

Using a Video Game to Improve the Language Skills of Second Language (L2) Learners in the Middle East

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This research project presents a practical evidence-based investigation into whether video games can be used to enhance the linguistic skills of adults learning English as a second language (L2) in the Middle East. It explores the possibilities of harnessing a particular video game in the form of Web 2.0 tools, as the media of online, as well as, face-to-face instruction in a post-compulsory educational environment. The project seeks to illustrate the usefulness of integrating video games for Arabic speakers studying English at a higher education institution (HEI) for six hours a day having little or no motivation. The research identifies obstacles in the learners' ability to acquire the L2, which in this case is English, in the educational system of a particular curriculum. It offers a way in which to surmount the obstacles in terms of content as well as methodology by exploring the possibility of incorporating a video game into the curriculum to provide innovative instruction for the learners. This study adopts the active or practical participatory project method in the form of an experiment or pilot study. The study describes how to play a video game proved to be advantageous to the group of learners in question in preparing for their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination through a variety of literacy practices based on the video game.

Keywords: video game, motivation, second language (L2) learners, examination, literacy practices

Introduction

In a post-compulsory educational setting funded by the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the pre-requisite for students in the foundation programme hoping to proceed to university was an academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS) band score of 5.0. There are nine bands ranging from band 1.0 to band 9.0, which is native speaker equivalency. The students needed to have an intermediate or B1 level (ranging from A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 to C2) (see Appendix I) on the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) spectrum (O'Dowd, 2007, p. 340), which they did not succeed in acquiring (see Appendix III), as their exam marks show, due to the fact that there was a huge gap between the curriculum content in Stage 1 (A1) and Stage 2 (A2) and what was being taught in Stage 3 (A2/B1).

Consequently, the students were unable to connect the information they were gleaning in Stage 3 to what they had learned in Stage 1 and Stage 2. So, finding the work too difficult to cope with, students became demotivated which brought about a further lack of success, resulting in a vicious cycle of failure and disinterest.

It was found that the reason for this great divide in the curriculum content was due to the immense amount of vocabulary in the word families that had to be contextualized and internalized, notwithstanding the various grammar points, strategies, and techniques taught on how to complete listening, reading, and writing tasks in Stage 3 with the onslaught of IELTS preparation. Since learning a language is pre-dominantly skill-oriented learning, the students eventually suffered from information overload, and subsequently, became demotivated.

Now, if these learners were considered unmotivated, as such, it is necessary to be clear as to precisely why they were so.

Motivation, according to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 3), literally means “to move” having been derived from the verb “*movere*” in Latin. They go on to say that motivation concerns the direction and magnitude of human behavior with regard to the choice of action, the persistence with it and effort expended with it (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 5).

Thus, motivation may be defined in simple terms as moving towards a prescribed target with focus and determination. So, it was crucial to develop motivation in a learner and to promote learner-autonomy by whatever means available. Since learning a second language (L2) is no mean feat (Blake, 2008), the students had to work hard to improve, not only their listening, speaking, reading, and writing competencies, but also their grammar skills with regard to syntax, punctuation, and vocabulary, which they tended to neglect in their first year of study in the foundation programme.

The Problem

Dörnyei (2014, p. 520) professed that there were two types of motivation: “extrinsic motivation” and “intrinsic motivation.” Extrinsic motivation is predominantly goal-oriented since the learner is “pursuing something as a means to an end” and is driven to study to achieve a specific goal. In intrinsic motivation, the inherent desire deep down inside, an individual prompts themselves to undertake learning for its own sake or for love of the subject being learned.

Hence, most of the learners were extrinsically motivated, as they were goal-oriented with the view to achieving a qualification, to further their education or secure a job as is evident in Appendix II. Despite the problems they faced, many students persevered to learn English, since it is currently considered by young Emiratis to be a language of power, prestige, pride, authority, and employability in a competitive world and in a modern technologically advanced age.

On the other hand, in spite of the “carrot and stick” method (Dörnyei & Czíser, 1998, p. 219), with all the rewards attached to learning in the form of extrinsic motivation, several students still lacked motivation, because they found the course uninteresting (see Appendix II & Appendix IV).

