



Beyond the Controller: Spectators as Linguistic Mediators in Game-Enhanced L2 Interaction

Joffrey Caron*

**Corresponding author: PhD in Applied Linguistics, Adjunct Professor,
Department of Modern Philology, Faculty of Letters, University of Castilla-La
Mancha, Ciudad Real, Spain, ORCID: [0000-0002-5810-7092](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5810-7092)
Email: joffrey.caron@uclm.es*

Abstract

This study examines how non-controlling participants mediate access to and use of French as an L2 during classroom-based gameplay with commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) video games. It specifically investigates how spectators' contributions shape shared understanding, collective decision-making, and subsequent in-game action. The data comprise 13 video-recorded gameplay sessions, totaling 8 hours and 40 minutes, involving 24 Spanish university students with French proficiency levels ranging from A1 to B1+. The corpus included cooperative and solo gameplay, with the analysis focusing primarily on episodes from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. Using a collection-based multimodal conversation-analytic approach, 60 episodes of peer linguistic and communicative assistance were identified and compared. The analysis shows that spectators participate by providing access to written text, translating or reformulating game language, converting interpretations into action, and temporarily assuming interactional leadership. Through these practices, non-controlling participants transform written, spoken, and visual game resources into actionable knowledge for the player and the wider group. The findings distinguish technical control from interactional agency: controller possession determines who can execute an in-game action, but not who organizes interpretation, decision-making, or strategic guidance. The study therefore shows how pedagogically organized solo gameplay can create situated opportunities for collaborative meaning-making and language-focused interaction.

Keywords: game-enhanced language learning, commercial off-the-shelf video games, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, linguistic mediation, conversation analysis

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Introduction

Commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) video games have attracted increasing attention as potential resources for second-language learning and teaching (Reinhardt & Bain, 2026). Unlike serious games designed around instructional objectives, COTS video games circulate primarily as entertainment products and vernacular cultural artifacts. Their classroom use exemplifies game-enhanced language learning, in which an existing game is incorporated into a pedagogical activity without assuming that the game is intrinsically educational (Reinhardt, 2019; Reinhardt & Sykes, 2012). Such games' relevance instead emerges from the relationship among their semiotic resources, the activity design, and participants' situated practices.

Research suggests that COTS video games can provide exposure to contextualized vocabulary, narratives, instructions, and recurrent linguistic forms (Ranalli, 2008; Sundqvist, 2019; Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). However, much of this research concerns individual or extramural gaming. In L2 classroom settings, the use of solo games raises a distinct interactional and pedagogical problem. When only one learner controls the avatar, that learner appears to occupy the role of player, while classmates risk being positioned as passive spectators. This asymmetry may make solo games seem incompatible with collaborative language learning. Yet suitable COTS video games that combine local cooperative play with rich target-language input may not always be available for classroom use. Investigating learners' participation around solo games therefore addresses a practical challenge for game-enhanced language learning: determining how a technically single-player activity can be organized as an environment for peer linguistic assistance and collaborative meaning-making.

Controller possession grants control over in-game action, but it does not necessarily determine the extent of a participant's linguistic or interactional involvement. Research on gameplay watching and spectating suggests that non-controlling participants may remain consequentially involved in the activity (Andersson, 2023; Baldauf-Quilliatre & Colón de Carvajal, 2021a, 2021b). However, little is known about how co-present spectators in L2 classrooms transform game language into shared, actionable understanding.

Therefore, the present study examines how non-controlling participants mediate access to and use of the L2 during collective classroom gameplay with solo COTS video games, and how their contributions shape shared understanding, decision-making, and subsequent in-game action. Using a collection-based conversation-analytic approach, the study identified and analyzed episodes of peer linguistic and communicative assistance across a video corpus, with particular attention to assistance provided by non-controlling participants.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

COTS Video Games and Game-Enhanced Language Learning

COTS video games are entertainment products rather than materials designed for instruction. When incorporated into pedagogical activities, they exemplify game-enhanced language learning, in which educational value arises from the interaction among game resources, task design, and participants' situated practices rather than from the game alone (Reinhardt, 2019; Reinhardt & Sykes,

2012). Recent reviews confirm continued interest in COTS games while emphasizing that learning opportunities depend on game characteristics, pedagogical arrangements, and the social organization of gameplay (Rajendran et al., 2024; Reinhardt & Bain, 2026).

COTS games can provide contextualized language through dialogue, menus, instructions, narratives, visual cues, and action. Narrative relevance, contextual and visual cues, repeated encounters, and the need to understand language to progress may direct learners' attention to lexical items and support form–meaning connections (Franciosi et al., 2016; Janebi Enayat & Haghighatpasand, 2019; Lai & Chen, 2023; Lee, 2023). Research has also associated sustained participation in commercial multiplayer games with aspects of L2 development, although outcomes vary according to proficiency, game genre, exposure, and interactional conditions (Jabbari & Peterson, 2023).

Watching, Spectating, and L2 Game Interaction

Solo gameplay creates an apparent participation asymmetry because only one participant controls in-game action. Nevertheless, non-controlling participants retain access to the game's language, visual information, and unfolding consequences. Experimental comparisons challenge the assumption that controller possession necessarily produces greater learning: watchers have demonstrated vocabulary outcomes comparable to, and sometimes better than, players, possibly because players divide their attention between linguistic input and game mechanics (Andersson, 2023; deHaan et al., 2010).

