

INTEGRATING SECOND LIFE INTO AN EFL CLASSROOM: A NEW DIMENSION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The use of multi-user virtual environments (MUVes) as a learning platform has been one of the new trends in distance education recently. Second Life (SL) has gained popularity in the field of foreign language learning and teaching because of its immersive and interactive environments. This paper aims at emphasizing the prominence of SL in foreign language learning and teaching. It provides a brief history of SL use in foreign language education, defines SL as an online 3D virtual learning environment and explains how to design language learning experiences in SL. Moreover, it summarizes the benefits and drawbacks of teaching English to EFL learners in SL. It also expounds the language teacher's role in SL as well as the description of available ESL/EFL sites for learning and teaching English in SL. Lastly, it makes some recommendations for language teachers regarding the powerful use of SL as an instructional device in the classroom.

Key Words: Second life, multi-user virtual environment, language learning, language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, multi-user virtual environments (MUVes) have emerged as a powerful learning platform providing a three-dimensional, interactive learning experience for students (Dede, 2003). Second Life (SL) is the best recognized and the most favored MUVE with a user population of over eight million since its beginning in 2003 (Burgess, Slate, LeBouef, LaPrairie, 2010). This virtual environment was developed by a San Francisco based company entitled Linden Lab which specifies as its mission "[...] to connect us all to an online world that advances the human condition" (Linden Lab, 2009). Linden Lab has established a platform filled with the objects, adventures and experiences of the people deploying SL. People enter SL for such purposes including, but not limited to meeting other people, working, educating and being educated and having fun (Hundsberger, 2009).

In an educational context, SL offers a space for educators who are struggling to find out new ways to supply appealing and beneficial learning in virtual contexts. A plethora of educational institutions have constructed their virtual campuses for teaching, learning, training, or advertising purposes since Linden Lab released "Campus: Second Life" in 2004 (Cheng, Zhan, Tsai, 2010). For educational use, USA Today reported that more than 300 universities have employed SL as a pedagogical tool, with some for distance education courses, and some for use by professors to supply existing face-to-face courses (Sussman, 2007). A report prepared in 2008 asserted that nearly 1,000 educational institutions in the world utilize SL in various ways to meet different needs (Lester, 2008). A number of universities have their own SL virtual campuses (e.g., Harvard, Princeton, Drexel, Ball State, Stanford, Ohio, and Bowling Green) (Descy, 2008; Schiller, 2009).

The literature investigating the general features of virtual worlds and their potential benefits for teaching and learning has produced a long list of positive capabilities. Kalyuga (2007) revealed that virtual worlds are highly interactive since they offer dynamic feedback, learner investigation, real-time individualized task option, and analysis. Virtual worlds have other instructional benefits, such as allowing for creativity within a powerful media environment, presenting opportunities for social interaction and community creation, paving the way for cooperation, maximizing a sense of shared presence, dissolving social boundaries, decreasing social anxiety, increasing student motivation and involvement, and accommodating millennial generation learning preferences (Amichai- Hamburger & McKenna, 2006; Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Carteaux, & Tuzan, 2005; Craig, 2007; Dede, Clarke, Ketelhut, Nelson, & Bowman, 2005; FitzGerald, 2007; Gee, 2003; Kirriemuir & McFarlane, 2003; Lamb, 2006; McGee, 2007; Prensky 2006; Soukup, 2004). Related to potential benefits of SL in foreign language education, Cooke-Plagwitz (2008, 2009) listed three main benefits. Firstly, SL enables learners to develop their own avatars, which can effectively assist introverted students in participating and learning. Second, SL presents a collaborative learning environment, which stimulates students to co-build knowledge. Third, SL creates an immersive environment, which contextualizes students' language practice.

Despite its benefits to foreign language learning and teaching due to its immersive and interactive environments, SL has some drawbacks such as the cost of renting out a piece of land or a developed property to conduct virtual classroom activities, the need for high end technology, frequent technical failures, complex operational tasks and lack of user awareness (Siribaddana, 2011).