So, this is where the problem lies: the increased intensity of the workload between the first year from Stage 1 to Stage 2 and the second year from Stage 3 to Stage 4 (B1/B1⁺) (see Appendix I). Moreover, motivation as an impetus towards achievement was lacking among the learners as some of them confessed that they came merely to socialize (see Appendix II & Appendix IV).

Consequently, due to the fact that the learners were not committed to learning English, their linguistic competencies being at A2 level, were below the level required to commence IELTS preparation which should have been at B1 level. On further investigation, it was discovered that their lack of motivation was caused by the lack of inspiration in the curriculum as the students said that it was boring (see Appendix II & Appendix IV).

Hence, it was vital to improve the curriculum with regard to knowledge and understanding of the language, so that the students were ready to tackle the rigours of IELTS examination preparation. Thus, with emerging technologies changing the landscape of learning, it was deemed that the use of video games, which known as game-based language learning (GBLL) in the form of Web 2.0 tools, would prove beneficial to upgrade the learners' linguistic competencies when integrated into the teaching-learning process of the traditional classroom.

The Igniting Question

This research was a practical experiment or pilot study to find out whether the video game—*Assassin's Creed 2*, could be used to motivate reluctant learners through blended tutoring. It was used as a platform for homework wherein learners played a section of the game in English, watched a video on it, and read a segment of a text in order to be able to have discussions based on it. The students also had to complete contextual tasks in the face-to-face traditional classroom to develop their language skills.

Hence, the objective of this study was to find out the following: Can the use of a video game help to improve the linguistic skills of L2 learners in the Middle East?

The study was in the form of an experimental research project which employed the active participatory method. There were 12 students who participated in the project and were closely monitored by the researcher for the purpose of drawing conclusions for the research.

Consequently, this research may also be termed as an “action research” (Bell, 2005, p. 8) as a video game was introduced to improve the linguistic competencies and competences of 12 participants. Both primary and secondary research was undertaken in the form of a questionnaire (see Appendix II) with multi-choice questions to verify reasons for the learners' lack of motivation and the students' comments at the end to evaluate the learning (see Appendix VI). The questionnaires provided quantitative data as they were used to measure the quality of the course. The study is both a participatory and an applied research, because the students actually participated in the research (Cipano, 2009). The study was in the form of an experiment to bring about an improvement in the attitude and behaviour of the students, and to encourage motivation by engaging the learners in meaningful and participatory learning.

The methods (Cipano, 2009, p. 32) applied to collate information for quantifiable data were students' record of marks sheets with grades before the experiment (see Appendix III) and the pie chart that provided reliable proof of the learners' improvement after it which portrayed their final Level 12 (Stage 4) examination results (see Appendix V). Qualitative data was provided through the questionnaire and students' comments (see Appendix II & Appendix IV).

The research was also an applied research, as it was carried out by an individual practitioner who had identified the need for change or improvement in the curriculum. Since the aim of applied research is to arrive at recommendations for good practice, it will tackle a problem or enhance the performance of the organization and individuals through change to the rules and procedures within which they operate (Denscombe, 2002, p. 27 as cited in Bell, 2005, p. 8)

Subsequently, the results of the project were used to inform future practice wherein the curriculum content was altered.

Rationale

The main reason why a video game was chosen as a means to improve the linguistic skills of these particular learners was, because in the 21st century, emerging technologies are offering alternative ways to conceptualize and deliver education (Thompson & MacDonald, 2006, p. 1). Technology predominantly adopts “cognitive-constructivist” and “experiential” (Itin, 1999, p. 91) pedagogical approaches to learning. Thus, in this respect, video games provide innovative, practical, and experiential learning for students of all ages.

Atkinson and Hirumi (2010, p. 70) declared that as a teaching tool in the 21st century, video games might provide an effective medium for facilitating learning, and thus, promoting positive changes in students’ performance and brain function.

On a similar note, Ellis (2005, p. 8) stated that since students needed extensive input, teachers ought to create opportunities for them to receive input outside the classroom. By virtue of the fact that video games have high language content, incorporating a video game into the curriculum may prove to be efficacious to the learners to help improve their language proficiency.

In addition, Skehan (1998, as cited in Ellis, 2005, p. 2) claimed that proficiency in an L2 required that learners acquired both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions, which catered to fluency, and a rule-based competence consisting of knowledge of specific grammatical rules, which catered to complexity and accuracy.

