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Insider Makes the Deal Easy. An Online Speaking Class Using a Social Deduction Game

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Abstract

The present study aimed to report a new way to conduct a foreign language speaking class using a social deduction game *Insider* during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Insider* is a tabletop party game revolving solely around conversation, and its social deductive elements encourage players to use their L2 communicatively. The primary goal of the study was to develop oral fluency of simple question and it was sufficiently achieved. Also unexpectedly, learner agency and playful creativity were emergent in the class, which indicated a future possibility of game-based, or learning with games language class.

Keywords: Insider, Pedagogy, Game, gamevironments

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Context

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has triggered a transition to remote, online teaching worldwide, including Japan. While the affordances of instructional technology seemingly lend themselves to off-campus remote learning, the transition process and its outcome were not often viewed as successful. University lecturers have confronted questions about the issues of computer accessibilities and the widening of the digital divide rise to the surface, with the pressure to deliver quality instruction as was done

on campus. At Teikyo University of Science, a private university where the author works, the situation was as abysmal as was at other schools in Japan. The forementioned computer accessibility was the most serious problem – most students had only smartphones to access the Internet, and personal computers were in short supply at that moment. The university lacked a learning management system, which forced the individual teachers to build their courses literally from scratch, with varying computer literacy skills. Under these circumstances, language classes faced a predicament especially in the field of speaking, as it seemed unattainable to maintain simultaneous spoken interaction. It was unclear to what extent it is possible to guarantee learning experiences, and how fun they could be. The author decided to use the tabletop social deductive game *Insider* (2016) to tackle the pedagogical challenge posed by the pandemic. The goal of this report is to illustrate how the game provided playful learning activity on *Zoom* (2011) and helped maintaining the integrity of the spoken interaction class.

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Intention

Because of the participants' inexperience in the target language, the primary goal of the class was to develop fluency in question-answer interaction. The game's pedagogical role is to provide repeated practice of the target linguistic form.

What is *Insider*?

> "Do we really have free will? Who decides this? Are we controlled by what we hear and what we see, even while thinking we decide freely? Insider is a game that deals with these questions." (*Insider* game description 2016, package)

Figure 1. Physical copy of *Insider* (Japanese edition).

Insider (2016) is a social deduction game where players work as a team asking yes/no questions to deduce the secret word. The twist is, while all players cooperate with each other, one of the players is an *insider*, who knows the secret word from the beginning. The *insider* can always tell the right answer, but that would reveal their secret identity and will lose the game as a result in the later phase. Thus, the *insider* attempts to act as the commons while being manipulative to the others and bring them closer to the theme.

Players are assigned roles at random, typically one "master", one "insider", and the rest of the players are "commons" (*Insider* 2016). The *master* player, secretly selects a word from a set given in a deck of cards (in class setting, the teacher can predetermine the word and skip this process.) The *insider* player, whose role is not known to the other players (including the *master*), will then secretly view the word. Then the commons and the *insider* are given a limited amount of time in which they ask yes/no questions to reach the secret word. The *insider's* role is to secretly lead the commons towards the correct answer without making them aware their discussion was manipulated. If they fail to guess the correct word, everyone loses. If, however, if the word is correctly guessed in the given time, all players will discuss the game and

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deduce the identity of the *insider*. If the players guess the insider correctly, the *commons* and the *master* share in victory. If they fail, the *insider* wins the game.

The author selected *Insider* because its gameplay exclusively revolves around language – the game is communicative in nature. It excels at bringing authentic, meaningful interaction, which is widely considered necessary for language learning, while generating fun as the players navigate the game's challenge. The game can accommodate up to 8 players originally, but it is feasible with more players in class setting if the teacher chooses to give the *insider* role to a random number of students to maintain game balance.

Despite its dystopian, grizzly-sounding theme, the game encompasses humor and humane interaction rather than solemnity. Thematic appropriateness is an important issue when bringing a tabletop board game to class.

Participants

The present study took place in one of the mandatory subjects which all first-year students are required to take. A total of 28 (M = 20, F = 8) Japanese university students majoring in either natural science teaching or English education participated in the present study. They were aged 18 with a few exceptions of 19 and 20. They had studied English for an average of 8 years, mainly through highly controlled formal education in Japan, and their English proficiency was at the novice level in general (around A1-A2 level in CEFR). Their in-class communicative opportunities are scarce, and learning anxiety and disinterest in remote learning are two common features found by the university's internal survey. They primarily chose their smartphones as a device to participate in the activity.

