

Virtual Learning, Real Heritage Benefits and Challenges of Virtual Worlds for the Learning of Indigenous Minority Languages

¹Mats Deutschmann, ²Hanna Outakoski, ³Luisa Panichi, ⁴Christel Schneider

E-mail: mats.deutschmann@miun.se, hanna.outakoski@samiska.umu.se, panichi@cli.unipi.it,
christel.schneider@icc-languages.eu

¹Mid Sweden University (Sweden), ²Umeå University (Sweden), ³Università di Pisa (Italy), ⁴ICC International Language Network (Germany)

Abstract

This paper will present the Island of Avalon Learning in the virtual world of Second Life® (SL). Avalon Learning has been created under the ongoing European project AVALON for the design, testing and implementation of language teaching and learning in virtual worlds. Avalon (Access to Virtual and Action Learning live ONline) is a 2 year multilateral project funded under the EU EACEA Life Long Learning Programme (LLP) 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 virtual worlds. 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. The ultimate aim of the project is to create both a virtual environment and a sustainable community of practitioners and users which will outlive the project itself.

Recent literature in the field endorses virtual worlds as a particularly appropriate platform for the development of oral language proficiency in distance education, collaborative and intercultural learning contexts and vocational training. The free client programme of Second Life®, for example, is a 3D virtual world accessible via the Internet and which 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 and communication with others is possible via both voice and text chat.

Examples of learning scenarios from the Beginners Course of North Sami carried out in conjunction with the Avalon project will help to illustrate some of the benefits and challenges of using virtual worlds for the teaching and learning of languages in general and for indigenous minority languages in particular. Some of the benefits include the provision of online synchronous communication for linguistic communities which are dispersed over vast geographical areas, the co/re-construction of cultural and linguistic identity, opportunities for authentic language contact between native, heritage and L2 learners, the unparalleled creative dimension of the platform in particular in terms of individual and collaborative building and learner movement and freedom within the environment. This paper will conclude with a discussion of some of the challenges of using virtual worlds as a distance education platform in different language education contexts and how they may be overcome.