Hence, GBLL may be an effective and beneficial form of instruction, because besides providing a repertoire of formulaic expressions, it encourages the player to think, learn, and play. Several games require the application of critical thinking skills, while others are strategy-based. Video games help to develop the players’ cognitive capabilities and, subsequently, provide an experiential learning environment as players learn by trial and error. Besides, they also experience emotional disappointment or satisfaction when they lose or win. Then, as the desire to win supersedes everything else, players determine to win a victory in the next game whatever the cost is, and so, increase their efforts in the game.

If L2 learners could apply as much determination to learning the target language as they do to winning games, then, they would indeed be motivated to learn and this motivation would enable them to succeed. This proves that the self-determination theory propounded by Deci, Vellerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) had value. Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982, p. 47) called this kind of motivation “instrumental,” because the learners’ desire to proceed with their education was the instrumental factor for learning to bring about success. Knowles (1980, p. 42) called it “goal-oriented motivation,” because the students’ motivation inspired them to achieve their goal.

Moreover, games provide a multi-sensory approach to learning. As they cater to all learning styles, they are quintessentially multi-modalities (Rama, Black, Wan Es, & Warschauer, 2012, p. 324). Just like literary novels, games are an imitation of life and players can assume different roles whilst playing. The players-learners become the protagonists, heroes, or heroines who vanquish their enemies through careful planning, maneuverings, and political strategizing which improves their critical thinking skills. Besides, learners can be what they want to be and fulfill their desires for conquest, power, and other psychological needs in the self-determination theory as they gain dominion over imaginary fantasy realms (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006, p. 2). Additionally, video games were “goal-directed games” (Cornillie, Stephen, & Desmet 2012, p. 251) which provided a motivational surge by compelling players to do their utmost to achieve the targets that the games set for them.

In the same way, Ausubel (1968, as cited in Lewis & Chen, 2010, p. 103), a proponent of the cognitive learning theory, believed that meaningful learning occurred when learners actively related new materials to their cognitive structure and reorganize their understanding of concepts.

Last but not least, the notion of introducing this innovative strategy into a conservative female L2 learning setting was considered challenging, since a rationale for doing it had to be provided (Sykes & Reinhardt, 2013) before authorized permission could be granted. So, due to the high-risk factor that it involved, it was crucial for the experiment to be successful.

Hence, for all these reasons, GBLL was deemed a more innovative and effective alternative to task-based language learning (TBLL) by the researcher. Nevertheless, they are both similar in many ways as is evident in the intervention.

Intervention Method

The video game in this project—*Assassin's Creed 2*, was used in the form of a literary novel. Students played the game at home for a period of three months and maintained a blog on their experiences and achievements playing the game. They each had their own vocabulary notebook where they wrote meanings of all the new words and terms encountered in the game. The students also engaged in a variety of literacy practices, such as writing newspaper articles, role-plays, sketches, advertisements, scene summaries, and character analyses in a literary environment.

The game—*Assassins' Creed 2*, has an historical background. Set during the Renaissance period in 1478 in Italy, it tells the story of a young assassin, Ezio Auditore, whose father and older brother are killed through a conspiracy. His mother and sister escape to a relative's home in the country, while Ezio Auditore goes on a mission to kill all the knights' templars responsible for the deaths of his father and brother. Ezio is befriended by the famous artist and scientific inventor, Leonardo da Vinci who makes weapons for him to kill his opponents with it.

The learners watched a section of the film—*Assassin's Creed 2*, a few times and made notes on it. They shared the vocabulary they encountered in the section and wrote them down in their notebooks. This was followed by a discussion based on the activities in the segment that they had watched. At home, the learners played the game independently in English. This was to serve a two-fold purpose:

1. To support understanding of the part of the film that they had watched in class;
2. To empathize with the protagonist, Ezio Auditore (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006, p. 2), so as to enable them to understand the other tasks, they had to do to improve their literacy skills.

