

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

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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 [4]. While in Japan a task-based (TBLT) approach is starting to win favour among government policy makers [18], 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. This paper explores the behaviour and perceptions of a group of Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the virtual world of Second Life (SL) focused on learner behaviour vis-à-vis a task-based language teaching approach utilising collaborative problem-solving tasks. Participants in the study comprised 24 lower intermediate English language learners at a private Japanese university, studying on an intensive course in fourteen 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 informal interviews with two pairs of 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. 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.

1. Introduction

Students who entered higher education in the first decade of the twenty-first century have grown up in a world in which digital technologies have changed the nature of reading, writing and communication [9]. For teachers and learners of foreign languages, particularly English, the impact of digital technologies on the use of language and communication cannot be ignored. These technologies present learners with opportunities for increased access to authentic materials and contexts for language use, as well as for dialogues with native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) and encourage more interactive, collaborative and learner-centred teaching and learning approaches. In educational theory, recent sociocultural perspectives underline the importance of collaborative pedagogical tasks for achieving more authentic language learning environments [3]. Indeed, as far back as 2001 Chapelle explored the interface between computer-assisted language learning (CALL), task-based learning (TBL) and second language acquisition (SLA) [1]. Although written almost a decade ago, Chapelle's understanding of the potential relationship between task-based language learning and technology remains largely unfulfilled [6]. The research has explored debates in SLA and TBLT such as negotiation of meaning, noticing, focus on form, and complexity of L2 practice, but has often adopted modes of task design that owe more to presence-based environments than computer-mediated ones.

Second, although TBLT has developed an increasing amount of research over the last two to three decades, it has until recently rarely explored using technology in non-Western contexts such as Asia. Given the limitations of current task-based approaches such as these, Ortega [6] argues that future research on TBLT and technology needs to consider more “real-world” spaces such as online “open social spaces, gaming, [and] immersive environments” if the potential encounter between them is to be realised. This paper responds to both Ortega [6] and Chapelle [1] by reporting on a study examining Japanese learners’ attitudes to a task-based approach inside the virtual world of Second Life. The purpose of this study is to examine how the use of the 3D virtual world Second Life has been used to aid a task-based language teaching approach.

2. Background

2.1 Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

At the same time as the so-called generation of “digital natives” were being born, task-based approaches started appearing in the early 1980s in the field of language learning. Task-based language learning owes a great deal to early research by Prabhu [10] who posited the importance of problem-solving activities and the task as a structuring principle of syllabus design in opposition to the prevalent form of linguistic syllabus which was organized according to a linear mastery of linguistic forms [15]. Tasks evolved by placing an emphasis on interaction, cognitive processing and authentic language use through negotiation of meaning [2]. Pica, Kanagy and Falodun [8] indicated that negotiation of meaning is related to increased levels of interactive tasks [5]. Research on interactive tasks emphasized how they produced greater complexity and accuracy in terms of output than non-interactive tasks, which tend to focus more on fluency [13]. In addition, research on task planning indicates that it improves performance in accuracy and fluency [6].

2.2 CALL and Web 2.0 Applications

Developments over the last five years in Web 2.0 applications, however, suggest a renewed interest in a task-based approach utilising technology [14]. Research to date has been rather limited in terms of empirical studies, though numerous euphoric claims have been made about Web 2.0’s potential to transform education in general [7]. Web 2.0 is related to a new attitude towards the use of Internet technology, emphasizing the development of a truly networked environment in which new applications are automatically updated online. Whereas the first generation of the Web is popularly conceived of as a one-dimensional “read only” experience, the applications associated with Web 2.0 enable users to interact with the “read-write” Web in which they can actively contribute their own content.

2.3 Virtual Worlds and Language Learning

For researchers who examine language learning in virtual worlds, a number of areas of interest emerge [17]. These include research on improvements in learner attentiveness to pedagogical activities as well as general classroom behaviour and participation [11]. Research confirmed that students’ satisfaction with learning in virtual worlds like Second Life was high when using authentic tasks, and argued that learners reported on significant opportunities for enhanced levels of engagement in online environments [12]. Typically virtual worlds (VWs) have been identified as learning environments which promote opportunities for constructivist-led pedagogies in which learners can engage in text and latterly voice chat activities connected with problem-solving, collaborative learning, knowledge-building and role playing activities [16]. Building on MOOs’ emphasis on encouraging a developed first person level of engagement, VWs continue this by developing a richer experience for participants. Typically constructivist approaches which underline the importance of collaborative or social engagement as the basis for learning, have been closely identified with the use of Web 2.0 applications in education.

3. Methodology

This paper examines findings from a qualitative case study of learners using a task-based approach in a 3D virtual world. The study involves two pairs of students chosen from 25 third and fourth year undergraduate English major students at a private university in central Japan. Data was collected during one week in August 2009 and included researcher observations, field notes, informal interviews, and video recordings of the four students working in pairs at their computer screens, as well as the use of a video capture application (Jing.com) to capture screen activity.

