-centred, task-based approach as recommended by Skehan (1996).

Student Reception and Feedback

Most of the classes in which the activity was used were surveyed anonymously. Of the 209 responses, all reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed that the activity was enjoyable, and all but a single respondent indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that it was useful for their general English development. However, responses were more mixed regarding the question, “Do you feel that this activity is relevant to your development

of English for your major?" In this instance, almost 15% of respondents (38) indicated that they disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed. One possible explanation might be learners not linking the development of task-orientated, problem-solving language to their current and future scientific contexts. Accordingly, future implementations might benefit from directly addressing the target skills, and their potential transference, in the introductory sessions. Finally, among the 17 respondents who chose to submit optional comments, seven mentioned the difficulty of the game, and four suggested the worksheet preparation was uninteresting and/or unnecessary. As with all activities, teachers may want to consider student level when they choose which activities or worksheets to use.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the use of a commercial video game in freshman and sophomore Science majors' EFL classes. As has been shown, the game constitutes an effective, technology-mediated, information gap activity that can facilitate opportunities for student-led resolution. Although not designed for EFL/ESL contexts, the authors' experiences have shown that this activity can be a positive addition to communication classes through various scaffolding activities. *Keep Talking & Nobody Explodes* has a lot of other potential uses. The authors have used it in lieu of traditional, semi-structured communication class speaking tests, as a basis for writing instructional-process paragraphs in writing sessions, and as a fun break in-between other projects. While *Keep Talking* is certainly a useful resource as it is, teachers may also wish to design modules that meet their own learners' specific needs. Links to materials described in this article as well as some other worksheets, the game, manual, and sources for getting started with designing your own modules, are available at the links below.

Further Suggestions

There is already a vibrant modding community, where the code of the program is open to the public who are able to design their own modules. Many of the modules designed by the community are specifically for educational contexts, and there are even tutorials that completely explain the process of designing tailored modules.

Links

Game and Manual website: <<http://keeptalkinggame.com/>>

Modding Tools: <<https://github.com/keeptalkinggame/ktanemodkit>>

Steam Workshop: <<http://steamcommunity.com/app/341800/workshop>>

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Editor's Note: *The above article provides a new approach to incorporating a technology-based activity to gamify your classroom. No doubt there were many more exciting and innovative ideas discussed recently at the JALTCALL 2017 Conference in Matsuyama and the PanSIG 2017 Conference in Akita, as well as other similar events. If you have a technology-related activity or tool that you want to share with the readers, please submit your idea to the editor at the email address in the header above. Through collaborating and sharing, we can all keep our classes Wired!*

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