Among the literacy tasks, the learners did were writing character sketches on the hero, Ezio, his mother, and his sister. The reasons for this were: Firstly, character sketches are an integral part of literature and literary writing; and secondly, describing people is also a crucial part in the speaking component of the IELTS examination. Candidates have to talk about a famous person that they admire, or describe the most polite person that they know in the present tense. By writing character sketches, the students were able to get a better command of the target language as corrective feedback (CF) given was more permanent and effective in the written form. CF provides learners with positive evidence of target language forms or by pushing learners to self-correct their errors (Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p. 906). Thus, by doing this, the learners were able to gain confidence to transfer the written word, the spoken word, and vice versa since writing and speaking are both productive skills and are based on the same underlying language system.

Swain and Lapkin (1995, p. 373) hypothesized that,

In producing the target language, learners may encounter a problem leading them to recognize what they do not know or know only partially. In other words, the activity of producing the target language may prompt L2 learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems.

Swain and Lapkin support Ellis and Shinatani's theory that when learners are pushed (1995, p. 373) through frequent corrective feedback to improve the accuracy of their production, it accelerates the accuracy as well as the acquisition of the target language. This principle may be applied to improve both the written and oral proficiency of L2 learners.

To further improve their proficiency the learners also had to write brief summaries of some of the sections of the film that they watched. The objective of this task was to improve their understanding of the use of the simple past and present perfect tense, which are important in the writing component of the IELTS examination. This is why the entire purpose of this study was to find a way to improve the learners' language proficiency in order to achieve an IELTS qualification. To further reinforce the use of the past tenses, based on a newspaper article on the beheading of Ezio's father and brother, a soft board display was completed as group work over a period of three continuous lessons. On the same note, students designed posters on Ezio entitled "Wanted dead or alive!"

The students did group projects on buildings, such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi, and St. Paul's Basilica in Rome. They researched information from the internet which helped them improve their interpersonal skills in groups. Group learning is an effective way to enhance learning as group members share their knowledge and experiences with one another. Apple (2006, p. 280) stated that one of the eight principles to successful collaborative learning was "simultaneous interaction" and "equal participation." So, the group leader should not be allowed to create a mini-monarchy or dictatorship within the group. Collaborative learning is highly successful, if everyone cooperates and the workload is evenly distributed among the members.

Collaborative or cooperative learning is effective, because when students work in mixed ability groups, more confident learners can help the less confident ones who can perform simple tasks, such as surfing the net for information, looking up meanings of words in their tablets, mobiles, or paper-based dictionaries, and finding pictures or photos for posters and printing them out. Shy learners feel valued, as a result, their grades improve with peer support through projects done in the traditional classroom to exploit their potential. According to sociolinguist, Vygotsky (as cited in Apple, 2006, p. 284),

Through the sharing or scaffolding of knowledge from fellow classmates, students can reach their zone of proximal development (ZPD) potential for learning. The use of "collaborative dialogue" places more emphasis on the process of learning, rather than seeing the product as a means in itself.

Thus, the process in group work is far more important than the product. Students need to enjoy their learning in order to profit from it.

In addition, the students prepared and participated in a news podcast on Ezio's return to Rome, which empowered the learners and helped relieve their L2 learning anxiety. With regard to this, E. Horwitz, M. Horwitz, and Cope (1996, p. 126) said that foreign language learners felt fairly comfortable responding to a drill or delivering prepared speeches, but tended to "freeze" in a role-play situation.

Subsequently, a video was the preferred choice as opposed to a recording, since the main aim was to enhance the learners' communication skills to help them speak confidently by looking directly at their audience.

Practising for the news podcast enabled the learners to develop their ability to speak in a free flow activity, so vital to the speaking component of the IELTS examination. The potential of this activity was visibly manifested in the learners' examination performance, which achieved the highest band score as opposed to writing which was the lowest (see Appendix V).

Finally, the learners wrote an essay on the themes running through the text of the game. Ideally, this activity should have been done first. However, the learners needed to fully comprehend and internalize the storyline presented in the game and the video through other interactive tasks, such as the discussions, group activities, and journal logs in order to achieve good grades in this particular assignment.

Evaluation

From this brief experiment on game-enhanced learning with the L2 advanced level class and its ensuing success, the use of video games may indeed be considered an effective and innovative teaching technique. Juul (2005, p. 36) said for a resource or methodology to be effective, voluntary participation was a prerequisite which ensures that everyone played the game knowingly and accepted the goal, rules, and feedback.