3.1 Participants

The context for this research was an intensive English course entitled, "Computers and Communication". All 25 (m=10, f=15) students enrolled on the course agreed to voluntarily participate in the data collection process. The two pairs of students selected for the data collection were chosen based on convenience as I was the teacher of the class and therefore had easy access to them. The course was chosen as it was the only course that specifically required students to engage with technology and communication and did not require an existing knowledge of the subject. Students therefore were expected to have a range of aptitudes and perspectives on the use of technology in the language classroom. A classroom poll at the beginning of the class identified that none of the students had previously used Second Life and none were conscious of having used a task-based language teaching approach.

3.2 Intensive English Courses

The syllabus of the intensive course examines a number of different learning outcomes which are associated with the use different tasks and the necessary English computer applications to achieve them. The web-based applications include Bubbl.us (a collaborative mind mapping tool), SurveyMonkey (an online survey tool), GarageBand (an application for making podcasts), iMovie (for recording videos), and Second Life. The defined task cycle identified how learners have to work together to produce an interview about how residents of Second Life view their affiliation with the virtual world. Students were responsible for planning, developing and carrying out the interview with native and non-native speakers of English in Second Life, preferably via voice chat or text chat if necessary. The results of the survey would be reported during a recorded video presentation created using iMovie. Appropriate grammar functions and language awareness would be addressed during this final phase of the cycle, and therefore allow learners to explore the tasks with a primary focus on negotiation of meaning and problem-solving activities using their existing interlanguage.

4. Findings

At the beginning of the course learners were given an overview of TBLT. This was contrasted with the communicative language teaching approach (CLT) and grammar translation method (GMT) with which they had mostly been familiar in English language classes in Japan. Particular emphasis was placed on the active and collaborative nature of student participation in TBLT as opposed to GMT; the positioning of grammar activity during the report phase of the task-cycle as opposed to at the beginning of a CLT class; and the emphasis on the use of authentic situations in TBLT as opposed to GMT.

Early tasks in the task cycle, collaborating on a mind map and using the web-based Bubbl.us mind mapping tool, had familiarized learners with the principle of sharing in a computer-mediated context. Learners quickly adapted to the environment and were able to explore the application following an initial introduction by the instructor. Though learners were spatially distant in an open plan classroom, they were able to communicate across this space, particularly using the inbuilt text chat facility. Inhibitions felt by students in typical language classrooms in Japan were discarded during the students' immersion in SL, and the sense of anonymity, enabled them to communicate with a wider range of learners in more animated ways.

In a classroom environment the use of the VW contributed to learner collaboration. It also brought learners closer to authentic English language speakers and enhanced opportunities for collaboration and target language usage via text and voice chat. Learners were observed planning and evaluating their language learning tasks, thus enabling potentially richer engagement with native and non-native speakers. The task-based approach can be described as encouraging a form of situated learning. Learners were also observed acting as mentors for other group members, both in smaller teams as well as in the wider class.

The environment provided authentic activities and the learners experienced immersion in a range of examples of virtual cities, locations and buildings. Learners' took a keen interest in the design of their 3D avatars and repeatedly returned to refine their in-world images, activities that suggested a high degree of involvement with their characters and a high degree of embodiment. Rather than acting as mere observers of language learning activity, their heightened sense of virtual embodiment gave them opportunities to continuously participate in independent ways, adopting a first person level of engagement, rather than in the few opportunities afforded by typical classroom environments in Japan.

The VW enhanced student motivation and provided them with potentially more resources online to aid them with their English language tasks. For example, access to online translation and dictionary tools were widely available. Rather than engage in passive listening and textbook directed learning, learners had to actively explore their new environment, discovering new pathways for themselves, reflecting and making decisions as they progressed.

Learners' development as coaches, however, was restricted by their reluctance to use English and typically coaching took place in Japanese. Instructions to learners in English were directed to the whole group, smaller groups and individuals. In turn learners were able to become expert modellers of instructions and aid other learners in the process of using the technology. Learners therefore adopted a range of roles and taught other students as they solved various problems, both language and technology related.

Learners fully exploited the online communicative features including text chat and student perspectives underlined how this contributed to integrated forms of cooperative or collaborative learning. Although the layout of the computer room is open plan and encourages learners to cooperate, it often produces pockets where learners do not directly face the front of the class and can therefore become isolated. While the adoption of multiple roles did a great deal to encourage greater interactivity, collaboration and motivation between learners, the dominance of Japanese, unless otherwise commented upon by me in my role as an instructor, tended to neutralize some of the acquired advantages.

5. Conclusion

The 3D virtual world of Second Life provides an online environment in which authentic language learning within a task-based framework can be explored. While the students overcame significant barriers to participation, and all became more active and motivated in their language learning tasks, significant challenges were also presented by the research. Most significantly, students preferred text chatting in a combination of English and Japanese over engaging in spoken discourse in English with native and non-native speakers. Second, students overwhelmingly relied on the use of their L1 (Japanese) for communicating during the preparation and collaborative stages of the tasks. This calls into question the gains made in motivation and engagement. In future developing strategies which encourage students to engage with each other in the target language in all phases of the task cycle need to be articulated to overcome this significant obstacle to meaningful collaboration in an online language learning context using a 3D virtual world. While further research is required to fully examine the different aspects of VWs in language learning contexts, this case study suggests ways in which Second Life can present language learners in Japan with significant opportunities for enhanced collaboration using a task-based approach.

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