Classroom Learning, Virtual World Application - Developing the SVECTAT Method

Steven COOK[a]*, Mark ELWELL[b] & Morgan LEIGH[c]
[a]*Japan Advanced Institute of Science & Technology, Japan*
[b]*Hakusan International School, Japan*
[c]*University of Tasmania, Australia*
*scook@jaist.ac.jp

Abstract: This paper reports on progress in developing the SVECTAT (Shared Virtual Environment Complementing Task Achievement Training) method for language instruction. Testing with tertiary-level learners of English in Japan reveals new perspectives on the pedagogical and learning characteristics and value of the method, and on challenges and pitfalls to be considered in its use. Specifically, learners reported particular value from immediate application of material from classroom activities in real communications through the medium of Second Life.

Keywords: Application of learned material, language instruction, Second Life

Introduction

Among the serious limitations and challenges of formal language instruction are the problems of providing sufficient individual instructional time and guidance. Furthermore, typical formal language instruction faces a wide gap between the material studied in the classroom and the actual practical application of such material in authentic communications with speakers and writers of the target language.[1]

The SVECTAT (Shared Virtual Environment Complementing Task Achievement Training) method has been found to enable learners to experience individual progress (as measured by self-assessment in ability to achieve specific communication tasks, scoring 0 points for "not able" up to 3 points for "independent") in less instructional time compared with a control of traditional face-to-face role playing exercises alone.[2]

The first test divided subjects into three groups: a control group A, which received instructions and carried out tasks solely in the physical classroom environment; group B, which received instructions and carried out tasks in the physical classroom environment, then carried out the same tasks in the virtual environment of Second Life; and group C, which received instructions and carried out tasks solely in the virtual environment. Group A showed an aggregated improvement of 18 points, or 32%, group B of 17 points, or 31%, and Group C of 5, or 1%.

The first test of the method involved a small sample size (twelve subjects) and short testing period (three hours), half of which was used in groups B and C for familiarizing the subjects with the use of Second Life. There was clearly a need for further testing.

This paper will present and discuss the results of the second test of the SVECTAT method. This test was intended to validate our previous findings and to gather feedback and insights from the subjects themselves. Of particular interest was the self-perceived educational value for the subjects of being able to immediately apply material learned in classroom activities in authentic communications in public venues using the shared virtual environment of Second Life.

1. March 2010 Test

1.1 Methodolodgy

A total of 24 participants (12 male and 12 female, from the countries China, Japan, Mexico, and Thailand, Tunisia, and Vietnam) were given a succession of tasks to be achieved using the English language, success being determined by obtaining a tangible result within the time allocated. Testing lasted for 12 hours over two days.

Based on the findings of the initial control test [2], we chose to conduct this round of testing by having the 24 participants and 2 instructors co-located physically for the instructional elements, role-playing, and task achievement within the virtual environment.

Participants first received modeling of the language skills needed for obtaining the desired result, then each of the participants was separated from the group and asked to role-play one task at a time with one of the two instructors, then finally to complete the same task in an open public social venue (Korea1 222,10,24) in Second Life.

1.2 Testing Protocol

The same self-assessment instrument used in the 2009 test served as a pre-test and a post-test, in which participants were asked to rate themselves on their English language ability with the 10 tasks allocated. The choices were: "NA" - "not able" to successfully complete the task; "Competent" - able to successfully complete the task with guidance or assistance; "Confident" - able to successfully complete the task without guidance or assistance; "Independent" - able to successfully provide guidance or assistance to others.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Results

All participants reported self-assessed improvement in their ability to carry out functional tasks using English, including tasks which they did not specifically practice in the exercise. Our findings also reflected the benefits surrounding the physical co-location of instructors and participants.

2.2 Discussion

The culmination of the exercise was a debriefing and discussion session. One participant summed up the overall consensus regarding the SVECTAT exercise by saying "the educational value I experienced was to practice material in the classroom and then immediately being able to apply it in the real world" (referring to communication with peers outside the formal educational environment).

The physical co-location of instructors and participants for the scaffolded learning activities and instruction, role-play exercises, and finally the learner-guided public interaction within the virtual environment, seemed to help participants take the skills acquired in the formal classroom setting and immediately apply those skills in the virtual environment with the public. This was an unexpected, but very welcome outcome that we believe requires further exploration.

3. Conclusion

The SVECTAT method when applied to a physically colocated larger sample size demonstrated the effectiveness of using a virtual environment with access to public interaction in tandem with traditional scaffolded learning settings.

Participants reported value in using the virtual environment to apply language skills acquired from classroom exercises with people in authentic English-language settings not easily replicated in the confines of a formal classroom setting.

Acknowledgements

References

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