On a similar note, McGonigal (2013, p. 21) also reiterated that the freedom to enter or leave a game ensured that stressful and challenging work was experienced as a safe and pleasurable activity.

Notwithstanding the above statements, the learners' efforts to cooperate and their individual achievements in the tasks set, brought great rewards for them (see Appendix V). Moreover, the learners were awarded stickers and the winning groups received prizes. As some of the learners stated in their comments (see Appendix IV), the whole project was a diversion from the monotony of having to do IELTS practice papers which are tedious and boring. They claimed that it was an unusual and innovative method of teaching.

In addition, GBLL provided a plethora of benefits, as it afforded pleasure for the students who participated in diverse literacy activities in a stimulating classroom environment conducive to learning. Games are versatile resources, as they can be adapted to suit the needs of both learners and tutors who seek to provide be spoke tuition for the learners. For tutors, there are several challenges involved in devising, planning, and creating activities to enhance learners' competencies. For example, the learners needed to be engaged in literacy practices that would assist in improving their overall skills for the purpose of achieving good results in the IELTS examination. This fine balance between literary and literacy tasks created a problem that had to be surmounted if the experiment was to prove successful.

Therefore, the objectives for the tasks had to be benchmarked in IELTS standards. So, the activities that the students completed during the project were adapted accordingly, and subsequently, convinced the students that it would help them improve their linguistic skills. In doing so, the project was successful, because it provided "meaningful learning" for them (Caon, 2006, p. 10).

Conclusion

Although in this case the project was successful, some teachers might hesitate to experiment with new techniques, like GBLL. Students themselves might not want to venture into unknown waters, as they might feel reluctant to vacate their comfort zones. However, when tutors clearly see the potential of GBLL as a positive and innovative digital learning tool, they will not hesitate to use it as a viable resource in their repertoire.

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Appendix I: Council of Europe Levels

Council of Europe levels	Description
C2 Mastery	The capacity to deal with material which is academic or cognitively demanding and to use language to good effect at a level of performance which may in certain respects be more advanced than that of an average native speaker. Example: Can scan texts for relevant information, grasp main topic of text, and read almost as quickly as a native speaker does.
C1 Effective operational proficiency	The ability to communicate with the emphasis on how well it is done, in terms of appropriacy, sensitivity and the capacity to deal with unfamiliar topics. Example: Can deal with hostile questioning confidently, also, get and hold onto his/her turn to speak.
B2 Vantage	The capacity to achieve most goals and express oneself on a range of topics. Example: Can show visitors around and give a detailed description of a place.
B1 Threshold	The ability to express oneself in a limited way in familiar situations and to deal in a general way with non-routine information. Example: Can ask to open an account at a bank, provided that the procedure is straightforward.
A2 Waystage	An ability to deal with simple, straightforward information and begin to express oneself in familiar contexts. Example: Can take part in a routine conversation on simple predictable topics.
A1 Breakthrough	A basic ability to communicate and exchange information in a simple way. Example: Can ask simple questions about a menu and understand simple answers.

Appendix II: Introduction Questionnaire

Question 1: Why do you come to?

(a) to meet friends (4) (b) to pass my time (0) (c) to study English (8)

Question 2: Why are you studying English?

(a) to go to university (3) (b) to get IELTS (6) (c) to get a job (3)

Question 3: How do you find your English course?

(a) useful (3) (b) interesting (1) (c) boring (8)

Question 4: How do you like to learn?

(a) by watching videos and doing reviews (2) (b) by doing tasks (7) (c) by doing projects (3)

Question 5: Do you like to work?

(a) alone (8) (b) with a friend or an appointed partner (1) (c) in a group (3)

(The figures in the grids depict the number of students who opted for each answer)

Appendix III: Block 9 Grades for Level 9

Student number	Reading (%)	Writing (%)	Speaking (%)	Listening (%)
(1) V00032856	64	42	55	45
(2) V00033152	50	32	40	51
(3) V00021014	65	42	42	52
(4) V00032884	56	35	45	53
(5) V00032889	57	46	52	55
(6) V00035165	40	35	43	42
(7) V00032904	55	42	50	56
(8) V00034980	52	35	50	50
(9) V00035068	45	35	40	45
(10) V00032893	51	45	55	50
(11) V00037424	57	50	55	58
(12) V00033036	62	50	60	65

