
An Analysis of Second Life in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: Exploring its Potential

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I. Abstract

The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in language learning and teaching has greatly increased in the last decade. Among the different technological tools used in the learning process, virtual worlds have gained popularity among educators and students (e.g. Warburton, 2009; Wang & Burton, 2012; Zhang, 2012; Duncan et al., 2012). This article explores the different possibilities the virtual world *Second Life* (SL) offers in the language learning process. SL is an online virtual world where residents all over the globe can interact through their avatars by which they can collaborate and learn in an experimental way. This paper offers a theoretical approach about the potential of SL in foreign language education. Firstly, it explores the use of this platform in education, explaining its origins, evolution and current changes. Secondly, it will focus on the advantages and disadvantages of the use of this virtual world for learning languages, paying special attention to the different learning environments, the students' motivation, and the educational activities amongst others. This paper will conclude with a section of pedagogical implications in which an activity will be proposed to show the different implications of SL in a foreign language classroom. Students will have to work on four different activities that will be based on one of the main four language skills that are established by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): writing, speaking, listening and reading. After explaining the activity, special attention will be paid to the strengths and weaknesses of this specific task.

Keywords: Second Life, Virtual Worlds, resident, avatar, Foreign Language Learning.

II. Introduction

Second Life (henceforth SL) is an online virtual world that was launched in 2003 and developed by Linden Lab (Senges, 2007). It can be easily downloaded and accessed online, and anyone can create a user account for free. SL users are called residents and they can interact with each other through their avatars. Residents can visit many destinations, meet other residents, play games, do business, socialize, and of course, most importantly learn languages among many other activities. «SL is a 3-D simulation of the real world. Almost everything you can find in the real world has its SL equivalent» (Duncan et al., 2012:3). The virtual space of SL is divided into islands, and on the official SL website, destinations are split into many categories¹. Avatars can travel by walking, running, teleporting or flying as shown in figure 1.

¹ <http://secondlife.com/destinations>



Figure 1. Avatar flying

SL is one of the most popular virtual worlds (Wang & Burton, 2012). Nowadays, SL has more than 31 million residents. The growing number of users in the last six months can be seen in the following graph².

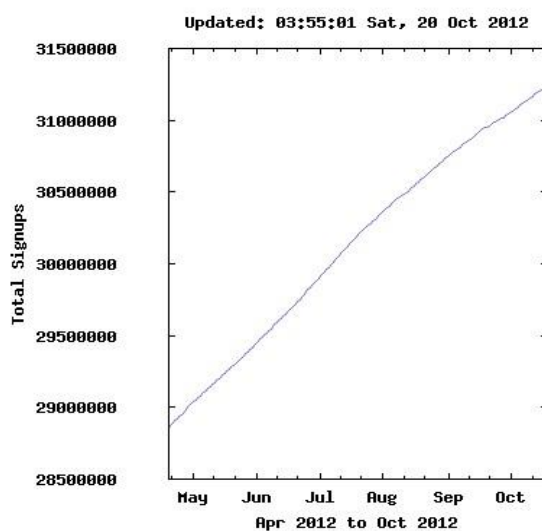


Figure 2. Development of SL users from April 2012 to October 2012

(Taken from: <http://taterunino.net/statcharts/signupstotal400.jpg>)

This virtual world has countless applications, such as; arts, science, religion, and entertainment among many others. However, it must be noted that this tool is very useful in education and its popularity is indeed increasing every day. SL has developed beyond its initial expectations and has created different islands devoted exclusively to education. Through SL we can experiment and learn from a range of different topics in many different educational fields.

Although there is great interest in the affordances that virtual worlds have in educational settings (Salmon & Hawkridge, 2009; Warburton, 2009; Dalgarno & Lee, 2010), and their future use in education (Salmon, 2009), there has been relatively little said about the potential of SL when dealing with language learning and teaching.

