Benefits and challenges of using Second Life in English teaching: Experts’ opinions

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Abstract

This research study aims to depict an evaluation of using Second Life (SL) in English Language Teaching (ELT) at the tertiary level via data collected from experts who have applied this virtual environment as instructors and experienced it in a comprehensive way. The participants selected for the present study were five different experts from different universities located in Turkey. Through structured interviews, the qualitative data from the experts have been collected and analyzed with code and theme identification. According to the data analysis, SL helps learners improve both their speaking and their listening skills, and SL has multiple benefits that each instructor can mold in accordance with the learning and teaching purposes. The challenges can be categorized as technical, financial and user-related ones. The results might be of great value to instructors and curriculum planners who would like to embed Second Life applications into foreign language teaching.

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1. Introduction

Within the related literature on English Language Teaching (ELT), various terms have been assigned to Second Life and similar environments. Some of these terms are; multi-user virtual environments (Kapp and O’Driscoll 2010), avatar-based virtual worlds (Tseng et.al, 2013) and 3D virtual worlds (Kim et.al, 2012). Second Life (SL), one of the most popular virtual worlds, was developed by Linden Lab. and launched in 2003 as a free-access program for its visitors who interact with one another via avatars (Kruk, 2014).

Especially in tertiary education, virtual and blended learning environments have started to be welcomed with growing interest and curiosity. As proposed by the sociocultural theory of learning, in such environments, the target language is not focused from the structural perspective but it is assembled and experienced via mutual communication. Virtual environments are identified as a form of “socio-constructivist and situated cognition-based educational software” which has come out as a phenomenon in the area of education (Nelson and Ketelhut, 2007, p. 269). Learners explore the language while learning it (Saunders, 2007). In addition, learners experience a less stressful environment in the virtual world in terms of language use, and they do not report a significant inherent level of technical related anxiety.

The research studies on SL focus on the use of the environment from diverse perspectives. According to the results of a meta-analysis of publications on SL from its launch to 2011, the most investigated fields of subject were teacher education and language education. Besides, SL has become an area of inquiry to investigate its potential to improve various educational aspects, such as; collaborative learning, community of inquiry, authentic learning, action learning, problem-based learning and the success of SL in motivating students (Wang and Burton, 2013). The research data on such studies indicate the contribution of SL to foreign and second language teaching purposes. In an experimental study by Wehner, et.al (2011) a consistent increase was measured in the motivation of language learners in the SL group in comparison to the learners in the control group. In another study by Hislope, et.al (2008), SL was investigated as a foreign language classroom supplement to foster contact and conversational skills with the native speakers, and found out that SL enabled the learners to develop familiarity with a wider range of conversational settings and cultural experiences than in a traditional classroom.

With the advance of using SL for educational purposes and the beneficial results obtained from related applications, many universities in the world have started to create virtual or blended learning environments via their Second Life Campuses. There exist such virtual campuses in Turkey, as well. As mentioned by Bulu and Isler (2011), Middle East Technical University (METU) has a Second Life METU Campus that has been designed for the students to participate in group activities in virtual classrooms. Moreover, the scholars developed a virtual campus for Istanbul University in Turkey (Sarisakal and Ceylan, 2003) and now, Istanbul University Virtual Campus is in use on SL for both instructors and students.

2. Aim

This research study aims to depict an evaluation of using Second Life in ELT at tertiary level via the data collected from experts who have applied this virtual environment as instructors and experienced it in a comprehensive way as practitioners, developers and researchers. Therefore, the research questions identified aimed to investigate the participants’ notions on the strengths of SL for the teaching of language skills, the benefits of SL and the challenges of using SL in language teaching.

3. Method

This study was designed in line with evaluation research as the purposeful sampling of participants enabled the inquiry on their epistemological beliefs (Krathwohl, 1998; Driscoll, 2000). The experts selected for the present study are five different instructors from different universities located in Turkey. Through structured interviews, the qualitative data from the experts have been collected and analyzed with code and theme identification.
4. Findings

The participating experts were asked to identify the language skills and aspects that SL might contribute to teaching as the strength of the virtual environment. All of the participants declared that ‘speaking and listening’ skills do improve via SL related applications. It was also emphasized that these two skills improve in an integrated way. Therefore, all the participants mentioned ‘speaking and listening’ without regarding one of them as different or better in the phase of improvement. Two experts indicated that SL contributes to the teaching of writing as it is optional to speak or write in SL in order to communicate with the other visitors. One expert highlighted that SL contributes to problem solving skills as well. The findings of related data are:

