

Second Life® as a virtual platform for language education

Christel Schneider, Luisa Panichi

E-mail: christel.schneider@icc-languages.eu, panichi@cli.unipi.it

ICC International Language Network (Germany), Centro Linguistico Interdipartimentale - Università di Pisa (Italy)

Abstract

Online Learning is often described by its participants as isolated because of the lack of community. With recent developments and web 2.0 applications new tools are available that allow teachers and students to meet online in ways that are comparable with face-to-face events. This paper would like to introduce Second Life® (SL) a Multi-User Virtual Environment as a virtual platform for foreign language education and learner engagement. SL is a 3D virtual world accessible via the Internet. A free client programme enables its users to interact with each other through 'Avatars'. An 'avatar' is the graphical representation of a computer user representing himself/herself or alter ego. Recent literature in the field endorses SL as a particularly appropriate platform for the development of oral language proficiency in distance education, collaborative and intercultural learning contexts and vocational training. The authors in particular would like to share their experience from the ongoing European project **AVALON** for the design, testing and implementation of language teaching and learning in Second Life. Avalon (Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONLINE) is a 2 year multilateral project funded under the EU EACEA Life Long Learning Programme and runs until December 2010. The 26 participating European partners include 10 state funded universities and 16 other public and private organisations operating in the following areas: language education, teacher training, intercultural training, language testing and certification, online education, publishing, business communication and networking, design of 3D environments and language learning in Second Life®. The project is a transversal programme which targets language learners from the Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus and Grundtvig communities. Not only does the project aim to create a platform in which these diverse learning communities can come together but it also has a particular interest in providing access to technology and language learning to learners in remote locations. Furthermore, part of the resources of the AVALON project will be allocated to the development of a 50 hour introductory teacher training course for teachers who are new to SL and wish to take an experimental approach. Indeed, the ultimate aim of the project is not only to provide access to virtual environments for teaching and learning of languages but also to ensure the establishment of a sustainable community of practitioners and users which will outlive the project itself. This paper will thus illustrate the action learning process through which best practice models are being developed. These models will be discussed in relation to established and ongoing research in the field and in particular in terms of their role in fostering successful learning outcomes in the virtual world of SL. Finally, this paper will provide examples of learning scenarios that have been designed and are being implemented under the project including courses for Debating and Academic English, Business English, Italian for Beginners, English for the Catering Industry and Tandem language learning set-ups.

Learning English in the classroom and in the forum: what is university students' perception of their interaction in these two contexts?

Patricia Arnaiz Castro, Canaria y José Luis Ortega Martín

E-mail: parnaiz@dde.ulpgc.es, ortegam@ugr.es
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran (Spain), Universidad de Granada (Spain)

Abstract

An interesting consensus of experienced online course designers and teachers is that 'properly designed' hybrid courses consisting of in-class time and online time provide the most beneficial results, combining the advantages of both types of instruction delivery. Such hybrid online courses are said to provide more guidance, and help students stay focused on their learning. However, there are few empirical studies to date which have assessed the effectiveness of hybrid online language courses.

Studies on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) have reported several benefits for language learning. CMC, for example, does not demand for competition and provides for more equal participation. It also enables introverted learners to interact with others. A further advantage would be that the NNs in CMC environments have the possibility to reexamine and edit the text-based conversations. They therefore become more aware of the language structures that they and their peers are using to compose messages. Having the advantage of seeing the postings on the screens may lead to self realisation and hence self-correction (Dekhinet, 2008:412).

The type of CMC system our research deals with is the one which occurs at different times, namely, asynchronous. Asynchronous CMC places conditions on language use that are considerably different from those of face-to-face classroom discussion. Perhaps most important for the support of reflective discussion is that asynchronous CMC does not impose any time constraints, which allows participants to work at their own pace.

Our study investigates the perception of university English language learners of their participation in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and their perception of their participation in the classroom. And a relationship is established between their perception and the marks obtained in a subject corresponding to the second year of their Teaching degree. Two groups of students between the ages of 20 and 40 registered in the subject in two consecutive academic years (2007-2008 and 2008-2009) responded to a questionnaire designed ad hoc on their perceptions of these two contexts for interaction. Moodle has been the software used to communicate with the students.

Participants were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale their degree of agreement on 16 statements related with the two learning contexts mentioned above. The data were analysed and transferred to SPSS 16.0 to calculate descriptive statistics, the t-student, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and correlations between the different variables. The results obtained suggest that the CMC may be beneficial for those learners who find it difficult to participate in face-to face sessions. For those learners with a high degree of participation in class the CMC may act as a complement to their language learning process.

Our research can contribute to a better understanding of the implications of integrating technology in TESOL. Also, we suggest that future research could try to focus on the relationship between second language learning and other psychological mediators.