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A Review of the Impact of Board Games on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Board games, as a highly interactive form of activity, have attracted increasing scholarly attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research in recent years. This paper presents a systematic literature review of relevant research, examining the theoretical foundations and empirical developments in five core dimensions: the Interaction Hypothesis and negotiation of meaning; communication strategies; task-based language teaching; game-based learning; and motivation and affective factors. The review demonstrates that board games can elicit authentic communicative behaviors in naturalistic contexts, effectively increasing opportunities for comprehensible input and output, facilitating negotiation of meaning, and enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation and affective engagement through game-based mechanisms. At the same time, existing research is characterized by limitations, including small sample sizes, insufficient diversity of game types examined, and a lack of longitudinal assessment of long-term effects. This review aims to integrate existing findings, provide a reference framework for the design and implementation of game-based approaches in second language teaching practice, and identify promising directions for future research.

Keywords

second language acquisition, board games, game-based learning, task-based language teaching

1. Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a vibrant interdisciplinary research field at the intersection of linguistics, education, and cognitive science. Since the 1970s, researchers have investigated a wide range of factors influencing second language learning outcomes, including the quality and quantity of language input [1], interaction between learners [2], task design [3], and affective variables [4]. Entering the twenty-first century, game-based learning (GBL) has emerged as a prominent pedagogical paradigm, gradually entering the purview of SLA research and generating substantive scholarly debate regarding the question of whether games can effectively facilitate language learning. Board games, activities conducted through face-to-face interaction rather than digital devices, have attracted particular attention as a contextual vehicle for SLA research, owing to their distinctive social and communicative characteristics. Unlike digital games, board games require participants to engage in sustained oral communication: explaining rules, negotiating strategies, expressing opinions, and debating decisions. This high-intensity language use context naturally creates abundant opportunities for comprehensible input and output, aligning closely with the central arguments of Long's [2] Interaction Hypothesis and Swain's [5] Output Hypothesis. Although a number of studies have

examined the application of board games in language classrooms from various angles, systematic literature reviews remain relatively scarce. Most existing reviews concentrate on digital games, such as video games and computer games, in relation to language learning, with comparatively limited attention to the distinctive context of board games [6,7]. This paper aims to fill this gap by synthesizing theoretical developments and empirical research across nearly four decades of scholarship, systematically evaluating the mechanisms through which board games influence second language acquisition and their pedagogical value, and offering recommendations for future research directions. The central questions guiding this review are as follows: (1) What theoretical rationale supports the use of board games to promote second language acquisition? (2) What does the existing empirical research reveal about the effectiveness of board games in language learning? (3) How can board game activities be effectively designed and implemented in second language teaching practice? The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 addresses the Interaction Hypothesis and negotiation of meaning; Section 3 examines communication strategies; Section 4 adopts a task-based language teaching perspective; Section 5 discusses game-based learning theory; Section 6 explores motivation and affective factors; Section 7 provides an integrated discussion; and Section 8 presents conclusions and directions for future research.

2. The Interaction Hypothesis and Negotiation of Meaning

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of the Interaction Hypothesis

The Interaction Hypothesis, initially proposed by Michael H. Long in 1981 and systematically revised in 1996 [2], constitutes one of the core theoretical frameworks for understanding the mechanisms through which board games facilitate language learning. Long [2] argued that second language acquisition depends not only on comprehensible input but also on the process of meaning negotiation occurring within interaction. When learners encounter comprehension difficulties during communication, they trigger various negotiating behaviors, including clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. These interactional moves facilitate language acquisition by drawing learners' attention to linguistic form, providing corrective feedback through recasts, and creating opportunities for modified output. Building on this foundation, Gass [8] integrated the relationships among input, interaction, and output, proposing that negotiation of meaning serves as the bridge connecting these three elements. Specifically, negotiation of meaning activates the noticing mechanism, enabling learners to compare their interlanguage forms with target language input, thereby identifying linguistic gaps and implementing corrections. This theoretical insight provides a compelling rationale for understanding language learning in board game contexts: the frequent disagreements, rule clarifications, and strategic discussions that arise during gameplay constitute a naturalistic environment that triggers negotiation of meaning.

