Second Life calling: language learners communicating virtually across the world

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Language learners are motivated to learn when they understand a given context and are able to relate to the authenticity of the situation. Many of these activities are traditionally achieved through role-playing. In Second Life (SL), people from different corners of the globe can participate in live, synchronous communication in a shared virtual space through their virtual representations or 'avatars'. One advantage of SL for such role-play is that the focus is on the avatar, not directly on the language learner. This paper reports the results from a pilot study conducted at a New Zealand polytechnic on the perceptions of learners of English using the multi-user virtual environment of Second Life to complement their learning.

Keywords: Second Life, CALL, role-plays, synchronous communication, collaborative learning

Introduction

Since the 1960s, computer technology has played an increasingly significant role in the learning and teaching of languages. Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been an area specialising in developing and delivering methods that enable learners and educators to access language learning via this technology. CALL is described (Hubbard, 2009) as a constantly-changing field, where the technology used may improve the conditions in which language learning and practice take place, hence improving learner motivation. However, Hubbard also points out that, as it involves the use of relatively new and not fully trialled technologies, CALL may be unpredictable and time-consuming.

The advent of technology in computer assisted language learning (CALL) has contributed greatly to the field of language-learning and -teaching worldwide. This is particularly evident in the developments seen in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) technologies, which "involve every language skill and area including speaking and listening skills" (Ciekanski and Chanier (2008) cited in Deutschmann et al. 2009). The Internet continues to be instrumental in facilitating global connections and collaboration between people through improved network infrastructure, greater connection speed and Web 2.0 technologies (Frias et al, 2011; Peachey, 2010). The growth in the availability and use of Web 2.0 tools, in particular, "can provide language learners with meaningful opportunities to engage in multiple literacy practices and to construct learner identities through interactive activities in virtual communities" (Wang, C X et al., 2009 p 2).

This paper reports on a pilot study undertaken to explore the perceptions of learners of English as an Additional Language (EAL) using an Internet-enabled multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) Second Life (SL). This is considered to be a relatively new technology in CMC, and it is acknowledged in the current literature that there needs to be more research into the use and benefits of MUVEs in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Wong, 2011; Deutschmann et al. 2009; Henderson, 2010; Wu, 2012). This study aims to contribute to a wider

understanding of the current use of SL by EAL learners as a platform to promote interaction between users in order to improve their English language skills.

Learning languages in virtual worlds

One of the facets of language and language learning is the need to communicate. The benefit of a meaningful conversation in authentic situations is invaluable to language learners (Warschauer & Meskill, 2000; Krashen, 2003). However, it is not always feasible to 'create' these situations, especially in a classroom environment. Second Life provides a platform where language learners can meet and hold conversations in a multimedia-rich environment, giving the participants a sense of 'being there'. Two characteristics of a conversation in SL, which together create a unique experience, are the use of avatars and the immersive nature of the environment in which they interact. The avatar, a visual representation of the learner, is defined as "the bodily manifestation of one's self in the context of a 3D virtual world" (Savin-Baden, 2010). While the avatar is still operated and controlled by the learner, the focus shifts from the real person to the avatar, allowing the language learner to speak without 'losing face' (Wu, 2012).

Virtual worlds can provide visual stimulation in a way that is not feasible in an ordinary classroom. Learners can immerse themselves in an environment that is built by other users for the purposes of replicating an original location. Therefore, English learners can find themselves catching a double-decker bus to the British Museum without having to leave their homes. Field trips are important in language learning, but the time and cost involved in arranging them is often prohibitive. However, a virtual environment like Second Life can be used to create an immersive and authentic learning environment relatively cheaply and quickly. The virtual environment is also conducive to social and collaborative learning, as communication takes place via problem-solving and co-creating. According to Wu, "when they [learners] learned about body parts in English classes, they can only remember the basic vocabulary such as nose, face, eyebrows, etc. However, when they were making changes to their avatar, they grasped more words such as hairline, skull, and pupil..." (2012 p.5).

