

# Second Life and Its Application to English as a Foreign Language Settings

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**Abstract:** Currently Second Life offers the most potential as an educational MUVE (multiple user virtual environment) to promote immersion and interaction between Second Language learners and native speakers of the target language. This paper describes an evaluation research approach used to investigate its potential for use in a mid-level Chinese university among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students lacking in appropriate technical skills and equipment. Various ways were used to integrate SL into an EFL program to see if it could provide an immersive environment and sufficient interaction with native speakers to enhance English communicative competence. SL was promoted as a platform for social networking as well as a virtual classroom for e-learning and test-taking. Results suggest that a lack of student awareness of SL and reluctance to use it are primary barriers to its use in a Chinese environment.

**Keywords:** Second Life, EFL, virtual worlds, Avatar Classroom, English teaching,

## Introduction

People all over the world invest large amounts of money and time in learning English as a foreign language. Many students are able to become proficient in reading and listening since these two skills are relatively easier to acquire, whereas learning to speak in English proves to be a much more challenging mission to accomplish. Often this process of learning how to orally express oneself in a foreign language requires a sympathetic and patient conversation partner expert in the target language to talk to. In fact, it is claimed that English “as a subsequent language is first and foremost affected by the quality...of available mentor(s) or in their absence interlocutor(s).” (Janik, 2004, p. 199).

Finding English conversational partners for students to practice speaking with can present a problem in many parts of the world. First of all, there may be very few native English speakers to talk to and given the large ratio of students to teachers in a typical classroom a student may only have a few minutes to speak in English during a typical class period. Furthermore, speaking to a native teacher may be an anxiety provoking event, to an EFL student, especially considering the power a teacher may have over a student. The problem may also be compounded, by large classroom sizes, since it will take a great deal of courage for a student to speak up when many other classmates are listening in.

Putting students into groups to practice talking to each other in English can also be problematic. The students may find it awkward and embarrassing to talk to another student in what is to both of them a foreign language. Unfortunately, the temptation to stay inside the comfort zone of their own native language is just too great for most students to overcome. These problems combined together repeat and replay in many classrooms to produce an educational setting in which it is very difficult for a student to learn to speak English comfortably and fluently. It points to a need for an environment for EFL learners to practice communicating in English free from the anxieties of a typical classroom.

## 1. Literature

The opportunity for English learners to speak to native speakers from around the world quickly, cheaply and easily has recently resulted from the creation of virtual worlds on the 3D internet (Shih & Yang, 2008). Thanks to advancements in high tech computer science and applications, everyday 50 to 70 million people around the world log into virtual worlds either to participate in large scale games or as a social network. One of the most popular non-game Multiple User Virtual Environments (or MUVes), Second Life, allows these users to communicate either in text or in voice.

Second Life (SL) is an online 3D virtual worlds created by the residents who inhabit it. The platform was originally created by Philip Rosedale at Linden Lab in 2004. In January of 2009 it was reported that there were nearly 17 million residents or accounts and that over 500,000 residents had logged in within the last seven days with a peak of 82,653 residents on Second Life at one time (Rufer-Bach, 2009. p. 7). Currently there are about 15,000 new member registrations everyday to Second Life on average. Each resident selects an avatar that can move around freely and interact with other avatars by text or in voice which allows them to attend meetings, hold conferences, have classes, do role plays and many other educational activities (Hodge, Collins, & Giordano, 2011).

Second Life provides participants the ability to speak to other residents all over the world (virtually) face to face any time, day or night. Consequently this also provides language learners with the nearly unprecedented ability to have immediate access to speakers of their target language providing only that they have adequate computer skills and hardware. Second Life also gives EFL learners access to a wide variety of World Englishes by being able to contact English speakers from India, Australia, Columbia, Russia, Europe, Southeastern Asia and etc. by going to any of the numerous locations in Second Life. By using the search function one can quickly locate areas used by people from many different nationalities. Upon teleporting to these locations English learners will find themselves in a 3D immersive environment of authentic, natural language use.

The first requirement is the need for a computer capable of processing large amounts of data simultaneously (see Robbins & Bell, 2008). In order to participate in the virtual world and create the illusion of inhabiting a body, i.e. an avatar, a large amount of data must be streamed back and forth over the internet connection. While the scenery of the virtual world is being streamed to the viewer, the movements and choices of the embodied avatar are being simultaneously streamed to the “computer farm” housing the virtual world. Both audio and video data streams are synchronously merged allowing participants to see each other and communicate with each other (virtually) almost as if they were next to each other having a conversation. This puts a heavy load on both the computer and the internet connection requiring a large of amount of random access memory (RAM) and a fast broadband connection (Weber, Rufer-Bach, & Platel, 2008). In addition, a participant should have a certain level of technical ability and skill for using virtual worlds and feel comfortable enough that using the medium does not distract his or her attention from activities in the virtual world. However, these technical skills are well within the range of anyone familiar with using the interactive 3D internet (Wang, Song, Xia, & Yan, 2009).