² <http://www.gridsurvey.com/>

In this paper, I explore the advantages and disadvantages of SL in Foreign Language (henceforth FL) education, focusing on different aspects such as, the different learning environments, the students' motivation, the educational activities, along with various other characteristics. The last section of this paper will include some pedagogical implications where different activities to be applied in the FL classroom will be described.

III. Objectives

Although there is great interest in the affordances that virtual worlds have in educational settings (Salmon & Hawkrige, 2009; Warburton, 2009; Dalgarno & Lee, 2010), and their future use in education (Salmon, 2009), there has been relatively little said about the potential of SL when dealing with language learning and teaching.

In this paper, I explore the advantages and disadvantages of SL in Foreign Language (henceforth FL) education, focusing on different aspects such as, the different learning environments, the students' motivation, the educational activities, along with various other characteristics. The last section of this paper will include some pedagogical implications where different activities to be applied in the FL classroom will be described.

IV. Material and Method

This research project was developed in the year 2013 as part of a subject in the English Studies Degree. After conducting some research on Second Life, it was observed that it was essential to investigate its potential in a FL classroom. However, as it was quite difficult to conduct an experimental study due to time and resource limitations, a theoretical study was selected.

To start writing this paper, a lot of research on published material was done to be able to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of this tool. With the information obtained, some activities were designed to be applied in a FL classroom.

In order to explore the positive and negative points of SL, an avatar was created in this virtual world to become familiar with all the different applications this platform provides. Contact with other users was also essential to develop the findings offered in this paper.

V. Results and Discussion

Advantages of SL in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

As it has been mentioned, SL is a really powerful tool for language learning. Both students and teachers can benefit from the affordances provided by this device in order to improve their language learning

process. This section presents a list of advantages when using SL for FL learning and teaching, and they are as follows: 1) Realistic environments, 2) Social interaction and collaborative environment, 3) Learner's motivation, 4) Constructivism and experimental learning, 5) Educational activities, and 6) Immersion.

1. Realistic environments

The language learning process can be done in realistic environments. Students are able to learn the target language within a real context. According to Dalgarno and Lee (2010) «Simulated 3-D environments modeled on real places and objects have the potential to provide an enhanced sense of realism and a greater sense of presence» (p.9). Learning a language is not just learning its structures, grammar or vocabulary, it also involves learning its culture and traditions. SL offers this possibility because residents can virtually travel to any country anywhere in the globe (see Figure 3) to learn the target language. Sockett and Toffoli (2012) establish that «when learners participate in virtual communities with other English users, opportunities arise to use the language in real context» (p.10).



Figure 3. The city of London in Second Life

2. Social interaction and collaborative environment

Social interaction is essential to achieve the different goals and objectives in the language learning process. Through interaction, students can learn from each other in a collaborative environment, making the learning process more rewarding. As stated by Dalgarno and Lee (2010):

Multi-user 3-D environments can allow learners to carry out tasks together rather than just communicate. It is widely acknowledged that cooperative and collaborative learning strategies should involve activities and tasks that entail positive interdependence between participants. (p.16)

SL encourages socialization among its users. What is more, students have the opportunity to collaborate in a wide range of activities internationally using the target language to enhance social interaction. This socialization

appears to aid engagement and collaboration in all educational environments:

Social is not just defined as interactions between individuals and groups, but also between individuals and the spaces they co-construct around themselves. The act of building and producing hence becomes a powerful training and teaching tool supporting socialization and extending opportunities for conceptual thinking and exploration. (De Freitas & Veletsianos, 2010:3).

3. Learner's motivation

Another of the main advantages of SL deals with the motivation of the learner. In the 21st Century new technologies surround us; nowadays almost nobody uses an encyclopedia or sends handwritten letters. Students also get bored when they have to translate sentences, complete the gaps in an activity or read aloud a text in their FL classroom. So, teaching methods have also changed. ICTs have opened a new way in education and have encouraged learner's motivation. According to Seneges (2007), students learning languages in the virtual world of SL are really stimulated because they learn in a fun and new way. Besides, according to this author, the realism of virtual worlds is a positive point to develop this feeling of excitation. SL also encourages learners to be interactive and to increase their self-confidence (Duncan et al., 2012). Moreover, this virtual world provides its users with "lived experiences" that promote their motivation. SL residents can do things that would be impossible or really difficult to do in the real world, such as flying or teleporting (Twining, 2009).

