



Task-based Language Teaching and Collaborative Problem-solving with Second Life: A Case Study of Japanese EFL Learners

Michael Thomas

E-mail: mthomas4@uclan.ac.uk

University of Central Lancashire (United Kingdom)

Abstract

With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies over the last five years, it has been argued that immersive 3D virtual worlds provide opportunities for language learners to engage in authentic language use and collaborative communicative tasks (Molka-Danielsen & Deutschmann, 2009). While in Japan a task-based approach is starting to win favour among government policy makers, where its functional and situated approach to learning leads advocates to see it as a successor to communicative language teaching (CLT), few studies have considered the importance of a technology-mediated task-based approach (Thomas & Reinders, 2010).

This paper explores the behaviour and perceptions of a group of Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language in the virtual world of Second Life focused on exploring learner behaviour vis-à-vis a task-based language teaching approach utilising collaborative problem-solving tasks. Participants in the study comprised 25 lower intermediate English language learners at a Japanese university, studying on an intensive course in fifteen 90-minute class periods spread over one week. An ethnographic approach was used in which learner behaviour was examined with the use of recorded video data of classroom and computer screen activity aided by ad hoc interviews with learners. A series of collaborative negotiation tasks connected with the development of a research-based task to be carried out in Second Life with native or non-native speakers of English were established. A final team presentation task reflecting on learners' research in Second Life completed the task cycle. Whereas Japanese learners of English are typically perceived as being resistant to collaborative activities, have low motivation, and prefer rote learning, findings from the research indicated that the use of authentic language learning contexts enhanced learner motivation and willingness to collaborate. Nevertheless, resistance to the use of the target language during the learners' task preparation and reflection on the success or failure of task completion, remained a significant obstacle. The paper calls for more research on the use of virtual worlds aided by a task-based language teaching approach with Asian learners of English.