The aim of this paper is to stress the importance of second life in foreign language learning and teaching. It presents a brief history of second life use in foreign language education, describes second life as an online 3D virtual learning environment and explains how to design language learning experiences in SL. Moreover, it summarizes the benefits and drawbacks of teaching English to EFL learners in SL. Furthermore, it takes into account the language teacher's role in multi-user virtual environments as well as the description of available ESL/EFL sites for learning and teaching English in SL. Lastly, it makes some recommendations for language teachers with respect to the powerful use of SL as an instructional device in the foreign language classroom.

SECOND LIFE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Foreign language educators had utilized other types of game-focused virtual reality technologies to foreign language education for decades before SL was launched. Researchers adopted the view that VR could promote foreign language learning (Salies, 2002; Schwienhorst, 2002; Von der Emde, et al. 2001). Von et al. (2001) summarized pedagogical benefits of employing VR in foreign language learning in five aspects: (1) natural communication and content, (2) autonomous learning and peer teaching in a student-centered classroom, (3) individual learning, (4) prominence of experimentation and play, and (5) students as researchers.

Garcia-Carbonell et al. (2001) indicated that language input to enhance communicative competency seemed very restricted since language teachers normally check the students' conversation frequency, topics and responding time in traditional classrooms. Simulation and gaming, however, appear to offer a good solution to the problem that lacks language exposure beyond the classroom.

Since its emergence in 2003, SL has attracted growing and remarkable attention from researchers and practitioners, including foreign language educators due to having user-created, community-oriented characteristics (e.g., Hislope, 2008; Clark, 2009; Sykes, 2009; Wang et al., 2009; Cooke-Plagwitz, 2008, 2009; Kurisak and Luke, 2009; Henderson et al. 2009; Grant and Huang, 2010). Some research studies have focused on the effectiveness of teaching foreign languages in SL. To illustrate, Hislope (2008) indicated the perceived strengths and weaknesses of deploying SL in her intermediate Spanish course in Spring 2008 as a tool to develop more out-of-class contact with native Spanish speakers. The findings of a survey having 20 open-ended questions applied to 15 students revealed that students had both positive and negative experiences with

respect to learning Spanish in SL. The findings of the study also showed that while students liked interactive, creative, and gaming-like aspects of Second Life, they had difficulty in technical issues and the high learning curve of navigating in SL. Further, most of the students participating in the study indicated that SL could assist them in developing their comprehension of Spanish.

Clark (2009) investigated teaching hybrid Spanish courses with the instructor teaching grammar and organizing communicative activities in class while students discussing topics and doing projects in SL beyond the classroom. By constructing a Spanish *hacienda* in SL which offered further components of language and culture, the author was able to provide students with an immersion experience. Clark further asserted that with students being able to get together either in a real or virtual world to do activities, SL could be an optimum place to teach single lessons or an entire course of a traditional Spanish 1.

Sykes (2009) studied the interlanguage pragmatic improvement by learners of Spanish in MUVes regarding making appropriate requests in Spanish. The findings obtained from interview data and in-class presentation showed that learners' awareness of the complicated pragmatic issues increased via the utilization of a synthetic immersive environment. The study exhibited little improvement from pre- to posttest. However, anecdotal evidence suggested that students who were studied internalized the subtleties of making appropriate requests in Spanish.

Wang et al. (2009) discussed an ongoing research collaboration between an American university and a Chinese university, which investigated the infusion of SL into a program of teaching English as a foreign language during two semesters in China. They unearthed that Chinese EFL learners were able to, through the SL platform, suitably exchange ideas and views with native speakers of English on issues that both groups viewed as interesting. This was a highly beneficial learning experience that would not be easily achieved in real life.

Cooke-Plagwitz (2009) reported that SL was particularly useful for the students of the Net Generation whose learning styles have been immensely influenced by the evolution of information technology. Kuriscak and Luke (2009) examined language learners' SL attitudes and stressed that students liked the opportunities afforded by SL to interact with native speakers.

