

Chapter 45

Integrating the Real and Virtual World for Academic Language Education in Second Life

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) study conducted in virtual worlds that could help teachers in terms of knowledge about acquisition processes, in which technology is integration between formal and non formal education. The research comprises of two studies strongly focused on the development of Italian oral language proficiency. It was held within Second Life® (SL™)¹ in order to explore the affordances of public spaces to enhance Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)² and to stimulate the oral production through learner’s engagement. Since 2007, a new pilot project, Café Italia, was developed by Carmela Dell’Aria (aka Misy Ferraris) in Second Life®. Starting from theory and research (SLA and Linguistics) the project leads to effective language learning practice. As matter of fact, the research moves to analyze learners’ needs, to give a focus for instruction, to adapt technology to their needs through experimentation, and to evaluate the results.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant increase in the popularity of virtual worlds, and their significance as mediums for enabling personal learning environment (PLE)³ is never more evident. Virtual worlds (VWs) are a type of online community that takes the form of a computer-based simulated environment through which users can interact with one another, using objects and creating content (Ka-

plan & Haenlein, 2010). Virtual Worlds include those such as Second Life®, a 3D online virtual community which allows you to:

develop your own online community by using Second Life Groups... Use groups to hook up with people who share your interests, or use them to build a web presence for your new Second Life business. Group members can easily keep in touch with each other, develop their virtual land together, and set dates to meet up (Second Life’s blog).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2122-0.ch045

Figure 1. Characters in Second Life (2010)



In Second Life® (see Figure 1) users can act and interact via a digital representation, an avatar, which is described as:

a digital persona that you can create and customize. It's you — only in 3D. You can create an avatar that resembles your real life or create an alternate identity. The only limit is your imagination (Second Life's blog).

Everyone can arrange a personal learning environment to manage and plan different educational resources, using and interacting with them in a personal way. In consideration of the emerging social behavior, the design of online educational environments is overcoming the limits of the traditional virtual learning environment and the difficulties of the PLE, in order to focus the attention on the concept of a “person in place.” This is based on the centrality of the person, who lives educational experiences in a place full of social relationships and technologically advanced, and where people can find an appropriate support to the development of their experiences. The frame of the virtual learning place (VLP) should include all elements that support the interaction, the social

learning and the link with real life. Their fulfillment should be considered a practical example of technological progress, pedagogical experimentation, and a new educational strategy practicable at any level. For this reason our action research counts the design and realization of a pilot project, Café Italia, with small groups of academic students. It aims to offer alternative tools for language teaching and new practices in accordance with different approaches and methodologies such as SLA, multiple intelligences, constructivism, neuroscience, multi-competence, process drama, and prosody approach. Working simultaneously on both the teacher training (teaching process and teacher's skills profile) and learning process, we want to take in consideration the problems with language teaching and learning. According to SLA, the project offers an experiential contribution to the management of students' motivation and involvement by the affordances of virtual worlds (VWs). The project has as goals to:

- Make the foreign learner more active and motivate.
- Make the teachers aware of the VWs' affordances and limits.

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