Chapter 23

Teaching Grammar in Virtual Worlds:
The Case of the English Present Simple Tense

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ABSTRACT

The main aims of the chapter are to investigate the use of ActiveWorlds (AW) for teaching the English simple present tense as compared to traditional instruction and to find out the difference between the use of AW and traditional teaching when it comes to individual students. In the theoretical part, issues concerning virtual worlds are highlighted and some germane studies are discussed. The empirical part presents the outcome of the quasi-experimental study. It comprised three lessons and two groups of Polish senior high school students: the experimental group was subjected to instruction in AW and the control group was taught in a traditional way. The data were obtained by means of grammar tests and a post-questionnaire. The results show that both groups benefited from the instruction they received; however, the experimental learners' retention of the said grammar item turned out to be much superior when compared with the controls. In addition, the experimental students expressed more positive opinions on the lessons. Implications and future research directions are also offered.

INTRODUCTION

Second Life, ActiveWorlds, or in general 3D VWs, are defined as persistent virtual environments in which people experience others as being there with them and where they interact with them (Schroeder, 2002, p. 2) or as immersive and social environments where learners can visit relevant locations online and meet with others for real-time (voice or text) conversations (Vickers, 2010, p. 75). Virtual worlds can also be understood as computer media that allow many users to simultaneously access the same computer generated space as virtual placeholders called avatars. (Kim, Lee, & Thomas, 2012, p. 3)

Virtual worlds can be used as a learning environment in an online course (Petrakou, 2010), since they provide a unique environment for language teachers and learners who are separated by distance to engage in social activities (Bronack, Riedl, & Tashner, 2006). They can be utilized in interactions between text chat and audio modalities for L2 communication and feedback (Wigham & Chanier, 2015). Virtual worlds can also increase students' confidence and help to overcome cultural barriers in studying the target language (Zheng, Young, Brewer, & Wagner, 2009). When compared with computer-mediated communication (CMC) interaction, the combination of text chat with personal avatars offers students access to multiple communication channels. For example, avatars can exhibit a choice of non-verbal communication cues that are difficult to reproduce in other sorts of synchronous CMC (cf. Peterson, 2008). Virtual worlds also offer a simulation of space (i.e. the ability to project a simulation of 3D space or spatial aspect) (cf. Hew & Cheung, 2010) and experiential space in which students learn by doing and observe the outcomes of their actions (Chee, 2007).

Despite such benefits, empirical research on the use of virtual worlds in foreign language learning and teaching is still in its infancy, particularly when it comes to utilizing such worlds in teaching grammar. The present paper aimed at partly rectifying this problem by conducting a *quasi-experimental* study which investigated the usefulness of employing the virtual world *ActiveWorlds* and its chatting utility in English as a foreign language classes to teach a group of Polish senior high school students the present simple tense. It was the belief of the author of the paper that the use of *ActiveWorlds* could be more beneficial for teaching the said grammar item than traditional classroom setting because students could use it in communication, thus making the learning of the grammar structure in question more motivating and meaningful for them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Three-dimensional virtual worlds (e.g. *Second Life*, *OpenSim, Quest Atlantis*) have made an important contribution to the field of language education (Wang, 2017). One of such worlds, i.e. *ActiveWorlds* (AW) originated from developers in San Diego, USA in 1994 (de Freitas, 2008). This virtual world was originally known as *AlphaWorld* and was officially opened in 1995 (Reis, Escudeiro, & Escudeiro, 2011). According to the AW's website (https://www.activeworlds.com/web/cabout.php), this virtual world hosts a free Universe of over 600 3D virtual reality worlds with its most popular being *AlphaWorld*. In these worlds clients or language learners can choose from an array of avatars that are appropriate to their (perceived) personality and choose unique names for themselves. In addition, students can move around and perform a variety of activities (e.g. play games, do shopping, make friends, build a virtual house). Visitors to this virtual world enter it through the *ActiveWorlds* browser and navigate in 3D virtual environments built by others (Kotsilieris & Dimopoulou, 2013).

Language learners can log in to a virtual world (e.g. *AlphaWorld*) as personalized avatars, i.e. graphical, three-dimensional representations of real people (Topol, 2011). As avatars they can perform a set of actions (e.g. they can walk, run, fly, nod, raise a hand, show enthusiasm), teleport to different places, share digital artifacts or manipulate in-world objects (Kozlova & Priven, 2015; Wang, 2017).

There have been a number of research projects that incorporate foreign/second language teaching/learning into these complex virtual environments (e.g. *Second Life*, *ActiveWorlds*). Such studies concentrated, among other things, on interactions between language learners (e.g. Peterson 2005, 2006; Hadjistassou & Molka-Danielsen, 2016), oral performance (e.g. Lan, Kan, Sung, & Chung, 2016), foreign

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