Recent research confirms that watching gameplay remains underexplored in SLA, particularly from sociocultural perspectives concerned with the interactions surrounding play (Andersson, 2025). Interactional studies further show that playing and spectating are locally accomplished participation positions rather than fixed roles. Non-players may participate consequentially by commenting, instructing, assessing, and coordinating action (Baldauf-Quilliatre & Colón de Carvajal, 2021a, 2021b). Here, *watchers* refers to participants in experimental viewing conditions, whereas *spectators* designates co-present participants who do not currently control the game. What remains underexplored is how such spectators transform L2 game content into shared, actionable understanding. This matters because educators may use language-rich COTS games designed for individual play, raising the question of how learners without direct control can participate meaningfully. The present study therefore examines how spectators read, translate, reformulate, explain, and act upon French-language game content. It contributes by showing that control over in-game action and interactional agency can be distributed differently, and by identifying the multimodal practices through which spectators shape collective decisions.

Mediation and Peer Linguistic Assistance

The study is theoretically grounded in a sociocultural understanding of mediation and collaborative activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Mediation involves facilitating access to texts, concepts, and communication through practices such as relaying information, explaining, reformulating, and selecting relevant content (Council of Europe, 2020). These practices relate to collaborative dialogue, collective scaffolding, and peer assistance, through which learners pool partial

knowledge to address linguistic problems (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Recent classroom research demonstrates that participation in game-mediated activities combines talk with gesture, gaze, and bodily conduct to support explanations and communication (Gao, 2024). Learners also use strategies such as inferencing and seeking feedback to resolve comprehension difficulties (Calafato & Clausen, 2024; Hamat & Mahamad Amran, 2021).

Multimodal CA-SLA provides the analytical approach for examining how mediation is publicly and sequentially accomplished through talk, gaze, gesture, screen orientation, controller manipulation, and subsequent game action. This approach treats intersubjectivity as an observable achievement through which participants display, verify, and revise their understanding in the unfolding interaction.

Taken together, these perspectives conceptualize spectator mediation as a publicly organized interactional accomplishment rather than an individual cognitive variable. Game-enhanced language learning establishes the pedagogical status of the COTS games; sociocultural research on mediation and peer assistance identifies the practices through which learners facilitate access to language and action; and multimodal CA-SLA provides the analytical framework for tracing how these practices become consequential in the unfolding interaction.

Building on this theoretical and analytical framework, the study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How do spectators participate linguistically during collective gameplay with solo COTS video games in an L2 learning context?
- RQ2. Through which mediation practices do spectators transform game texts, interface prompts, and narrative information into actionable resources for the controlling player and the wider group?
- RQ3. How does the distribution of controller access shape participants' interactional roles and create situated opportunities for peer linguistic assistance and collaborative meaning-making?

Method

Participants and Research Context

The cohort comprised 24 Spanish university students enrolled in either English Studies or French and English Studies programs, with L2 French proficiency levels ranging from A1 to B1+. Some participants took part in multiple recorded sessions (see Appendix B for participants' profiles).

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the first, second, or third year of their degree programs. All participants had Spanish as their dominant language. In accordance with the research protocol approved by the university's ethics committee, further demographic information, including participants' age and gender, was not collected because it was not necessary to address the research questions.

All recorded activities targeted French as an L2, and the games were configured in French. "English Studies" and the bilingual "French and English Studies" refer to participants' university degree programs rather than to the target

language of the gameplay activities. Participants enrolled in English Studies were also taking French-language courses as part of their degree. Their reported proficiency levels, ranging from A1 to B1+ on the CEFR scale, refer exclusively to French. Spanish was the students' dominant language and was used occasionally by participants to translate, explain, or resolve interactional difficulties. English was relevant only to participants' degree programs and was neither the target language nor the configured language of the games.

The study received approval from the ethics committee of the author's university. Participants provided written informed consent, and participation in the recordings was voluntary. An equivalent alternative activity was available. Pseudonyms are used, and identifying information was removed or replaced. The recordings are not publicly available because participants consented only to restricted scholarly use.

Data Collection and Pedagogical Procedures

Data were collected over three months through 13 recorded gameplay sessions totaling 8 hours and 40 minutes; individual recordings lasted 25–49 minutes (see Appendix A).

Data collection occurred in two phases. The first comprised two laboratory sessions in which B1-level dyads played *Harry Potter* cooperatively. During the second phase, the remaining 11 recordings were collected during regular French L2 classes. Gameplay formed part of pedagogical sequences targeting movement verbs, spatial prepositions, imperatives, instructions, and proposals. The only instruction all participants received was to interact in French and minimize their use of Spanish, but L1 interactions occurred frequently within the beginner groups.

The data derive from a video corpus of French L2 gameplay involving three COTS video games: *LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1–4* (hereafter, *Harry Potter*), *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (hereafter, *Zelda*), and *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*. The games generated different participation configurations. *Harry Potter* allowed two participants to control in-game action simultaneously, whereas *Zelda* and *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* are solo games. During the solo-game sessions, one participant held the controller while classmates watched the shared screen and could contribute to interpretation and decision-making. The controller was passed to another participant approximately every five minutes or whenever the player was defeated. Control over in-game action was therefore asymmetric at any given moment but rotated over time, while linguistic and strategic participation remained open to the wider group.