Procedure and Apparatus

The game session was conducted using *Zoom* once per week in the second semester 2020, in the regular morning class timetable. Each time, the students were encouraged to participate from home every week, but since their individual environment entails various issues such as Internet data cap or private room restriction, they were also given an option to participate by listening to the edited recordings and submitting their deduction later through Google Form.

Role assignment and secret word setup, which were to be done by using game cards, were arbitrarily done by the teacher. The teacher often assigned the *insider* role to multiple students to lubricate the gameplay (lone *insider* occasionally goes blank and the game discussion comes to a standstill). The role and secret word information was sent to the *insiders* through *Zoom's* private chat function.

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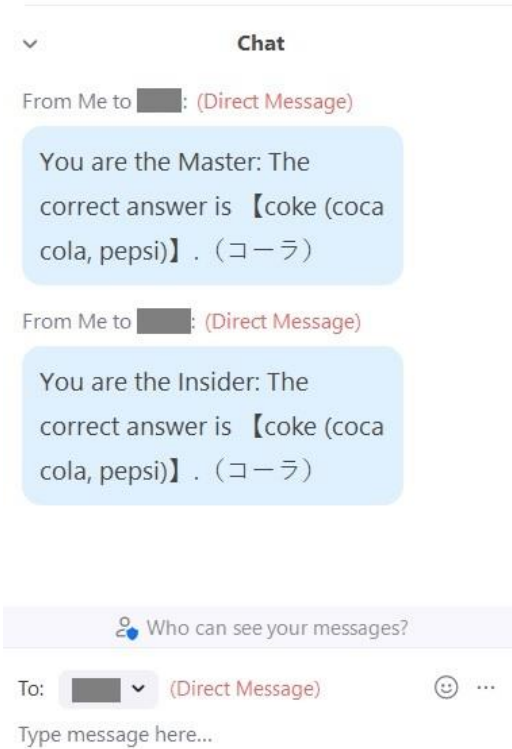
Figure 2. Secret information sent to students using private chat function.

During the game, the students were encouraged to use English and only English utterances were regarded as game actions, though, their use of their native language (Japanese) was also permitted for peer discussion. After each game session, the students were asked to post their questions they asked during the game as well as expressions they were unable to verbalize in English through Google Form. The teacher gave corrective feedbacks to their English and demonstrated translation using simple English. The Google Form also provided abovementioned opportunities for those who were unable to attend the *Zoom* session.

Fail or Succeed

This game-based class led by the *Insider* was a success. The students became proficient in simple question formation and their oral fluency significantly improved.

Earlier Weeks (Week 1 to 5)

The students' language use was limited to a set of *safe questions*, such as *is it an animal?*, *is it a living thing?*, *do you have it?*, *can you buy it at a convenience store?*, which had been introduced either by the teacher or their peer. This type of skewness in language use is often observed in class, and tabletop game-based class was not an exception. The gameplays themselves were surprisingly well played overall. All students, including rather introvert ones, spoke English proactively. The key of the success was the *insider* role requires them to be always enrolled in conversation. When they are the i*nsider*, they are destined to take part in discussion to navigate the others. If they stay wordless and silent when they are the *commons*, and in one game they abruptly burst out asking questions, that is virtually telling their secret identity. These psychological dynamics of the game led to a significant success as a speaking class.

Later Weeks (Week 6 to 10)

To the author's surprise, many of the students autonomously started to use relatively low-frequency vocabulary, such as *vehicle*, *transportation*, *concept*, *transparent*, *establish*, in addition to grammatically more complex structures, as subordination clause using *if* or *when* to express themselves. They also asked increasingly more in-game questions with significantly less downtime. The teacher's feedback did not contain any of such linguistic representation; I rather focused on using simple and concise expressions, which indicates the students voluntarily tried to incorporate broader vocabulary and intricate expressions. Such spontaneous language learning beyond the scope hardly becomes a staple in novice classes in Japan, where linguistic accuracy is primarily emphasized. It seemed that *fun* elements, i.e., the goal-oriented nature of the game, let the learners focus on interaction and mitigate their anxiety. Meaningful interaction is widely considered one of the key concepts in successful language acquisition, and the game provided it sufficiently.

Future Perspective

For the future, the author wishes to attempt autonomous gameplay using *Zoom's* breakout session function. Although the social deduction game is possible with more than 20 participants, it entails issues such as dispersed commitment or concentration. Groupwork approach, by grouping the students and letting each group play the game, might be as effective, or be more effective than the whole class teaching method. *Zoom* provides a breakout session function for groupwork. The teacher can create multiple rooms, assign students to each room, and letting them play the game autonomously once they become accustomed. Autonomous group game-based learning seems capable of solving such issues by giving each learner more opportunities to be involved in the gameplay.

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