2.2 Empirical Research on Meaning Negotiation in Board Game Contexts

A body of empirical research has investigated meaning negotiation in relation to the Interaction Hypothesis. Newton [9] examined meaning negotiation behaviors in task-based activities, finding that information-gap tasks generated higher frequencies of clarification requests and confirmation checks, and that these negotiation behaviors were significantly associated with vocabulary acquisition. Although this study was not specifically focused on board games, its research context closely parallels board game scenarios, providing an important reference framework. Rankin et al. [10] found in their study of language learning in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) that players spontaneously produced substantial negotiation of meaning during collaborative tasks, including repeated requests for clarification of instructions, reformulation of strategies, and interactional correction of target language forms. These findings are equally applicable to board game contexts: when participants explain game rules, negotiate action strategies, or manage disagreements, they naturally encounter the communicative pressures that necessitate meaning negotiation. Sykes [11] conducted research specifically focused on language interaction in board game environments, finding that the quality and complexity of language interaction produced by participants in game contexts was superior to that observed in traditional classroom activities. The language interaction in game contexts is characterized by authentic communicative purpose; participants must effectively convey and comprehend information in order to win the game, which aligns closely with Long's [2] argument that negotiation of meaning drives language development.

2.3 Comprehensible Output and Input

Swain's [5] Output Hypothesis provides an important complement to the Interaction Hypothesis. Swain argued that language learning requires not only comprehensible input but also comprehensible output, the process by which learners are pushed to express meaning more precisely and appropriately. In board games, participants must continuously produce language to accomplish game objectives; this pushes output, which helps learners identify gaps in their linguistic competence, thereby promoting language acquisition. Wong and Yunus [12] conducted a systematic review of research on board games and ESL learners' speaking abilities. Analyzing multiple empirical studies, they found that board game activities significantly increased learners' opportunities for speaking practice, with notable improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and grammatical accuracy. The researchers specifically noted that the communicative contexts created by board games, requiring information exchange, meaning negotiation, and collaborative interaction, precisely fulfill the conditions posited by the Output Hypothesis for effective language learning.

3. Communication Strategies in Second Language Interaction

3.1 Definitions and Classifications of Communication Strategies

Communication strategies constitute another important area in SLA research, focusing specifically on how learners maintain communication when their linguistic resources are insufficient. Tarone [13] systematically classified communication strategies, defining them as learners' attempts to bridge the gap between their linguistic competence and their communicative intentions. She identified five major categories: avoidance strategies, in which learners avoid topics requiring unfamiliar vocabulary; approximation, where learners substitute a semantically similar word for an unknown expression; circumlocution, in which learners describe characteristics or functions of a referent instead of naming it directly; code-switching, where learners insert words from their first language; and appeal for assistance, in which learners request help from interlocutors. Faerch and Kasper [14] reinterpreted communication strategies from a psycholinguistic perspective, emphasizing that communication strategies represent cognitive planning behaviors during speech production and reflect learners' conscious management of linguistic resources. They distinguished between achievement strategies, which aim to accomplish communicative goals through substitution or innovation, and reduction strategies, which avoid linguistic difficulties by simplifying the intended communicative content.

3.2 Communication Strategies in Board Game Contexts

Board games provide an ideal naturalistic context for studying communication strategies. During gameplay, learners face real-time communicative pressures: they must convey complex information without interrupting the flow of the game, significantly increasing the frequency with which various communication strategies are deployed. Peng and Zhang [15] analyzed the use of communication strategies among board game participants in Chinese university English classrooms, finding that circumlocution and approximation were the two most commonly employed strategies. When learners did not know specific vocabulary items, they conveyed meaning by describing functions, attributes, or analogical relationships; this not only helped them maintain communication but also, in the process, promoted vocabulary awareness and the construction of semantic networks. The study also found that code-switching was common among Mandarin-speaking learners, particularly when rapid transmission of complex strategic information was required, but that the proportion of target language use increased progressively with accumulated gaming experience. Ortega [16], in a comprehensive review of communication strategy research, noted that task design significantly moderates the use of communication strategies. Tasks characterized by high degrees of information differential, such as cooperative board games requiring division of labor, tend to elicit more diverse and complex communication strategies, while open-ended or competitive tasks tend to generate more meaningful negotiation behaviors. This finding suggests that teachers should make conscious selections among different game structures depending on their instructional objectives.