In classroom sessions, the teacher introduced the task, provided the instructions necessary to use the controller and begin playing, and provided assistance when necessary. The teacher introduced the task, provided the instructions necessary to use the controller and begin playing, and offered assistance when necessary. The teacher did not prescribe specific game actions or systematically direct participants' interpretations or peer interactions. Participants interpreted the game content, made decisions, and coordinated their actions themselves, although the teacher occasionally responded to requests for assistance or communication difficulties, as illustrated in some extracts. Participants completed game-related tasks, including navigating, interpreting instructions, solving puzzles, and deciding

collectively on the player's actions. These tasks elicited language related to movement, location, instructions, and proposals, but did not require learners to produce predetermined linguistic forms. French instead served as a communicative resource for pursuing game objectives.

The recordings represent unscripted interaction occurring within researcher-designed pedagogical activities rather than fully naturalistic interaction. Although the games and broader objectives were introduced for pedagogical purposes, participants locally organized their decisions, help-seeking, and meaning-making without scripted contributions or predetermined researcher prompts.

No systematic consciousness-raising or teacher-led corrective-feedback procedure was implemented during gameplay. However, participants could spontaneously notice, discuss, reformulate, and correct linguistic forms, and these peer-mediated exchanges were retained as part of the interactional data.

Game input was not quantified because it varied with participants' actions and progression, but included recurring written, spoken, and interface-based resources.

Data Selection and Focus of the Present Study

The present article focuses primarily on *Zelda* because its single-player configuration makes the distinction between control over in-game action and interactional participation particularly visible. The game presents written and spoken resources relevant to progression, including dialogue, instructions, quest objectives, interface information, clues, and environmental cues. Interpreting these resources may create opportunities for reading, translation, reformulation, explanation, strategic advice, and validation.

Following the collection-based logic of conversation analysis (Clayman, 2024; Clift & Mandelbaum, 2024), the complete corpus was repeatedly viewed to identify episodes of peer linguistic and communicative assistance. The resulting collection comprised 60 episodes: 46 from *Zelda*, none from *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, and 14 from *Harry Potter*. The four practices were identified across the *Zelda* sessions, while the *Harry Potter* episodes provided contrastive cases involving cooperative gameplay.

An episode was included when four criteria were satisfied. First, at least one assisting participant did not hold the controller. Second, that participant assisted a peer in interpreting or producing the L2 in relation to a game text, instruction, objective, or unfolding situation. Third, the contribution became consequential for shared understanding, decision-making, or subsequent in-game action. Fourth, the assistance was observable through talk, gesture, gaze, pointing, screen orientation, or a combination of these resources.

The collection includes episodes in which non-controlling participants read texts, translated or reformulated game language, explained expressions, supported L2 production, selected relevant information, proposed strategies, or transformed instructions into courses of action. Through iterative comparison across the collection, these fine-grained mediational functions were consolidated into four broader, partially overlapping practices: providing access to written text, translating or reformulating game language, converting interpretations into action, and temporarily assuming interactional leadership.

The Results section presents four *Zelda* episodes illustrating these practices. An additional episode from *Harry Potter* provides a contrastive case in which two participants had simultaneous access to in-game control. The comparison clarifies how controller distribution shapes peer mediation rather than evaluating the games against one another.

Transcription and Analytical Procedure

The study adopts a conversation-analytic approach to second-language acquisition (CA-SLA; [Markee & Kunitz, 2015](#); [Mondada, 2013](#); [Seedhouse, 2004](#)). Transcripts were progressively refined using ICOR conventions from ICAR ([ICAR, n.d.](#)) to represent overlap, pauses, lengthening, cut-offs, uncertain hearing, language choice, and relevant embodied conduct (see Appendix C for full transcription conventions). To improve readability and convenience for readers, only the English translations of the transcriptions are provided in this paper. Participants' nonstandard productions were preserved in the English translations.

Each episode was analyzed in four stages. First, the analysis established who held the controller and how others displayed access to the activity. Second, it identified the linguistic, visual, and embodied resources mobilized by non-controlling participants. Third, it traced the assistance and its ratification, modification, rejection, or non-ratification, including whether it informed a decision or action. Fourth, each contribution was examined for its mediational function, such as reading, translating, reformulating, explaining, supporting L2 production, selecting information, or providing action-oriented guidance.

Multimodal conversation analysis was selected because the research questions concern how spectator mediation is accomplished sequentially and how its consequences become publicly observable. The approach permits analysis of talk alongside gaze, gesture, pointing, screen orientation, controller manipulation, and subsequent in-game conduct. Rather than treating mediation as a self-reported strategy, the analysis examines how participants themselves display the relevance, acceptance, modification, or rejection of an assisting contribution. Finally, consistent with the conversation-analytic approach, claims are grounded in participants' publicly displayed orientations within the recorded interactions rather than in retrospective accounts of their internal states.

