

Chapter 15

Task Design for Language Learning in an Embodied Environment

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ABSTRACT

3D voice-enabled MUVes are increasingly being used in education and in the area of language learning, and teaching is no exception. In this chapter, the authors will examine the affordances that MUVes offer in this field, starting with a brief overview of the various theoretical frameworks underpinning successful teaching and learning of languages in general and how they apply to MUVes. The authors then highlight a range of issues arising from a team's extensive practical experience in material design in the embodied environment of Second Life. These considerations include many possible avenues for follow up by researchers. Finally, they provide some examples of task design to bring these issues into focus.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61692-822-3.ch015

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALISATION, OBJECTIVES AND OVERVIEW

Achieving a degree of proficiency in at least one of English, Mandarin or Spanish as a second language is a prerequisite for most educational policy systems in the 21st century. Indeed, competence in English is considered by many governments around the world to rank alongside ICT proficiency as a universal life skill at the heart of primary and secondary education (Graddol, 2006). It is equally widely accepted that the most advantageous way of learning a language is immersion—to do so living and practicing with native speakers in the target language community. Clearly, this option is only open to a minority of people who find themselves at a suitable life stage and with the means to do so. Virtual worlds however, especially if voice enabled, are particularly suited to language learning and offer the potential for second language study without the need for world travel.

MUVEs provide a radically new context for the language classroom, creating opportunities to adapt and customize the educational environment as never before—and creating a number of methodological questions as well. The pedagogy of second language acquisition in formal education depends heavily on the role of the participants, the flexibility of the environment and the overall resources available. Task-based learning, in combination with competency guidelines, has proven to be an effective approach for teaching in virtual worlds, particularly in *Second Life* (www.secondlife.com). Practice, though, indicates a need for re-evaluation of existing assumptions of classroom management, skills development, participation and the use of materials, to name a few.

In this chapter, we will discuss these concerns as impacted by embodiment on task design and contrast this to real life learning situations. LanguageLab.com, a private company operating within Second Life, built a virtual city to support language learning in 2005 and, over several years,

a community of educators worked on a variety of projects exploring the potential of teaching English and Spanish formally and informally in a MUVE. The teaching and learning experiences which form the basis of this chapter can thus be considered a reflection on praxis, referring to a series of ongoing case studies within the LanguageLab.com environment.

The objectives set in this chapter are two-fold:

- To provide an overview of the various theoretical frameworks underpinning successful teaching and learning of languages in a MUVE highlighting avenues for possible follow up by researchers
- To provide the basis of good practice in the field of language learning for practitioners to implement and build on.

BACKGROUND: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND ITS RELATION TO PEDAGOGY

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the study of how second and foreign languages are acquired. SLA is closely related to language pedagogy and its findings are relevant to the field of foreign language teaching. In order to better understand the relevance of SLA to the field of foreign language education, an overview of the main concerns of SLA is provided.

What Constitutes Knowledge of Language?

The aim of language study is to achieve communicative competence (Canale & Swaine, 1980), which refers to the ability to use language appropriately for the communication context. According to Canale & Swaine (1980), in order for a speaker to be communicatively competent they have to master four components: grammatical,

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