

”SECOND LIFE” IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Abstract

The article describes the possibilities of the virtual environment “Second Life” in second language acquisition in the context of informatization of the contemporary society.

Key words: Blended learning, virtual learning environment, Second Life, second language acquisition.

Introduction

Economic pressures from budget cuts and the rising cost of education continue to mount. While students are forced to pay higher tuition fees and even drop classes, educators are obligated to creatively «do more with less» by designing curriculum that accommodates economic constraints. For forward-thinking educational institutions committed to the cost-effective employment of emerging technologies for communication, collaboration and learning, blended learning amplifies the ongoing mission to deliver world class education.

Blended Learning

The term *blended learning* has been in use for almost 20 years and its meaning according to Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts, and Francis ‘has been constantly changing during this period’ [5].

It was first used in the corporate world to refer to a course designed to allow workers to both continue in the workplace and study. Rather than taking time out on a residential seminar, training was delivered via (for example) self-study manuals, videos, and the web. Blended learning was in part adopted as a cost-saving measure [2].

In the world of education, three definitions of blended learning are especially relevant.

Definition 1: a combination of face-to-face and online teaching.

'The integrated combination of traditional learning with web based on-line approaches' [4, p.17]. This is, arguably, the classic definition of the term. 'Traditional learning' here is classroom teaching or 'face-to-face' language lessons. The delivery of the online part of the course is usually through learning technologies, typically involving a Virtual Learning Environment such as "Blackboard", "Moodle" or "Second Life" and comprising the use of Learning Management Systems ("The Learning Manager", "Conductor", "LearnerWeb" etc.), blog tools ("Blogger", "Manila", "Free Open Diary" etc.), assessment tools ("Perception", "Quiz Rocket", "Test Generator" etc.), audio tools ("Acid Pro", "Peak", "Sonar" etc.), video tools ("Movie Maker", "Premiere", "VideoStudio") etc. [3].

Definition 2: a combination of technologies.

'The combination of media and tools employed in an e-learning environment' [4, p.17]. This definition could describe a purely distance learning course, where no face-to-face lessons occur. Communication between the learner and e-tutor may take place through any number of technologies, such as email and internet telephone.

Definition 3: a combination of methodologies.

'The combination of a number of pedagogic approaches, irrespective of the learning technology used'[4, p.17]. A course that combines 'transmission' and 'constructivist' approaches would fit into this category, such as one involving element of a present-practice-produce methodology as well as task-based learning.

In this article, following Oliver and Trigwell, we indicate blended learning as a combination of traditional with web based on-line approaches.

How the use of the term *blended learning* might develop in the future is not clear. Westbrook [6, p.13] has argued that it may be becoming diluted because the large number of definitions it has attracted means that almost any approach can be defined as BL. The term may therefore become redundant. However, *blended learning* is likely to remain an important concept in language teaching since its overall focus is concerned with the search for 'best practice', i.e. the attempt to identify the optimum mix of course delivery in order to provide the most effective language learning experience.

At the present moment the term continues to develop. A further possible conceptualization of *blended learning* is as 'a combination of real world plus in-world', where a teacher delivers a face-to-face lesson and then arranges to meet a student for a follow-up class in a virtual world such as "Second Life" [1, p.36].

About Second Life

Second Life (SL) is a virtual world developed by Linden Lab. It was launched on June 23, 2003, and is accessible on the Internet. A free client program called the Viewer enables its users, called Residents, to interact with each other through avatars. Residents can explore, meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade virtual property and services with one another, or travel throughout the world (which residents refer to as «the grid»). Second Life is for people aged 18 and over, while Teen Second Life is for people aged 13 to 17.

Built into the software is a three-dimensional modeling tool based around simple geometric shapes that allows a resident to build virtual objects. This can be used in combination with the Linden Scripting Language which can be used to add functionality to objects. The Second Life Terms of Service provide that users retain copyright for any content they create, and the server and client provide simple digital rights management functions [8].

Second Life's status as a virtual world, a computer game, or a talker, is frequently debated. Unlike a traditional computer game, Second Life does not have a designated objective, nor traditional game play mechanics or rules. As it does not have any stipulated goals it is irrelevant to talk about winning or losing in relation to Second Life. Likewise, unlike a traditional talker, Second Life contains an extensive world that can be explored and interacted with, and it can be used purely as a creative tool set if the user so chooses.

There are over one hundred regions used for educational purposes covering subjects such as chemistry and English. For language teaching and learning the AVALON project was launched in 2009 in Second Life.