Results

The analysis identifies four spectator practices represented across the collection: providing access to written text, translating or reformulating game language, converting comprehension into action, and temporarily assuming interactional leadership. These practices often overlap, but they have different sequential consequences. A contrastive episode from *Harry Potter* clarifies why spectator mediation becomes especially salient in collective solo gameplay, where only one participant has control over in-game action.

Spectators as Readers: Taking Responsibility for Textual Access

Extract 1 occurs when the group encounters a quest text explaining that the character should follow the location indicated on the map. Iris (IRI) does not hold the controller but initiates a collective reading activity.

Extract 1:

1. IRI <((in Spanish)) let's see let's read>
2. ((They all read; IRI reads under her breath.))
3. (5.3)
4. IRI <((in Spanish)) okay so she should go over there
5. right>
6. ((they all laugh))

Iris's first-person plural formulation, *vamos a leer* ("let's read"), prospectively organizes reading as a shared task rather than an individual undertaking. The 5.3-second silence that follows is therefore not an absence of participation. It is an accountable interval during which the participants collectively attend to the screen. Iris's quiet reading also publicly displays her continued orientation to the text.

At line 4, Iris does not provide an exhaustive translation. Instead, she extracts its action-relevant point: the character must go "over there." The Spanish tag *no?* (translated here as "right?") invites confirmation and makes her interpretation available for collective ratification. Her intervention thereby opens a space in which an individual on-screen text can become an object of shared understanding before gameplay continues.

The text consequently changes participation status. Although it appears on the screen in front of the controlling player, it does not remain information for that participant alone. Iris takes responsibility for directing the group's attention toward it, allocating time for reading, and formulating its practical implication. It appears that, because she is not occupied with control over in-game action, she is available to monitor textual information while others remain oriented to the controller or the unfolding game. Her position as spectator provides a particular form of access rather than placing her outside the activity.

Spectators as Translators and Reformulators: Making Game Language Intelligible

Translation in the collection is frequently distributed across participants rather than delivered by one individually designated translator. In Extract 2, Iris and Luz jointly work through an extended narrative sequence concerning events that occurred 100 years earlier. Their contributions overlap and complement one another (TEA stands for teacher).

Extract 2:

They read the on-screen text.

1. IRI <((in Spanish)) there are 100 years it brought ruin and desolation.
 2. LUZ <((in Spanish)) years.>
 3. LUZ <((in Spanish)) inside the <((in French)) kingd-> inside this castle>
 4. IRI <((in Spanish)) okay>
 5. (7.0)
- The sentence "He suddenly appeared, ravaged towns and villages, and left a trail of death behind him." appears on the screen.
6. LUZ appeared <((in Spanish)) I don't know what (inaud.)>
 7. (1.4)
 8. IRI <((in Spanish)) behind>
 9. (2.5)
 10. LUZ <((in Spanish)) lives or [(inaud.)>

11. IRI [(inaud.)]
 12. <((in Spanish)) that he did to the towns>
 They begin translating the new text: "But for the past hundred years, his destructive power has been contained within the walls of the very symbol of our kingdom..."
 13. LUZ <((in Spanish)) after 100 years>
 14. (3.0)
 15. LUZ [<((in Spanish)) continue>
 16. IRI [<((in Spanish)) he has destroyed (inaud.)>
 17. TEA [<((in Spanish)) For 100 years, his destructive
 18. power has been contained>
 19. TEA *he gestures to indicate that he is inventing the term
 20. IRI <((in Spanish)) within the walls>
 21. LUZ <((in Spanish)) the symbol of our> <((in French))kingdom>
 22. French))kingdom>
 23. TEA <((in Spanish)) kingdom>
 24. IRI ah:
 25. TEA <((in French))kingdom> <((in Spanish))kingdom>
 26. IRI <((in French))kingdom>
 27. TEA <((in Spanish)) it is> <((in French))it was on the
 28. vocabulary list>
 29. IRI <((in Spanish)) that was there the castle>
 30. LUZ <((in Spanish)) and (inaud.) there are several>

Neither participant produces a complete translation. Both contribute *años* ("years"), Luz relates the truncated French *royaume* ("kingdom") to the castle, and Iris supplies *detrás* ("behind"). Pauses, cut-offs, uncertainty, and overlapping contributions make the translation recognizable as an incremental collaborative accomplishment. Later in the episode, when the teacher asks what they have understood, Luz reconstructs the broader implication: the voice has warned them not to delay, and the person speaking must be helped. The practical outcome is not a sentence-by-sentence rendering but a sufficiently coherent account of the narrative problem.

Extract 3 illustrates the relationship among approximation, assistance, and repair. Kiko (KIK) reads quietly and displays difficulty with *bijou* ("jewelry"). He then shows the controller to Luz while asking how to open something.

Extract 3:

- KIK ((he reads the text quietly))
 KIK <((in Spanish)) is it an object for the night or what>
 TEA <((in French))it's a:: piece of jewelry>
 LUZ *she turns toward the teacher
 KIK +he looks at her and mimes confusion-->
 (4.0)+
 KIK ----+
 TEA <((in French))you don't understand jewelry/>
 KIK +he shows his controller to LUZ
 KIK <((in Spanish)) how [do you open (inaud.)>
 TEA [like a: a necklace* earrings
 TEA ;he mimes the objects----->
 LUZ *she presses
 the button on the controller, then turns toward the teacher

TEA <((in French))you see necklace: jewelry¿>
 TEA -----¿
 LUZ <((in Spanish)) jewelry>
 KIK ah (inaud.)

