Robert Dormer introduces an element of dynamite into his lessons.

Incorporating into our teaching products which have not been designed with the ESL/EFL classroom in mind can be a tricky business. However, from time to time, some really fun, useful and – perhaps most importantly of all – pedagogically-sound products do present themselves. Information-gap activities are nowadays a familiar feature in many classrooms and, increasingly, technology-mediated tasks are establishing themselves as reliable, rewarding tools. *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes* is a game that combines the strengths of both these trends, and it has been an explosive hit in my classroom. I feel sure there’s real potential for your students to benefit from it, too.

The game

*Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*, like all good information-gap games, requires teams to work together and share information in order to solve a common goal. One team takes control of a 3D, procedurally-generated and fully interactive ‘bomb’, and by communicating with another team, which has sole access to the ‘manual’, they attempt to disarm the various modules.

The modules

There are a wide variety of different modules, each presenting a unique challenge. The earlier modules tend to be comparatively easier than those appearing later, ensuring that the next level is
always pushing the participants that little bit further. Early levels have tasks that require, for example, the students in possession of the manual to ask questions about the number of wires and their colours, and various details found around the bomb, such as serial numbers, batteries, etc. Successful negotiation of this particular challenge requires careful examination to discover the required information, and accurate language choices to convey it. An example of a later module is a puzzle that requires the students to distinguish between very similar-sounding sequences of words, sometimes negotiating the inevitable confusion through spelling, and sometimes by accentuating certain parts of the phrases.

Using the modules
The modules are entirely independent of each other, and can be solved in any order. The range of puzzles is truly eclectic, calling upon diverse skills under the pressure of time, and I strongly recommend you search for the many fun videos available on YouTube to get a feeling of why this game has been so well-received and is so widely enjoyed.

Initially designed as a party game, it has now attracted an active ‘modding’ community, with many bespoke modules available through the Steam computer game community platform. Since I first started using this game, over 120 custom modules have been made available for free, with some that are particularly suited to ESL/EFL users, and there is even a small but growing number of custom modules specifically programmed for English learners. The more tech-savvy can use the free modding toolkit to create their own modules and levels – you can even modify the appearance of the game itself! More details of the game, including a demonstration video, can be found at www.keeptalkinggame.com/. The manual is available as a free, downloadable document at www.bombmanual.com/, so teachers can take a look before deciding to buy.

Getting the game
Single-computer licences are, unfortunately, the only option at the moment, and the game retails through Steam, Google Play and, directly, through its own website. The price per licence is around $15. After purchase, the game can be directly downloaded and installed on your preferred device. It works with touchscreen tablets and desktop and laptop computers, as well as many of the most recent mobile devices. The game has also
become particularly popular for use with virtual reality devices, such as Playstation VR and the Oculus Rift system. But, whatever system you prefer to run the game on, installation is smooth and simple, and there is a convenient and visually intuitive introduction to the controls, which obviously is quite important for second-language users.

Scaffolding for language classes

The potential of information-gap tasks to enhance the language learning experience is broadly acknowledged. Recently, the added value of technology-mediated task-based approaches has been highlighted. I have found that use of this game has been extremely effective as a technology-mediated task, providing both ample opportunity for student-led resolution of tasks and a clearly-defined outcome: ie preventing the bomb from exploding!

However, while the game has potential for use across the gamut of language ability levels, I have found that some preparation, provision of examples and scaffolding will maximise the chance of a positive reaction. One useful strategy is to make an example video (the one I used is available at https://goo.gl/9qoz51); it works very well if the students can see their own teacher playing the game. Also, I created worksheets to help the students with the basic set of questions they need in order to solve the easier modules at the start of the game.

The manual doesn’t contain too much difficult vocabulary, but with all the instructions for 11 different modules, as well as details of the information to be found around the bomb itself (batteries, ports, etc), it is quite a hefty tome, with a daunting amount of new information and vocabulary. Given this, I split the manual into sections, ensuring that at least two students covered any one section, to ensure overlap. The students are assigned the task of writing the meaning of any difficult words or expressions above the line in their part of the manual. This works quite well as a pre-class, homework activity. I then scan and re-combine these parts to form a new, annotated manual for use in class. Combined with the scaffolding worksheets and demonstration video, this annotated manual has been enough to support my beginners in engaging with the game, with generally very positive results.

However, with many classes, this level of scaffolding for the earlier levels of the game won’t be necessary and, at times, I have simply let the students work in groups to figure things out for themselves.

However, once the first few levels have been completed (usually not without some explosive failures!), the game becomes significantly more challenging. I use a system whereby, in order to proceed to the next level, a team must observe three rules: speaking only in sentences, using only English, and not looking at the other team’s computer or manual. However, they are allowed to contravene any or all of these rules in practice runs, in which they can prepare the required expressions and get to understand the different modules (later levels are randomly generated within certain parameters, so this works well). During the preparation, one member stands at a whiteboard positioned behind the team, and can write any expressions/phrases needed for a certain module. (In real time, using L1 then working together post-attempt to change these into English is a good strategy.)

When the teams are ready to attempt a level within the rules, they can ask the teacher to observe them. As usual, competition amongst groups helps to increase both focus and enjoyment.

I strongly recommend that during this period of ‘self-scaffolding’ the later levels, you circulate and offer advice for the structures they need to negotiate the increasingly complex problems.

Other uses for the game

I have used the game for genre-based writing classes (eg procedural instructions, technical writing, etc). My students are science and technology majors, so this is particularly useful for their write-ups of experiments. Additionally, I have started replacing some parts of the more traditional ‘communication tests’ (interviews, self-introductions, speeches, etc) that I use with my lower-level classes with this activity, and I am in the process of reviewing data collected in a needs analysis (based on their lab work) to help me use the modding system to design my own bespoke modules. I have also been experimenting with using video and audio recording, which not only improves accountability but allows the students to revisit their performance, deciphering the causes of breakdown and improving future attempts.

In short, this game can be used as it is, as a fun,impactive one-off session, or scaled up to a more integral and time-consuming curriculum component. With technology-mediated tasks and gamification being some of the hottest trends in English language teaching, I fully expect this game to be used in more and more contexts. We’ve certainly had a blast with it, and I hope that you can find a way of making it work for your students, too!

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