

Second life: Anxiety-free language learning?

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Abstract

Second Life is a virtual world that was created by Linden Labs in 2003 and that can be easily downloaded and accessed over the Internet. In the last few years, there has been a dramatic increase in its use as an educational tool. There are currently over 300 higher education institutions from all over the world that own a virtual campus in Second Life. A large number of interesting educational projects can be found across a range of subject areas, including language learning and teaching. This paper will explore the advantages offered by Second Life for language learning. More specifically, Second Life will be presented as a potential alternative platform for oral and written communication between language learners that may have a positive impact in the affective variables that come into play when learning a language, i.e. self-esteem, motivation and, particularly, anxiety. According to research carried out in the field of Sociology, computer-mediated communication seems to favour uninhibited behaviour and decreased self-awareness. This may have an impact in anxiety level and in order to test this hypothesis, an experiment will be completed involving face to face communication and communication in a virtual environment. The aim will be to determine whether anxiety levels in both settings defer.

Introduction

The use of games and virtual worlds in education has experienced a steady increase in recent years, and educational institutions and practitioners have drawn attention to their potential for teaching and learning (De Freitas, 2007). Second Life (SL) is the virtual world for choice amongst most educators (Inman et al., 2010: 45) and a growing number of research studies are being published on the subject (Bradshaw, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Bell, 2009).

This study aims to determine the extent to which SL may be an appropriate platform for language learning taking into account the importance of affective variables such as anxiety and the effects that Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and anonymity have in users. An introduction to SL and its main characteristics will be presented in the first part of this article, followed by two sections devoted to CMC and foreign language anxiety. The final part describes the experiment that will be carried out in SL aiming to explore the research question set out above.

SL -Origins and Affordances

Despite the fact that SL was launched as a social network, it seems to have achieved more success as an educational tool. There is now a section on education in SL's main website¹, as well as an Education

¹ <http://education.secondlife.com/>



Directory² listing the academic institutions present in this virtual world. SL has been described as the most sophisticated virtual world in terms of graphics quality and immersive capability (Warburton, 2009: 418) and, although it may be perceived as a videogame, this is not an accurate description, as there are no goals to be achieved. The user, or rather their graphical representation or avatar, moves around freely and interacts with the world and the other residents. SL integrates a chat and a voice tool to communicate inworld, both of which are extremely valuable for language learning. In fact, many innovative projects and experiments are being developed in this field in higher and secondary education (Henderson et al., 2009; Schneider & Panichi, 2009).

But what makes SL an interesting tool for language learning? Is this a case of using technology for the sake of it? Virtual worlds have been described as “the future of human interaction” (Zhu et al., 2007: 201) and consulting agencies such as Gartner Inc. predicted a few years back that 80% of Internet users would be registered in a virtual world by 2011 (Salmon, 2009: 528). SL offers a combination of features that may have an encouraging effect in students, particularly in language learners.

The first and most obvious characteristic is its graphic realism, which helps users immerse in this new world and feel that they are actually there. Avatars can perform a wide range of actions -they can walk, run, fly, dance and, most importantly, they can interact with each other thanks to the chat and voice tools already mentioned. All this combined gives the user a sense of presence, making SL a highly immersive experience. Immersion has been said to have a positive impact in students' motivation (Warburton, 2009: 421), which is, in turn, an essential ingredient for successful language learning (Dörnyei, 2001). Immersion encourages learners to engage (Jenkins, 2005) and, as Pholke (2007: 20) emphasises, it “changes the role of the user from passive contemplation to active participation”. If motivation and engagement are two of the effects that SL can awaken in its users, it may be an appropriate tool for language learning.

Another interesting aspect is that in SL teachers can create the scenarios that they may need for their language classes and even replicate real places, thus enabling them to design activities that they would not be able to run in a classroom. Users can build whatever they want -provided that they have the technical expertise required to do so. This particular point has been mentioned as one of the technical barriers presented by SL (Warburton, 2009: 422); however, building everything from scratch is not the only option available. There are hundreds of already designed items that can be purchased in SL's shopping section³. Their price varies according to size and complexity, but there is an array of objects for just a few Linden Dollars and even for free. Holodecks also offer interesting possibilities, as they can instantly generate different scenarios. This is particularly useful for role-play activities, as it enables us to host meaningful tasks replicating real-like settings.

SL is an online environment. This means that it can be accessed anywhere in the world with a fast Internet connection, a reasonably powerful computer and a SL user account. SL can thus eliminate distance, which is no longer a barrier when it comes to having native speakers “in our classroom”. Language tandem activities can be scheduled during and/or after class time, giving students the opportunity to engage in meaningful speaking practice with real native speakers of the language being learned. There are other Voice Over Internet Protocol applications such as Skype or Messenger that can be used for that purpose, but SL adds the immersive capability and the versatility mentioned above.

