Exploring Second Life for Effective English as a Foreign Language and Culture Learning

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Introduction

Second Life (SL) was created by an American Internet company, Linden Lab, in 2003 as social site where participants interact using personal avatars in a shared, animated 3D environment. Although SL was not created with the intention of promoting language learning, the site has capabilities to facilitate written, oral and physical communication, so the possibilities for language learning certainly exist, and there are designated areas/communities created by users specifically for language learning to take place. This paper is an attempt to research how SL could be effective as a site for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to improve their language skills while also building cultural awareness. The paper will discuss the following questions:

- Is SL effective to help learners improve language mechanics such as grammar, spelling and punctuation?
- How can SL help develop oral and written fluency?
- How can SL help build learners' cultural knowledge and prepare them emotionally and psychologically for an abroad experience?
- What are learners' feelings about using/interacting in the site?

Although SL is not an academic site in itself, it is available as *Sloodle*, a partnered site with *Moodle*, which is widely accepted as an effective academic tool for educational support by many educational institutions. Teachers can also designate or create their own areas within SL, such as virtual classrooms or communication spaces where their student avatars can meet and learn together. SL is visually stimulating and exciting and may therefore be motivating for many late teen and young adult language learners (in the 18 and over grid). Basic membership in SL is free, and it is relatively easy to join and navigate if one has an e-mail address and basic computer skills.

Meaningful and Constructive Learning

Students may sign up for a free membership with the adult SL site by providing their email address and basic personal information such as name, birth date and location (useful practice for any application process). This can be done in English, or in Japanese, depending on their comfort level with English and how much time teachers want to spend on the starting process. Student may then take part in orientations in English or Japanese, again, depending on their comfort level and comprehension level.

Students should spend some time designing their avatar, which is an important part of the starting process because they are carefully creating a self or identity that may be considered an extension of their own physical body. SL avatars themselves are a message, an expression of the user's cultural self, which is linked to cultural norms (Yang, 2012) (or possibly anti-norms). Students may also need to spend some time learning how to maneuver their avatar (sit, walk, fly, teleport, etc.) They will also need to

learn how to use the texting and chatting functions. After these skills are understood, students can continue to explore and learn, and eventually, and ideally, on their own, without teacher guidance, as gaining independence in the target language and culture demonstrates skill advancement.

Tasks for beginning students can simply require making introductions to new avatars (which includes classmates that already know each other). More advanced students can engage in discussion topics that are level appropriate. Teachers may want their students to have a safe and controlled experience, such as holding their seminars in an SL virtual classroom or having pairs or groups meet in a pre-determined place where they may text and chat in English. Other students may feel confident enough to explore on their own, or with a buddy, and try to meet and communicate with "stranger" avatars in English.

Besides using SL for conversation and opinion-exchange tasks, learning to use the site, explaining features and functions to one another, exploring and utilizing the site and its tools, are also practical tasks where students may be simultaneously practicing their computer skills with their language skills. For collaborative and constructive tasks, students can try to create a product such as constructing a virtual object, facilitation of an SL business, or the creation of a report or video about experiences in SL. Teachers could observe students' linguistic tasks directly, or have students keep a journal or logbook about their experiences, where they went, and what they talked about. Blogging or discussions about SL are a few other post-SL tasks that can also be beneficial to reinforcing new knowledge. From the starting tasks, to the actual exploring and communicating, to post reflection about one's experiences using English in SL, learners can be

engaging in the target language at every step.

Language and Cultural Immersion

As the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) can be used in SL, learners would be exposed to the target language in an immersive context as long as they do not revert back on their first language. Reading comprehension, understanding instructions and writing one's personal information is required in the form of set up when joining the SL site. Text boxes allow avatars to practice writing/dialoguing with each other. There are information boards and other written props in the 3D environment in which to practice reading. Avatars can listen to music, radio stations or other recordings as well as have live oral/aural communication with other avatars for comprehension practice. SL has the capabilities for chatting/speaking/conversation practice, which is lacking in many English language classrooms in Japan. Unlike most textbook activities, which concentrate on only one or two language skills at a time, SL requires whole language immersive participation.