In addition to the studies that focus on the teaching of Spanish or English, there are other studies related to the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language in the literature. For instance, Henderson et al. (2009)'s empirical research regarding a collaborative activity described and ordered Chinese food in Mandarin in a virtual Chinese restaurant. The study revealed that there was a significant improvement between students' pre and post self-efficacy ratings which, the authors believed, was the outcome of a lesson infused into SL that maximized the students' experiential learning opportunities. The other study conducted by Grant and Huang (2010) discussed the infusion of SL as one way of addressing some issues that are existent in college level Chinese language instruction. That is, the pedagogical and logistical restrictions of formal classroom-focused curriculum, textbook-based context, and teacher-centered methodology. These researchers recommended that integrating learning into an online 3D virtual environment like SL provide learners with valuable opportunities to effectively communicate in realistic and, hence, meaningful ways.

In our times, there are three EU-funded projects which are concerned with foreign language learning in SL, namely the AVALON project (Access to Virtual and Access Learning live ONline), the NIFLAR project (Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research), and the "Talk with Me" project. Funded by the Norwegian Open University, the Kamimo project looked at teaching and learning in SL and gave teachers a place -- Kamimo Island -- to experiment with teaching in SL. A lot of the experimentation that took place on Kamimo Island has fed into the project proposal for the AVALON project. The Kamimo project was completed in 2008 and it was concluded that SL has prominent pedagogical potential owing to its immersive composition and social networking characteristics (Hundberger, 2009).

Other projects include ASimil8 that is based at University College Dublin; Avatar Languages utilizing an integration of SL, Skype, GoogleDocs and an online whiteboard; the Electronic Village Online, a professional development project and virtual extension of the TESOL Convention; Teach You Teach Me, also known as a buddy network since people are finding conversation partners in SL to teach their own language and learn the other person's language at the same time. There is also EduNation, which is a production of Consultants-E and offers training in SL by placing emphasis on language teaching and learning. The most structured virtual world language school is Language Lab which has constructed an English city in SL exclusively for its students. In this English city, students can learn English by total immersion in real-life scenarios, for example visiting a doctor or a lawyer etc. Other virtual language schools are the British Council's Learn English SL for Teens, Talkademy, and Virtlantis (Hundberger, 2009). Besides these projects, it is worth reporting that "a figure of roughly three quarters of UK universities are estimated to be actively developing or using Second Life at the institutional, departmental and/or individual academic level". (Kirriemuir, 2008, p.58).

SECOND LIFE AS AN ONLINE 3D VIRTUAL LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

SL, unlike the game-focused VR, is a multi-user-created cyber environment in which people around the world perform social interactions for a variety of purposes such as commerce, business, and education. This 3-D virtual world provides students with immersive and interactive real-life communications with people around the world, contributing to bringing great benefits to foreign language education. SL has opened new horizons to second language study (Sweley, 2008).

The degree to which input is comprehensible is highly variable in everyday contexts. However, a 3D VLE like SL enables the level of input to be better shaped to the understanding levels of specific groups of learners than is possible in similar contexts in real life. Through visual observation of the surrounding environment, interaction with objects in the environment (clicking an object to hear an audio file for pronunciation) or agents within the environment (other learners, automated non-player characters), learners can better comprehend what they cannot comprehend from text-based information (Grant & Huang, 2010).

Communication in SL can be conducted in two ways: text-based chat which can be asynchronous or synchronous and live voice chat. The communication can be organized individually or in a group format. Users can interact with one another verbally in real time, which provides another layer of genuineness to the text-based interaction. Besides communications via text messages and audio conversations, avatars can also interact with one another by utilizing simple non-verbal gestures (e.g., waving, thumbs-up). It is via these forms of communication that foreign language teachers can establish an appealing and interactive language learning context that assists language learners in hearing, deploying, and practicing the target language (Cheng, Zhan, Tsai, 2010).