4. Constructivism and experimental learning

SL allows learners to construct personal knowledge through simulation, experimentation and interaction among residents and objects (Dalgarno & Lee, 2010). Furthermore, virtual worlds stimulate constructivist learning theories. Constructivism states that learning is a process where students actively work to promote their knowledge. «In constructivism, students actively participate in the knowledge creation process rather than merely receiving knowledge from the transmitter (i.e. the teacher)» (Inman et al., 2010:56). So, students will feel more motivated when learning foreign languages in SL because they will experience and build their own knowledge through their own avatars and they will make their own decisions.

5. Educational activities

SL offers a wide range of educational activities used by teachers for designing the activities of the FL classroom. Duncan et al. (2012) offer the following classification:

Table 1. Educational activities

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Problem-based learning• Enquiry-based learning• Game-based learning• Role playing• Virtual quests• Collaborative simulations (learn by simulation)• Collaborative construction (building activities)• Design courses (game, fashion, architectural)• Virtual laboratories• Virtual fieldworks• Attending lectures or classes

These activities pursue different objectives and are based on different learning theories and hypotheses, such as experimental learning, collaborative learning, constructivism, problem-based learning, or instructional learning among many other approaches. So, teachers can plan their lessons trying to mix these activities in order to cope with all types of learners. Every student has a different learning style, so it is important that teachers use different materials and methodologies to fulfill every learner's needs. The applications of these different activities in a FL classroom through SL will be presented in the final section of this paper.

6. Immersion

Immersion is one of the main ways in which learning can be acquired. All children learn their mother tongue through immersion. Of course, it is the best way to master a language. Virtual worlds offer the possibility to learn the target language by immersion with other learners (Salmon & Hawkridge, 2009).

SL offers an immersive experience and a strong sense of co-presence when other avatars are present. In an educational context, this co-presence can be understood as the presence of student and teacher in the same virtual environment. The contributions of both and their abilities are key elements to successful learning transactions (Warburton, 2009).

Disadvantages of SL in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

In this section, this paper offers the main disadvantages or limitations of SL. We will analyze the problems that both educators and learners may face in the FL learning process. The aforementioned disadvantages are as follows: 1) Technical problems, 2) Unfamiliarity of SL, 3) Absence of non-verbal communication, 4) Choice of educational activities, 5) Educational level, and 6) Inappropriate content.



1. Technical problems

One of the disadvantages of FL learning and teaching through SL is related to its software. As SL is still an emerging platform, some of its applications do not work properly and occasionally computers freeze. According to Senges (2007) «Once a week, SL does not work during some hours because of its maintenance; and every two weeks, its users need to download and install a new version of the program» (p.70). So, these technical difficulties can be a drawback when using this tool in a FL Classroom. Therefore, teachers may waste lots of time trying to restart computers or to solve technical problems.

2. Unfamiliarity of SL

Another limitation in the use of SL for educational purposes deals with the unfamiliarity of this device. Teachers and learners need time to use this tool properly and to implement activities (Dalgarno & Lee, 2010). At first, neither teachers nor students know how to use the different applications this software offers. They cannot control their avatars, chat with other residents, teleport to other destinations or just change their avatar's clothes. Developing these skills is not easy, so educators have to take extra time to master this virtual world, in order to be able to design activities and to assist the learners (Zhang, 2012). Fortunately, Graham Davies³ wrote a complete tutorial for SL. In this tutorial users can learn from how to install the software to how to buy and build a new land.⁴

3. Absence of non-verbal communication

The main and final objective of a language is the ability to communicate. In order to communicate, people do not use just words. Body language also plays an important role. The way people move their hands, their gestures and expressions, the tone of their voice or their rhythm are important elements to achieve this final goal of communication. Unfortunately, virtual worlds do not show their residents' body language, and this fact can damage communication. The main problems users have faced due to the absence of non-verbal communication are connected with turn takings. The results of a research conducted by Zhang (2012) show that:

The absence of such non-verbal cues sometimes can be problematic because interlocutors are generally unable to determine when it is the appropriate time to interpose, especially in talk mode. Consequently, interruptions or simultaneous talk among the interlocutors are often expected (Zhang, 2012:6).