Luz's participation has two consequences. She presses the relevant controller button, enabling the immediate interface action, and subsequently provides a Spanish equivalent of the French word *bijou*, thereby resolving the lexical problem. Control over in-game action momentarily shifts through the physical handling of the controller, but the episode also depends on Luz's linguistic uptake of the teacher's examples.

Based on these cases, a distinction between translation for accuracy and translation for action can be proposed. The findings suggest that translation for accuracy makes linguistic form itself accountable and seeks an adequate equivalent, whereas translation for action seeks sufficient understanding for the group to proceed.

The two orientations can coexist, as Extract 3 demonstrates, but gameplay frequently privileges actionable sufficiency. Hesitations and approximate interpretations are tolerated when they do not prevent the identification of a relevant next action.

Spectators as Action-Oriented Mediators

Spectators do more than make game language intelligible. They transform linguistic information into gameplay decisions, as shown in Extract 4.

Extract 4:
 1. LUZ <((in French)) we to go *(2.0) in front* *to *the
 2. tower*>
 LUZ *she points to the screen *she gestures the height
 of the tower
 IRI <><((in Spanish)) okay (0.9) <> that we go in front
 of the tower<>>
 IRI <>she nods <>then turns toward LUZ
 LUZ <((in Spanish)) to what is* there in front>*>
 LUZ *she points to the screen

Luz first offers an approximate French formulation while pointing at the screen and depicting height. Iris reformulates the proposal in Spanish, nods, and turns toward Luz. Luz then points again and specifies the visible destination. Talk, gesture, screen content, and spatial orientation jointly transform information from the preceding cutscene into a navigational proposal.

Spectators thus mediate among three linked spaces. In the linguistic space, they isolate a word, text, or instruction. In the semiotic space, they relate it to a visible tower, map location, interface element, or collectible object. In the actional space, they formulate what should be done next. This mediation is selective: participants retain information relevant to progression while leaving other material untreated. Such selectivity should not automatically be evaluated as incomplete comprehension. It is an interactional response to the immediate practical demands of gameplay.

Spectators as Interactional Leaders

Across these episodes, control over in-game action and interactional agency are distributed to different participants. Extract 1 provides the clearest case. Iris initiates reading, sustains the group's orientation to the text, extracts the quest-relevant meaning, and solicits confirmation, although she does not hold the controller. Similarly, Luz's reading, formulation, and pointing in Extract 4 organize the group's spatial interpretation, while Iris ratifies and reformulates it. The controlling player's subsequent action thus becomes contingent on linguistic work performed elsewhere in the participation framework.

Interactional leadership is locally achieved rather than permanently attached to a participant role. A spectator acquires epistemic authority when others treat their reading, translation, or proposal as relevant. This authority remains partial and contestable. Extract 2 contains competing fragments and visible uncertainty, while Extract 3 requires further lexical assistance before Luz provides an adequate category term. Nevertheless, spectators produce much of the task-related language through which a next action becomes recognizable.

The player therefore retains privileged control over execution but not necessarily over interpretation, decision-making, or the sequential progression of talk. In these episodes, collective solo gameplay generates a division of labor in which the most linguistically active participant is not necessarily the person holding the controller. The controller determines who can immediately execute an action, whereas the interaction determines whose understanding informs that action.

Contrastive Case: Cooperative Gameplay and the Limits of Spectator Mediation

Extract 5, from *Harry Potter*, presents a different participation configuration.

Extract 5:

1. TEA <((in French)) you have to go ou:t (0.5) no/ (1.3) to
 2. go ou:t(1.3)>
 LUZ <((in French)) [yes:>
 TEA <((in French)) [outside>
 IRI ah/ <((in Spanish)) we have to go [no>
 LUZ <((in Spanish)) how (0.5) how>

The teacher reformulates the French verb *sortir* (“to go out”) as *aller à l’extérieur* (“to go outside”). Luz acknowledges the instruction, while Iris renders it approximately in Spanish. Mediation remains relevant, but both learners can act through their respective controllers. The episode is therefore not organized around a durable distinction between one controlling player and spectators who must shape in-game action indirectly.

This contrast does not establish that cooperative games eliminate mediation or that solo games automatically generate it. Instead, gameplay configuration changes its interactional salience. In cooperative play, access to action is distributed

by the game, and participants can respond through their own controllers. In collective solo play, only one learner can execute the group's decision at a given moment. Reading, translation, reformulation, and guidance consequently become especially visible means through which spectators shape progression without direct control over in-game action.

The findings therefore qualify the category *spectator*. It describes a participant's relationship to the controller, not the limits of their linguistic, epistemic, or interactional contribution.