Over 400 real world educational institutions from around the world were listed on Second Life in 2010 (University of Liverpool). Universities have found Second Life useful for distance learning, for virtual classrooms and campuses and to create simulations of the subject matter they teach (Hew & Cheung, 2010). For foreign language learners this provides convenient access to native language speakers living in their own countries. Students are able to travel (virtually) to a foreign country, speak to people there and visit sights in that country to learn about the people and customs, all within the comfort of their

own homes. However, the use of Second Life as a foreign language learning tool has yet to reach its full potential, especially in Asia.

## **1. Research Questions**

The research questions explored in this study are:

1. What are the primary barriers to Chinese EFL students for creating sufficient immersion and interaction with target language speakers in Second Life to enhance communicative skills?
2. What are the primary barriers to Chinese EFL students for accessing the technology for use of MUVE's and/or Second Life?
3. How effective can a virtual classroom be for delivering practice tests to Chinese EFL students?

## **2. Method**

Several university classes in Taiwan over a period of three years were used to explore different ways of using Second Life to teach English as a Second Language. Each of the classes were given the following instructions to make sure they had the necessary knowledge to complete their goals:

- They were given a brief introduction to Second life and told that since thousands of English speakers from around the world are logged on at any given time that it could be used as an English learning resource.
- They were given written instructions on how to join Second Life, pick an avatar, and how to move and teleport.
- The students were given a presentation in class showing them each of the steps necessary to become a resident and use Second Life.

First, in the spring semester of 2009 three conversational EFL classes ( $n = 79$ ) at a university in Yunlin, Taiwan were instructed in how to use Second Life to supplement their regular traditional classes. They were given a class in a computer lab and shown how to perform many of the functions necessary to move around and communicate and were encouraged to explore Second Life. Feedback from the students was received both visually in the computer lab and by verbal feedback from the students themselves.

During the following Fall semester of 2010 two classes of students ( $n = 48$ ) at a university in Hsinchu, Taiwan were also given instructions in how to use Second Life and were given an assignment to join Second Life and interview an English speaking resident and report back to class..

During the fall and spring semesters of 2011 a two semester class was given a midterm test and a final test based on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). In order to practice for the tests the students were encouraged to log onto Second life. The tests had been digitized and turned into a game format using an Avatar Classroom teaching tool created by Paul Preibisch and Edmund Edgar.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

The purpose of the first class in the spring of 2009 was to introduce students to the use of Second Life to communicate with native speakers of the language they were learning.

Several problems developed after giving the students the initial assignment to join and log onto Second life.

- 1) It was discovered that the computer facilities at the university had firewalls that prohibited access to virtual worlds so that students were unable to log onto it on campus. This prevented many students from doing the assignment in the university computer lab. Later a different computer lab was found that allowed access to the computer ports used by second life which gave the students who did not have adequate computers access to SL.
- 2) It was discovered that only a limited number of avatars were allowed to log on from a single remote sight. Second Life requires a lot of bandwidth so that too many students logging on at the same time creates a lot of lag, and may overwhelm the system.
- 3) If there were too many avatars attempting to log on it created too much drag and slowed everything down to a crawl. Hence it was decided that rather take a class of students into the computer lab it would be better to show them how to do the assignment in their free time.
- 4) The students were not familiar with what to do in a virtual world and so several students became distracted and began engaging in inappropriate behavior by creating outlandish avatars and sending ridiculous messages.

Because of these difficulties, it was decided that better strategies would need to be developed to get students to use Second life to communicate with English speakers from around the world. It was decided that:

- Coordination with the computer lab technicians is necessary to ensure that all the computer labs on campus would be able to download and run Second Life.
- Students need to be divided into groups so that the number of people logging on at the same time would not overload the system.
- Rather than instructing students how to go in world in a computer lab it would be better to give them instructions on how to use Second Life on their own time
- Students need very explicit instructions in their native language in order to know how to join and perform the basic operations on Second Life.
- The instructions must not only be very clear but also simplified so that only a minimum number of steps are needed to get to the correct location in SL.

Later on in the same semester it was noted that at least two students (older adults, attending the night school) did return to Second Life to continue having “English classes” with a Second Life resident from Britain. One student gave a class report on it and the other was still observed using Second Life nearly a year later.

Second, in 2010, two classes of English majors were given simplified directions on how to operate in Second Life. Arrangements were made with the director of the computer lab to change firewall settings to allow the use of Second Life at any of the computers on the entire campus. This time students were divided up into small groups of two or three students in order to do their assignments and 18 groups of students did successfully join and log onto Second Life. Eventually each of the 18 groups did complete the assignment by going in-world and interviewing an SL resident living in another part of the world in English.