Based on the learning objectives, SL classrooms can be structured to exhibit an instructional context in which specific language learning topics are displayed via well-designed graphics and colorful objects to meet the needs and expectations of learners with different learning styles. The virtual avatar presence of teachers and students contributes to a real feeling of being in a class. It can be stated that SL can present a good, attractive, and contextually appropriate platform for native speakers of a target language to interact with learners (Wang, et al., 2009).

According to Carter & Elseth (2009), a variety of instructional tactics frequently utilized in the traditional classroom are also existent in SL. To illustrate, based on the needs for instructional activities, animations, audio or video clips, PowerPoint Presentation, note cards including any information, words or phrases can be designed beyond the virtual classroom and they can be easily uploaded to SL. These materials can be linked to any object in SL and regained via a simple mouse click. The micro-worlds provide language learners with the

opportunity to interact with other people and design objects within the environment, hence contributing to the interactive composition of the world.

Lastly, SL gives language teachers the chance to record events taking place or the entire lesson conducted within the environment. After watching their own recorded video clips in SL, language teachers can evaluate their personal performances and interactions with others (Cheng, Zhan & Chen, 2010). Other colleagues can criticize the conducted lesson in terms of methodology deployed by the teacher. They can give feedback to their colleague as to pros and cons of the presented lesson. They can give helpful advice to their colleagues concerning better ways of presenting the same lesson. The same process can be done with students, too. Students can record events taking place or the entire lesson conducted within the environment and they can criticize their own language learning and development by watching their own recorded video clips in SL.

DESIGNING LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN SECOND LIFE

When designing language learning experiences in second life, the language teacher should take into account context, activities, resources and support. Learning design commences with establishing the context. This covers comprehension of both the expected learning outcomes and the students. Activities should have an overt purpose that reflect the realities of the educational context and help students to work on their own issues and deal with problems and challenges (Sharpe and Oliver, 2007, Alexander and Boud, 2001). Some researchers (e.g., Sharpe and Oliver, 2007; Mason, 2001) state that students benefit when the purpose of the learning experience and the benefits of the technology environment is expressed to them in language they comprehend.

In developing learning experiences that utilize Second Life, it may be useful to have some activities external to Second Life, for example, to include activities not possible in Second Life, to evaluate the learning, or to administer the risk that some learners have no or unreliable access (Salt, Atkins, Blackall, 2008). Although SL is a medium for synchronous and non-synchronous activities and can be highly social, hence satisfying the human contact requirements of online learning, avatars are restricted in their facial gestures at present. Observing student participation in activities and effectively intervening to stimulate and role playing in simulations may enhance the desired active participation. Lack of engagement may be brought about by both personality traits and technical challenges.

When designers admit what they presume students will do to understand, existing resources within SL should be described, and employed or customized, or shaped. The seven universal design principles (Centre for Universal Design, 2008) can show how to design these builds, i.e. develop builds that are understandable and instinctive for others to utilize; have an overtly comprehended purpose; can be utilized equally by different learners, in a variety of ways without too much effort; and, even if users do not deploy them as the builder originally aimed, they are still likely to succeed in learning. Designing for reusability is prominent for cost-effectiveness and as global citizens (W3C, 2008).

As Oliver (1999) indicates, supports contain the schedules, scaffolds, structures, encouragements, motivations, assistances and connections utilized to foster language learning. These supports can be offered via human interaction or well-designed resources. In a modern language learning context, such as Second Life, two types of support seem to be fundamental – support of educators who are not yet self-reliant in the environment or of what it presents educationally, and of students, both for their subject learning and for assistance in utilizing a new environment (Salt, Atkins, Blackall, 2008).

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH TO EFL LEARNERS IN SECOND LIFE

Benefits of Teaching English to EFL Learners in Second Life

In creating a more communicative and immersive learning experience for EFL learners, SL presents many benefits to language teachers, especially since the launch of voice. Voice in SL helps learners to talk with one another just like they do in real life environments. EFL learners can now communicate with other people (i.e. friends, colleagues, acquaintances, complete strangers) in a 3D environment regardless of where they are physically located (Vickers, 2007).