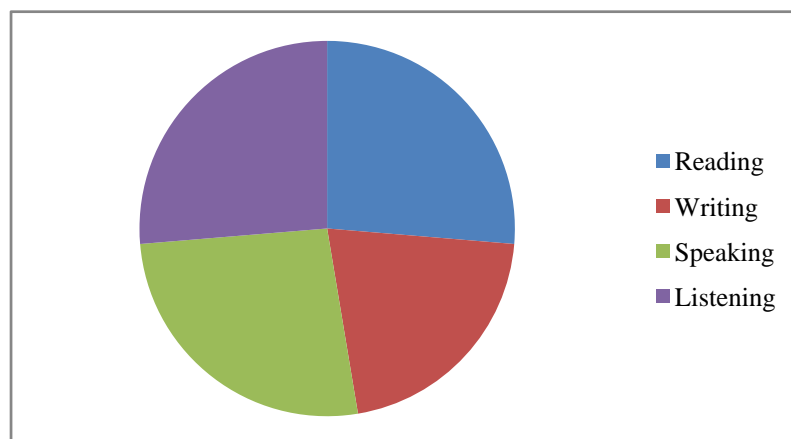
Note. The pass mark is 50. Many students scored below the pass rate and failed.

Appendix IV: Learners' Comments

1. I like it. It was very nice. I enjoy playing video games. I also like watching movies and writing tasks. I understand better.
2. I like to come to college to sit and talk with my friends. I like to drink coffee and eat chocolates and talk with my teacher. I do not like grammar. It is very difficult.
3. I like playing computer games. I enjoy the movies so much. I enjoyed the videos and the activities. I learned so much.
4. I enjoyed playing the video game and watching movies. I like history because it is interesting. I learn a lot from playing video game. I love watching movies. It is exciting. I like learning about the past. Without the past, there is no future.
5. I love this project. I like to come to class and talk with my friends and talk with my teacher. We do so much work. We play games, talk, watch videos and do many things. I do not like study English in book. I love learning English like this project.
6. I do not like playing computer games. They are boring. They are for boys. I like to write stories and watch movies and work with my friends.
7. I do not like to learn English. It is very difficult. I do not like grammar. It is boring. I like to sit and talk with my friends.
8. I like to work with my friends. I like to sit and talk with my friends.
9. I like playing video games and doing activities with my friends because we enjoy. I learn a lot like this. I do not like to study too much, only a little. This project was interesting and I learned a lot.
10. I do not like to study English. It is difficult. I think my friends help me. I like working with my friends.
11. I like watching movies, but I do not like this movie and playing video game.
12. I like watching movies, but I do not like writing. I feel tired. I like to speak with my friends and teacher and learn many things.

Appendix V: Pie Chart on Students' IELTS Results

The average scores for reading was 5.5, for writing was 4, for speaking was 5.5, and for listening was 5. So, the students improved in all the skills except in writing. This may be because the project was inclined towards literary writing, whereas IELTS writing leans more towards academic writing. However, on a positive note some of the students scored 4.5 and two got 5 in the writing examination.



Appendix VI: Learner Record of Work

Video Game Project

Student number	Character sketches	Summaries	Essay on themes	Poster	News podcast
(1) V00032856	6/10	5/10	5/10	9/10	8/10
(2) V00033152	5/10	5/10	4/10	9/10	8/10
(3) V00021014	6/10	6/10	5/10	9/10	8/10
(4) V00032884	6/10	6/10	5/10	9/10	8/10
(5) V00032889	6/10	6/10	5/10	7/10	7/10
(6) V00035165	5/10	5/10	4/10	7/10	7/10
(7) V00032904	6/10	6/10	5/10	7/10	7/10
(8) V00034980	6/10	6/10	5/10	7/10	7/10
(9) V00035068	6/10	5/10	5/10	8/10	9/10
(10) V00032893	6/10	6/10	5/10	8/10	9/10
(11) V00037424	6/10	5/10	5/10	8/10	9/10
(12) V00033036	7/10	6/10	6/10	8/10	9/10

Note. The first three tasks were individual tasks, but the last two were group activities. That is why the marks are similar. The 12 students were divided into three groups of four.