It was believed that the experiment turned out much better in 2010 because students were divided up into groups and given clear and simpler instructions. They were instructed to find a good quality computer with a lot of RAM and log on to do their assignment on their own free time. A PowerPoint presentation was used to show students how to join and use SL and a YouTube video was created using Camtasia so that students could refer to it any time. The students were required to go in-world and interview an English speaker living in a foreign country and report to the class about it. To make it easier for the students each group was given a USB which contained the official SL viewer and the

software necessary to record their interview. Each group was able to complete the assignments and report their interview results to the class.

Third, in 2011, the purpose was to see if SL could be used for testing purposes in an EFL class. EFL students in two classes ( $n = 52$ ) were given reading and listening tests designed similar to the question formats used on the TOEIC for their midterm and final tests. It was announced to the students that they could practice their midterm and final tests online in SL by going to a sight that was posted on the class Facebook page. The SL practice tests would in fact be identical to the ones they would be given in class, so that practicing could give them a major advantage. Students were again given instructions on how to join, log onto and perform the basic functions on SL. They were given a PowerPoint presentation in class on how to go to and use the Avatar Classroom (created by Paul Preibisch and Edmund Edgar). The midterm and the final tests were turned into multiple choice questions so that they could be put on the Moodle website and then utilized by the Avatar Classroom as a game played over a shark tank.

In order to make the process of getting onto Second life and to their practice test as simple as possible links were set up on the class Facebook page. Getting there would only require a few clicks from the Facebook page. To further help students two videos were created with Camtasia software telling students how to join and use SL and how to use the shark tank game and the links for both were put on the class Facebook page making for easy access.

After logging into Second Life and teleporting to the Avatar Classroom the student would then need to sit on a quiz chair which was situated over a large tank of water. If they picked the wrong answer their quiz chair would go down. If they picked too many wrong answers the chair would go down into the tank of water which contained a hungry shark, screams could be heard and red blood would appear completing the illusion that the unsuccessful student was eaten by a shark!

After the first midterm and final tests it was noted that only a few students did go to the Avatar Classroom to take the practice test. Four of those students also scored the highest on the final test by a large margin. Later when the teacher attempted to talk to them it was discovered that the students needed a translator even for a simple conversation. It was realized that the students may have simply noted the correct answers to the test and memorized them. For the second semester the format of the Moodle tests was changed and the flashing indicator lights on the Avatar Classroom were removed so that students could only get a score at the end of the test, no immediate feedback!

#### **4. Conclusion**

The use of virtual worlds, including Second Life, has the potential to provide significant advantages to EFL learners around the world, namely, immediate access to each other as well as native English speakers. A teacher interested in giving his students these advantages will first need to create a strategy to overcome a number of problems:

- 1) Arrangements need to be made to open the internet ports necessary for using Second Life; after this is done it will be open to any students.
- 2) Second Life requires a lot of bandwidth so that too many students logging on at the same time creates a lot of lag. An easy way to prevent this is by dividing students up into groups and giving them instructions on how to complete the assignment in their free time.
- 3) The instructions need to be simple and direct for the students to follow and preferably in the students' native language. Creating Youtube videos with explicit instructions and putting all the links on a Facebook page can prevent much misunderstanding.

- 4) The next problem after logging on is what to do after successfully arriving in the virtual world. Students may be uncertain about how to initiate communication, how to find suitable conversational partners or what to say after they found one. In the future students need to be given specific advice on how to initiate communication in a virtual world.
- 5) Students may not know where to go. To make it easier specific locations for EFL learners need to be investigated such as The English Village, Cypris Village III, Virtlantis or Help Island Public. Posting these links on the class Facebook page will greatly simplify things.
- 6) For posting a test online, the Avatar Classroom created by Paul Preibisch and Edmund Edgar, has a shark tank game which students will find to be fun and can be useful for that purpose.
- 7) To prevent students from simply memorizing the correct answers at the Avatar Classroom the Moodle format should be adjusted so that a variety of points and suggestions are given to the students but not the immediate feedback of the correct answer. Also the flashing indicator light on the quiz chairs will need to be moved.

The purpose of this paper has been to inform other EFL teachers of the potential advantages and benefits that virtual worlds provide for their students. At nearly any time of day a student can log onto a virtual world such as Second Life and practice speaking to other English speakers in a 3D immersive environment. Many different locations provide quality English classes at no charge. Some initial problems that were encountered and had to be overcome have been discussed and possible solutions were presented. Because of the unprecedented potential that virtual worlds provide to EFL teachers and learners alike it is strongly suggested that future researchers explore further ways to make virtual worlds more accessible and useful.

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