

Chapter 17

Foreign Language Instruction in a Virtual Environment: An Examination of Potential Activities

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ABSTRACT

The chapter conveys the experiences of using the virtual world Second Life (SL) to supplement classroom-based instruction of an introductory foreign language class. With attention given to the needs of educators and instructional designers, as well as students, the author presents selected activities, along with detailed practical plans and theoretical justifications for those activities. She follows by discussing the technological characteristics of SL (communication features, logging features, and features used to ease activity preparation) that the author found to be of particular pedagogical value in her instruction. The importance of situated cognition, cultural relevance, self-pacing, students' autonomy, and interactivity with diminished inhibition is examined as well.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual worlds increasingly provide instructional tools that allow students and teachers to create a dynamic learning environment. These three-dimensional virtual spaces, entirely created by their residents, form highly collaborative and authentic contexts that can allow for more meaningful learning than traditional classrooms. One of the most popular virtual worlds, *Second Life* (SL), provides tools which make it possible to

create innovative, dynamic and pedagogically-sound activities. The option of building or, in virtual lingo, “rezzing,” allows instructors to tailor material to specific pedagogical needs (Kaplan-Rakowski & Loh, 2010).

The existing literature displays the growing interest of educators in employing multi-user virtual environments to supplement, or even replace, the classroom (Roussou, 2004; Foreman & Borkman, 2007; Lim, Nonis, & Hedberg, 2006; Dickey, 2005; Dieterle & Clarke, 2008). Seeing SL as a paradise for dynamic instruction, teachers of many fields have been using this virtual world. Those fields

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include art, business, health education, interior design, writing, urban planning and design, theatre, military science, and many more. Both instructors and researchers have been exploring the potential of this virtual world in order to better define how these environments could facilitate and promote learning (Coffman & Klinger, 2007; Kaplan-Rakowski & Loh, 2010; Dickey, 2005; Salmon, 2009; Schwienhorst, 2002).

For foreign language instruction, virtual environments display certain particularly useful characteristics; these include unique communication tools and immersive settings facilitating situated learning. In the past, foreign language students were limited to a classroom space filled with artificiality, where only pictures of Shanghai were to remind them that they needed to speak Chinese. Now, thanks to the existence of virtual worlds, students can easily and instantaneously teleport to a virtual China. Once there, thousands of native speakers (or more precisely, their avatars) are available for students to converse with and practice their Chinese. This venue makes learning potentially more meaningful and sets it in a relevant context. Therefore, much of the artificiality of the traditional classroom has been removed.

Due to the particular advantages of virtual worlds for learning foreign languages, it comes as no surprise that “language learning is the most common education-based activity in *Second Life*” - as Joe Miller, Linden Lab Vice President of Platform and Technology Development claims (<http://www.virtualworldsnews.com/2009/05/out-of-stealth-8d-taps-language-learners-bots-microtransactions.html>).

Indeed, the affordances of *Second Life* for foreign language instruction have been leading to increased focus from educators (Molka-Danielsen & Deutschmann, 2009; Cooke-Plagwitz, 2008; Wang, Song, Xia, & Yan, 2009; Canfield, Kaplan-Rakowski, Sadler, Volle & Thibeault, 2009;

Molka-Danielsen, Richardson, Deutchmann & Carter, 2007). For example, CALICO (The Computer-Assisted Language Instruction Consortium), a leading foreign language education association that focuses on teaching languages with technology, devotes an increasing amount of conference slots for presentations on virtual world language learning. Another sign of growing attention is revealed by the numerous projects conducted within SL that involve language learning. Hundsberger (2009) lists several of those projects. They include the NIFLAR project (Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research), The Kamimo project, the AVALON project (Access to Virtual and Access Learning live ONline), and the Talk with Me project. Those projects explore the possibilities that foreign language students can have for education in virtual settings. Another potential endeavor in SL is called Teach You Teach Me - Second Life Language Buddy Network. Thanks to this network, language learners can find SL conversation partners speaking their target language.

The rapid growth of foreign language instruction within SL suggests that there exists an increasing need for a reference which instructors can use as a starting point in learning how to incorporate virtual worlds such as SL into their classes. This chapter provides such a reference by guiding the reader through activities which illustrate the useful features of SL that facilitate innovative and effective instruction.

The following sections of the chapter showcase selected activities conducted in SL. The author describes the activities, and provides annotations referring readers to the theoretical underpinnings that follow, explaining the rationale behind the activity design. Following the showcase, the author concludes with a discussion of the most valuable technological and pedagogical aspects of instruction in a virtual world.

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