Table 1: Strengths of using SL in teaching language skills

| Dimension                        | (f) |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Teaching of speaking and listening | 5   |
| Teaching of writing              | 2   |
| Problem solving                  | 1   |

Except for one identification, the dimension of benefits could not be represented via frequencies as each expert come up with his/her distinct identification of features of SL and shared his/her own understanding. According to the data collected, the major benefit of SL was that each instructor could mold it according to his/her own needs, views and case. So, this leads us to the finding that SL has multiple benefits. Only the finding that SL enabled ‘overcoming identity issues via avatars’ was mentioned by various participants (f=3). As indicated by an expert, SL provided both synchronous and asynchronous education, therefore; commonality of time and place was not necessary to receive the same education. Besides, it provided an effective environment in order to share materials online among visitors. SL also allowed autonomy for both learners and teachers. As emphasized by an expert, “it is an environment of creativity for both parties, since; the teachers are free to self-rule and students to self-discover”. Moreover, an expert pointed out that classrooms were highly populated and instructors could not have enough number of rooms to teach in. Therefore, SL was reported as having a benefit of ‘overcoming physical issues such as crowd and classroom’. SL was indicated as a motivating environment for learners, and promoted ‘collaboration and interaction’ among participants. Lastly, one of the experts stated that they taught English as a foreign language and exchanging conversations with native speakers was not a frequent opportunity for learners. As another benefit of SL, ‘experiencing authentic language use’ with the native speakers visiting the same virtual environment was also reported.

Table 2: Benefits of using SL in teaching

- Overcoming identity issues via avatars (f=3)
- Synchronous and asynchronous education
- Sharing of materials online
- Allowing autonomy for learners and teachers
- Overcoming physical issues of crowd and classroom
- Motivating students
- Collaboration and interaction
- Experiencing authentic language use

The challenges identified were grouped under three categories, which were technical, financial and user-related challenges. All of the experts indicated that SL in language teaching had these three main categories of challenge. In terms of technical challenges, the requirement of hardware of high technology with good graphic, voice cards and the Internet connection was highlighted. It was also indicated by one of the experts that SL was not yet compatible with mobile devices, which was a technical deficiency hindering the effective use of the environment. The participants also highlighted that there existed financial challenges. As it was reported by the experts, payment was required to use effective tools, find simulations and sites to visit. Moreover, the cost of the essential equipment was indicated to be so high. The last theme on the challenges was identified as the user-related ones. An expert
underlined the fact that both the teachers and learners had to be well-aware of the technical knowledge to use the environment effectively. In addition, it was also pointed out that designing the virtual environment took too much time for the teachers and a professional support team was required when technical issues and problems raised. As the last challenge, obscenity was highlighted, since; not all the visitors were in the virtual environment for educational purposes. The expert indicated that the learners had to be warned on this issue, as well.

| Table 3: Challenges of using SL in teaching |
|-------------------------------------------|
| Technical challenges                      |
| (f)                                       |
| 5  | Expensive hardware                        |
|    | High technology                            |
|    | • Good graphic and voice cards             |
|    | • Good Internet connection                 |
|    | Not yet compatible with mobile devices     |
| Financial challenges                      |
| 5  | Payment is needed                          |
|    | • to use effective tools                   |
|    | • to find sims and sites to visit          |
|    | High cost of equipment                     |
| User-related challenges                   |
| 5  | • Technical knowledge is required          |
|    | • Designing the environment takes too much time for teachers |
|    | • A professional support team is needed    |
|    | • Obscenity                                |

5. Conclusion

This research study aimed at identifying the experts’ opinions on using Second Life in English teaching at tertiary education. The results indicate that especially the teaching of ‘speaking and listening’ skills is fostered in an integrated way, and the teaching of writing and problem solving skills are also the strengths of using this environment in ELT. The benefits of SL are multifaceted as they vary in accordance to user and case-specific needs. Besides, the challenges that might be faced by the teachers and learners while using SL are technical, financial and user-related ones.

As indicated by the participating experts, the integration of skills is possible in SL and the related applications in terms of task design and material development can be aimed in order to increase the effectiveness of using SL in English teaching. Since the speaking and listening skills are the very first ones to improve, SL environment should be introduced to both practitioners and learners. An educational policy to overcome the financial challenges can be developed so that the universities are supported in the budget to improve SL related applications within the curricula. And lastly, training for both practitioners and users may develop the effectiveness of using SL environment in English teaching.

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