³ Graham Davies was a professor of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Founder President of EUROCALL, and one of the main precursors of SL in Europe.

⁴ <http://www.ict4lt.org/en/IntroSLViewer2.doc>

4. Choice of educational activities

Teachers should be aware of the different activities proposed to their students through SL. Depending on the activity; students will play an active or passive role. Duncan et al. (2012) consider that if teachers focus on student learning, attending lectures would be really didactic for them although they will have a passive role, while those activities dealing with collaborative construction will help students to build their own knowledge and they will play an active role. So, educators will have to plan and design their activities carefully in this virtual world depending on the role they want their students to play.

5. Educational level

SL cannot be used in all educational levels. Only people who are over 18 years old can create an account in this virtual world. Although, it is true that there is a version of SL called Teen SL for users who are between 13 and 17 years old (Wang & Burton, 2012). Both versions are built by their users.

6. Inappropriate content

Within the virtual world of SL, we may find inappropriate contents for an educational setting. Sex, violence, insults, bullying and even avatar harassment or sexual assaults are examples of the improper behavior of some residents. All the problems users may face do not allow an effective learning and sometimes challenge teachers to keep a friendly environment (Zhang, 2012). Teachers need to be aware of any kind of inappropriate content in order to take measures.

Pedagogical implications

This section proposes an activity to show some pedagogical implications of SL in a FL classroom. After explaining the activity, special attention will be paid to the strengths and weaknesses of this specific task.

The proposed activity can be adapted in order to fit other educational levels or languages. However, my proposal is for students of English as a FL with an upper-intermediate level.

In order to design this activity, teachers must buy a private island in SL (see Figure 4). In the official website of this virtual world, there is a marketplace section where residents can buy islands, houses, art or animals among many other products.⁵ Many islands are for free.

⁵ <https://marketplace.secondlife.com/>



Figure 4. Private Island for sale in SL

Once, the island is bought, it will be also necessary to purchase four huts in the marketplace. In each hut, students will have to work on a different activity that will be based on one of the main four language skills that are established by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): writing, speaking, listening and reading. Table 2 shows the distribution of the activities in the different huts.

Table 2. Distribution of huts

HUT	SKILL
Hut 1	Writing
Hut 2	Speaking
Hut 3	Listening
Hut 4	Reading

Students will be divided in four homogenous groups (see Figure 5) at the beginning of the activity and they will spend an average of 20 minutes in each hut, working on a different skill. It is important to take into account that the number of students in each group and the time devoted to each activity can also vary depending on the classroom profile and the duration of each lesson.



Figure 5. Island with four huts

Before starting the activity, students will have a session to access to SL in order to create their avatars and to familiarize themselves with the tool. The role of teachers is essential to explain to their students the different applications of this software. Educators will also have an avatar to act as moderators while the activity will be running.

So, once the students know how to use SL, the activity can be developed. The four tasks students will have to carry out in each of the different huts are explained below.

1. Hut 1 (writing)

In this hut, students will find a writing workshop. First of all, they will be welcome by a teacher and invited to take a seat (see Figure 6). Then, they will attend a five-ten minute lecture about how to write a good composition. In this lecture, the teacher will deal with key aspects such as how to organize ideas, how to write good introductions, how to follow good structures and how to conclude an essay.



Figure 6. Writing workshop

Once, the lecture is finished, students will be asked to work in small groups. Each group will have to work on a different topic. So, they will have to start an activity which involves brainstorming about their topic. Each member of the group will have to suggest at least three different ideas. With these ideas, they will try to write their outline. After writing their outlines, the teacher will check them and if they are correct, students will have to finish the composition individually following the group outline. At the end, every student will read aloud his/her composition to see the differences and similarities among them. Students will realize that with the same topic, they can write many different things.