3.3 The Relationship Between Communication Strategies and Language Development

The use of communication strategies is not merely an immediate means of coping with linguistic difficulties; it also represents a potential pathway toward language development. Dornyei and Scott [17], in their comprehensive review of communication strategy frameworks, observed that the process of strategically deploying linguistic resources is itself a form of language learning behavior: as learners experiment with new modes of expression, they unconsciously expand their linguistic schemata. The frequent deployment of strategies in board game contexts thus carries dual value: maintaining immediate communication while simultaneously promoting language internalization. Yanguas [18] further verified the association between communication strategies and vocabulary acquisition through task-based research, finding that in interaction tasks conducted with visual support, participants' use of circumlocution and meaning negotiation showed a positive correlation with the retention of target vocabulary items. This finding carries important implications for board game design: the physical props, illustrated cards, and visual information present in board games may constitute important media for strengthening this mechanism.

4. The Task-Based Language Teaching Perspective

4.1 Theoretical Framework of Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is one of the language teaching theories most closely connected to board game research. Ellis [3] provided a systematic theoretical account of TBLT, defining a task as a meaning-focused activity requiring learners to use language to accomplish a specific goal. In his framework, effective language learning tasks should possess several core characteristics: they should be primarily focused on meaning rather than form; they should have a counterpart in real-world activities; they should require language output to accomplish the task; and evaluation criteria should be based on the effectiveness of task completion. Nunan [19] further distinguished between pedagogical tasks and real-world tasks, emphasizing that task design should simulate authentic language use contexts as closely as possible. Board games exemplify activities that satisfy these criteria: the game itself provides an authentic communicative purpose (winning the game), the game process requires sustained language output, and game outcomes provide participants with immediate evaluative feedback on task completion.

4.2 Empirical Research on Board Games as Language Learning Tasks

Research treating board games as task-based language learning activities has accumulated considerable empirical support. Zagal et al. [20], analyzing the collaborative characteristics of board games from a game design perspective, observed that most board games inherently possess information differentials, negotiation spaces, and shared goals, precisely the core elements required by TBLT, and thus have intrinsic potential to function as language learning tasks. Brinton and Master [21], in their research on TBLT curriculum design, specifically discussed the design principles of gamified tasks, observing that the introduction of game mechanisms such as competition, rewards, and immediate feedback into tasks can significantly enhance learners' task engagement and language output quality. This provides theoretical support for teachers introducing board games within a TBLT framework.

4.3 Focus on Form in Interactive Tasks

An important point of debate within TBLT concerns how to balance meaning first with focus on form. Long's [22] concept of focus on form emphasized that in meaning-oriented interactive activities, teachers and learners can opportunistically redirect attention to linguistic form, thereby facilitating the internalization of grammatical knowledge without disrupting communicative fluency. Board games, as highly meaning-oriented tasks, create favorable conditions for the natural occurrence of form-focus: when participants encounter misunderstandings or communication breakdowns, they often spontaneously re-examine linguistic form, generating incidental focus on form. Loschky and Bley-Vroman [23] demonstrated through experimental research that in tasks with specific linguistic requirements (task-essential conditions), learners' frequency and accuracy of use of target grammatical structures improved significantly. This finding carries important implications for board game design: through deliberate engineering of linguistic demands within games, teachers can achieve naturalistic acquisition of specific linguistic forms within game contexts.

5. Game-Based Learning Theory

5.1 Theoretical Foundations of Game-Based Learning

Game-Based Learning (GBL) refers to a pedagogical design philosophy that incorporates game elements or game mechanics into non-game contexts, such as educational settings, in order to enhance learning outcomes. Gee [24] conducted a systematic analysis of the learning potential of video games, proposing that games create immersive learning environments whose core learning principles include immediate feedback, adjustable challenge levels, active engagement, and peer collaboration. Although Gee's research centered primarily on video games, the learning principles he identified are equally applicable to board game contexts. Prensky [25] further proposed the concept of digital natives' natural affinity for game-based learning, arguing that the introduction of game elements can effectively reduce learning anxiety, enhance learning motivation, and promote deep processing of knowledge. In the domain of language teaching, this suggests that game-based design may have the potential to address the pervasive problem of affective anxiety in traditional language classrooms, a factor identified by Krashen [1] in his Affective Filter Hypothesis as a key constraint on language acquisition efficiency.