Discussion

In this section, the findings are interpreted through the study's three complementary perspectives: game-enhanced language learning situates the pedagogical use of the COTS games, sociocultural theory explains spectator contributions as mediation and peer assistance, and multimodal CA-SLA shows how these contributions become publicly consequential in unfolding interaction. They indicate that technical control and interactional agency are distributed differently during collective solo gameplay. Across the focal episodes, non-controlling participants read on-screen texts, translated or reformulated French L2, selected action-relevant information, and guided subsequent decisions. The discussion develops three implications of these findings while treating the observed episodes as situated opportunities for L2 engagement rather than evidence of language acquisition.

Participation Is Distributed Beyond the Controller

The first finding challenges a controller-centered understanding of gameplay participation. Although the controlling player has privileged access to the timing and execution of in-game action, this technical entitlement does not grant exclusive control over the activity's linguistic or strategic organization. In the analyzed episodes, spectators initiated reading, proposed translations, extracted instructions, and evaluated whether an interpretation was sufficient for action. Progress thus often depended on information made available by someone other than the controlling player.

This distribution became particularly visible when an on-screen text suspended progress. Such moments created a practical problem for the group rather than solely for the player. By making the text publicly relevant, translating part of it, or reformulating its actionable core, a spectator could temporarily organize the group's attention and guide its next decision. Interactional leadership was therefore not fixed by controller possession but shifted according to the local demands of reading, interpreting, deciding, and acting.

Solo gameplay consequently produced a division of labor rather than a stable opposition between active players and passive viewers. Only one participant could execute the next move, but control over action could be separated from control over meaning. This distinction develops [Andersson's \(2023\)](#) observation that

watching need not constitute linguistic inactivity. It also converges with [Baldauf-Quilliatre and Colón de Carvajal's \(2021a, 2021b\)](#) argument that spectatorship is interactionally achieved rather than defined simply by the absence of controller use. The present study identifies a specific form of spectator consequentiality in the L2 classroom: non-controlling participants mediate access to the target language and thereby influence the organization of gameplay.

From a CA-SLA perspective, these contributions are relevant because they make participants' understandings publicly inspectable. Reading aloud, candidate translations, repetition, repair, embodied orientation to the screen, and subsequent action display how French L2 becomes an object of joint attention. Such displays do not demonstrate durable learning; rather, they show how language, intersubjectivity, and gameplay progress are coordinated through interaction.

Spectator Mediation Is Action-Oriented

The second finding is that peer linguistic and communicative assistance is action-oriented. Spectators did not necessarily translate or reformulate game language to produce complete linguistic equivalents. Their contributions were shaped by the practical need to determine what should happen next. A partial translation or concise summary could be interactionally adequate when it identified a destination, object, direction, or required move. This accords with [Pirainen-Marsh and Tainio's \(2009a, 2009b\)](#) account of game language as a resource for situated participation and coordinated activity, rather than merely as input processed independently of gameplay. It also supports [Reinhardt's \(2019\)](#) view that the language-learning relevance of COTS games emerges through learners' engagement with game resources and objectives.

Understanding became observable through its practical consequences. A candidate interpretation could be treated as adequate when the player followed a proposed route or selected an option, and reopened when an action failed or another participant challenged it. This pattern is consistent with [Mondada's \(2011\)](#) description of understanding as an embodied, situated, and sequential achievement displayed through subsequent conduct. Gameplay thus provided an environment in which interpretations could be proposed, acted upon, tested, and revised.

Successful action, however, did not necessarily demonstrate accurate or complete linguistic comprehension. Participants could reach an appropriate outcome through partial interpretation, contextual inference, visual information, or other semiotic resources. The game instead provided a local criterion of practical sufficiency: whether the proposed understanding allowed the activity to continue.

This action orientation also highlights the relationship between spectator mediation and language-related episodes. Language-related episodes foreground problems concerning linguistic form, meaning, or use ([Swain & Lapkin, 1998](#); [Toth & Gil-Berrio, 2022](#)). Some spectator-mediation episodes displayed these

characteristics through lexical searches, translation alternatives, repetition, explanation, or correction. Others remained primarily oriented toward extracting task-relevant meaning and progressing in the game. Spectator mediation may thus generate a language-related episode, but the categories are not interchangeable: the former may subordinate linguistic detail to the trajectory of play, whereas the latter makes a linguistic problem explicitly salient.

Finally, game feedback contributed to the establishment of intersubjectivity without independently determining it. An expected game outcome could provisionally support an interpretation, while an unsuccessful action could prompt participants to reconsider the text, revise a translation, or propose an alternative. The pedagogical relevance of feedback therefore emerged through its incorporation into interactional episodes of interpretation, proposal, action, and reassessment (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2012). Spectators served as mediators by connecting French L2 resources, visible game consequences, and the group's developing course of action.

Solo Games Can Become Collaborative Learning Environments

The third finding is that a technically solo game can support a collectively organized language-learning activity. Although the software is designed for one controlling player, participation was assembled through shared attention, linguistic assistance, embodied conduct, and strategic consultation. This further supports the view that playing and spectating are locally accomplished forms of participation rather than fixed roles determined solely by controller access (Baldauf-Quilliatre & Colón de Carvajal, 2021a, 2021b). Collaborative potential therefore depends not simply on the number of available controllers but on how opportunities and responsibilities are distributed among participants.

