

## **Second Life as Tool to Enhance Language Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence.**

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### **Abstract**

One of the objectives of the European project NIFLAR (Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research, 2009-2010) is to improve the teaching of foreign languages focusing on intercultural awareness using synchronous digital communication environments in a blended learning system. One of those environments being Second Life.

Within the project, as well as being a platform for teacher training programmes, interaction tasks are being created to promote meaningful cross-cultural communication. These pedagogical tasks, that have been developed for intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Byram, Nichols & Stevens, 2001; Hinkel 1999; Kramsch, 1993, 1998; Muller-Jacquier, 2003) and in which intercultural awareness (Tomalin & Stemplesky, 1993) and authentic social interaction (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne 2006) are central, have been conceived to play a bigger role than the ones being performed in current classroom-based foreign language education.

Second Life has given us the opportunity to be able to enrich the foreign language learning context and at the same time to promote the learner's autonomy (teacher was never present during interactions) by placing learner and interaction at the centre of the learning process (Tudor, 1996; van Lier, 1996).

The project was integrated in the university of Utrecht as a blended learning experience in the first year Spanish language course at B1 proficiency level. This Second Life group consisted of 14 foreign language students [Utrecht] that participated in couples with 7 native speakers, pre-service teachers [Valencia]. The participants for this group were selected at random from the course members, whereas the remaining students were allocated, also at random, to be part of a video-web communication group and a control group, who did not participate in networked interaction sessions with native speakers and only followed the normal language course. Five tasks were developed: tasks that were in line with their coursebook and that were carried out after the corresponding unit had been dealt with in the classroom. The interactions lasted an average of 90 minutes and were scheduled to take place once a week in a time span of five weeks.

Participants followed a series of tutorials to get acquainted with Second Life, all sessions have been recorded and pre and post-tests as well as pre and post-questionnaires were completed after each task. Although some technical problems were encountered throughout the project [Internet connection, Second Life configurations, recording of sessions], these did not prevent a highly positive evaluation of their experience. Preliminary results seem to indicate that the participants think it helped them to broaden their intercultural competence, that they found the interactions motivating and challenging and that at the same time they did not feel like classroom assignments. It is also rewarding to know that when asked if they would like a project like this to be part of their language course they all answered "yes!".



In this presentation we will describe the process used in this project, from task elaboration to student organization, as well as show some interaction samples and share the preliminary results, hoping that our findings provide ideas so others can implement them at their institutions.