5.2 Comparative Research on Board Games and Digital Games

Within the research landscape of game-based learning, digital games (computer games, video games) have attracted considerably more scholarly attention, while research on board games has lagged comparatively behind. Mayer [6], in a comprehensive review of the relationship between games and learning, identified a significant digital game bias in current game-based learning research, noting that the distinctive value of board games, particularly their advantages in promoting face-to-face language interaction, has not yet received sufficient scholarly recognition. Reinders and Wattana [7] compared the effects of digital games and board games on learner language output in Thai ESL classrooms, finding that both types of games had significant effects on enhancing learners' willingness to communicate (WTC). However, board games demonstrated more pronounced advantages in facilitating real-time interactional negotiation between learners, while digital games showed greater strengths in providing comprehensible input and contextual vocabulary learning. This comparative study demonstrates that the two types of games each possess distinctive language teaching value and should be selected according to specific instructional objectives.

5.3 Application Research on Board Games in Language Classrooms

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused specifically on the application of board games in language classrooms. Flores [26] conducted interview research with ESL teachers who used board games in their classrooms, finding that teachers broadly believed board games helped break down language anxiety, increase student talk time, and create authentic language use contexts. However, teachers also noted that game selection and activity design significantly influenced pedagogical outcomes: not all board games naturally promote language acquisition, and teacher-mediated task adaptation and language scaffolding are necessary. Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio [27] employed discourse analysis to study patterns of English use by Finnish adolescents during gameplay, finding that game participants spontaneously repeated, imitated, and internalized English language patterns encountered during play. This phenomenon aligns closely with Vygotsky's [28] account of language internalization through social interaction, confirming the social constructivist theoretical foundations of game-based learning.

6. Motivation and Affective Factors

6.1 The Role of Motivation Theory in Second Language Acquisition

Motivation is a critical affective factor influencing second language acquisition outcomes. Dornyei [4] proposed the L2 Motivational Self System, a model that emphasizes the ideal L2 self, learners' vision of themselves as proficient users of the target language in the future, as an important intrinsic driver of sustained language learning. Game-based learning, by creating positive emotional experiences and a sense of achievement, can help reinforce the construction of this ideal self, thereby stimulating learners' intrinsic motivation. Krashen's [1] Affective Filter Hypothesis illuminates the influence of affective factors on language

acquisition from another angle: when learners are in a state of high anxiety, the affective filter impedes effective processing of language input; conversely, a low-anxiety, high-confidence emotional state is conducive to language acquisition. Board games, by creating a relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere, have the potential to lower learners' affective filter, thereby enhancing language acquisition efficiency.

6.2 Board Games and Language Learning Motivation

Multiple studies have confirmed the positive effects of board games on language learning motivation. Yolageldili and Arikan [29] conducted a survey study in Turkish EFL classrooms and found that classes using language game activities significantly outperformed traditional instruction classes on measures of learning attitudes and classroom participation. Students reported feeling more relaxed and confident when using the target language during game activities. Rao [30] employed qualitative methods to examine game-based instruction in Chinese university English classrooms, revealing specific mechanisms through which board games enhance learning motivation: competitive elements stimulated learners' pursuit of linguistic accuracy, while collaborative elements strengthened learners' sense of social belonging and group participation motivation. This simultaneous activation of a dual motivational mechanism, individual achievement motivation and social relational motivation, gives board games a distinctive advantage in promoting language learning motivation.

6.3 Affective Factors and Language Anxiety

Language anxiety is an important affective variable influencing second language learners' classroom performance. Horwitz et al. [31], who developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), defined language anxiety as a specific type of anxiety arising in foreign language learning environments, primarily manifested as communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety.

