Chapter 25
Second Language Teaching in Virtual Worlds:
The Case of European College Students under the ERASMUS Program

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ABSTRACT

This project is a proposal for a case study that aims to describe and understand communicative and pedagogical processes involved in Second Life® (SL™) in a context of second language learning, by modelling in-world lessons of Portuguese as a second language for ERASMUS students[1] arriving in Portugal. The purpose is to provide examples of situated e-learning driven activities and perceive how an immersive context stimulates learning by involving students in a virtual reality situation, where real life language context situations are provoked and where 'not possible in real life' learning routines happen. This will allow experiencing the advantages of this platform compared to physical life teaching and learning contexts, through the inherent characteristics of this medium, such as the synchronous and simultaneous use of voice and text.

INTRODUCTION

Modernity has brought changes to our society and all citizens that are living and growing in this new age of knowledge feel the new canons of an incoming age (Loureiro & Bettencourt, 2009). Education, an important area of social and civilization development, cannot disregard those new changes, and may not be disconnect from ongoing changes in teaching and learning theories and practices since the last century. For that reason, teachers have being challenged to

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develop new strategies of teaching and learning, in order to accomplish the requirements of a networked society and improve the know-how of their students, in a digital age. Nowadays, we are living in the age of the "digital native" (Grewal & Harris, 2009), and due to the advantages of the social web, students "have a lot of practice of e-mailing, blogging, Googling, chatting, gaming (...) (Bekkers, 2009). They are multitasking, just like the new paradigms of education requests.

Students are no longer simple information collectors. They are now more active and reactive users. They develop and share contents and information. In fact, each of us are content builders, which is shared by a new type of communicator. However, Web 2.0 is, nowadays, an old-fashion paradigm. We are, today, in the presence of what some academics call the Web 3.0 (Loureiro & Bettencourt, 2009). This concept is related to virtual environments, interactive 3D dimensional universes that are experienced by the user with avatars, and that enable sharing, co-creation and communication to a next level in education. A new era of a real collaborative web is being explored, where "humans become more linked together (...) more networked (...) and the Internet has no limits or borders" (Veen & Vrakking, 2006, cited by Loureiro, 2009).

According with the Web 3.0 assumptions, Second Life, having itself MUVEs (Multi-User Virtual Environment) characteristics, may have huge possibilities if used for education and teaching purposes.

Our target group, for this e-learning project, are the ERASMUS college students. The ERASMUS Program was established in 1987. It is a mobility program among universities of member states of the European Union, and also of other associated states, that involves students and teachers, and allows the former to study in another country for 3, 6 or 12 months. The main goal of the program is to encourage and support students and teachers' academic mobility inside the European Union, and other European countries such as Norway, Iceland, Turkey or Liechtenstein.

In the ERASMUS program, students need to be exposed to the language of the foreign country before their period of studying abroad. This takes time and effort for languages that are recognized as being difficult. Thus, proficiency in a foreign language can explain the difference between moving students and non-moving students. Students will accept very easily to learn English and probably other widely spoken languages, but they will be more reluctant to learn other languages unless they are motivated by specific reasons (Fuller et al., 2005). SL may allow an immersive experience, and keep students motivated and focused to learn a foreign language. We have perceived that "education began, slowly, to realize that many of the attributes of great game playing, from the intellectual challenge to the provision of multiple learning styles had an immediate part of to play in learning" (Freitas & Neumann, 2009).

In this study, our focus group is the ERASMUS students who come to Portugal for studying.

THE E-LEARNING CONTEXT IN SECOND LIFE

In recent years, some educators come up with ideas of transforming existing platforms to provide rich multimedia experience, together with open-ended content creation and large global communities, the MUVEs (Kapp & O'Driscoll, 2010). The aim is to use MUVEs as an immersive learning environment to provide a new perspective of implementing situated learning or other methods through the use of new technology.

Multi-user virtual environments provide opportunities for students to explore authentic learning environments. The process of internalization results of multiple sensory inputs such as visual, auditory and tactile (Perez, 2009) because learning is embedded within the activities, the context and a specific culture. Social interaction is a critical