As important as learning the four language skills is learning non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions, body language and body movements. Visual cues such as clothing, hairstyles and other aspects of physical appearance are additional indicators of cultural situations and personality. SL also requires the practice of digital literacy skills in the form of learning how to use site tools, following instructions/prompts and navigating one's avatar with the mouse, arrows or other keys. Visual literacy is required because one must take part in an interactive simulation with moving characters and backgrounds that have culturally specific

information/visual symbols. Users/learners should learn to understand avatars though what they look like, how they dress and what gestures they use. With the help of the SL tool bar, avatars may practice physical gestures, such as bowing, hugging, clapping, etc. These actions/gestures are also a form of communication which is culturally influenced.

If EFL learners log on and enter areas within SL that have been created and used by English speakers, they will be immersed in an English environment. Teachers that give students specific tasks to do while in SL will ensure that students are being active and are engaged in what is happening (Wang, et al., 2012) in this online culture. By doing this, teachers can ensure a whole language approach is occurring. Participating in SL is a social, immersive and creative learning experience (Vickers, 2010: 75). With other avatars, participants can create not only meaningful dialogue, but also virtual objects such as clothing, cars, buildings and landscapes. "Virtual worlds offer exploration opportunities both internal and external to the learner, which in turn offer conversation and language learning opportunities" (Vickers, 2010: 76).

In SL, participants may choose simulated places named after real cities and places around the world that they want to go to and explore. They can interact within that cultural environment with avatars that they know (their classmates) or may not know (absolute strangers and sources of another culture due to real or avatar-assumed personality, gender, age, nationality, etc...). These are meetings for cultural interaction and communicative practice. Although these places are available only by computer, they are built and maintained by real people from all over the world, so real cultural information exists in SL. Ess (2011) states that

design, usage and effects of places like SL are shaped by the first culture (of the creators), which meet with the second culture (of the participants) and where they merge and form the third culture. Places like SL are a dimension of human activity, and can therefore be considered another dimension of culture(s) (20). The use of culturally rich sites such as SL may help learners to become global citizens. Chen and Dai (2012) write that online sites may actually hasten the growth of globalization. If learners can participate in sites like SL, they will be participating and contributing in the very real cultural process of globalization.

In order for language learning to have meaningful content and context, it would have to be provided within a cultural framework. Students cannot learn vocabulary, spelling, sentence structure and expressions without having a cultural situation or event in which the language exists. An authentic cultural situation may be hard to create in a classroom where students are learning a language that is not used in daily life, and by a teacher who may not speak the target language as a first language him or herself. SL provides a digital environment that is real in the sense that meaningful dialogue and interaction can take place and where cultural cues also exist in the form of symbols and simulated cultural artifacts.

Teachers could give specific tasks such as finding cultural artifacts in certain places (what's on food menus, the meaning of messages in advertisements, describing objects or characters in their surroundings). They could also create and leave behind artifacts from Japanese culture or another culture. Discovering and producing are two ways to have a personal, meaningful and memorable cultural experience. If students are comfortable, they could attempt to find English speaking "strangers" to

have culture-related conversations/interviews with. Any of these experiences may be documented for assessment/evaluation.

SL is a culturally immersive site but may not be considered "real" in the sense that is merely digital simulation. However, the symbolic systems (written and oral language, still and moving visuals, technical functions) of SL are real and should be considered authentic cultural artifacts. When users are interacting with the site and these symbolic systems and the cultural artifacts within them, they are experiencing cultural immersion. That which occurs is SL is "consistent with social norms of the physical world" (Antonijevic, 2011: 235). Although in this sense, SL may seem to be a culturally rich place, Antonijevic also warns that the "mimicking" of social norms that exist in the real world may also be representations of gender stereotypes and cultural and racial bias. Teachers do have to be wary not to let their students (and themselves) fall into the novelty of SL without critical awareness of digital falsities and misrepresentations that can also appear. However, it should be noted that lies or misrepresentations occur possibly as often in real life situations as well.