The contrastive cooperative extract helps clarify the relevance of this configuration. When participants can act independently through separate controllers, they may respond to a problem without first making their interpretations publicly available. In solo gameplay, a non-controlling participant must communicate an interpretation if it is to influence progression. This material asymmetry may make peer assistance especially visible and accountable, although it does not automatically produce collaboration. As sociocultural perspectives emphasize, the potential of a tool or activity structure is realized through participants' situated use of linguistic, material, and social resources (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Lantolf et al., 2015).

Controlling players and spectators can therefore be understood as complementary rather than hierarchically ordered participation positions. Controller rotation allowed learners to alternate between executing game actions and contributing from a non-controlling position. Participants could pool partial knowledge and construct solutions collaboratively, in line with research on collective scaffolding and peer assistance (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 2001). The findings do not establish that spectators necessarily process language more deeply than controlling players, but they show that controlling and non-controlling positions offer different resources and constraints for participation.

Accordingly, the pedagogical value of solo COTS video games does not require every learner to control the avatar simultaneously. It depends on a participation arrangement in which non-controlling learners have legitimate and consequential opportunities to contribute. This aligns with Reinhardt's (2019) account of game-enhanced language learning, in which pedagogical value arises through the orchestration of games, tasks, participants, and social practices rather than from the game's intrinsic educational properties. The analyzed episodes illustrate how such orchestration can create situated opportunities for peer assistance and collaborative meaning-making, while leaving questions of retention, transfer, and durable L2 acquisition to longitudinal or outcome-based research.

Conclusion

This study has shown that spectators need not remain passive during collective gameplay with solo COTS video games. Although only one participant could execute an in-game action at a time, non-controlling participants mediated L2 resources through reading, translation, reformulation, explanation, validation, and strategic guidance. These multimodal practices transformed game resources into shared interpretations and actionable guidance, demonstrating that technical control does not determine the distribution of interactional agency. The collaborative potential of solo gameplay therefore depends not only on the game's technical configuration but also on how participation is interactionally and pedagogically organized.

Solo games should not be dismissed as unsuitable for language classrooms simply because only one learner holds the controller. Game selection should instead account for interactional affordances and the pedagogical arrangement surrounding play. Text-rich moments, consequential choices, recurrent instructions, and pauses permitting joint attention may support collaborative activity when spectators have recognizable responsibilities. Accessibility, pacing, difficulty, and familiarity with the genre should also be considered. A solo game is not pedagogically useful by default, but controller scarcity need not be treated solely as a constraint.

A light role system may legitimize spectator participation and prevent non-controlling positions from being equated with silence. Possible responsibilities include action-oriented roles, such as player and strategy advisor; language-oriented roles, such as reader, translator, mediator, and lexical observer; and participation-management roles, such as comprehension checker and interaction facilitator. These should remain flexible responsibilities rather than rigid identities. Rotating them after a checkpoint, quest, or short interval can distribute controller access and linguistic responsibility while reducing the likelihood that confident participants monopolize translation or strategic authority. However, excessive role fragmentation may produce artificial turn-taking and weaken engagement. Teachers should therefore select only the roles needed for the task and group size.

Before gameplay, teachers can provide a concise role sheet and rehearse expressions connecting interpretation to action, such as “It means that we have to...,” “I think we should...,” and “We should read this first.” The aim is not to pre-teach every lexical item, but to provide resources for requesting or offering assistance, proposing interpretations, and delaying action while the group attends to the target language.

Selected mediation episodes can subsequently be revisited without converting gameplay into continuous correction. Learners may reformulate instructions, compare translations, reconstruct the reasoning behind a successful action, or review vocabulary recorded during play. Practical success should not, however, be equated with linguistic accuracy. A brief post-game phase can distinguish language that was sufficient for action from more accurate or idiomatic formulations. In this way, situated solutions may become explicit learning opportunities without assuming that interactional participation necessarily produces acquisition.

The teacher’s role is to make spectator participation legitimate and linguistically productive without over-instructionalizing gameplay. Mandatory translation, continuous interruption, or correction of every approximation may displace the action orientation that gives mediation its relevance. Intervention can instead focus on consequential moments, such as when the group cannot progress, an interpretation excludes other participants, a recurrent form warrants attention, or communication breaks down. Strategic use of learners’ shared languages may also support mediation when a rapid explanation enables renewed engagement with L2 content (Swain & Lapkin, 2013).

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, the study involved a small cohort in a specific university context, which limits transferability to other learner populations, proficiency levels, and instructional settings. Second, the analysis focused primarily on *Zelda*. Its narrative structure, textual density, mechanics, and single-player configuration may have shaped the practices observed; other genres and games may generate different participation patterns. The *Harry Potter* data provided contrastive cases, but these were fewer and were not intended to support a systematic comparison between games.

Third, the four practices emerged from a collection of recorded episodes selected according to their observable interactional consequences. Less visible forms of attention or assistance may therefore have remained undocumented. Participants’ interpretations of their roles and experiences were also not investigated through interviews or stimulated recall. Fourth, the analysis demonstrates opportunities for L2 engagement, mediation, and collaborative meaning-making, not durable language acquisition. No pre-tests, post-tests, or delayed measures were used to establish retention, transfer, or proficiency development. Finally, the teacher’s influence and the effects of role rotation, group composition, gaming experience, and proficiency differences were not examined systematically.