Peachey (2007) lists the main benefits of teaching English to EFL learners in second life as follows:

- Interactions: SL offers opportunities for social interactions among a group of people and their communities,
- Visualization and contextualization: It provides users with playing and creating contents, sometimes unattainable in real life, because they are distant, costly, made-up or improbable to access.
- It offers opportunities to recognize and learn about other cultures,
- It makes immersion in 3D environment simple, having a strong impression of "being present"
- Simulation: It provides playing contexts, sometimes hard to know in real life, considering them as an advantage for educational purposes (Salmon, 2009)

Hundsberger (2009) emphasizes the potential of SL to reduce performance anxiety. An avatar's anonymity, albeit being optional, can be beneficial to some students. Especially, Asian EFL learners suffer from performance anxiety in real life. Since it is not acceptable for them to make mistakes and they don't like to embarrass themselves in public, they don't speak up. At this juncture, SL helps such learners to decrease their performance anxiety.

Iribas (2007) stresses that, when deploying SL, learning experiences are maximized, because users can promote abilities, try new ideas and learn from their mistakes. SL contributes to promoting students' creativity (Mas & Marin, 2008) in that users can build different applications (e.g. avatars, museums, cities) from nothing; they should play with their imagination to deploy SL (Iribas, 2007). Lastly, it can be stated that learning English as a foreign language in SL is beneficial for EFL learners because they should not move to a physical space for taking lessons anymore because of doing it from their homes or jobs (Sanchez, 2007).

Challenges for Teaching English to EFL Learners in Second Life

Although SL offers a plethora of benefits to aid foreign language learning, it is not without some challenges. Siribaddana (2011) lists the key factors that limit the use of SL for foreign language learning and teaching as follows:

- The expenditure in renting out a piece of land or a developed property to perform virtual classroom activities can be viewed as one of the main challenges for a number of educational institutions. This not only prevents educational institutions from participating in SL but also negatively affects researchers who are enthusiastic about utilizing SL as a research tool,
- The need for high end technology: At present, the highly challenging graphical interfaces in SL necessitate a lot of resources from the hardware deployed by the participants and these highly demanding graphical interfaces in SL take much of the band width for regular operation.
- Frequent technical failures: From time to time, users can encounter technical problems and this can be comprehensible to a certain extent in that SL is a growing technology requiring patience until it achieves its upright state.
- Difficult operational tasks: For some students, the navigation and the employment of some tools will not at all be easy and can easily demotivate a person who is not so competent to utilize such technologies earlier.

- Lack of user awareness: SL, as is the case with many of the newer technologies, needs more time to infuse into areas that it had failed to reach so far. It is because of this reason that organizing a learning program via SL should take into account the user awareness and their capacity to use this technology in their learning practices.

THE LANGUAGE TEACHER'S ROLE IN SECOND LIFE

The role of the language teacher has altered and will undoubtedly encounter further proliferation as technology becomes a more basic and constant characteristic in the EFL classroom (Cronin, 2003). In a foreign language teaching environment that deploys computers and the Internet as a fundamental part of language learning, the role of the teacher undergoes a significant change from the holder of a knowledge to a position where the teacher is viewed as a guide and where the learner has more control over what she learns. This is a change in the teacher's role from the instructional, "sage on the stage", to the more facilitative, "guide on the side" (McKenzie, 1998).

