Chapter 37
Immersion and Interaction via Avatars within Google Street View:
Opening Possibilities beyond Traditional Cultural Learning

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ABSTRACT

The optimal approach to learning a target culture is to experience it in its real-life context through interaction. The new 3D virtual world platform under consideration, Blue Mars Lite, enables users to be immersed in existing Google Maps Street View panorama, globally. Google Maps with Street View contains a massive collection of 360-degree street-level images of the most popular places worldwide. The authors explore the possibility of integrating these global panoramas, in which multiple users can explore, discuss, and role-play, into the classroom. The goal of this chapter is to shed new light on merging Google Street View with the 3D virtual world for cultural learning purposes. This approach shows itself to be a promising teaching method that can help EFL learners to develop positive attitudes toward the target culture and cultural learning in this new cultural setting.

INTRODUCTION

Learning through engagement and immersion in cultural context offers promising possibilities for cultural learning. Cultural context plays an important role in contributing to the expansion of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' cultural learning. In the EFL context, the fact that learners are physically situated *outside* the target culture means that teaching cultural content from textbooks in a structured context, e.g., in EFL classrooms, becomes the norm. However, it is well-recognized that culture is best learned when learners are completely immersed in a natural or real-world cultural setting, rather than learning it in the classroom, in an artificial and compartmentalized way. Thanks to innovative new technologies, possibilities exist for target culture learning through immersion in "real-world" settings, even in the EFL context.

Google Maps with Street View allows users to discover the real world via 360-degree street-level imagery (Google Maps Street View, n.d.). Of late, thanks to panorama technology and the debut of Google Street View in 2007, users can explore natural landscapes, cities, rural areas, buildings, and artifacts, worldwide by engaging in virtual sightseeing at street level. Additionally, users can plan, navigate, and enjoy a virtual trip, such as hiking the Grand Canyon, and can visit the interiors of buildings, such as restaurants and stores, using panoramic view virtual tours offered by Google Street Business Photos, on their computers or mobile devices.

Google Street View enables users to explore places in a variety of contexts, worldwide. In the process, it opens up many new and exciting possibilities for language and culture learning, and broadens learners' immersion experiences. The use of Google Street View in daily life is closely linked to language and culture learning, due to the technology's ability to simulate what would otherwise usually only occur through immersion in the real-world context. According to Avatar Languages,

…the program [Google Street View] allows us to virtually explore a location and it therefore offers immersive experiences similar to a 3D virtual world. Of course, 3D virtual worlds are also social spaces, where fellow users can meet each other and this is not the case with Street View. … Google Street View is a useful and everyday tool, so it is easily incorporated into real-life activities that offer language learning opportunities (Avatar Languages, n.d., para 5).

Google Street View also provides culture-authentic materials for cultural learning. Learners can be exposed to authentic materials which supply them with authentic inputs. The authentic materials, including visual materials such as street signs, public artworks, ads, artifacts, and realia, stimulate follow-up conversations, communication, and interaction, be it face-to-face or through the use of computer-mediated communication tools. The use of authentic materials plays an important role in fostering cultural learning, and has a beneficial effect on cultural learning. Google Street View brings the real world into the classroom, allows users to employ target language for real-life purposes and to benefit from the cultural immersion, and triggers student-student and student-instructor interactions.

Google Street View is similar to 3D virtual environments, in that both provide "immersive experiences" as mentioned in the previous citation. On the other hand, Google Street View does not provide a social space like Second Life does, in the form of a virtual environment where people can meet, communicate, and interact directly with one another "in-world." As a result, and based on her own experiences, it occurred to the researchers that some users may feel lonely while engaged in Google Street View sightseeing, and might prefer to have company while exploring. For language learners in particular, Street View brings real-world contexts and authentic materials to the language classroom, but is still limited in terms of its beneficial effect due to the inherent

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