Future research could compare solo and cooperative games across genres, proficiency levels, and classroom contexts; combine interactional analysis with learner reflections; and investigate how pedagogical roles affect participation. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies could also determine whether spectator mediation supports the retention and transfer of linguistic knowledge beyond the immediate gameplay activity.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

An AI language model, M365 Copilot, supported the editing and restructuring of text originally written in French by the author. Its role was limited to translation into academic English and assistance with concision and organization. It was not used to generate or analyze data, select extracts, interpret findings, or make research decisions. The author verified all AI-assisted content and takes full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Overview of the Recordings

Note: Program labels refer to students' degree tracks: English Studies or French and English Studies. The target language of all recorded activities was French.

Rec. No.	Setting	Participants	Pseudonyms	Program	Prof. Level	Minutes	Game	Game Mode
1	Pair	2	Eva, Juan	Bilingual	B1	41	<i>Harry Potter</i>	Cooperative
2	Pair	2	Alfonso, Rodrigo	Bilingual	B1	35	<i>Harry Potter</i>	Cooperative
3	Class	7	Sofia, Leo, Ana, Enrique, Zoe, Jorge, Elsa	English	A2	29	<i>Zelda</i>	Single-player
4	Class	3	Alba, Sara, Iker	Bilingual	B1+	41	<i>Zelda</i>	Single-player
5	Class	8	Leo, Ana, Enrique, Zoe, Jorge, Emma, Raúl, Pau	English	A2	25	<i>Assassin's Creed: Valhalla</i>	Single-player
6	Class	6	Carmen, Sofia, Leo, Ana, Enrique, Zoe	English	A2	37	<i>Assassin's Creed: Valhalla</i>	Single-player
7	Class	3	Alba, Sara, Iker	Bilingual	B1+	49	<i>Assassin's Creed: Valhalla</i>	Single-player
8	Class	5	Inés, Iris, Mar, Luz, Nora	English	A1	46	<i>Zelda</i>	Single-player
9	Class	2	Iris, Mar	English	A1	40	<i>Harry Potter</i>	Cooperative
10	Class	2	Luz, Iris	English	A1	46	<i>Harry Potter</i>	Cooperative
11	Class	2	Luz, Iris	English	A1	44	<i>Zelda</i>	Single-player
12	Class	3	Iris, Inés, Luz	English	A1	43	<i>Zelda</i>	Single-player
13	Class	2	Luz, Kiko	English	A1	44	<i>Zelda</i>	Single-player



Appendix B
Profiles of the participants

Participant	Is a Gamer	Had Played the Game Used in the Session Before
Alba	No	No
Alfonso	Yes	No
Ana	Yes	Yes (<i>Zelda</i> , but not <i>Assassin's Creed</i>)
Carmen	Yes	Yes (<i>Zelda</i> , but not <i>Assassin's Creed</i>)
Elsa	Yes	Yes (<i>Zelda</i> , but not <i>Assassin's Creed</i>)
Emma	No	No
Enrique	No	No
Eva	Yes	Yes (<i>Harry Potter</i>)
Iker	No	No
Inés	No	No
Iris	No	No
Jorge	Yes	Yes (<i>Zelda</i> , but not <i>Assassin's Creed</i>)
Juan	Yes	No
Kiko	Yes	No
Leo	Yes	Yes (<i>Zelda</i> , but not <i>Assassin's Creed</i>)
Luz	No	No
Mar	No	No
Nora	Yes	No
Pau	Yes	No
Raúl	No	No
Rodrigo	Yes	No
Sara	No	No
Sofia	Yes	No
Zoe	No	No

Appendix C

Transcription conventions

Note. Transcription conventions adapted from ICOR conventions created by ICAR (ICAR, n.d.).

Symbol	English description
&	Indicates that a turn continues across several lines when it is interrupted by other speakers' turns.
=	Latching (no discernible gap between turns or utterances).
[]	Indicate the onset and end of overlapping talk.
:	Sound lengthening. Colons are repeated according to the perceived duration of the lengthening.
-	Cut-off or abandoned word.
XXX	Unintelligible segment. Each X represents approximately one syllable.
(inaud.)	Completely inaudible segment.
(example; example)	Parentheses indicate uncertainty on the part of the transcriber. When two possible transcriptions are considered, they are separated by a semicolon.
(.)	Pause shorter than 0.2 seconds.
(0.8)	Pause longer than 0.2 seconds.
<((description)) transcription>	Vocal activities (e.g., laughter, crying, reading aloud).
/\	Rising and falling intonation. Marked rises and falls are represented as // and \\, respectively.
CApitals	Perceptually salient emphasis.
((comment))	Description or transcriber's comment.
((in Spanish: sí))	Code-switching.
* + <>, etc.	Markers indicating the onset and offset of a gesture (one symbol is assigned to each participant).
----->	Indicates that a gesture continues across several transcript lines until the next boundary marker.
---->>	Indicates that a gesture continues throughout the remainder of the excerpt.

Author' Biography



Joffrey Caron holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics and is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Castilla-La Mancha (UCLM), Spain. His research focuses on conversation analysis, second-language acquisition, and the use of video games for language learning, with particular attention to interactions between learners in gaming environments.