

Chapter 26

Teaching Foreign Languages in a Virtual World: Lesson Plans

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ABSTRACT

The author uses her teaching experience, gained both in the real world and in virtual worlds, to convey several potential foreign language activities that could be conducted in a virtual environment. The activities are presented in the form of lesson plans, which teachers should find useful for the preparation of their virtual lessons. The lesson plans follow the conventional format that is used in the USA, however, the lessons themselves are hardly conventional. They take advantage of several affordances of virtual worlds and present activities that are difficult, or even impossible, in a traditional classroom (e.g., traveling in time or traveling in space). Teachers are encouraged to use the lessons as examples of possible activities, which they can modify according to their experience, their preferences and their students' needs.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides educators with several foreign language activities that have been developed, tested, and refined specifically for use in a virtual environment. The lesson plans are accompanied

with useful hints and practical guidelines for educators for whom teaching in a virtual world is new. The hints and the guidelines are of an applied nature; however, they are written in accordance with cognitive information processing and social cognitive theories, as well as the constructivist epistemology.

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The activities are intended as starting points, which instructors may modify and customize as needed. These needs depend, first of all, on the characteristics of students in the class (their age, background, interests, language level, purpose of study, and preferences). Second, they depend on whether classes are conducted strictly as distance learning, or possibly as hybrid learning, or whether the virtual environment is used as a tool to enhance a traditional classroom (where all the students and the teacher are present in the same real-world room but they all interact in the virtual world). The material should be generalizable to most languages taught at the high-school or undergraduate level, although non-Latin scripts may require software adjustments to enable typing and display on some computers.

It is assumed that before these activities are conducted, the students already have their avatars created and are familiar with basics of *Second Life* (or an alternative virtual environment with similar features). These basics include avatar navigation (moving around, walking, running, flying, sitting down, standing up, etc.) and communication tools management (local chat, instant messenger, voice chat, and logging functions). Further, it would be useful if the students have some basic building skills (making boxes or other shapes, putting textures on those shapes, changing the color of the shapes, and manipulating the shapes).

The lesson plans in this chapter are called: “Time Machine”, “Color-Coded Galleries”, “Simon Says”, “Going to a Restaurant”, “Tour Guide”, and “Describe Your Creation”. Each of these activities takes advantage of several unique features of virtual environments. These features include flexibility regarding geography, time, and physical movement, which is restricted in traditional classrooms. Further, several activities take advantage of various interactivity possibilities, such as student-teacher interactivity, student-student interactivity, and student-content interactivity.

Using virtual environments is increasingly popular for practicing foreign languages. It is not surprising because virtual worlds provide access to native speakers “within a click”. Moreover, the meaningfulness of the interactions and the conversations with interlocutors is enhanced thanks to the culturally relevant locations (e.g. talking Italian in a pizzeria), and is further facilitated by useful communication tools (i.e. local chat, voice chat, instant messenger). For ideas of other foreign language activities or/and possibilities of using virtual worlds for language learning, see, for example, Canfield et al., 2009; Cooke-Plagwitz, 2008; Kaplan-Rakowski, 2010a; Kaplan-Rakowski, 2010b; Kaplan-Rakowski & Mizza, 2010; Molka-Danielsen & Deutschmann, 2009; Sadler, 2009; Silva & Larsen, 2010.

Connections with the culture of the target language are especially important for language learning. Therefore several of the activities in this chapter stress the ability of virtual worlds to convey historical or cultural settings that would be difficult to portray in a traditional classroom. These virtual settings may have educational value beyond foreign language instruction, and could be used as well for lessons on geography, cultural studies, anthropology, art, or history.

The lesson plans follow the conventional format used by many teachers in the USA. The plans include an introduction, warm-up, pre-assessment, input, guided practice, independent practice, closure, and assessment based on objectives. Where appropriate, some of these components are purposely omitted, depending on the characteristics of the lesson. The components of each lesson plan also include its title, topic, expected level of the target audience, general description of the lesson plan, lesson objectives, required materials, and estimated time required. Further, at the end of each lesson plan there is a section with additional comments, where the author provides supplemental material, suggestions, and possible modifications to the plan.

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