Culture exists in SL because of the various locations that simulate real places around the world, the ability to chat with users from different countries, cities and cultures, as well as the ability for users to form an identity through a malleable avatar. Identity may be thought of as the core of human culture, and virtual sites like SL help the development of self-awareness (Jee, 2010). SL participants do not only create their avatar self, they can help to co-create the physical environments and social communities in which they function. Cross-culture communication in SL happens because large distances are not a factor. This allows for the

sharing of language and culture, collaboration across borders (Wang et al., 2009). SL allows for simultaneous linguistic and cultural acquisition and allows participants to form stronger social bonds, which are the processes of a successful language-learning program.

Technical Considerations

Although sites like SL provide opportunity for language and cultural learning to take place, teachers must be cautious of setbacks such as technical problems such as unstable bandwidths, Internet connection problems and speeds. There may also be problems of poor audio quality during chats as well as echoing, microphone problems or frozen screens. Teachers have to consider and even expect that there will be technical drawbacks when using any activity that requires reliable computers and equipment and good Internet connection.

An additional consideration is that the use of English in live virtual worlds does not conform to traditional grammar, spelling or punctuation, as that usually taught in academic settings or published language learning textbooks. Slang, localized dialects, acronyms (LOL, OMG) are some examples of non-standard English that users are exposed to in SL and may have to learn quickly. Whether this is positive or negative in the development of one's language skills and cultural knowledge is debatable and could be the base of another research project. However, understanding this language is a necessary part of digital literacy.

Emotional/Psychological Considerations

Because the process of entering a place that may be considered technically and visually foreign, and because learners will be putting their knowledge of English to use, accomplishing tasks in this environment and fashion should be a confidence booster for students who are especially self-conscious about their abilities in using English successfully. Using SL should also give learners the simulated process or pattern of tasks that they will have to do when actually going abroad: making introductions, asking for and giving cultural information, asking and giving directions and having spontaneous conversations on a variety of topics.

For EFL learners, SL may be a particularly good learning tool because it can simulate the feeling of "going abroad." Feelings such as excitement and nervousness are common emotions felt by young people and even adults as they go abroad in real life to experience a language, culture and people that they feel to be "foreign." Experimenting with international sites like SL may prepare students emotionally and mentally for a real life experience in the future. If students can get excited, and even experience feelings of anxiety or nervousness about signing in and undertaking tasks in SL, it may prepare them for emotionally challenging situations before they actually embark for a new land. SL may help to prepare students mentally so that there is potentially less culture shock. Culture shock may be caused by a variety of factors such as suddenly being in an environment that looks, sounds or feels different, new, confusing or scary— SL may cause all of these emotions and more until a user becomes accustomed to the SL culture. This may provide cognitive and emotional preparation for a real life cultural immersion.

Although learners will be physically safe behind a computer at school or in the comfort of their own home, SL does not come without virtual dangers. It is possible to be harassed verbally (orally and/or through text) and/or visually/physically attacked by other avatars. Experiences like this can be shocking and disturbing, so learners should be warned ahead of time and may want to take precautions such as not roaming the SL world alone. However, such virtual dangers may also be considered a practical educational lesson before actually going abroad in real life, which is also not without conflict or dangers. SL does have a function where online abuses can be reported, which in itself becomes an additional practical task if such a case arises.

Understanding Learner (and Teacher) Attitudes

In order to incorporate both a quantitative and qualitative research process, the following questionnaire would be given before and after the SL study to collect students' opinions. In an ideal study, students will be exposed to SL for at least 30 minutes once a week (either during class time or as homework) for fifteen weeks (one semester).