Hadhrami & Penfold (2011) list the language teacher's role in second life as follows:

- A new learning context- many drawbacks
- Need for more cooperation
- Rather than competing, faculty are directed towards innovative cooperation across disciplines and national boundaries
- Instructors understand that familiar ways of delivering knowledge and information may not be as powerful in a 3D multi-user space
- A number of educators try traditional ways of teaching first, and then move them towards more student-focused pedagogies

In Collins and Berge's (2008) viewpoint, a dramatic shift in pedagogy takes place when conducting teaching in a MUVE and instructors are well-informed to conform to the guidelines below:

- The task of the instructor is to establish an environment that paves the way for the expansion of knowledge to students through constructing and investigating within MUVEs. Students' obtaining information from virtual worlds should present different kinds of stimuli and exposure to a variety of environments within SL;
- Activities within virtual worlds should be tailored to the capability of the student and the objective of the curriculum within the class;
- Lessons and objectives that can be conducted within a virtual world in place of a classroom instruction is stimulated;
- Gaining knowledge and skills via the deployment of MUVEs is a suitable and forceful device for students who are digital natives.

DESCRIPTIONS OF AVAILABLE EFL/ESL SITES FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING ENGLISH IN SECOND LIFE

There are four well-developed EFL/ESL sites for learning and teaching English in SL. One is What is Second Life English? (<http://www.esl-secondlife.blogspot.com/>). The Second Life English group has been assisting language learners and teachers in SL since 2006. Their previous activities were mainly held at the English Village in which they designed weekly team-teaching events and helped learners and teachers in a variety of ways.

The second well-designed SL site is Second Life & ESL: Learner Autonomy for the Digital Natives (<http://www.slideshare.net/bcgstanley/second-life-esl-learner-autonomy-for-the-digital-natives>). This is a self-access center. There are no plans for teaching in SL. However, there are games and quests with audio/text clues that require comprehension. The village is based on Portmerion in Wales.

The third well-developed SL site is Second Life English Village (<http://slurl.com/secondlife/English%20Village/126/130/80/?title=English%20Village>) intended as a place where language teachers from around the world can come together to “create community and collaborate as they explore the possibilities of teaching languages in Second Life” (Kay and FitzGerald, 2008). English Village provides both learning spaces and teaching tools for language teachers and makes significant use of ‘holodecks’. Taking their name from the Star Trek TV series, holodecks are pre-built scenes which can be brought into existence or swapped at the click of a button by the teacher. They provide a range of different scenes that can be used for role playing. Some of the scenes currently available are a restaurant, a bus stop, a hospital scene and a post office.

The fourth well-developed SL site is Sabio Serevi’s ESL school (<http://secondlife-education.pbworks.com/English>). Sabio Serevi is an ESL teacher creating his own space in SL to conduct classes. He conducts a regular weekly schedule of conversation, grammar, and writing courses. This site is a good example of how private language teaching is conducted in SL.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

Virtual worlds like SL are particularly appropriate for teaching and learning foreign languages. Students can immerse themselves in linguistically appropriate environments, take on roles and even identities that can offer a powerful affective and cognitive model for language performance as well as interact and collaborate with others to achieve complex goals via the deployment of pedagogically suitable media such as text, voice, and video. SL can foster competency based training such as skill, vocabulary, and grammar like other computer assisted language learning devices. However, it can also foster synchronous interaction with teachers, students and others, containing native speakers in rich creative ways (Henderson, Huang, Grant, Henderson, 2009).

Finally, SL creates an effective learning environment for EFL learners beyond traditional classroom environment. Every language teacher should utilize SL in their teaching either as a part of a totally online distance language education class or a supplement to a traditional face-to face class to provide students with a motivating, interesting and rich environment that contributes to the development of communicative competence of EFL learners in the target language. It is via using SL in language learning that students are engaged in interaction and meaningful communication. Activities used in virtual environments help students to negotiate meaning, develop their language resources, realize the way in which language is utilized, and participate in meaningful intrapersonal or interpersonal exchange. SL provides opportunities for students to enhance their own routes to language learning, progress at different rates, and have different needs and expectations with respect to language learning. SL contributes to creating a virtual community in which EFL learners can learn through collaboration and sharing. In a word, SL is the optimum platform for conducting the real foreign language teaching in an unreal learning environment.

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