Autonomous learning is paramount in second language acquisition (Hourigan & Murray, 2010; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). If learners gain confidence in approaching fluent speakers of the target language in a virtual environment, they are more likely to approach them in real life situations. SL can provide the medium where language drills, prepared discussions, and even open-ended topics are tackled in as 'realistic' a manner as possible without the complications that real-life situations could impose on the learner. The environment in which language learners interact may lead to increased participation, as they are 'hiding behind their avatars' and are immersed in 'simulated situations for real-life association' (Peterson, 2010; Deutschmann et al. 2009). This concept of anonymity is raised by Wong (2011) and Wu (2012); they highlight the reluctance of learner participation due to 'losing face' when speaking English. The support gained from online peers in assisting with the use of the technology may also encourage learner-centred, problem-solving interaction in SL.

Despite the above positive perceptions of SL, Knutzen & Kennedy (2012) point out a limitation - the time zone difference for synchronous voice chats. Their research investigates a collaboration pilot project between a university in Hong Kong, China and Texas, USA. They recommend that institutions planning to collaborate on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) instruction should ideally do so in more compatible time zones, such as Australia and New Zealand. An alternative to interacting in SL is suggested by Wang & Shao (2012) if technical obstacles arise. Their research included activities involving reading and translating SL's official web site to gain insight into the virtual environment. The outcome was increased motivation to participate in SL due to its visual attraction and game-like environment.

Research Design

This research was prompted by a desire to investigate the following questions: What are the student perceptions of SL as a tool to practise English language skills? How can these perceptions be integrated into and utilised by language teaching methods? These questions arose from the following observations:

- finding language exchange partners is difficult to organise and maintain
- language practice out of class time is limited
- encouraging learners to be more independent and autonomous is a difficult task, both for the teachers and the students
- access to good materials for discussion can be limited

Consequently, the current research, of which this pilot is a part, aims to investigate the initial and ongoing perceptions of language learners using Second Life, and to identify those aspects of a virtual environment that can be leveraged to encourage autonomous language learning.

This study aims to investigate whether language learners perceived value in their Second Life experiences. In particular, it was expected that it would highlight certain aspects such as the value of having access to a widely accessible and authentic learning space providing speakers and thereby providing richer opportunities to practise the target language. It was also expected that learners would enjoy a setting that protected them from the embarrassment or loss of face that can come from classroom-based activities, and that educators would welcome the opportunity to refine their teaching strategies.

Participants and Data Collection
This pilot study collected data from three distinct groups of participants:

a) English language learners at intermediate or advanced level, corresponding to IELTS levels 4 to 9, and who were regular users of Second Life (three such learners were interviewed in-world about how they perceived their language learning to be enhanced by the use of SL);

b) twelve international students studying English in New Zealand and participating in both real life and Second Life activities (their pair and group discussions in the form of open-ended questions were observed both in class and in-world);

c) intermediate and advanced language learners from the *Cypris Chat* and *Virtlantis* SL groups were surveyed via a questionnaire (available at http://bit.ly/1harI2I) (fifteen responses were received).

Findings & Discussion

Once the data had been collected, it was analysed to identify the major themes that emerged. These themes, which are discussed below, were: immediate feedback, immersive environment, role-playing, community of practice and anonymity. Comments taken from student feedback are shown in italics.

Immediate feedback
One of the recurring themes was the presence or availability of a 'teacher' in SL. This could be an English language tutor, or a near-native speaker of English, who was willing to listen to the conversations and provide instructive feedback. In many cases, the learners' only access to another English speaker was via the Internet:
"No teachers but - volunteers/native speakers provides us those chances and it's much easier for me to attend"
Despite the lack of highly structured lessons in SL, the learners enjoyed interaction with other 'avatars', and found their immediate feedback invaluable. The conversation took the form of discussing topics that were initiated by the avatars, or suggested by the organisers in-world. The language difficulties were resolved as the communication proceeded. Some learners preferred written text, as they were able to process the information. Others felt comfortable enough to have the conversation live, with the use of a headset and microphone.