1. What do you think your English level is? Circle 1−10 (10 is the highest)
2. How high do you think your computer skills are? Circle 1−10
3. What English learning activities do you like and/or not like? Why?
4. How interested are you in traveling, sightseeing or having an abroad/ cultural experience? Circle 1−10
5. Have you ever been abroad before? Did you enjoy it? Why or why not? If you have never been abroad before, do you want to? Why or why not? What do you want to do if you go abroad?

Using questions 1-4 both pre and post SL program will help estimate whether or not students' confidence, self-perception of language skills and attitude towards language learning have improved or not.

Additional post-program questions:

6. Did you enjoy participating in SL? What specifically did you like and/or not like about SL?
7. Did you talk to "strangers?" Do you prefer to talk with classmates or with people who you do not know if real life? Why?
8. Do you prefer to talk through your avatar or through your real self? Why?
9. What feelings/emotions did you have while using SL? Example: boring, frustrated, excited, nervous, scared, weird, shy, etc.
10. Did you feel like using SL allowed you to go abroad or have a simulated experience in a foreign country? Explain.

For ethnographic and qualitative data, teachers should observe both students and their avatars throughout the study. An additional or follow-up study could involve collecting data and opinions of teachers that use virtual worlds to promote language learning, as well as teachers who do not. This may help in the understanding of how sites like SL could or could not be effective in improving student (and teacher) attitudes and motivation.

Conclusion

Wang, et al. (2012), explain SL as a virtual space where the "five C's" (Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities)

take place. Communication happens with the exchange of language by texting (reading, writing) and chatting (speaking and listening). Culture is embedded in the visuality, physicality and general experience of the site. Connections are made by real, live participants. Comparisons exist in the process of third culture formation. SL is made up of communities that continue to change and develop. If teachers can get their students to participate in the five C's in the target language, then effective language and authentic cultural knowledge can be acquired.

Online communication is generally thought of as being progressive and innovative in the field of foreign language learning, not only for learners, but also for teachers. SL in particular could be effective for EFL learning because it offers an opportunity for online immersion, which most language classrooms in Japan do not. In addition to language, there is the cultural knowledge building that occurs concurrently when interacting in this animated virtual world. Furthermore, sites like SL allow for intellectual construction, the practice of reasoning and sense-making, as well as the improvement of technical skills. Learners are not just exposed to language and cultural items passively, they can and are expected to be active in their exploration and creativity when speaking/listening, reading/writing and practicing physical/gestural communication. The possibilities for improving one's knowledge of a foreign language in a meaningful and constructive manner may possibly be infinite in the constantly changing world of SL.

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Abstract

Learning a foreign language and culture successfully requires a process that does not feel artificial. If teachers can incorporate authentic materials and provide the opportunity for students to communicate directly with speakers of a foreign culture, learning can feel like a real and meaningful experience. However, learning English in classrooms and campuses in Japan is a process that often remains foreign and therefore far-reaching and possibly unattainable until one has the opportunity to go abroad. Affordances of the internet and real-time communication tools, however, can help bridge the gap to learning a foreign language and culture, as well as bring a sense of immediacy and relevancy to learning without having to leave the country.

Live multi-user social sites such as Second Life allow a participant to explore and communicate in the target language and culture with users from around the world. In addition to being able to practice English reading, writing, listening and speaking, learners are exposed to cultural concepts and artifacts in the form of an animated simulation of real life. This virtual reality space allows for not only passive exposure to language forms and cultural mannerisms, but encourages learners to be active and

creative in using their own knowledge and skills in a collaborative manner to learn, acquire and share new information. This is ideal for preparation to go abroad in real life on one's own.

The following paper will discuss how Second Life can be effective in increasing learners' fluency in the English language and how the site, although a simulation of reality, can provide useful cultural information through visual and social interaction. It will also discuss how the site, in addition to traditional forms of literacy, can also help to improve learners' digital literacy and general computing skills in the target language. Gaining mobility in a virtual environment such as Second Life may be a suitable and effective learning program for young adults because it can be entertaining, engaging and motivating on a personal level.