² <http://edudirectory.secondlife.com/>

³ https://www.xstreetsl.com/modules.php?name=Marketplace&lang=en_US



Immersion, graphical realism, virtual geographical mobility, multiple scenario availability, potential to access native-speaking users, written and oral communication capability... all these elements should help create a motivating and compelling environment for students, as they make language activities meaningful, and as close to real life as they can be within the classroom walls. The alternative (speaking Spanish to an English-speaking peer) is not quite as exciting and is likely to cause students to reverse to English in minutes, unless they are extremely committed learners or they know that using a language other than Spanish in the classroom is penalised. But there is yet another potential advantage of using SL as a language learning tool: the anonymity provided by this environment may help reduce the fear to social feedback, which quite often hinders students' progress.

SL and the Effects of Anonymity

Just like Skype and Messenger, SL is also a form of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). One of the most prominent features of CMC is that users can remain anonymous. In SL, users are “hidden” behind their avatars and their fake identities. They can even hide their voice if they choose to communicate via chat. This anonymity can have interesting effects in CMC users and, in fact, it is a topic that has been widely researched in the fields of psychology and sociology.

Research shows that anonymity brings about lack of identifiability and weak social feedback, which, in turn, can lead to uninhibited behaviour (Kiesler et al., 1985: 99). As Spears & Lea (1994: 430) put it, CMC allows us to “express one’s true mind, our authentic self, unfettered by concerns of self-presentation”. In addition to this and according to Kiesler’s seminal studies (1985: 81), CMC decreases self-awareness “reducing introspection and concern about how others will react”.

All these qualities (i.e.: weak social feedback, uninhibited behaviour and decreased self-awareness) are extremely relevant -and beneficial- for language learning. Some of the most important barriers stopping students from using the foreign language are related to their inhibitions and their fear of negative criticism. Bearing this in mind, SL might be an appropriate platform for language learning. Additionally, these features might help create a low-anxiety environment and, as it is explained in the following section, the role of affective variables such as anxiety, motivation and self-esteem is key for successful language learning.

SL and the Effects of Anxiety

Affective variables in language learning have been widely researched since the late 70s, when Dulay and Burt (1977) started to talk about the Socio-affective Filter. According to these authors, motivation, self-esteem and anxiety play an important role in language learning. The higher the motivation and self-confidence and the lower the anxiety levels, the more likely students will be to succeed in learning a new language (ibid.: 30). Language tutors are thus encouraged to create low-anxiety environments and highly motivating activities.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has been perhaps the most researched of all three variables. Horwitz et al. (1986) developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), which comprises a total of 33 items scored on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The FLCAS is the most widely used instrument to measure foreign language anxiety and it has been found to be reliable across a range of languages. Scholars have also focused on the anxiety caused by the specific skills involved in language use. Speaking seems to be the most anxiety-generating activity, and research on the matter is abundant (Horwitz, 2001; Young, 1991; Pichette, 2009). FLA can have a number of



negative effects on students, including worry, errors, forgetfulness, communication apprehension or absenteeism (Young, 1991). It seems to be triggered when students feel that their self-identity or self-concept is threatened by their limited ability to express themselves (Horwitz et al., 1986; Young, 1991). In an experiment carried out by Kim, students claimed that they felt anxious when speaking spontaneously, in front of peers and due to fear of negative evaluation (Kim, 2009: 153).

In SL students might not feel as exposed as they do in a normal classroom. As Henderson et al (2009: 466) put it, “Virtual presence can result in reduced apprehension and embarrassment that otherwise can impede experimentation such as through role playing”. The fact is that users seem to feel shielded behind their avatars (Carter and Click, 2006; Rosell-Aguilar, 2006) and their anonymity may decrease the fear of negative evaluation. This, however, is still to be tested, and the experiment described below has been designed as an attempt to shed some light on the matter.

SL Experiment

The proposed experiment sets out to test the hypothesis that language anxiety levels may be lower when communicating in SL than in a face-to-face setting. Our subjects will be students registered on year 2 in the BA in Spanish at Roehampton University (London). An equivalent number of Erasmus students studying at Roehampton University will be recruited.

The experiment will be developed in two stages. The first session will be Face to Face (FtF); students will be paired up randomly (a native English speaker with a native Spanish speaker) and they will be asked to complete a number of speaking activities. At the end of the session, students will be administered a FLCAS test together with a number of open-ended questions regarding the aspects that make them feel anxious when speaking a foreign language in a FtF context. The second session will be held in Roehampton University’s Second Life’s virtual campus. It will involve the same native English students but different native Spanish students; they will be paired randomly and will be presented with several oral activities. Upon completion, they will be asked to fill in a FLCAS test as well as a small number of open-ended questions regarding the anxiety-provoking elements that they may have encountered in SL. A shorter version of the standard FLCAS test, including only questions related to speaking anxiety, will be used for both sessions. Results from both FLCAS tests will be compared in order to find if there is a significant difference in the anxiety experienced by students in both environments.

Conclusion

This article presents SL as a potential alternative environment for language teaching and learning and sets out an experiment that may shed some light on SL’s appropriateness for that purpose. It is acknowledged that the proposed study presents a number of limitations, such as the low number of students participating in the experiment and that the instruments used are based on students’ impressions. Further research is needed and empirical methods such as Galvanic Skin response tests and/or heart rate monitoring shall be used at a later stage of this research study.

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