Immersive environment
Another significant aspect of SL is its immersive quality, where the learners (avatars) are in a location, or at least looking at one on a computer monitor. The ability to visualize the environment in which a learner interacts provides a 'buffer' zone to collect one's thoughts and ideas to produce the necessary appropriate language, especially in the context of subliminal learning:
"...but i wanna say that when i came to sl it was into really for learning here everybody speaks english so i started chatting in english "
"After two years I discovered English learning sims...I started voicing...Here they have activities not really classes...where you can practise speaking...it's a great opportunity and it's all for free so why not learn? Some of the stuff we have here in SL for free can cost a lot of money in real life you know"

Role-playing
Role-plays are used to set the scene for a particular language unit. It is often the concept that needs to be conveyed to the learner. Once that is achieved, the learner then practises mostly by repeating the language that is introduced. The process of 'acting it out' makes the situation realistic: *'the main reason for me to come here I can use my English actually by using voice...I don't have this type of chance in my real life in Japan. So even though I try to learn English by listening or reading but no chance to use actually so it's really good to know how much I can use'*

The Community of Practice
Community of practice in SL is paramount. Collaboration amongst the language learners, volunteering tutors and/or near-native speakers, is highly valued and regularly practised. This encourages autonomous learning, with the most valuable resource being the *other* avatars. *'This is like an English world with all the people knowing that you are learning... you're still learning...They don't expect you to be perfect and this is very*

important...you just talk and it's ok to make mistakes...it's ok to find difficulty in trying to find a certain expression...so you feel comfortable...you don't feel like pressured or stressed...and then you speak naturally"

Anonymity

Anonymity is another important characteristic of SL, as building relationships with other avatars encourages learners to practise their skills in a more relaxed manner: *"We need to be careful but once I get to know people...we share real life stuff and we become friends in Facebook etc...I mean they become like a part of us...I have some friends I have never seen them but I wish one day I can get a chance to see them in real life"*

Recommendations for educators

The potential of Second Life lies primarily in the language exchange opportunities facilitated by its immersive environment and its well-established global community of language learners and educators. The volunteers benefit reciprocally from interacting with each other, as each party can contribute to, and receive, something valuable from the exchange. Collaboration among volunteers is important for the exchange of technical, pedagogical and social expertise. Educators should be on the lookout for existing resources as there may be an expanding pool of resources that educators can make use of, including set activities for language learning purposes. Engaged students are better learners. Therefore, tasks with clear aims should lead the sessions in SL. Like any other learning environment, ongoing feedback should be sought from the learners to gauge their level of skills, interest and capability to use the technology. The integration of new technologies into current curriculum areas, rather than researched separately, is necessary to overcome any possible barriers, especially technological ones. Another area of research could be the investigation of the perceptions of EAL tutors. The field of professional development and training, especially for those new to the profession, may be a good starting point to introduce language educators to virtual worlds.

Conclusion & Future Work

Language learners, by definition, have to communicate. If an immersive environment is provided, in the company of like-minded people with similar needs (in terms of learning and practising additional languages), an optimal situation is created for informal learning. This, together with useful materials and resources, and volunteer teachers, creates an environment providing ample opportunities for both formal and informal language practice. The learners can guide each other and take ownership of their learning, creating a 'learning moment' when it suits them. The role of the educator remains that of assessor and facilitator in this environment. Once the credibility of the 'teacher' is established, the activities take place as though the parties were in a face to face situation in a classroom. This is similar to 'traditional' classroom teaching where the teacher tries to build a good rapport with students to gain their trust. However, in a virtual environment, the roles may at times be reversed as some learners of language may be expert users of the technology – a situation which is empowering for the students, as they use their new language skills to help their peers and communicate with their teacher. Our pilot study indicates that the use of Second Life, a virtual environment, can assist language learners by providing a virtual classroom at times convenient to them. The notion of having a real person to talk to, in the form of an avatar, in a location that virtually replicates an authentic situation, provides useful opportunities for autonomous language learning. Within the virtual space, the difficulties of communication can be negotiated and resolved, hence facilitating the use of new language skills in a real-life situation. Learners are empowered by having the freedom to participate in a language community when and where they choose, guided and inspired by educators taking a facilitation role rather than an instructional role. This study suggests the use of multi-user virtual environments is a beneficial adjunct to classroom-based language learning, and research is planned to investigate this further.

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