Different topics are suggested for this workshop, namely, social networks, education at home, environment, vegetarianism, domestic violence, addictions to new technologies, diet and health, knowledge of new cultures, equality between men and women, and renewable energies among many other possible options.

2. Hut 2 (speaking)

Inside this hut, students will find a department store with some shops and restaurants. Once the group of students enters this hut, they will be given a different role. The different roles are: shopping assistants, customers and waiters. In this activity, students will have to use the voice application to communicate with their classmates.

Students will change their roles every five minutes, so they will be able to adopt a different role during the activity. They will also find cards with vocabulary attached to some specific objects. Thus, students will learn vocabulary related to specific fields. For example, if learners are in a sports store (see Figure 7), they will learn words such as *racket*, *helmet*, *bat*, or *gloves*, and sentences like *how much does it cost?*. If they are in a restaurant (see Figure 8), they will ask for the bill, for the menu, or for the dessert. Students will be asked to use formal and polite language during the activity, which means that they will construct correct and formal clauses using Standard English.



Figure 7. Sports store in SL

Figure 8. Restaurant in SL

3. Hut 3 (listening)

Inside this hut, students will find a cinema (see Figure 9). They will watch a fragment of the documentary film «Super Size Me» directed and starred by Morgan Spurlock. After watching this fragment, students will be asked to answer some questions in order to know if they have understood the film. The different questions suggested for this listening comprehension are:

- Has obesity stopped increasing in America?
- Is obesity only an American problem?
- What is Morgan going to do?
- What does Morgan's girlfriend think about what he is going to do?
- What was the protagonist's health status before starting the experiment?
- How did Morgan feel after his first Supersize meal?



Figure 9. Cinema in SL

4. Hut 4 (reading)

Students will have to read a text about Halloween. In this text, they will learn about the history of this festivity and then they will have to teleport themselves to Halloween town in SL (see Figure 10) where they will go on a virtual quest.



Figure 10. Halloween town in SL

Students will have a list of questions to answer related to the text they have read and others that will be only answered after visiting this new destination. In Halloween Town they will find clues to answer the questions. Students will have to work in teams, in a collaborative environment in order to find all the answers.

Advantages and disadvantages of the activity

In this activity, teachers work through different educational activities, such as: virtual quests, role-playings, lectures, workshops or collaborative construction activities, so this will let them use different methodologies and therefore suit all learning styles. What is more, in a single activity learners are going to work on all the different skills.

This activity will enhance students' motivation. Students should feel more excited because they will be working with new technologies, and they will have the chance to work in a real context. They will visit different destinations and they celebrate an English festivity.

Learners are able to practice real speaking and writing using both SL voice and chat applications. That will also motivate them, because they will feel a real need to use the target language.

Students will learn in a collaborative environment, through constructivism and experiential learning. Part of this activity is designed to work in teams, so, collaboration among students is essential. Besides, they will experiment in order to build their own knowledge.

As a limitation I should point out the time needed to design the activity, the time needed to familiarize with SL and the time needed to explain the different tasks to the students. Furthermore, as it has been mentioned in this paper, one of the main disadvantages of this software is related to its technical issues.

VI. Conclusion

As we have seen throughout this paper, the virtual world SL offers many possibilities for educators, although, nowadays there are some limitations that have to be polished in order to reach SL's full potential. SL is still a new tool, it appeared in the year 2003, and many investigations are being carried out in order to look for new uses and applications of this virtual world. In this paper I have analyzed its potential in the FL learning and teaching focusing on its main advantages and disadvantages.

In fact, SL affords educators the possibility to experiment. In this sense, they can use their imagination in order to explore new learning and teaching methods. They can be creative; they can build new islands, new buildings, new avatars. Students will appreciate the originality of their teachers' activities because it will enhance their motivation and excitation. And the language learning process will be more rewarding both for students and teachers.

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