

## Chapter 58

# In-Game Culture Affects Learners' Use of Vocabulary Learning Strategies in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

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### ABSTRACT

*Millions of language learners use commercial off-the-shelf computer games as informal learning contexts. Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are rich meaningful vocabulary learning contexts with in-game cultures that encourage creativity, decrease anxiety, force interaction, demand cooperative and autonomous learning, increase motivation, and reward curiosity. This case-study of World of Warcraft® players examined how the in-game culture affected participants' use of vocabulary learning strategies. Using research processes inherent in Grounded Theory, rich data was collected from extant MMORPG texts and observations of, interviews with, and elicited texts from a criterion sample of six ESL experienced gamers. Through constant comparative analysis, patterns and strategies emerged. Gu's (2005) model of vocabulary learning strategies in contexts was adapted to suit digital game contexts. The results highlight the need to value how the MMORPG culture affects language learners' vocabulary learning strategies and argue for study into autonomous language learning in commercial off-the-shelf digital games.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This inductive case study (Bytheway, 2011) was instigated in response to informal reports of vocabulary gains from playing massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) from students at Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand) and the University of Twente (The Netherlands). This study examines and explains how in-game culture affects vocabulary learning strategies used by

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English second language learners in MMORPGs. This study integrates information from several fields: vocabulary learning strategies (Griffiths, 2008; Gu, 2005; Nation, 2008; Oxford, 1990), MMORPGs as learning contexts (Steinkuehler, 2007; Yu, 2009), digital in-game cultures (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Learning vocabulary is essential for second language acquisition and can be acquired explicitly and implicitly (Nation, 2001) in formal (in classrooms) and informal (outside classrooms) learning contexts (Ortega, 2009). Vocabulary learning opportunities in informal learning contexts, such as passive media (newspapers, television) are valued by learners and teachers; however, the use of passive media is decreasing and use of interactive media (digital games) is increasing (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008). Informal language learning contexts are changing, and therefore the vocabulary learning strategies that learners create, select and use are also changing. Learners, teachers, and researchers need to examine how interactive media is affecting learners' vocabulary learning strategies and processes to insure learning in formal contexts remains effective and relevant to language learners' experiences in the real and digital worlds around them.

Strategies are activities learners consciously choose to regulate their language learning (Griffiths, 2008), and language learning strategies become language learning processes when learners use them unconsciously and automatically.

Gu (2005) and Nation (2008) assert that vocabulary learning processes can to a considerable extent determine overall success or failure of second language acquisition. The 'how' people learn is increasing being examined by vocabulary-learning researchers. To date, many researchers have used artificial memory and recall tasks to examine psychological memory strategies, list learning, short term recall tasks, initial learning, basic recognition, and incidental learning. However, the ecological validity and pedagogical authenticity of many of these experiments is questionable (Gu, 2005). Research that examines learner-centred contexts (rather than teacher-centred contexts) where learners to select vocabulary items and manage autonomous vocabulary learning is to date limited (Stockwell, 2011). Qualitative research conducted in authentic second language learning environments adds valuable insight from another perspective. It is time that research turned from a prescriptive and quantitative focus on how much is learned, what is learned, and what should be learned, to examining how people learn in complex learning contexts with multiple and incongruent contributing factors. When we know how people learn in realistic complex contexts, then we can discover ways to improve teaching practices, learning strategies and processes, and learning outcomes.

To date, vocabulary learning strategy research has identified several main ideas. Learners are aware that vocabulary learning improves language learning, and learners use vocabulary learning strategies more than other language learning strategies for other aspects of language learning. In addition, research shows that successful learners use broad selections of strategies in flexible and versatile ways (Gu, 2005; Schmitt, 1997). However, most learners prefer to use simple mechanical strategies (repetition) instead of deeper more complex strategies (contextual guessing), even though, deep strategies appear to improve learning gains. Learners may be using mechanical strategies to prepare to pass tests in assessment-driven learning-cultures (Oxford, 1990), and learners may avoid using deeper more complex strategies because they may be culturally inappropriate in their learning contexts (Politzer & McGroarty, 1985).

Unfortunately, many studies of language learning strategies appear to ignore culture, authentic communication opportunities, and real learning contexts (Gu, 2005; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). Instead studies often artificially simplify learning contexts in order to focus on and zoom in on separate factors related to learning. However, Gu maintains that only after analyzing the learning task, context, and avail-

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