7. Integrated Discussion

7.1 The Integrated Mechanisms Through Which Board Games Facilitate Second Language Acquisition

Synthesizing the research findings across the domains reviewed above, the integrated mechanisms through which board games facilitate second language acquisition can be understood on several levels. First, at the level of linguistic input and output, board games dramatically increase learners' exposure to comprehensible language input and opportunities to produce language output by creating authentic communicative contexts. Game participants are continuously exposed to authentic patterns of target language use as they explain rules, negotiate strategies, and express opinions, closely aligning with Krashen's [1] emphasis on the importance of comprehensible input. Second, at the level of interaction and meaning negotiation, the information differential situations created by board games, where players have different information or goals, serve as natural catalysts for triggering meaning negotiation. The clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks that learners produce during games constitute precisely the core mechanisms for promoting language acquisition identified in Long's [2] Interaction Hypothesis. Third, at the level of affect and motivation, the entertainment and competitive elements of games effectively lower learners' affective filter, stimulate intrinsic learning motivation, and create an emotional environment conducive to language acquisition. This resonates with the core arguments of Dornyei's [4] motivational theory and Krashen's [1] Affective Filter Hypothesis.

7.2 Limitations of Existing Research

Although existing research provides considerable empirical support for the positive effects of board games on second language acquisition, several notable limitations warrant attention. First, sample sizes are generally small. Most empirical studies employ convenience sampling with samples ranging from 20 to 60 participants, limiting the generalizability of findings. Future research should conduct larger-scale randomized controlled experiments to enhance the external validity of conclusions. Second, the diversity of game types has not been adequately represented. Existing research often treats board games as a homogeneous category, overlooking differences in language acquisition outcomes across different types of board games (strategy games, cooperative games, card games, etc.). Future research should systematically control and compare the game

type variable. Third, assessment of long-term effects is insufficient. Most studies examine only immediate language production outcomes, lacking longitudinal tracking of long-term language acquisition effects. The long-term impacts of board games on vocabulary retention, grammatical accuracy, and communicative competence remain to be investigated in depth.

7.3 Implications for Language Teaching Practice

Based on the foregoing review, this paper offers the following practical recommendations for language teaching. First, when selecting board games, teachers should prioritize game types characterized by high degrees of information differential and negotiation space, in order to maximize the frequency of meaning negotiation. Second, teachers should conduct explicit language preparation prior to gameplay, helping learners acquire target language expressions they may need during the game, thereby reducing code-switching and improving the quality of target language use. Third, game activities should be integrated with clearly articulated language learning objectives, supplemented by post-game language reflection activities that guide learners toward conscious consolidation and internalization of language use during the game. Fourth, teachers should attend to differences in learners' proficiency levels, designing grouping structures that facilitate peer-assisted learning, guided by Vygotsky's [28] concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, to maximize the language learning potential of board game activities.

8. Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper has conducted a systematic literature review of research on the impact of board games on second language acquisition, encompassing five core dimensions: the Interaction Hypothesis and negotiation of meaning; communication strategies; task-based language teaching; game-based learning; and motivation and affective factors. The review results indicate that board games, as a highly interactive language learning context, possess multiple mechanisms for promoting second language acquisition: they create authentic communicative contexts, elicit meaning negotiation behaviors, provide naturalistic opportunities for communication strategy use, satisfy the core requirements of task-based language teaching, and effectively enhance learner motivation and affective engagement through game-based mechanisms. However, existing research still exhibits clear shortcomings in terms of sample sizes, diversity of game types, and long-term outcome assessment. Future research should work toward conducting larger-scale, more systematic empirical investigations, with particular attention to the differential effects of different types of board games on different language skills and learners at different proficiency levels, as well as the integrated effects of board games combined with other language teaching approaches. Furthermore, as blended learning and online instructional models become increasingly prevalent, exploring the adaptation and application of board games in digitally mediated teaching environments represents a research direction of considerable practical value. In summary, board games hold broad application prospects in SLA research and language teaching practice. Through deepened theoretical understanding and expanded empirical research, this field has the potential to play an increasingly important role in the design and implementation of game-based approaches to language instruction.

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