About AVALON

The AVALON project (Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONLINE) is a two-year project funded by the European Commission as a part of the Education and Culture DG Lifelong Learning Programme. This project aims to:

- create and test out exemplar tasks and activities designed to promote communication amongst the learning community. These materials will be based on work being carried out currently and these tasks and activities will be located in linked 2 & 3D environments and will be made available for future users. These will be accompanied by best practice guidelines for the users;

- create and pilot a training course for teachers who would like to extend their e-learning skills to include virtual teaching worlds. This course will run for the first time during the project and will be offered after the project has finished as an extension of the LANCELOT School as a separate validated and internationally recognized qualification. The materials for running the course will also be available for any other enterprise wishing to run the qualification. 2 & 3D materials will be stored for future use [7].

Creating the materials and training course will involve a broad sample of the target language learning and teaching communities. This will lead to a further promotion of the benefits of the use of 3D worlds in the development of real world language skills. It will also feed back its results and findings into the wider 3D educational community.

Second Life's persistent virtual environments enable students to work together synchronously and then return, individually or as a team. The learning space is always available, not just for geographically dispersed groups but even those who meet regularly in the physical world. This is particularly useful when students require more flexible schedules or need to work asynchronously on the same project.

Second Life amplifies learning beyond capabilities afforded by teleconference calls and web presentation tools but it also creates opportunities for field trips inside virtual organs, machines and other environments that go far beyond the walls of traditional learning spaces. Training simulations are

also incredibly powerful in Second Life because they simulate complex processes in the physical world and avatars can take on different roles to enhance learning. Already, many prominent educational institutions and organizations understand it and are creating virtual learning environments to deliver a wide range of courses, field trips, and events.

There's a reason why over 700 educational institutions from all over the world are in Second Life today – the advantages of learning in immersive 3D environments are many. Learning in Second Life can cut universities' costs and help reach and retain more students. Dozens of highly successful projects are proving that Second Life can be as effective as traditional classrooms and for many students it's an even more effective learning environment. In a few words, Second Life as an educational platform is engaging and it works.

There are many distance learning technologies, but Second Life is probably one of the best because it actually feels like you're «there» when you're inworld, and it caters to many kinds of learners – visual, auditory, and experiential. Second Life also demands participation; if you walk away from your computer, or discontinue using your keyboard or mouse for a few minutes, your avatar slumps forward – asleep – and everyone else in the virtual space can visibly see that you're not paying attention. Students don't disengage or get bored when there are so many interesting ways to explore and learn in Second Life. It's a powerful simulation, modeling, and data visualization tool.

Learning today has expanded far beyond books and lessons. In our global society, learning includes creating new understanding, respect, and appreciation for different people and cultures. A powerful way to create bridges is to collaborate with one of the 700+ educational institutions globally in Second Life. Many learning institutions have created joint learning programs in Second Life with great success. Using the various collaboration tools in Second Life, and the Second Life Education and Research e-mail listservs, it's easy to connect with other teachers and professors in Second Life who are open to collaborating, sharing, and creating joint learning

programs. Because Second Life accommodates synchronous and asynchronous learning, time zones start to melt away — as do differences between people.

Additionally, Second Life is an ideal learning environment for many disabled students as it provides greater accessibility than traditional campuses, as proven by the Second Life community Virtual Ability. There is one more element to consider – environment.

Taking care of the environment by reducing our carbon footprint is no longer a nice idea – It's a mandate for businesses, governments, and educational institutions from around the world. By reducing the need for travel and meeting in a virtual classroom, schools can save millions of carbon pounds from entering our environment. Although virtual worlds require energy to power computers and servers, the environmental impact is minimal by comparison. Intel recently published a case study on Second Life data centers and validated that claim.

Research has uncovered development, teaching and/or learning activities which use Second Life in over 80 percent of UK universities. At least 700 universities around the world teach courses or conduct research in Second Life. New educational institutions have also emerged that operate exclusively within Second Life, taking advantage of the platform to deliver content to a world wide audience at low cost [7].

Conclusion

It is clearly seen that virtual worlds can solve many of the challenges faced by educational institutions. Today, hundreds of colleges, universities, and other learning organizations—from nearly every country—are either augmenting their current curriculum with a virtual learning component or they are holding classes and entire programs exclusively in immersive learning environments in Second Life.

The author of the article is now a member of AVALON and LANCELOT teams and has experienced some of its possibilities thanks to colleagues from the University of West Bohemia (Czech Republic), which are currently participating in the Project.

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